https://dspace.org/

Johnny Golightly comes home

Hopkins, Patrick Mark

2009-02-26T11:39:07Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/6501

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Johnny Golightly Comes Home

Patrick Mark Hopkins

A creative work and reflexive essay submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Research

Johannesburg 2007

The young man frantically packing in his first-floor room at the Transvaal Hotel in Volksrust's main road certainly does not hear the screech of the goods train as it slows for the nearby Charlestown siding. This despite the fact that he opened the window a few minutes ago to allow fresh air to penetrate the stifling fug built up by the ancient air conditioner and three-bar heater in the corner. The chill blast from the snowstorm that had gusted and howled since mid-afternoon helps him focus, slightly, as it pierces the blizzard of alcohol, cocaine and terror swirling in his mind.

He is short, probably five seven or eight, slight, and somewhere between handsome and pretty. His skin is like cream, well cared for with expensive moisturisers, and he has the grey-green eyes of a cat, now darting to see if he has forgotten anything. His jaw is angular, not strong, his mouth soft, his blond, diminishing hair, cut short except for a wisp at the front that is gelled into a spike. His voice, which keeps exclaiming, 'Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!' is effeminate, as are his small hands, which he keeps clapping fretfully to his head.

He is wearing combat boots, skin-tight camouflage pants and a leather bomber jacket beneath which is a red T-shirt bearing a yellow hammer and sickle. The complete effect is as intended, macho camp. It is entirely at odds with his surroundings.

The red-brick Transvaal Hotel is as featureless as similar establishments that blight most small towns. He had groaned when pulling up earlier in the evening, but there was nothing he could do. His car had skidded about ten kilometres from the town, and Laing's Nek Pass on the other side of Charlestown, which he still had to negotiate, would be far more treacherous, maybe closed, with snow already settling on trees and banking on the verges.

And he sighed audibly when he saw his room. Threadbare mustard curtains that hung just past the sill; a green chair with a cushion covered in the same fabric as the drapes; a chipped, slatted wooden table on which he had put his suitcase; and a pair of creaky, uncomfortable beds covered with bright orange throws.

And between the beds a once-white shag rug from the same era as the two kitschy pictures on the hospital green walls – one of a tearful, bug-eyed child peering up to the heavens, and the other of a weathered fisherman tending his nets.

When he entered the hotel he had noticed a larger print behind the reception desk. This one depicted a Great Trek scene, with men battling to get an ox-wagon up a rocky hillside while their bonneted womenfolk looked on. Here, now, a group of eight men and a woman carrying a baby is extracting the master key from the harassed night clerk. It appears that the leaders of this lynch mob, rage frozen on their faces, is a trio of swarthy men with long, unkempt black beards. One of these is made to look even more ferocious by an aquiline nose kinked by an old break. With them is a sandy clean-cut young man, the husband of the woman with child, and four scraggly giants with wide shoulders and enormous bellies.

Once the key is obtained they make their way to the staircase, where the man with the crooked nose turns to signal silence by placing his index-finger to his lips. But halfway up the baby cries. The man in the room is ready to flee when he hears the bawl, and in a moment of clarity jambs the chair against the door. But he is soon to discover that this is only effective in the movies, because shortly thereafter the sandy boy has the key in the lock and the door effortlessly open.

‘Fucking fairy,’ he screams in Afrikaans as he bursts into the room with his companions.

The victim backs away, trembling uncontrollably, his eyes wide, seeing nothing but a blur. One of the black beards comes at him, arms flailing, but he manages to jump out the way. By now his mouth is so dry his tongue sticks to his palate. As he circles away one of the fat men grabs him in a bear hug, presenting him to crooked nose who unleashes four quick jabs to the face. The man is then flung to the ground where he begins shouting for help from a mouth gushing blood. A

boot crashes into his stomach, another into his back, forcing the wind from him in a great whoosh. As he gasps for air he gets a kick in the face and another on the thigh, propelling him against the wall beneath the sill. Realising he could be killed, he summons every reserve of will and strength to get quickly to his feet, open the curtain and leap from the window. As with the assault, which seemed to take place over an interminable time rather than an awful flash, he now appears to hang for an eternity before crashing awkwardly onto the pavement.

Before the pain can rise from his smashed ankles, coursing through his body with power enough to loosen his bowels, he tries to stand, only for his feet to crumple, and he sags down and rolls onto his back. He will not remember much of what happens after that. Snowflakes, but no recollection of the biting cold. Car doors open, close, engines start, tyres squeal, then a long pause, which in reality is less than a minute. And then something extraordinary – a vision.

He is convinced he is not hallucinating, that he is fully conscious, more lucid than ever. The train whistles as it comes into Volksrust, and at that moment the clouds are parted by a celestial light so blinding he has to turn his head. From it emerges an angel who gathers him up and carries him to a carriage on the train. All the while he feels a weightlessness, like a flake on a breeze that blows him inside to where he is brought before an Andy Warhol God, who places a hand on him and says, ‘You will be healed, Messiah, now go forth and fulfil your destiny.’

Part 1

Epiphany

Chapter 1

On returning from the Last Supper I sat to write a story of two books. The first was *Eccentric South Africa*; published six years ago in 2001. The other was this work. While I have authored many others, these were central to my being as they dealt with my obsession with extraordinary people.

I am often asked what defines these exceptional characters. I start by telling of my stay at a guesthouse in Ladismith in the Klein Karoo when there was a sudden commotion among staff bringing in the laundry. They had spotted a Cape cobra entrancing the owner's seventeen-year-old toothless Maltese poodle. A gallant neighbour, an attorney and nudist who had been mowing his lawn dressed only in a sun hat and running shoes, bravely hurdled the fence and dispatched the snake with a blast from his shotgun. To much hooting and applause he placed the cobra in a packet, dumped it in a bin and joined the guests on the wide verandah where he unblushingly hung around for the rest of the afternoon drinking wine.

Most would consider the lawyer to be eccentric, but for me he was merely quirky. What I am speaking of is far removed from this; like the radical environmentalist who slept in trees so he would not disturb the natural movements of nocturnal creatures. During my time with him I witnessed him calling birds, which came from all directions to perch on his outstretched arms, and he once wrapped a freezing puff adder in cloth and placed it in the sun to revive.

But while I can tell the difference between the offbeat and the aberrant, I cannot define an eccentric because their unpredictability makes them indefinable. There is, however, a discernable pattern in all their lives, which I discovered while doing a story on the calling to become a traditional healer. Like the shaman, the true eccentric at some point experiences a devastating physical or psychological trauma, during which they have an epiphany. This is followed by a period of denial, throughout which pressure builds to the point where the person becomes

ill. At this stage they have another vision; one so powerful that most are convinced it is the word of God, while the remainder believe it is the stirring of the god within. Regardless, all are certain that if they do not act upon it they will die; making it their messianic purpose.

Then I met a man who sowed such confusion amongst these ideas that it nearly killed me. But I run ahead.

*****

It was October 1964. I was twelve years old.

I arranged myself comfortably on top of my great-great-grandmother, Lady Julia Orenmore (1830-1922). Perched on a sphinx-like outcrop above the Mtoti River, all the graves looked onto the Drakensberg. But from her elevated spot the view was most dramatic, stretching along the spine of the dragon from Injasuti in the south to the Sentinel in the north. The mauve mountains striped and patterned with black in the folds, made to appear more distant and remote by an ever present curtain of haze.

Between where I sat and the mountains was Champagne Valley, a horseshoe glen framed by the curving bulk of the range to the west. It was a land of rivers. Water oozed from the mountain backdrop, feeding numerous streams that poured into the Little Tugela, which slowed as it worked its way eastwards to the Tugela and Indian Ocean. The Mtoti below was one of these brooks; for the most part a benign, sun-dappled creek that twists between groves, scurries over rocks and fills numerous ponds lorded by rainbow trout.

Lady Julia loved the mountains, and would often select a poetry book, hitch her skirts and walk up the hill to her favourite lookout; the place I was seated. It was a gorgeous day. The first summer storm had rumbled through the night before, leaving the air smelling sweet and fresh. With everything washed and clean and renewed, the low flying swallows and fragrant blue creeping roses and green

hovering dragonflies were revelling, resurgent. All except Havoc, my cross boxer-bull mastiff, who was sleeping next to me with his head on Phillip (1882-1889), *Our precious son gone to be an angel*.

The storm the previous evening was not enough to mutate the Mtoti into a stupendous brute, which happened at least once a year. That was when the clouds built, trapped one after the other against the sandstone barricade, roaring and echoing and flinging bolts and hailstones. Then the rain, great sheets so dense that you could not see your hand before your face; an outpouring that would tear into watercourses, sending down a two metre deluge that would take with it a swirl of trees, cows and any car unfortunate enough to be stuck on the bridges that would be ripped from their moorings. And when it subsided it would have deposited the nutrients that once nurtured the forests that covered the valley floor, but had long since been eaten by the Grey family sawmill over to my left.

The removal of the trees brought order: where once were yellowwoods, there were now gravel roads leading to tranquil farms and country hotels – The Nest, Champagne, Cathkin and El Mirador. Then new trees were planted; exotics brought in by the settlers to remind them of faraway places – fir and pine and cedar and plane and liquidamber and oak, like the three magnificent century-old ones next to our house that were shipped in by Lady Julia as saplings from the family estate in County Cork.

Most of my father's side of the family had been buried in this cemetery since the 1850s when Lady Julia and her husband, Martin Hopkins, bought the six-thousand acre spread in Champagne Valley from Boer trekker Hendrik Botes. The graves were not in uniform rows, or in any order, and they could broadly be split in two categories. Those who lived to great ages; showing a tendency for robust health in the face of an onslaught of alcohol, tobacco and Irish tempers. And those who died from misadventure: Andrew, Peter and Simon within a month of each other during World War 1; John from a ringhals bite; another Simon, drunk, decapitated when his MG went under a truck; Matthew, also

drunk, who took out a petrol bowser and half an Ermelo suburb when he lost control of his motorbike; and Francis, dispatched with a shotgun when his wife caught him with the maid.

‘There are lots of Mary’s here; some mothers of God, others Magdalene,’ explained my father in his slow, silky way, his hand on my shoulder, as he introduced me to my ancestors a few years before. ‘They say Magdalene was a whore.’

‘What’s a whore?’

‘That discussion we’ll have in the future,’ he smiled. Nodding to a pair of graves with skewed, rusted crosses at the head, he said, ‘Twins, both Mary, though I’m not sure which was the harlot. The one on the right, she lived to well over a hundred, used to ride a Brahman bull to Winterton once a week to buy tobacco, which she rolled in newspaper. The other died in her nineties when she fell off the roof of the house. She got the idea that the ring-neck crows that perched there were priests sent by God, and she wanted to sit with them.’

My wiry, suntanned father was on the shortish side, slim, with a lithe fluidity. You do not want to be big and bulky in the mountains; the ideal is like the mountain pony, small and sure footed. He was not handsome, but intriguing, with a longish face, brown eyes and slightly flared nostrils. His short hair was prematurely peppered at the temples, a family condition, and, as always, he was wearing khaki.

‘What a bunch,’ added my father, somewhat proudly, ‘they could drink anyone under the table. That’s why none of them were ever cremated; the oven is still to be invented that could deal with their incendiary livers.’

The reason for my forebears’ departure from Ireland is lost in time. Some say Lady Julia was banished for marrying a commoner, the more fanciful believe it was because Martin needed to put some distance between himself and the Irish

insurrectionary politics in which he had become embroiled. Both are good for me because either indicates the unruly gene that infests our lineage.

The first Hopkins settlers were eminent people. No more. Martin and Julia planted wattle groves to feed the demands of the tannin industry; and in much the same way as this noxious tree took root, so did my family. And they brawled and caroused and procreated with such gay abandon that when my father came to inherit the family estate it had been reduced to five-hundred acres of the most marginal land – the piece on which stood the old sandstone mansion that was as tatty as the fortune. But I cared nothing for affluence. The richness of this place, priceless freedom and the love of my father were worth more than trinkets.

'Live by your own code,' he advised whenever we were together. Guidance that had landed both of us in cauldrons of hot water.

The reason I was not in school was because I had been suspended. Not expelled, because I could write my standard five exams the following month. My aunt, my mother's sister Helen, once spat to my parents that my red hair and spray of freckles were the markings of the devil. I seemed to remember that this particular outpouring came after she found a grass snake in her handbag. A similar reference to Lucifer had been made when my mother was called to Estcourt Junior School to be confronted by impressive charges. I had run away three times; started smoking when I was nine, a habit maintained by shoplifting (but I was never caught); and ditto alcohol a year later. Then Russell Barnes and I were found spying on the girls shower in the adjoining hostel. That was too much and he received six strokes and I my marching orders.

'He is the son of Satan,' growled the bulldoggish vice-principal, Mrs Dingle. Leaning forward, so we could see into the pink bags under her eyes, the tirade continued. 'In all my years I have never seen the like. Mark my words, reformatory, prison even, is where he'll end up unless you do something soon. My suggestion is that you forget Estcourt High School and send him to

Newcastle High. All the troubled children from Durban and Pietermaritzburg go there, and if they can't instil some discipline then he's beyond redemption.'

And so, a month before, my mother had driven me home. She said nothing on that hour-long trip, did not need to. She was short, tending to plump, with cascading auburn hair and green eyes flecked with gold. She was still pretty, in a faded way, but the beauty was gone. It was not the lines that radiated from the corners of her wounded eyes, or the first hint of sagging skin that would soon flap like the jowls of her older sister; rather it was the misery ingrained in her down turned mouth that seemed to pull everything with it. Nor was her frumpy clothing attractive. Russet woollen skirts, pink blouses buttoned high, maybe a dusty yellow jersey in the evening.

It had not always been thus. She met my father while she was tending the bar at the El Mirador Hotel across the valley. She had taken a holiday job there while completing her degree in chemistry, a profession she hoped never to enter because she was to be married to Brian Tobias, her fiancée and housemaster at Estcourt High School. When that happened, though a date had not been set, she planned on becoming a housewife.

'I'm Bunny Hopkins,' he smiled as he pulled himself onto a barstool. 'You must be Dorothy, it's all over the valley that there's a beauty here.'

Actually, he had caught sight of her through the window and bribed a waiter to give him her name.

'Hey Dorothy, another Lion Lager, if you have the time,' ordered a man sitting at the other end of the counter beneath the stuffed head of a warthog sporting a cap which read: 'You've driven me to drink. How can I ever thank you?'

'Yes I'm Dorothy,' she said, opening the beer and pushing it down the counter. 'What can I get you?'

‘Double J&B and a date.’

‘We don’t have dates, nuts maybe?’

‘Not bad, not bad at all,’ he smiled. ‘Look I’m walking to the Blue Grotto on Sunday, would you like to join me? It’s about an hour from Cathkin Hotel.’

‘I know where it is, and I know I don’t want to go.’

But she did, mesmerised by his recklessness. That Sunday they walked to the cave, its face bisected by a pencil thin waterfall. There they plunged their sweaty heads into the cool shower that bounced and shot off the rocks, and laughed and ate the sandwiches she had prepared, and drunk the gin and tonic he had packed. They did the same the next weekend, and the one after that, and she mistook fiery passion for burning love and married her swashbuckling hero after a whirlwind fling. Could she not see that they were majestically unsuited – she tentative, he assertive; she timid, he bold; she tame, he wild. A mistake that began to dawn the first time she had to find her way to the outhouse of her new home during a pitch-black night. As she sat there in terror, wondering how close a spider was, or if an adder was eyeing her from a warm corner, she knew she was in a nightmare.

Worse, though she did not know it then, a rogue sperm was taking its first tentative steps to becoming me. As I grew, so she gained weight, which she never lost. And when I was born she transferred some of her resentment for my father to me.

I doubt whether the slow collapse of his marriage caused my father the slightest concern. Incensed husbands were a regular occurrence, driving up to our house in a rage of dust to confront him about his infidelities. They stomped, swore and threatened, but never took matters further because that would have been foolish. My father was a restless frontiersman, a good one, which required an intimate knowledge of terrain, horse, shotgun, knife and, his favourite, an ivory handled, hippo-skin bullwhip. He spent hours practising with it – the overhead crack, the

throw, the flick; standing or at full gallop. One of the highlights of the annual gymkhana was his show, where he split oranges in two with a single crack from the back of his cantering horse. It was a veiled warning, a demonstration for anyone wanting to mix-it-up with him.

Among his lovers there was one constant – Shirley Waite, the frisky, horsy wife of our closest neighbour. Their farm began just downriver, on the other side of where the Mtoti doglegs. Unlike ours, this was a profitable spread. From where I sat I could see fat Hereford dairy cows, and further on a tractor in a peanut field. Shirley was big boned, loud and jolly, with luxuriant chestnut hair, a golden complexion, high cheekbones and enormous, fun-filled eyes. She was everything my mother was not.

During one of my school holidays I had watched from the spot in the graveyard as my father had ridden to where the river narrows between the two farms. He dismounted, crossed, and sat on a stump on the far bank. Within ten minutes she was there. He did not turn, but waited for her to come up behind and slide her hands from his shoulders down his front – nibbling the lobe of his ear before running her tongue down his neck, then back up, lightly brushing his cheek. Eventually he turned and they slowly undressed, kissing and probing before falling in a frantic embrace of arms and legs.

I know my mother was aware of Shirley because her name came up more than once during the furious rows that ensued over my suspension.

‘The school says he is the devil, that they have never come across the like,’ said my mother in a trembling voice. ‘It is because he is wild, undisciplined.’

‘They don’t know what they’re talking about.’

‘And you would be able to tell them? You who has no rules.’

‘Let him be. He’s working things out.’

‘He doesn’t have to work things out. Just accept authority.’

‘And what type of man will that make?’

‘The type who can make a useful contribution to society,’ she snapped. ‘One who’ll become a doctor or lawyer.’

My mother’s dream before she married was that she would produce a brood of doctors, dentists, attorneys, accountants, bankers and engineers. Nothing else was a proper job, and all people should have proper jobs in a world of doctors, dentists, attorneys, accountants, bankers and engineers.

‘And Shirley?’ she challenged.

‘What about her?’ he said warily.

‘What type of man leaves his wife on Sunday afternoons to be with another woman? You think I don’t know? You think the whole neighbourhood doesn’t know?’

‘I don’t care what the neighbourhood thinks. In any case, this is about Patrick.’

‘Mrs Dingle says he should go to Newcastle High. They take in troubled boys.’

‘He’s not troubled.’

‘Not troubled? Running away! Peering in on girls in the shower! Stealing! Smoking! Drinking! He’s not troubled, you’re right, he’s possessed.’

‘He’s a boy. Boys look at girls. Girls look at boys. That’s how it works.’

‘And you look at Shirley and any other whore who’ll lift her skirts. You’re nothing but an animal, and Patrick’s going the same way.’

‘Oh please.’

‘No. I’ve had enough. Enough of you, this house, this life. You think you can handle Patrick, then fine, I’m going, leaving the two of you to it.’

With that my mother flounced down the passage to their room, pulled down an old suitcase, threw in some clothes and left to stay with her sister in Estcourt.

Later, my father came into my room and sat at the edge of my bed, not saying anything for a long time. Then he got up, turned, and said, ‘We’ll work it out. I think a few days in the mountains will be good for us.’

At five o’clock the next morning I was already awake, listening to the potpourri of laughter and talking and clattering in the kitchen, when there was a gentle knock on the door. A smiling maid with a tray of tea and a ‘Good morning’ quietly tiptoed into the room. I could hear my father getting dressed across the passage.

It was very cold and I dressed as warmly as I could. When I got to the dining room my father was already seated at the table, eating an apple. I sat to stare at a boiled egg and toast placed before me by Sam, the household factotum.

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Eat,’ ordered my father wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘You’ll need the energy.’

The rest of breakfast passed in silence. When my father got up, I followed him outside to where his constant companion in the mountains, the pocked-faced Umgaw, waited with two pack horses carrying our provisions and three

mountain ponies, helping me on to one. Not my favourite animals. My father and Umgaw rode like they were part of the horse, moving with it and anticipating its moves. I rode against the pony. When it was going up I was coming down. My crotch and inner thighs would once again be raw and bruised.

By the time I rounded The Sphinx the sun rising behind was gilding the underside of a lone cloud, the radiance deepening the greys in its hollows. I had long since taken off my jerseys, which I tried to jamb between my legs, only making matters worse. I could not see Umgaw who was following some way back with the pack horses, but ahead, on his horse at the crest of the Little Berg, I caught sight of my father, his felt hat aslant and his open jacket flapping gently in the morning breeze, looking for all the world like the statue of a hero. By the time my pony had scampered up the last incline to that level, my father had dismounted at a little stream where he was rolling oranges underfoot, which he claimed were better for quenching thirst than pure mountain water.

'Suck on this,' he said, passing me the fruit that he had bitten open at the top.

Ten minutes later Umgaw reigned in with a 'woaaah' and dismounted; washing his face downstream before accepting an orange from my father. We rested a while longer, then cantered to join the bridle path that runs beneath Sterkhorn, round Blind Man's Corner and into the Umhlawazini Valley. Here nature was at its grandest, the views superb, ranging from smooth vertical-faced sheets of stone, spear-like pinnacles and rugged slopes slashed with deep ravines. The wind was a bit stronger now, but nothing like the gales of August that gust with such ferocity they crack like bullets when screaming through breaches in the ramparts.

A baboon barked, its call bouncing from needles and reefs to rockeries and cowls and seemingly up and out of the hole in Kantunja, which my father told me is big enough to drive a double-decker bus through.

‘There they are,’ said Umgaw, pointing to a troop of baboons against the side of a hill.

We rode hard for the rest of the day, following the Contour Path over the Nkosazana River, skirting The Litter and Eastman’s Peak as we went. In mid afternoon we veered off, following a stream to where it became a waterfall, a curtain for a deep cave in which I had slept many a night.

The horses were unloaded and tethered before we made the short climb to the secluded entrance. I wanted to throw myself down, splay my tortured crotch, but there were things to do. I helped fetch the provisions and firewood, slipping and stumbling up the slope, unable to use my full arms for balance or grip. Then I brushed down the horses while my father laid out the provisions and Umgaw lit the fire. When I returned Umgaw was blowing on an ember to raise a flame from it, and my father, sitting against a rock on the far side, was depressing Boxer tobacco into his pipe while staring out to the orange sunset colouring the valley rose and violet.

My father gave a few dry sucks to check the airflow of the pipe and, when satisfied, lit a match to the tobacco. This was the time he cherished most on these trips. Here was his Eden. The solitude, with only the fall of water cutting the silence. An eagle, floating on a thermal, waiting for a last morsel before nightfall, cast its shadow past him, and he followed it with his eyes as it plunged and rose again. I could sense he felt alive and content.

As the sky darkened and the first stars could be seen, faintly, my father stood, stretched and knocked his pipe out on the sole of his boot before going over to the provisions and selecting three tins. He opened these with an attachment on his knife before shuffling them into the ashes forming on the border of the now roaring fire. This sent up a flurry of sparks, which was followed by a billow of smoke that hung a ghostly blue against the rushing water across the entrance. When the steam began to rise from the tins, he turned them so that the heat inside would be evenly spread.

Umgaw, opposite my father, placed a kettle and a pot of water on the fire. When boiling, he added mielie meal and salt to the pot, stirring it with a stick until the mixture was dry and fluffy. My father, taking three plates from a bag, divided the porridge, covering each mound with the contents of a tin, shaking his scalded fingers as he crushed each can underfoot.

I am not sure what the mess was that came out of those tins; carrots and beans I could make out in the unspeakable sauce, the rest unidentified. But I was so famished that I ate, pursing my lips and sucking in to remove the last bits stuck between my teeth when I finished. This was followed by condensed milk sweetened coffee and hard rusks, which my father and Umgaw dunked and slurped with relish.

As my father again filled his pipe, he turned to me, ‘Don’t worry too much about the school, we’ll sort things out.’

I dropped my head.

‘Come Patrick, you’ve got more spirit than all those bastards put together,’ he said lighting the pipe and sucking quickly for it to take. ‘Don’t let them get to you.’

‘It’s easy…’

‘Don’t give me that,’ he said with a dismissive gesture. ‘We’ve spoken about this before.’

What we had spoken of before was what was important to him. For my father, overarching everything, like an umbrella-of-life, was The Code. His was a relatively simple philosophy: People are answerable only to themselves, and it was a personal choice as to what rights you wished to give up – if any.

This was what he thought I, too, would want. So he had taught me about the mountains, how rivers were formed, where the passes were, and the best caves. What to do in a storm, how to climb rocks, and treat a berg adder bite. How to listen, not to adults, but the lapping of water and the buzz of bees gorging themselves on fallen, rotting fruit. He showed me a wasp building a nest from mud, and a platoon of ants carrying pieces of a leaf into a crack in the ground. And explained how to identify a bird from a piece of eggshell or a feather.

Sometimes when we walked along the tracks that ran into the mountains we saw duiker and monkeys. One day, approaching the foot of the hill, my father suddenly signaled for me to remain silent, be still, pointing under a bush ahead as I shielded my eyes. At first I saw nothing. Then a movement, followed by another, as a catlike creature placed its forepaws on a rock and sniffed the air. It slowly turned its head until it was looking straight at us: incomparably beautiful, its lithesome body spotted like a leopard, but I knew from the small head and round, alert ears that it was something else. Then, with a twitch of its tail, it silently disappeared into the long grass.

‘Serval,’ whispered my father, craning his neck to get one last glance.

My father took for granted that I wanted what he did, so this was what I needed to learn and be shown. It was not that I was ungrateful, or did not appreciate these things, it was just that it never occurred to him that I might have other dreams, that I might be my own person. In this he was no different from my mother, who also regarded my individuality as alien. And it would have been incomprehensible for him to have learnt that, even if I found this landscape awe inspiring, it was not for me.

So I shut up, and replied, ‘Yes dad.’

The problem for my father, I believe it an Irish thing, was that there was a contrariness about him. He not only took what he thought to be the high road when all others were taking the low, but provoked his fellow travellers as well.

Like when his mother forced him to eat meat, and he responded by becoming a vegetarian. Or when the Ten Commandments included an injunction against coveting thy neighbour's wife. And when all the other farmers in the region concentrated on beef or milk or bacon or tomatoes or peanuts, he planted dagga. Not on a small scale, between the maize as they do elsewhere, but huge fields of it. And his 'farm' was right here in the mountains, just north of this cave in the Mnweni Valley.

This was my father, and the life he wanted for me. One in which you did not walk close to the line, but beyond it, irrespective of whether this placed one on a collision course with society in general and the government in particular. It was a challenge the state took up, making him their primary regional target since subjugating the local Amangwane tribe in an infamous raid on a cold, wet Tuesday morning in February 1956.

'The police had had a good morning, clearing over 50 dagga fields,' recounted my father on a previous trip into the mountains. 'But trouble was brewing above Chief Zondo's kraal where a large group of knobkerrie and assegai wielding Amangwane had gathered. They began to move down, stopping momentarily, when a stupid policeman pulled his revolver and shot and killed one of the tribesmen. Then all hell broke loose and a few minutes later five policemen lay dead. Unfortunately for the Amangwane, two of the policemen were white.'

'Jeez!' I whistled.

'Police reinforcements, guided by fully armed Harvard aircraft, were brought in from near and far to hunt the tribesmen down,' continued my father. 'Plans were even made to bomb them should they attempt to flee into Basutoland. When it was all over another two had been killed and 26 arrested. Of those, 22 were executed.'

As the moon shed a bluish blush through the waterfall, I yawned, rubbed my eyes and rolled out a sleeping bag next to the fire. As I dreamt of men dangling

from gallows, my father and Umgaw discussed the trip they would be making to their crops the following week. They did not to know that the police had finally completed a circle of informers they had infiltrated among the dagga growers.

We had spent another two days in the mountains, riding and climbing fairly undemanding slopes. From where I sat on the grave of Lady Julia, I could trace the route we returned down through the Monk's Cowl Forest Reserve, into Wonder Valley and over the Sterkspruit. The whole area was now haloed by the setting sun, radiating yellow and orange shafts like those encircling the heads of stained-glass saints. I stood, wiped the dust from my trousers and called Havoc. I held the rusty gate for him and took a last look over the cemetery. At the bottom right hand corner was space for one more grave.

I took a pee against the side of the chapel, its sandstone tinged green by moss and veined with the black offshoots of ivy still to revive after the winter. When finished I turned my bicycle and gave it a push start, having painfully learnt that sometimes when you stood to peddle the cogs slipped and you came thumping down on your balls on the crossbar. But the ride to the house was easy as most of the way was downhill, and after getting started I sat up in the saddle to let the wind blow in my face as I coasted. Havoc, his tail raised in mock expectation, ran in and out of the long grass, at times running ahead of the bicycle, at others battling to catch up after yet another investigation. Past a field of tomatoes, my father's only nod to formal agriculture, I turned into the drive leading to the house, parking my bicycle in the shed next to his ancient Hudson Super Six, the grey paint worn through to the earthy red primer on the front wheel arch.

There was still a bit of light about, and some time before dinner, so I ambled towards the rickety, rusted metal swing bench under the jacaranda at the far end of the garden. Jasmine was heavy in the air, and a frog was in full chirrup for a mate in the pond that watered the orchard to the left of the house. Or I think that was where he was, for they are great ventriloquists, and he could well have been as far off as the leaking tap outside the bathroom. As I faced the house, the right hand side was eclipsed by the trio of oak trees planted by Lady Julia, one split

and blackened down the centre by lightning, but still sprightly. And in the bowl created by the conflagration, a pair of owls had made their nest.

The shadows of the oaks lay across the galvanised roof of the old mansion, deformed by the tricks of fading light. While deviant, this once grand sandstone would generally be classified as Natal Colonial. Low and sprawling, the roof extended to shade a deep veranda that ran round its entirety other than for the northern side – the business end that contained the kitchen and bathroom. Making it peculiar, stretched, was the wing of six bedrooms, for this was once also a hostel for Irish wattle strippers. Because of this association, I thought of the house as a leprechaun – its roof the pointed hat, the verandah the broad smile, and the kitchen from which diffuse yellow lamplight fell and laughter rang, the twinkle in the eye. And it was this Celtic affiliation that lent the structure the aspect of a story to tell. There were tales everywhere – from the sheet of loose roof-iron clanging as it was lifted by a gust; the flaking brown paint on wooden verandah supports and sash windows; the inscriptions carved in stone by heart sore Paddys: *Emma, My love forever, 1869*; the dour sepia photographs lining the dark-panelled, checkerboard tiled passage that ran through the house; to the horrors of the warren of cellars beneath. Accessed through a hatch to the side of the boiler-room between the kitchen and bathroom, this basement was a haven for snakes and ghosts. It was a demonic netherworld even my father knew better than to enter.

Havoc was still panting on the verandah, his tongue lolling from his mouth, and he turned his head as Sam emerged from the kitchen.

‘Patrick, go clean up, dinner in five minutes,’ he said.

I washed my hands at the tap around the side, and dried them on my pants. A plate was already waiting for me when I came into the high-ceilinged dining room lit by a single lamp on the sideboard. I was not hungry, alternating between staring at the *Blue Boy* tapestry opposite me and prodding at my chicken and mash, leaving the soggy vegetables.

After supper I went to my room, picked up *The Big Book For Boys* and brought it back to the lounge, where I sat by the fire on an ancient leather couch frayed and scuffed-through on the arms. A moth flew round the rim of a lamp, casting a shadow the size of a bird as it swooped and soared before entering a flaming death spiral. I turned to *The Ju-Ju Man* and lost myself in a yarn of native hordes sacrificing a missionary.

At eight o'clock Sam came in and commanded, 'bedtime.'

I was tired, did not put up a fight, and went to my room, the second biggest, once a dormitory for ten, and changed into pyjama bottoms, leaving my clothes scattered on the floor. The sparse furniture – a wardrobe, chair and single wooden bed covered with a threadbare, patchwork throw – distorting the proportions of the space, making it seem even bigger. Facing out to the back of the house, there was a door with sash windows on either side. One I kept open for fresh air, which also brought the unwelcome clatter of the loose roof sheet, but it did not distract for long and I was soon asleep, wandering into a realm where clergymen were being boiled in an enormous pot as cannibals danced a jig until their dinner was ready.

I was not sure of the time, but I came to with my father shaking my shoulder with one hand, shotgun in the other. Umgaw behind him, holding a torch.

'There's trouble, get under the bed and do not come out until I tell you to,' ordered my father. He looked exhausted, his face grimy, a drop of sweat coursing through the grit on his forehead. As I did as told, he exited.

Cars were driving up, and there were shouting and lights everywhere. Havoc was going berserk; quietened by a shot. There was more gunfire outwards from the house; my father making a stand. Complete pandemonium. A man entered my room, his brown shoes and khaki flannelling all I saw as he crept past. Another pair. As if in slow motion. Shots boomed. Screaming.

In terror I left my sanctum, tiptoed to the door and peered round. Brown uniforms everywhere, Umgaw flopped on the floor, a crimson hole in his head. My father slouched in the corner, guns trained on him, his eyes wild. I fled to the only place I knew they would not find me – out the door, round the bathroom and into the black pit that was the cellar. As I pulled the door closed I heard a single shot.

I sat here, teeth chattering, hands over ears, skin prickling, screams forming but frozen in the depths of consternation. Then two things, and I recall these clearly. First my nose was itching from the dust; then a great concentrated force began to stir and well in the depths of my inner being. There was no bright light, but an illumination pointing the way ahead. An out of body experience, if you will, revealing to me the calling of the chronicler, the taleteller.

Chapter 2

‘Mr Nathan needs to see you,’ instructed Merle Wakeford, catching me just as I was leaving the offices of Cecil Nathan and Beattie where I had been articled as a legal clerk for just over a year.

‘Can it wait? A friend has just phoned to tell of a place to rent in Burger Street, and I need to get there before it’s taken.’

‘Your problems with accommodation are private matters and should be dealt with in your own time.’

‘But I’m taking an early lunch.’

‘Not today,’ she said dryly. ‘Come with me.’

I followed her through the maze of passages to the oak-panelled sanctum of the patriarch of Pietermaritzburg’s most venerable law firm. Her stride evoked a sergeant-major on parade – left-right, chin up, eyes front. Even her clothes had a martial cut: severe long-sleeved cream top, brown belt, and an olive tweed pencil skirt hemmed two fingers above the knee.

She halted outside his office before tapping on the door and entering. A minute later she emerged and motioned me with an eyes-right to proceed across the maroon carpet to the enormous green-leather inlaid desk set before row-upon-row of law reports and legal tomes.

‘Good morning Mr Nathan,’ I said meekly.

For several minutes, it felt like an eternity, he did not acknowledge my presence, not even lifting his head from the papers he was signing. He was in his mid-eighties, shrivelled like a tortoise. But he had once been handsome, as the silver-framed photos on the walls and desk proclaimed. When finished, he sheathed his

pen in an ornate soapstone holder, cleared phlegm from his throat, and said in a monotone voice, ‘This is a very urgent matter. You are to lodge this motion with the registrar of the Supreme Court and then serve it personally on Shepstone, Whylie. It is to be done by three o’clock.’

All I got from Merle when I returned at two-thirty was a reproving look and, ‘Remember Mr Nathan needs to be driven to the Natal Law Society function at the Hilton Hotel at five. You must be available from four onwards, so don’t linger in your search for quarters.’

I left the offices by the rear exit, deciding to walk the five blocks to Burger Street because I did not want to create the wrong impression by arriving on a motorbike whose deep roar could be heard halfway across the city. Especially as I had been told that the owner, a Miss Cramp or something, was an elderly woman who had invested part of her savings in three upstairs-downstairs semis that had once housed railway employees. I was not given a street number, but had been assured that I could not miss them as they were rather garish and the only ones on a slope overlooking the Umzunduze River. She lived in the top section of the bright orange one.

At this hour the city was at its most oppressive, the late summer heat trapped and muggy in the bowl of the hills, inducing a torpor amongst residents. And not much was stirring when I turned southwest into Loop Street. This section of the city, the old town, is the most beautiful. Along streets lined with oak and jacaranda are gothic revival and Edwardian and Victorian homes set in lush gardens little changed from the century-old watercolours of the area lining the walls of our offices that showed residences decorated with carvings, garlands, gables and swirls.

Occasionally the sight of one of the houses along Loop Street reminded me of the old farmhouse in the Drakensberg, nudging deeply suppressed memories. My father must have believed he was having the last word in his acrimonious marriage by completing a will shortly before his death in which he left

everything, including the farm, to me. But my mother was not going to allow him this victory and responded in a way she knew would have enraged him; by having me packed off to the boarding school for troubled boys at Newcastle High School.

For five years I shared a thirty-bed wing with seventy boys, only graduating from a mattress on the floor in standard eight. Most were just lost boys although there was a smattering of harder-core surfer bums, druggies and petty thieves. And the brutish Alex Ansell who had chopped the legs off a kitten. All were subject to an intense programme of school, sports, cadets and hard labour enforced by caning for the slightest indolence, which was devised to break the individual spirit to the point where the shattered shell could be remoulded into an unproblematic member of society.

Our brightness was the rock ‘n roll revolution of the 60s. The Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin. And dope and a middle finger to the despised establishment; making us the small town rock stars. For which our reward in our summer of love was sex aplenty; emotionless couplings little different from the masturbation competitions we held in the dorm to see who could ejaculate the furthest.

After that came a year of military service, for which high school had more than prepared me. Then I was free. Or so I thought, because the system had surreptitiously succeeded in turning me into the thing I abhorred; an unproblematic member of society. It was tragedy I was blissfully unaware of while taking a portion of the accrued rentals from the farm and proceeds from the sale when I turned twenty-one to study for a legal bachelor of arts in order to prepare for a proper job. An obliviousness abetted by the fact that in my spare time I wore the trappings of the age. Rose-lens wire-frame John Lennon sunglasses; brocaded velvet waistcoats; frayed jeans; and, my greatest extravagance, an electric blue 1970 BSA Thunderbolt with lengthened front forks and high handlebars to create an *Easy Rider* look.

It was a confidence trick that fooled a number of girls, including a Dutch hippie. She kicked me out after seeing through the sham, which was why I was looking for new digs in a city where lodgings were at a premium. I had found temporary shelter with a friend, but we had both agreed that our amity was unlikely to survive much more than a week of cohabitation.

It had been six days since I had imposed myself and my heart rose as I turned into Burger Street, for before me I recognised the three sets of east-facing semis from the description given. They were infinitely more than I expected, which suddenly sent my initial elation into a tailspin. How would I afford it?

The colourful units, with a sunshine orange one at the fore, each had bay windows and a small street-facing porch lined with filigree. Quirky rather than quaint. On the verandah of the one I had been told was the residence of the owner were a profusion of multi-hued pots filled with fuchsias, geraniums and fragrant dwarf roses. A mauve bougainvillea crept up a lattice, through which the afternoon sun threw a checker pattern across the front door. I looked for a bell and, finding none, knocked and took a step back. A clock chimed three from within, followed by a gruff, lazy bark. When nothing happened I knocked again, which brought a tirade from a husky voice.

‘Be patient; I can’t find the key.’

But soon there was the rattle in the lock and the door half opened, a snarling basset hound trying desperately to get past a barring leg.

‘Shut the fuck up, Prince Twinkletoes,’ roared the woman. To me she asked, ‘How can I help?’

‘Miss Cramp…’

‘It’s Professor, and it’s Crimp, as in the anal pucker,’ she said testily. ‘As I’m retired and my surname has connotations that are not aesthetically pleasing I prefer neither, so call me Meredith. And who are you?’

Taken completely aback, I blanked; uncomfortable silence ensued. The tall, big-boned woman who had caused my discomfort was about sixty, but could have been ten years either way. Her wild, frizzed hair suggested youth, but it was nearly completely grey; there were fine lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes, and deeper furrows running horizontally on her neck, but these were contradicted by lively, feral green eyes; and a dazzling scarlet lipstick that few young women would have the confidence to wear. A colour very close to her paint-flecked Chinese gown with writhing golden dragons.

‘Well?’

‘I’m Pat Hopkins,’ I stammered, leaning down to stroke the dog, but it growled and I quickly straightened. ‘I believe you have a place to rent.’

‘Maybe. Tell me something interesting about yourself.’

‘I’ll qualify as an attorney at the end of this year,’ I replied, immediately feeling foolish.

‘My dear boy, that is the least riveting thing I have ever heard,’ she said scornfully. ‘Goodbye.’

With that she hooked Prince Twinkletoes back with her foot and closed the door.

My mind was a swirl as I slouched, defeated and bemused back to the office. At that point there was only one thing I wanted more than for the ground to open and swallow me, and that was to get the unit she had for rent. Sitting at my desk I looked up her number and dialled; it rang five times before she answered.

‘Meredith, it’s Pat. I was there just now. I’ll tell you something interesting about myself if you tell me something interesting about yourself.’

She chuckled, ‘I once lived with a Romanian count in a cave outside Coober Pedy on the Australian Outback. Your turn.’

‘My father was Natal’s biggest marijuana grower and dealer.’

‘I would love to meet him. But just because he’s interesting does not mean to say that you are too.’

‘You can’t meet him, he was killed in a shootout with police.’

‘I’m sorry…’

Before she could finish I took a deep breath and said, ‘I was there. I was twelve years old and fled to hide in a dark cellar, where I had an epiphany.’

‘Fuck off! Please don’t tell me you had a dream of becoming a lawyer.’

‘No,’ I laughed. ‘A writer.’

‘Then what the fuck are you doing studying law? I tell you what, I found your cowboy boots quite interesting, so there might be some promise after all. I’m having dinner with my tenants on Saturday. Be here at four to help me prepare.’

*****

The next time I saw Meredith she greeted me with a hug and kisses on both cheeks, her perfume a boisterous tang. I handed her a bottle of Nederberg Cabernet Sauvignon I had purchased that morning and bent to pat Prince Twinkletoes, but he had not yet warmed to me. He raised a warning lip.

‘Don’t worry about him.’

She was wearing dungarees over a brown T-shirt and silver sandals, her hair a tousled mess, partly tied back, but mostly sprung free. Round her neck a string of clay Liquorice Allsorts. The interior of the house, airier and more spacious than it appeared from outside, was a potpourri of fragrances: fresh basil from the kitchen; cut flowers everywhere in delicate pots; and sweet incense burning in an altar set in an alcove in the entrance hall. This shrine, comprising artefacts, candles, mirrors and a scorpion icon, was given an ethereal air by suspended Buddhist prayer flags that frolicked with any welcome gust. It was an intoxicating breeziness carried through the rest of the space.

The polished pine floors were the colour of honey, the walls like sunflower. Throughout, chiffon curtains in purple and violet billowed to conduct a symphony of wind chimes. There were three bedrooms either side of the passage leading from the entrance hall, and a cavernous bathroom with a ball and claw tub set beneath a mural in which a multi-armed goddess with snakes for hair performed fellatio on a giant penis. Down the passage was a studio papered from wall to ceiling with charcoal smudged sheets and, opposite, was a lounge with Ethiopian artefacts on the wall and bright Moroccan-style couches facing each other across a low wooden chest. On the mantelpiece was a pair of well-used red and blue hubble-bubble’s foiled with gold.

Further along we arrived in the dining room-kitchen that had been charmingly combined by removing the partitions while retaining the support pillars, which doubled as backings from which to hang long-handled copper-bottom pots, bouquets of dried herbs and large candleholders. In the centre was a pink marble workspace on which were cutting boards, knives, an array of bottled spices, and bowls filled with fruit and vegetables. There was an enormous gas stove against the far wall, with kitchen counters on either side crammed in the corners with sauces and oils and tins and cookbooks. On the sills of the open windows that looked out east were flowerboxes with coriander, thyme, chilli and sage. And in

the dining section was a half-moon stone fireplace before which was a long trestle table set for six with floral-rimmed plates and sparkling crystal.

‘First some wine,’ said Meredith, peering into the fridge. ‘A crisp sauvignon blanc should be perfect in this blessed heat. Here, open it. You’ll find a corkscrew in the drawer over there.’

As I rummaged she brought over two long-stemmed glasses.

‘We’ll start with a Hungarian cherry soup with soured cream,’ she continued, reaching for three tins of stoned Morello cherries from a high shelf. ‘For main there’s chicken fricassee with tarragon, and dessert’s an almond, chocolate and liqueur cake. Delicious. Can you cook?’

‘No.’

‘It’s very attractive for a man to be able to cook,’ she shot back, pushing her hair behind her ear. ‘Four of my husbands were brilliant in the kitchen. The fifth, I’m afraid, was as green as you. Nor did he redeem himself in the bedroom.’

‘Five husbands,’ I said, pouring the wine. ‘You must have a place of honour among the legal profession.’

‘Tell me about it,’ she said. Sliding the tins towards me, she continued, ‘So you don’t mess anything up, I’m going to give you the easy jobs. In the same drawer that you found the corkscrew is a can opener. Do you think you can manage the tins?’

‘I’m sure I can.’

She cooked while I chopped and peeled and trimmed. All the while she spoke of herself, or asked questions about me. By the time we finished with the pre-

preparation for dinner she had most of my story, and I the bones of her remarkable life.

Born to a German father and English mother, she was a child prodigy painter who had gone on to win a host of awards for her works that were exhibited in every major gallery and were displayed at the South African Museum of Art, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Durban Art Gallery and in various corporate collections.

'Are any of the paintings in the house yours?' I asked, licking my fingers.

'It would be like reading a book I had written,' she replied dismissively. 'I don't indulge in narcissism.'

Her inspiration came from wandering. 'Travel and voyages lead you on paths where you are continually forced to change your mind,' she boomed, throwing her arms wide and splashing wine over the kitchen floor. 'For most this is so scary, subversive and challenging that they would rather build cocoons to hide in – refusing to confront who they really are.'

The trips she embarked on were not advertised in travel brochures. Among them a Bonnie & Clyde adventure to Angola with a boy who shared her fantasies of bank robberies; a dash in Australia with a British banker who had gone walkabout with ten of his bank's credit cards and was keeping one step ahead of the law; and driver for a Thai arms dealer plying his wares in the United States.

'It was during my Buddhist phase, so I refused to judge him on what he did,' she shrugged. 'I always work on the assumption that perfect strangers, my counterparts, are all waiting for me out there. That they're always ready to party and the only missing ingredient is me. All I have to do is find them.'

'But the world is a big place,' I chirped defensively, getting the uncomfortable feeling she was telling me about herself as a backhanded rebuke.

‘No one requires an itinerary – you just need to break through your fear-ceiling and arrive,’ she responded, cocking her head at me. ‘All the people I’ve met have one thing in common and that is an absence of fear. And they only welcome people into their circle who have conquered their apprehensions. It is the same all over the world and when you commit to being free there is a cast of thousands waiting to play with you. At the end of the day it is really silly to hold on to preconceived phobias because they are all rooted in imaginary dangers that may occur in the future. Embracing them is like selling yourself a second-hand car every day.’

‘How do the husbands fit in?’ I asked, the need to change the subject becoming urgent.

‘It took me some time to work out that the counterparts waiting for me were there to party, not marry,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘Shit! What is it with that piece of paper that makes arseholes from heroes? One of them was an Indiana Jones type archaeologist in Mexico who overnight changed from wanting me to share his adventures to having me chained in the kitchen; then a cute hustler at Cairo airport who swept me off my feet with, “Welcome to Egypt, welcome to the land of confusion, allow me to unlock its secrets.” I did, and we married three days later. Anyway, the less said the better about him and the others.’

Meredith, in her mid-forties, joined the fine arts department of the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal; her focus outsider artists, or passion artists as she preferred to call them, especially Helen Martins at the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda, Nukain Mabusa at Revolver Creek near Barberton and the artists of Venda, who are called by the ancestors.

‘It’s the time of day when I like to enjoy a martini or two in the garden,’ she said, wiping her hands on a towel hanging from the oven door. ‘Be a dear and get some ice from the freezer.’

I crushed the ice while she took a bottle of gin and another of vermouth from the fridge and poured a quarter of each with a squeeze of lemon into a cocktail shaker. She added the ice and passed me the container to shake vigorously with an up-and-down action that quickly had my arms aching. It was with some relief when she motioned me to put it on a tray containing two martini glasses, a bowl of green olives and another of mixed nuts.

We had to go out the front door, turn left, and left again down a narrow alley that led between the semis and into a neat garden entangled at the borders by a vine meshed fence that was abuzz with insects. Dotted on the neat lawn were well established trees with pansies in full bloom round their base. A flight of doves took off with a clap of wings that sounded very much like the muted applause that sometimes erupted as a batsman stroked a four at the Pavilion cricket ground in Alexandra Park across the river. The brick-red Victorian dome of the stadium was just visible amongst the trees as it caught the last rays of the setting sun. I placed the tray on a table under a trimmed willow in the far corner, and sat on the slatted bench while Meredith unscrewed the cap from the shaker and poured our drinks, placing an olive in each.

‘Cheers, what a glorious evening,’ she said, letting her gaze wander over the scene. Then, turning, she leaned towards me, ‘Patrick, I have a confession. I didn’t find your cowboy boots in the least interesting. In fact, they clashed horribly with that hideous grey suit you were wearing. You, on the other hand, are of some fascination because I’m going to hazard a guess that you are deeply confused about what you’re doing.’

The sun was gone now, and the eastern sky the deep green of dusk.

‘That’s a broad statement considering that we’ve only spoken briefly,’ I huffed. ‘What you don’t know is that once I’ve qualified I plan to go travelling and write about my experiences. At least I’ll have a qualification to fall back on.’

‘Oh ye of little faith in yourself,’ she gently mocked with a smile and a hand on my shoulder. ‘But enough of this seriousness. Tomorrow you can move into the unit behind us, but there are two conditions.’

‘The rent? I might not be able to afford it.’

‘What were you paying in your last place?’ she inquired after a moment’s hesitation.

I told her.

‘Then that’s the rent if you accept the conditions,’ she said. ‘And I don’t care for the law, so don’t tell me that it’s not legal. It will be an agreement of honour.’

‘What are they?’

‘My books are stored in two of the bedrooms and I have no other space for them.’

‘No problem.’

‘The other is this: at any time I can give you twenty-four hours’ notice,’ she said standing and staring across the park. ‘If I do, you’ll not question it.’

‘Deal,’ I beamed.

‘I need to get ready,’ she said, turning to me. ‘You can either have another martini down here, or come up to the house for a glass of wine while I quickly take a bath.’

‘I’ll come up with you,’ I said, standing and rubbing the back of my legs to get the circulation going again after the hard seat.

While running her bath, Meredith gave me instructions. Stir sour cream into the soup, ‘Do it slowly or else it will clot’; cut the pumpernickel bread, ‘Not doorstops, civilised slices’; put the chicken in the oven, ‘At ten to eight, not a moment before’; decant the red wine, ‘And pour a generous helping for yourself. You’ll need it.’

I had just started mixing in the cream, a more time-consuming process than I anticipated as I had to hunt clots and mash them against the side, when there was a knock on the door. I put down the container, wiped my hands and, filled with dread, went to welcome the first guests. Rather than the couple I imagined, there was an angelic-faced, rotund man dressed in a Roman toga and sandals with a laurel wreath is his sandy, baby-curl hair. Dangling from a finger of one hand, crocked to shoulder height, was a flagon of Tassenberg; in the other, a bunch of grapes.

‘Willie Watts,’ he said, sweeping into the house. Handing me the wine as one would a jacket to a valet, he added, ‘Do be a sweetie and put that in the fridge.’

‘Can I pour you some?’

‘Not that, it’s as warm as a whore’s twat,’ he said in a loud voice. ‘Is there something which is at least at room temperature?’

‘I was about to decant a bottle, will that do?’

‘Sure,’ he waved. Stopping in the passage, he turned to look at me, ‘Say, you’re familiar.’

‘Yes, I used to take your Introductory Latin class.’

‘That’s it,’ he said, pinching his nostrils. ‘You had long hair and a beard and sat at the back. How many times did you repeat the year?’

‘Twice. I took it every year from first to graduation.’

‘Yes, I remember, not very bright. Now run off and get me some wine.’

When I returned he was flopped on a couch in the lounge, the hand holding the grapes dangling a fraction above Prince Twinkletoes’s nose, who was licking the bottom one with a long pink tongue. I was going to say something, but remembered the comment about my intelligence and returned to the kitchen to continue my chores when there was another knock.

This time there were two men, who I recognised as the folk duo The Horseshoe Creek Band, a group that enjoyed minor celebrity since recording an album five years back. The bull-chested, tall man had a fanned out ginger beard that reached to his jeans, which ended at bare feet that twinkled with silver toe rings. His companion had shoulder-length black hair, goatee and an outsize, skew nose, which was so out of proportion with the rest of his face that it appeared to have been plunked on by a make-up artist for a pantomime. His upper body, also, was not aligned to his spindly legs, something about a car accident, I recalled, which gave him a walk like someone desperately in need of the toilet.

‘Rod Day,’ said the bull-chested man in a voice that was surprisingly gentle. ‘And this is George Coetzee.’

‘So this is to be our new neighbour,’ remarked George in a rasping drawl. ‘Meredith says you’re an attorney.’

‘Not yet, I’ll only qualify at the end of the year.’

‘Don’t know what she was thinking,’ he continued, as if he hadn’t heard me. ‘A lawyer can only bring down the neighbourhood.’

‘I’ll try not to,’ I said.

‘Hear that Rod, he must be lying, his lips moved.’

‘Leave him be George,’ said Rod, pushing past me.

They joined Willie in the lounge, while I took refuge back in the kitchen after offering drinks. I was putting the bread on the table when Meredith made her grand entrance. She looked magnificent in a sheeny midnight blue caftan and matching rhinestone ornamented turban under which all her hair had been captured. She stopped at the entrance to the lounge. ‘I can’t believe you guys are sitting in here. Where are your manners, leaving Patrick in the kitchen? Now come through this instant.’

To me she said, ‘Sorry about them. Did you remember to put the chicken in at ten to?’

I nodded, pouring her a glass of red. The others straggled through as she took her first sip before seating them at the table. Willie at the head – ‘Where else for a senator?’ – Rod and George opposite me, leaving a place for Meredith and a mystery empty setting. Before sitting Meredith lit a variegated glass antique paraffin-lamp, which she placed on the centre of the table after switching off the overhead light. The pale illumination radiating downwards, then up, giving the effect of a séance on the faces. She then ladled the purplish soup into bowls and gave each a turn of pepper before decorating them with a final swirl of sour cream. She passed them round, then sat at the end of the table, leaving unoccupied the space next to me.

The soup was superb, as was the chicken that had flooded the room with herb-tinged aromas. I remained practically invisible until the dessert was served, preferring it that way as I was of an age when social inarticulation is at its most ungracious. There were some cracks about lawyers, but I’d heard them all before, and general small-talk enquiries. Mostly the floor was taken by Willie bemoaning the simple-mindedness of undergraduates, and George and Rod recounting their latest tales from small town gigs. But I was brought temporarily

into the spotlight when Willie lent back and said to Meredith, ‘You and Patrick were deep in conversation on the lawn this evening. You’re not after another toy boy?’

‘Fuck off Willie,’ she said, fixing him with a look. ‘I was discussing my terms…’

Before she could finish, the front door opened, bringing with it a human tornado.

‘A thousand sorries,’ apologised the girl, who looked and smelt as if she’d just stepped from a bath. ‘Saturday nights are the worst with the show; what with the guys getting rat-arse from ten in the morning when the pub opens.’

‘My darling, what you do is not a show,’ laughed Willie, who seemed at the stage of inebriation where he wanted to pick a fight with someone, anyone.

‘And you would know?’ she teased, tickling him under the chin before throwing her arms round his neck and kissing his forehead, kicking behind a beautifully sculpted, booted leg. Untangling herself, she turned to me and introduced herself, ‘Candy Apples. You must be the lawyer.’

‘Yes, but please, no more about my profession. I need a rest from it.’

‘I’d never say anything bad about attorneys, they are the best payers after bishops and judges,’ she smiled mischievously, the effect amplified by dimples that appeared on either side of her mouth glossed an emerald green to match her flickering eyes. To Meredith she added, ‘I really need a gin and tonic.’

She was about my age, short, deeply tanned, with straight, siren-red hair cut to her slender shoulders. Very pretty in a devilish way; her nose slightly snubbed, full lips, curling eyelashes, deep voice. Unrestrained breasts playing peekaboo

under a tie-dyed Dayglo vest; hip-hugging, minuscule white shorts unable to contain all of her derriere.

She sat next to me, took a cigarette from a silver holder, placed a hand lightly on my arm, and said, ‘Could you get me a light?’

Could I get her a light? I would have thrown myself into a pit of vipers had she asked. But I was so smitten that I nearly fluffed the simpler task at hand by fumbling in my pocket for a lighter, in a life-and-death race with George reaching for his matches, then flicking in evermore desperation as it failed to spark the first ten attempts. Willie watched this ineptitude with a growing expression of disdain, but Candy appeared oblivious and when I eventually succeeded in raising a flame she tilted in, sucked deeply so the end of the cigarette burned brightly, gave my arm a squeeze and sat back, letting smoke spiral from her nose.

Candy turned down an offer of soup, and picked sparingly at a minute portion of chicken, but did not hold back on the gin, sliding empty glasses toward me nearly as fast as I could refill them while she had a long conversation with Meredith regarding someone I did not know, but assumed an ex-boyfriend.

‘He keeps phoning,’ she said, wiggling her shoulders. ‘Two in the morning, three, four. Doesn’t he get the message?

‘They never do,’ added Meredith. ‘And it’s so ugly when they grovel.’

‘He’s not just grovelling, he’s out of his mind.’

‘Meredith, when last did someone grovel for you?’ smirked Willie.

‘I’ll have you know that Craig in sculpture is relentless. So much so that I’m starting to get the feeling that he’s four-legged. But Willie, let me tell you this

about our university: so many men – so many reasons not to sleep with any of them.'

Across from me Rod's eyes kept closing, jerking up each time his head subsided, until he pushed himself from the table and stood.

'I think I'm done for the night,' he stretched.

'Can I get you coffee or anything?' offered Meredith.

'Thanks, but I really must be getting to bed; I've had a very long week.'

That was the cue for George and Willie to begin the rituals of taking leave, but when I began to stir Candy again placed her hand on my arm and said, 'Don't go yet. I hate walking so late at night, even if it's only two doors down.'

'You could come with me,' suggested Willie. 'I do, after all, live downstairs from you.'

'But I'm not ready to go. So don't feel obliged, I'm sure Patrick won't mind.'

'Of course I don't mind,' I said, wanting to leap with joy.

The three men made their way out with hugs and kisses for the women and, for me, handshakes.

When Meredith returned from seeing them off she sighed, 'Those men can be such boors, always in a pissing contest. But they're honeys. Who wants coffee?'

'I'd rather one of those fancy brandies you keep in your booze cabinet,' replied Candy. To me she smiled, 'Have one as well. Do.'

I was torn: near the tipping-point of drunkenness where all semblance of control is lost, but unable to refuse the offer. We had five, maybe six, and I recall little else; remembering only that my tongue loosened considerably and I made them laugh with descriptions of the partners at the office. Each time Candy putting her hand on my arm, each time longer. Eventually Meredith said she'd had enough, gave me the key to downstairs and ushered us out. It took all my concentration not to stagger or slur as I made the short walk with Candy, who seemed none the worse for wear.

'What sort of show are you in?'

'Didn't they tell you? The sneaky bastards. Some people like to call it exotic dancing, but I prefer stripper. It's got more of the common touch. I like that.'

'Doesn't it bother you?'

'Why? It's by far the best use I can think of for all the baby doll pageants and ballet lessons my pushy mother forced on me. And my talent is going to take me all over the world. I'm already on a circuit that tours the country, and I'm saving so that I can go to London at the end of the year to audition for the John Raymond Revue Bar in Soho.'

The mere thought gave an extra bounce to her step, 'I'll be a star.'

When we got to her front door I said something like, 'I've never had such a wonderful time.'

'You're cute,' she said, putting her arms round my neck and kissing me hard. 'But it would spoil it in your condition. I'm off tomorrow and I'll come give your place a housewarming.'

*****

My possessions were so meagre that it took less than an hour to load my flatmate's battered Land Rover, with most space being taken by a double foam mattress. With it came two medium size suitcases, one filled with work clothes, the other with the regalia of my pretended life; a bag of toiletries, including a fairly sizeable hoard of dagga; an assortment of alcohols in various stages of consumption; books, mainly legal, files with lecture notes, and a pile of stationary pilfered from the office; a portable record player and four boxes of LPs; and a miscellany of bedding, motorbike spares, posters blotched in the corners by Prestik, and essential crockery and cutlery.

My semi, because of the slope, was somewhat smaller than upstairs, but with a similar configuration, except the kitchen and dining room were separate. When I arrived it had been swept and cleaned, the doors and windows opened for air, with little effect on the inferno brewing on that cloudless Sunday where it seemed only the screeching cicadas were not at rest. There was no furniture other than a wardrobe in the allotted bedroom, a rickety table in the lounge on which I placed the record player, and kitchen cupboards, atop which was a gift-wrapped package bearing my name. I tore it open to find Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, which was inscribed *Welcome, Meredith xxx* on the inside.

Soon after I received a visit from Prince Twinkletoes, hearing the scuff of his paws down the alley before he entered. He let me scratch his ear for the first time, but lost interest when it dawned there was no food and he went into the garden to sniff a molehill. When I finished unpacking I put on Country Joe and the Fish's *I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die* album before going round to put up posters, mainly covering the ghost of outlines left by long-removed picture frames. Among them the blown-up psychedelia of the Rolling Stones' *Parable of the Arable Land* and *Jefferson Airplane Takes Off*. And in my bedroom, opposite where I had placed the mattress, I stuck a quote from Timothy Leary: *You have to be out of your mind to use your head*.

I was draping a red sheet over the curtain rail above the bed when I heard the needle of the record player scratch as it was lifted. In the lounge I found Candy

going through the LPs. She was wearing old jeans, a pink, rose-emblazoned T-shirt and no makeup, which made her appear softer than last night.

She flashed me a dazzling smile, ‘Need something livelier to go with my housewarming present.’

‘You shouldn’t have,’ I objected weakly.

‘I don’t think you’ll say that when you get it.’

‘Drink?’

‘No, nor for you,’ she said firmly, but with a wink. ‘What I do want you to do is sit against the wall and stay there. And don’t move.’

I did as ordered while she continued going through the albums, at times stopping to read a sleeve. When she got to *The Velvet Underground and Nico* she said, ‘At last.’

She put it on, turned up the volume, and reached into a cloth bag, taking out a yellow Mills cigarette tin, and slithered over before opening it.

‘Close your eyes and open your mouth.’

When I did, she placed a sugar cube on my tongue and said, ‘Have a wild ride.’

‘What is it?’

‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,’ she sang, popping a cube in her mouth as she stood.

She began a rhythmic dance to *Sunday Morning*, not much more than a lifting of her hands to behind her ears and a roll of the shoulders that slowly moved down

to her hips and knees. Her pace quickened with *I'm Waiting for the Man*, and she turned her back to me as she bent to loosen her sandals, kicking them off. By the end of *Femme Fatale* she had removed her top and I was about ready to burst, restrained only by the knowledge that it would have wrecked the moment. Her jeans started descending in *Venus in Furs*, ending frenetically on the floor at the culmination of *Run Run Run*. Followed by her panties during *All Tomorrow's Parties*.

She turned to me at the start of *Heroin*, smiling at me through an orange sunset filled with butterflies. The walls were moving, on which the members of Pink Floyd came to life. Jesus, too, walking from a magenta cloud:

> I don't know just where I'm going
> But I'm going to try for the kingdom if I can

A coral mushroom in the fireplace, a kaleidoscopic cosmos, a tulip growing from Candy's breast as she started removing my T-shirt. Music dribbling from the ceiling, a thrash of drums in my heart, a piano tinkling in heaven. My shorts coming off, a golden monkey rising from my loins. A riot of dahlias. The Jefferson Airplane flying away. Then I was at the beach, timeless, the ocean washing over me, my back arched. Candy, on me in the surf, fragmenting into sparkles playing on the surface, reconfiguring into a flame-headed deity riding the waves that crash through me. Euphoria.

I'm not sure how long it lasted. Six hours, probably eight, because it was late afternoon when I stopped tripping. Candy was asleep on my shoulder and I gently untangled myself, walking naked to the kitchen where I had a long drink of water from the tap that spluttered a brown mess before flowing clear. I poured a scotch, two fingers, toasting the day and my luck at having stumbled into paradise. I was in love, adolescent, supernova-like love. For now my star was burning bright and I refilled my drink and poured another for Candy.

'That was nice,' she said, cuddling close when I sat next to her and passed her a glass.

We got drunk, and as we did we made love on the mattress, in the kitchen, under the willow. And over the next few weeks we expanded our locales to every room in her semi, different spots in the garden, and wherever my BSA headed on a Sunday. I once went to see her show at the Polo Tavern, the highlight of which was a bath scene with co-performers Rhina Horn and Strawberry Fields, which explained her freshly-washed fragrance the first time we met. But I never went back, never again wanting to see other men slavering over her, wanting to shut from my mind the idea that she supplemented her income by sleeping with some of them. An intrusion of reality that began to consume the supernova. But it took most of the approaching winter to accept this, both declaring throughout that it was too good to end.

Where did it end for her? I cannot be sure it ever began because the one thing that never changed was her plan to head for Soho at the beginning of the northern winter: 'Which forces everybody indoors and into the clubs.'

'You could come to London after the board exam,' she would say, twirling the hairs on my chest with a finger. 'We could tour Europe and get married in Paris; the wedding entourage arriving on motorbikes. Wouldn't that be cool?'

We both knew that was not going to happen, but never spoke it. Then there were the weeks she was away, more distant each time she returned. A foretaste of London; the cut-off point, the end.

I cannot pinpoint the precise moment it began to fizzle out for me. It might have been the Polo Tavern, but that is unlikely as I was still enthralled. Maybe it was the knowledge, the knowing but wanting to unknow, that as sure as there is nothing after death there was nothing after London. But I do know the exact moment I started looking forward to her catching that aeroplane. And, again, LSD played the starring role. I should never have taken it that day as the atmosphere was wrong: we'd had a silly fight over my forgetting to buy bread; Willie had complained about the noise of my motorbike so early on a Sunday

morning; and she was leaving for a few weeks the following morning, having already packed all her paraphernalia in her travelling trunk.

It was not my trip, but the insight. Somewhere along the way my mother became enmeshed in my vivid world. A molten, crimson glob that jelled into a death's-head that was unmistakeably her for it was the image etched into my mind from the last time I had seen her at her sister Helen. She was virtually immobilised by depression. Slowly the picture mutated until what I was looking at was I. I had become my mother, and Candy was my father, and I knew then what had possessed my mother to marry him. By wanting to escape what my father wanted for me, I had fallen into the clutches of my mother, and her past had become my present and her present was my future.

It became desperately urgent for me to extricate myself from the life I was creating, because something away from all this was stirring within, something exciting, a hankering I could no longer stifle, a feeling reminiscent of that night in the cellar. Magnified when I heard an aircraft fly overhead and, later, the rumble of a motorbike along the highway deep in the night. The following evening I was thankful to be on my own, not caring what Candy was doing with whom wherever she was. I poured a glass of wine, and rummaged amongst the books littering my bedroom floor until I found the unread gift from Meredith and settled back on the mattress.

In the first paragraph Kerouac wrote: 'Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning but never taking off.' Was he referring to me? And he finished the chapter with: 'Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.' I had to go. God, I had to go. Just qualify first. My mother clinging like a giant squid. Then rescue from an unexpected source. In the second paragraph of the next chapter he wrote: 'I'd been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savouring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the road-map was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod

clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles.' Breathing space. I, too, needed to pore over maps for months, read books about the pioneers and savour the names of places. It was massively convenient that the 'months' I gave myself coincided exactly with my board exams early the following year.

I could hardly contain myself as I ran up the alley and knocked on Meredith's door. She was wearing a nightgown printed with little flowers, and did not look at all pleased to see me.

'Is something wrong?'

'Not at all. I need one of those brandies.'

'I was getting ready for bed.'

'Well get unready, I have great news.'

'It had better be good,' she said, standing aside so I could enter.

'It is, as soon as I'm qualified I'm going to hit the road, go to every place in this country and write about it. Visit the people you've told me about and tell their stories.'

'I'm very pleased to hear that,' she said, passing me a glass. 'But why not go now?'

'I thought of it,' I lied. 'But I need to spend some time planning so I have a good idea where I'm going and what I'm going to do when I get there.'

'Never start with a premise,' she advised curtly. 'If you know where you're going there is no point in starting out. The only justification for travel is the unknown landscape – one that you discover for yourself.'

‘That’s very romantic, but I can’t just go out there with nothing.’

‘And you think you’re going to find something on a map, or in a book? Crap. You have to discover it yourself. You know what I think? That you’re still not ready. Now I really must go to bed.’

I was deflated and irritated as I returned to my room, but convinced I was right. It would be reckless to just go into a virtual unknown, and a few months before I received a qualification I could always fall back on. So I followed my plan and before Candy returned I’d finished Kerouac, and read a stack of books from Herman Charles Bosman to Alan Paton, Eve Palmer to Pauline Smith, and TV Bulpin to Lawrence Green. And my Route 6 was the N1 and N2 and N3 and…Kimberley, Mafeking, Port Nolloth, Hillbrow, Lady Grey…

When Candy got back I was more excited than when I broke the news to Meredith. But she was even less enthusiastic as she undressed for bed, ‘But what about London? I received a bonus in Johannesburg; enough for a ticket, and I’m going at the end of the month. What happened to our plans for you to join me so we could see Europe?’

‘It’s something I have to do,’ I said fluffing out her pillow. ‘I’ve already wasted so much. But I tell you what, when I get back I’ll come over.’

It was another reference to our mythical future that was never going to happen; absolutely certain of it a few weeks later as I watched her walk across the tarmac in Durban to catch her connecting flight to Johannesburg. She was wearing the same shorts and boots as the day we met, a black coat draped over her arm, travelling bag on the other shoulder, deep in conversation with a young man, his long hair in a ponytail. I was already history. As I turned to go, slightly empty, mostly relieved, it struck me that I did not even know her real name.

When I got into Meredith’s Kombi to return to Pietermaritzburg she put her hand on my leg and said, ‘You OK?’

‘I’m fine. Really,’ I coughed. ‘What I do need is a chemist, my throat is killing me.’

‘I wondered when those midnight garden romps were going to take their toll,’ she snickered, as she put the van into reverse. ‘The two of you were like rabbits.’

‘That’s all we were.’

By the time we got back, having stopped at a pharmacy along the way for a variety of over-the-counter remedies, I was sweating. A cold clamminess that permeated my bones, sending agonising shivers from head to toe.

‘Oh dear, I think you had better stay the night with me,’ said Meredith, parking at the front of her house so I did not have to take the walk from the lane to my bed. ‘I’ll run you a hot bath and make some soup. Read you a bedtime story.’

I laughed, or tried to, wheeze, cough, wheeze, cough. Then tears. Great shuddering sobs for the first time since my father’s death. A flood of sadness at loss, sickness, unrealised dreams, the kindness of a virtual stranger, a counterpart in my universe that I had not recognised until now.

‘Oh you poor, poor thing,’ said Meredith, hugging me so I could cry like a baby in the hollowness between chin and bosom.

The doctor said it was a bad dose of tonsillitis. I knew differently as I lay on a bed in Meredith’s guest room. I experienced pain so severe it contorted me into a stiff ball. Foetal. My skin burning, brain frying. Turned to the wall, red, painful eyes shut tight to block the vertigo of falling through an abyss of loneliness and grief, impotence and hopelessness, rage and despair. Then, when the agony subsided, LSD flashbacks. Ghosts floating above. My father and mother pulling me into their worlds. Cecil Nathan, too, with bald, mottled head,

the skin tight over his skull. A nightmare, a daze, a sense of desolation hanging over me like a shroud. And I sank into something very much like a coma, but knew I was alive because I remember Meredith giving me massages and wetting my lips. Her presence as real as the ghouls that haunted me.

Then, when I was nearer death than life, a sudden surge in energy. It was a divine window to my soul; a timeless moment, my pearl, in which I saw myself travelling a road of discovery.

On the morning I returned to work Meredith was waiting at her post-box outside her front door, Prince Twinkletoes next to her licking his balls. She waved me to stop.

‘Patrick, can you come in for a moment?’ she said, sifting through mail.

‘Can it wait till this evening, I’m running late and I’ve already been off for two weeks?’

‘No,’ she frowned. ‘And it won’t take more than a minute.’

When inside, I said, ‘Meredith, I must thank you for nursing me. You didn’t have to do it, and I’m most grateful.’

‘It’s what people do for each other,’ placing the mail on the telephone table. ‘But I didn’t call you in to receive your gratitude, but to remind you of our agreement. When you moved in we had an understanding that I could give you twenty-four hours notice. I’m exercising that right and I want you out by this time tomorrow.’

‘But…’

‘No buts,’ she flashed. ‘We had an agreement. Don’t let my last memory of you be of a person without honour.’

‘I start exams in a month,’ I said, dumbfounded.

‘That’s something you need to work out for yourself. Now run along, you’re going to be late for lawyering.’

I was angry and in a complete fuzz. How could she do this to me? I slammed the door of my office when I got in, slumped into my chair, and for a moment rested my forehead on the desk so I could look unseeing at my boots while I tried to think. Who could I impose on – Jim, Alex, Eric…? I was about to start phoning when I saw a file on my desk. Shit. I had to be at the Camperdown Magistrates Court in a half hour to represent Edgars Stores for a small debt that had grown out of all proportion because of pitiless legal costs.

As I rushed out, putting my legal gown over my shoulders, Merle was waiting, ‘Not so fast. There are a few things for Mr Nathan.’

‘I’m in court in a half hour, I’ll see you later.’

I made it just in time, only to find that the matter being heard before mine was causing delays. I went into the corridor and sat on a wooden bench. Great, I thought to myself, obstacles when I most need things to happen quickly. While contemplating my woes I gradually became aware of two things: an elderly black woman dressed in mourning clothes at a bench further down, and a faint odour of urine. The toilets were close to where I was sitting, but it was not from there. It was everywhere, in the walls and in the floors, and I recognised it for what it was.

Picking up the file I began the flick through. Gloria Vilakazi was the name on the Edgars contract she had accepted with an X. A simple mark threatening to ruin her life in what had started out as a purchase of school clothes. Further on there were letters of demand, a summons, judgement, writs, garnishee orders, tracing agents after she changed jobs and, the latest, a warrant of arrest and a

motion for imprisonment for contempt for not maintaining the onerous terms set out in the original order of court. I closed the file and walked to the Clerk of the Court to remove the matter from the roll.

Returning to the woman, I asked, ‘Are you Mrs Vilakazi?’

She looked up and in a gentle voice replied, ‘Yes, that is I.’

‘This is the file with the records of your debt. Take it home and burn it.’

‘But sir, I’ll get into more trouble.’

‘No you won’t, I’m the attorney for Edgars and I’m going to note the matter as finalised.’

Back in Pietermaritzburg I took a detour past Meredith. When she opened the door I flung my arms round her neck and repeated, ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’

‘No,’ she smiled. ‘If it is what I think, then you’ve saved your own.’

Turning to go, I added, ‘I have one more thing to do, then I’ll be back. Put lots of wine in the fridge, we’re going to have a bonfire and the party of my life.’

At the office Merle had been stewing, ‘It’s about time, Mr Nathan needs to see you urgently.’

‘Tell him to fuck himself.’

Chapter 3

The following morning I hit the road west, opening the throttle to take the motorbike beyond 100mph, keeping it howling at that speed until I got to Johannesburg. For a week I immersed myself in Hillbrow and the dim rock 'n roll clubs in the city centre. Red lights and strip joints, whatever drug the heart desired. Puke and sleeping on the floor and a bottle-blond named Ina. Did I ask her to marry me? And blurry 'immortality' races against the flow of traffic up Claim Street. Then Cape Town and a swing along the coast to Durban.

At the end of each day I chronicled my rebirth in a diary. Alongside people and places were joy and searing doubt. Fluctuations in emotion that I tried to blow away by riding at the very limit, only to find that what I was running from was with me all the way as a crazed pillion passenger. Reach higher…have another drink…go faster…take another pill…turn round…ask Cecil Nathan to take you back. Where am I going…how far will my journey be…will I find my pearl…will I recognise it when I see it? Where is love in all this…have I ever felt love…will I know it when it comes? Was Candy love…or was it that thing she used to do with her teeth on my dick? All unresolved when I returned to Johannesburg just after Christmas, and went in search of dagga dealer Popeye at Hillbrow Records.

'Hey, Popeye,' I said, slipping a note to the heavily tattooed man. 'Need to score.'

'Meet me in the alley.'

Outside he handed me a plastic packet along with an invitation.

'This is a not-to-be-missed event on New Year's Day – the inaugural Bonglympics at the Woodstock commune between Swartruggens and Groot Marico. Tell Terence I said you were cool.'

‘Sounds like a blast.’

‘Yeah, but don’t sprout it about. Last thing we want are pigs spoiling the party.’

‘My lips are sealed.’

*****

It took some time to find the dirt road leading to Woodstock since the sign ‘T Evans’ that the invitation said to look for was obscured by thorn trees. The track was appalling, running below a rocky ravine, over sandy riverbeds and into a secret valley once used by rustlers. At the end was a series of long, featureless buildings and a number of rondavels scattered round the unkempt garden. Above the entrance was a green banner: ‘Fuck the Law’, which hardly fluttered in the steamy air.

Though I arrived a half hour after the scheduled starting time of the event dubbed ‘going for green’, it was obvious matters were running much later.

‘Here things happen at their own time,’ shrugged Terence Evans, conceiver of the games and ‘make it up as we go’ referee and judge.

‘Popeye told me about this happening.’

‘If he said you’re cool, then you’re cool,’ said the young scraggy-bearded man wearing a ‘Burn the Evidence’ T-shirt, over which an ethnic necklace cascaded together with his long ginger hair.

‘I might want to stay a few days.’

‘No problem,’ he pointed. ‘If you follow the path behind the house you’ll find a cave in the koppie. You can park off there as long as you like. Will you be participating?’

‘No, I’ll have a puff, but I get nauseous if I smoke too much.’

‘Be free,’ he said rubbing his eyes. ‘But make a contribution for what you use.’

‘How much?’

‘That’s between you and your god.’

I took my sleeping bag and a few toiletries up the steep walk through the vegetable garden to the cave.

I returned through the building, which was eclectically decorated with kitsch light-fittings, stickers promising ‘loose women admitted free’, a set of obscene finger-gesture statuettes, and walls painted with underwater scenes that swam into lush pastures. In the vine-shaded courtyard, at a long table just off the kitchen, a group of participants prepared the dagga to be used in the one-hit competition bongs. At one end of the table, Darool juggled a trio of balls, and at the other a record player blared:

> Granny won’t you smoke some
> I used to sing about booze
> Now I sing about the stuff I use.

The garden, in the centre of which a German shepherd was attempting to hump an unwilling staffie, was littered with Buddhas, magic men, a ballerina, plastic hands, a purple head, and Kilroy. Further down, a kaleidoscopically painted bar where *mampoer* was served from plastic bottles. There, piano keys were painted onto the windowsills and the walls covered in chameleons, altering the landscape from tropical to African savannah. Terence’s depiction of a tiger as king of the jungle completed the scene.

‘The tiger was stuck in my head and this was the only way to get him out,’ he explained.

All the participants were barefoot and wearing toe-rings and ‘Legalise It’ T-shirts. Dagga Davis was asleep under a tree; Ang was practising intently on a sweet-smelling spliff as fat as a Churchill cigar; and Big Chief Sitting Handbrake kicked his motorbike to life and roared about the grounds. Hammerhead’s non-arrival, it transpired, was the reason for the delay.

‘I need to get home tonight,’ whined Ambush. ‘Why don’t we just start without him?’

‘Chill!’ admonishes T. ‘Time is not of the essence.’

Terence appeared unfazed by the impatience, busying himself with testing and selecting bongs from a collection that included one that looked like an iced condom, and finalising the rules and order of events. The rules, as expected, were kept as simple as possible. To begin, there was only one: contestants were obliged to inhale and hold each hit for five seconds.

‘Can I hold for longer?’ asked Elli.

Just as it appeared that Terence would be forced to start without Hammerhead, a white Opel skidded to a halt, disgorging a woman with pink highlighted hair and a large man wearing black-rimmed glasses and baggy shorts.

‘Hammerhead, my man.’

‘My man, my arse,’ hurumphed Hammerhead’s companion. ‘I thought we’d never get here. We were already on the other side of Mafeking when I said to him, “Phone Terence for directions.” But no, Bozo just replied, “Let’s first make sure we’re lost.”’

‘Hey mon, can I warm-up with a spliff before we start,’ drooled Hammerhead, unconcerned by the tirade.

‘Here.’

‘OK, listen up, let’s get started.’

‘I haven’t seen Dagga Davis for some time.’

‘He’s asleep under a tree near the pool.’

‘Give him a nasal shotgun.’

‘Can I?’ offered Hammerhead.

Dagga Davis was propped against the trunk, his head lolling and a dribble of saliva running from the corner of his mouth. Hammerhead drew deeply on a joint, gently positioned a pair of straws in Dagga Davis’s nostrils and exhaled sharply up them. The effect is immediate: Dagga Davis opened his glazed eyes, jumped to his feet and staggered about like a zombie. Matters descended rapidly from there.

The first event was a qualifying heat, in which men had to speed-smoke three bongs, and women two. It appeared that this served absolutely no purpose, as no one was disqualified.

‘Why only two?’ sulked Shanna. ‘We should be treated as equals.’

Terence, to mollify her, passed her a bong to smoke in the meantime; while Droid was forced to exhale. The next event, billed the ‘Marie biscuit warm-up’, involved the dry-mouthed participants having to eat a Marie biscuit, speed-smoke five bongs, eat another Marie biscuit, and then whistle without spraying crumbs – all on pain of a ten-second penalty. Macaroni lost time for dunking his Marie biscuit in bong water and Ang for spraying hers when she got the giggles.

This was followed by a seven-bong Speedline Marathon and the obstacle course that included a 150-metre dash to the bar, drinking a shot of *mampoer*, returning with a mug of water, speed-smoking five bongs and downing the water. After this, times were computed, and the top three men and two women went through to the seven-bong speed final, where Hammerhead and Ellie emerged victorious to take the red-eye bong trophies.

'Give them a drugs test,' demanded runners-up Macaroni and Ang.

I stayed at Woodstock for ten days. During that time I swam in the river and once ate magic mushrooms stored in a tin bearing a quote from the Matatec shaman Maria Sabina:

> The sacred mushroom takes me by the hand and brings me to the world where everything is known.

My trip was to a lilac world very similar to Meredith's garden in Pietermaritzburg. It was an inner journey in which I chronicled the lives of Helen Martins and Nukain Mabusa and people I had never heard of. And when I came down from my high I plotted the way to Nieu Bethesda.

*****

'This is my world,' proclaimed the wire sign on the fence to the right of the white, flat-roofed Karoo cottage.

I climbed the four steps from the street to the verandah shaded by curved galvanising, treading carefully to avoid the painted snowflakes that banked leftwards into a drift of crushed glass against the wall. Come in from the cold, it suggested, on a morning when the heat at just after eight was approaching infernal. Further along, before a shuttered window, was a sentry of eight concrete owls on permanent duty. Another, its wings outstretched, protected the front door heavily frosted with yellow suns and inscribed The Owl House. I knocked, using the code given to me by Meredith.

‘Miss Helen will try get rid of you with her village idiot act,’ she had advised, before I left Pietermaritzburg. ‘She hates any distraction as she’s frantic to finish the Camel Yard before her eyesight goes, which is failing fast. But as she’s obsessed by light there’re a few things you can do to shift the odds in your favour. Take her a gift, maybe a fancy candle, and arrive at full moon when she revels in her creation.’

Helen Martins, when she opened the door, was tinier than I expected. She was stooped, hardly to my chest, and as fragile as a flufftail, except for a huge nose and outsized hands, scarred by years of working with glass. Her complexion was as ashen as a ghost, an impression reinforced by milky-blue eyes, wispy grey hair and granny beard. And, hanging shapelessly from her skeletal frame was a jade floral dress which reached to just above four-toed feet in aquamarine slipslops. About her was a spicy poignancy, maybe cloves.

‘Miss Martins, so sorry to bother you, I’m Pat Hopkins. I’m a writer, a friend of Meredith Crimp, who suggested I do an article about you and your house…’

‘Patter cake, patter cake, baker’s man,’ she sang in a thin, reedy voice, doing a twirl, her arms flapping like a bird.

‘Sorry…’

‘Come back Peter, come back Paul. Fly away Peter, fly away Paul. Fly away Pat.’

‘I won’t take…’

But she shut the door before I could assure her that I would not take too much time as I already had the outline of her story. As I descended the steps there was a cacophony to the right of the house in the yard behind a fence barricaded tightly by queen of the night cacti. Finding a small gap, I caught sight of her

hobbling through what I assumed was the Camel Yard; a net enclosed chaos of cement owls and wise men and mermaids and pyramids and sphinxes and fantastical creatures on which roosted a gaggle of geese, bantams, laughing doves and wild birds.

I crossed the road to where I had parked my motorbike under a broad-canopied pepper tree and lifted the flap of one of the panniers, taking from it a newspaper wrapped antique lamp with emerald glass that I had seen in the window of a shop in Simonstown. I returned and placed it on the porch, before going to the fence.

'Miss Martins,' I called.

She scooted behind an Easter Island head, peering round long enough to say, 'Fly away Pat.'

'I've left something for you at the door. I'll not bother you again, but I'd very much like to see your house. So I'm going to wait under the tree across the road until tonight, then I'll leave if I've not received an invite.'

I laid out a groundsheet and sat against the tree, surrounded by a warm bottle of Coke, rusks, cigarettes, diary and a notepad. I took a swig and lit up, my eyes on the front door, which opened soon after as the old woman bent to pick up my offering. She brought it close to her face and turned it, before going back inside, not once looking my way.

'A joyful place, but dark too,' wrote Meredith in the conclusion to a paper on The Owl House. 'What is the significance of the oft repeated Mona Lisa? Or the pantry, which in her new order became Bluebeard's Chamber, an obvious reference to the 17th century fairytale of a wife who opens a forbidden door to find the floor covered in blood and the mutilated bodies of her husband's former wives hung from walls? Or the small area called Debauchery Corner in the Camel Yard containing the mythical Cock Man and a lion guarding the room to

which her father was exiled. A place encrusted with black glass and bricked up after his death; sealing secrets we can never know for sure.'

Martins, the youngest of ten children, was born in this house. Her combative, deeply religious father owned a small dairy herd that supplied the town with milk. He was also idiosyncratic: so paranoid about germs that he blocked the keyhole to the pantry to prevent bugs entering, yet forbade the washing of some food receptacles as they contained 'clean dirt'.

'Leave me alone, can't you see I'm busy?' he once shouted at a neighbour when asked why he was lying on the verandah with his head in a box.

The only offspring still residing at home, Helen was practising her piano scales one evening when her father returned. In a long mirror in the entrance hall he caught sight of himself. Or, rather, he saw a lion. Barging into the kitchen, he grabbed his wife round the waist with one arm and placed a hand over her mouth as he pushed her into the pantry and locked her in. By the time she started pounding on the door he had undone his trousers and stepped from them, his massive blue headed cock already hardening as he went in search of his daughter they called the Mona Lisa.

Helen backed into a corner as her father bore down, managing to evade his grasp as he lunged. She ran into the yard, taking refuge in the dark of the outside room, but her father saw her and followed.

Later, as the girl lay on her bed, her mother came into the room and took her in her arms, 'Helen, my darling, I could kill him in his sleep, but that would cause more problems. How would we live? Where would we go? But I promise you this, before his life is through we will take our revenge. Now you must promise that you'll never speak of this outside this house. We could never bear the humiliation.'

But as the rapes became more frequent, and Helen became increasingly withdrawn, the community realised something was amiss. And they became complicit when they closed their eyes in the same way as they did when they prayed. In turn she became their hell, and they cast her out so as not to be reminded of their shame, relieved when she left for training college.

After qualifying as a teacher, Martins met and married Johannes Pienaar who had a travelling acting troupe. While on the road she fell pregnant twice, both terminated because neither spouse wanted children – she fearing they would be born with devil horns and a tail. Unable to tolerate his infidelities, she eventually divorced him.

‘Mamma, I never want to see him again,’ said Helen, giving her mother the news over the telephone.

‘What will you do?’

‘I don’t know, maybe I’ll take a teaching job in Pretoria.’

‘But that’s so far. Why not come home? I’m not well, and I fear I’ve not long to go.’

‘Oh Mamma.’

‘Helen, it’s the duty of the youngest child to care for her aging parents.’

‘I know Mamma, but I can’t live in the house with him.’

‘He’s weak now.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’

‘I’ll force him into the outside room. He can see out his days alone with his sin.’

Helen returned to Nieu Bethesda to care for her ailing mother, who died in 1941. Her father, at this stage suffering from bowel cancer, passed away four years later – exiled in the outside room. A short while later Martins fell ill, during which time she had a dream.

'There was light ahead,' she recalled. 'A star coming my way, growing round like the sun, growing bigger every minute, so white that it was a white blaze, with time streaming from its spears. It was God and his face was shining in that white light. And He instructed me to reorder the world, fill it with light, the light of his child who would come to save us.'

Martins left her sickbed the following morning. 'It's a good day to live! It's a good day to live!' she sang as she skipped through her house. 'And on the first day God banished hell from here and on the second he said let there be light so that those in the dark will see once more.'

The first thing she did was to establish her faith. It was like no other. As a starting point she extracted the best from the major religions, which she moulded into a creed where God was the centre of her existence. His light shining on her, the Divine Child cast from Paradise for the sins of others. A god not to be feared. One did not tremble before your true father. Rather, he was to be loved and celebrated unconditionally; with such radiant joy that her world would become a beacon in a pit of darkness.

But Martins did not have the resources to tackle Earth, only her world – her house in Nieu Bethesda. She walked round it many times, studying how the light from the sun and the moon fell through the year; and when she needed to think she went into the garden. Paradise. And so a picture of breathtaking clarity began to form in her mind.

She envisioned a place of enlightenment. A triumph of good over evil. And as God's representative she would mirror earth with her heaven, a place where she

was God. There would be succour for the pariah, healing pools for the sick, guidance for the lost, and refreshment for the weary. A wonderment from which one emerged cleansed, reborn.

But she did not have the strength or skill to give effect to her plan, so she employed a string of helpers from Frans Olifant to the onetime sheepshearer, Koos Malgas. With their help she knocked out interior walls and replaced them with red, orange, yellow and green panes of glass. Those that remained, as well as furniture and ceilings and every available surface, were covered with patterns from glued, finely crushed glass. A smiling sun beamed down. All carefully considered to let in light, alter and reflect it. Then she set about telling the story of Creation in her garden. There were statues and stars and crosses and Meccas at all points. Amongst them were trees and birds in a helter-skelter merry-go-round of life and imagery, the real and the imagined. The transient and the frozen in concrete.

And once she began transforming her world she turned from mystic philosopher to overdrive doer. As her helpers crafted she mixed cement and crushed glass in an ever greater frenzy to keep pace with what was happening in her head. A fervour that would cripple her, and a dust from glass and cement and semi-desert that would blind her.

Sitting outside, I found a fresh page in my diary and titled it *January 1975 – Nieu Bethesda*:

> Nieu Bethesda, named after the biblical healing pool stirred by the wing of an angel, is an oasis at the end of a dirt road that switchbacks through arid Karoo countryside. Cloistered in a confine of the Sneeuberge, it is dominated by a massive whitewashed Dutch Reformed Church with a tall panopticon spire that has an unimpeded view of all that cowers in its presence. Its Calvinistic authority challenged only by a remarkable house on River Street on its western fringe.

> When I arrived, the growl of the motorbike amplified by the surrounding bastille, it appeared I had entered the *Village of the Damned*. Nothing stirred: not the sheep clustered under any available shade offered by poplars and wild pears; not a bird in the sky; not a breeze to creak the windmills. Not an open shop, not a single human. Then the sound of an organ and the first discordant line of a hymn. Aaah, Sunday.

In the early afternoon I dozed, jerked awake by the unconscious realisation of a presence. Martins stood over me with two buckets.

'The dammetjies need filling, so make yourself useful' she said, holding out the containers. 'When you come back from the river, go through the kitchen to the Camel Yard, I'll be waiting.'

My fingers ached from the weight as I stepped into Helen Martin's realm. A dazzle of light and colour unified by strategically placed mirrors that created a hallucinatory infinity in which floated cupids, fluffy toys, baskets of plastic fruit, reproductions of the Mona Lisa, scarves and Christmas cards. Beds were made and the table permanently set for future arrivals. Pilgrims? Maybe God? On the ceiling was an upturned vase, and on a remaining wall a Victorian print of a nude winged-male bearing off a long-haired woman. Affixed to the frame was a note:

Reunion

Guess now who holds thee
'Death' I said: But There
The Silver Answer Rang
Not Death, But Love.

'Come! Come!' she beckoned, as I entered the Camel Yard. 'There's no time to stand about, there's work to be done. Fill the ponds and the birdbaths.'

When I returned the third time she instructed, 'Remember to pour a dash into the debauched man's lap.'

I looked round, trying to locate Debauchery Corner among the 500 statues cramming the small yard. She pointed, then cackled after I went over and splashed water into the hollow of the seated figure with red jacket and brown cap, as it gave the appearance it had wet its pants. Next to it, scratched in concrete:

Now he knows the terrible fate
Who overcomes all gluttons
He will reform before it's too late,
And do up all his buttons!

After the fifth traipse to the river there was tea on a table and she gestured for me to help myself, 'And try a tammeletjie. I made them myself.'

The tea was insipid and the biscuit foul, but they were like manna in the baking heat despite it being late enough in the afternoon for the dust-laden sky to be tinted a rose-water hue. While I rested, she buzzed round the yard inspecting statues, cleaning off bird droppings, and, with her fingers, bracketing specific areas like a Hollywood director.

All the while she spoke to herself: 'Must paint the camels…time's running out…if I stop, death…hollow out the apex of the pyramid and have a statue emerging…I see through the mist…why is this happening to me, I who have done nothing…the shepherd needs a coat, it's freezing…the gathering darkness, I'm so depressed…dying isn't the problem, living is…God, why have you forsaken me?'

Then she recited a verse from the *Rubaiyat*;

And, proffering his cup, invites your Soul
Forth to your Lips to Quaff it – do not shrink.

'Walk with me,' she said, when I put my cup down. Breezily, she pointed to a model of the church in the centre of Nieu Bethesda, 'Look, my temple.'

She loomed over it, adjusting the star on the steeple. Then she described the flow of the statues; from east to west and north to south, which she designated as the mystical East – a corner in which the four-toed Divine Child waited for the wise men surging urgently through the desert on camels, ‘following yonder shining star’ in the form of a car’s headlamp mounted above the manger. And it all made sense as the setting sun appeared as if rising in this mirrored world. Feminine and masculine; purity and wantonness; hope and despair; light and dark; redemption and damnation; heaven and hell; life and death.

Martins was becoming increasingly agitated, which gave me the feeling of being an intruder, so I said, ‘Thank you so much for showing me your home, I’ll be on my way.’

‘Oh Patrick, you must think of me as such a silly old lady,’ she said, calming suddenly. ‘I don’t want you to go. The reason I’m jittery is because it’s full moon tonight and I have to prepare for my little glory. Stay, I think you’ll like it.’

Inside, she unhooked the coloured paraffin lamps hanging from the ceiling and took down candles from the rows of shelves in the kitchen. After they were lit, she began a three hour ritual, which started in the rudimentary bathroom with a mermaid preening itself on the edge of the tub. As we moved through the rest of the house she positioned the lights, shifting mirrors and strings of glitter to enhance the celebratory kaleidoscope.

All the while she spoke, slowly at first, then quicker, breathlessly. It was a game and conversation in which I had no part, other than as spectator. She wanted nothing from me, to know nothing of me, this was about her. Her magical carpet rides to holy places; Jerusalem, Mecca, Lhasa, Shangri-La. And when the candles and lamps were lit she pulled two mattresses through to the kitchen and fussed about where exactly to place them. When satisfied she lay on one and patted for me to join her on the other. As I put my head down the moon rose

above the courtyard, shining through the cut-out half-moons and stars and suns in the Camel Yard and into the house to play and bounce off glimmering surfaces in a hypnotic, heavenly swirl.

The show continued for hours. When the moon passed, she turned to me and said, ‘Patrick, you can go now.’

When I got back to the motorbike, I put on a jacket and lit a cigarette, my mind a rush. A few minutes later I saw a light moving in the Camel Yard and walked over to the peep hole through the cacti, where I could just make out Martins illuminating her way through the statues with the lamp I gave her. She was limping towards the Divine Child, where she sat. Naked.

*****

It was misty with fine rain nettling my face the following night when I rode through Barberton towards Revolver Creek. Passing the Noordkaap Hotel, I decided to sleep in a bed for the second time since hitting the road. Slowing to U-turn, I gunned the motor back to the entrance, the bike fishtailing as it battled for traction.

The receptionist giggled when she saw me, soaked through, hair and beard matted to my face, a droplet clinging to the end of my nose. My reservation processed, she said, ‘I’ll get someone to show you to your room. As we weren’t expecting guests we let most of the kitchen staff go, so there won’t be dinner. But you can order a sandwich in the Hanging Tree Pub. Breakfast is from seven to nine. Enjoy your stay.’

After I freshened up, I selected my driest clothes and headed for the bar, its walls clad with corrugated iron from which hung mining memorabilia to evoke the gold rush of a century ago. But that was as far as the theme went, as the rest of the space was decorated with such appalling taste that it took on an appeal of its own. Signs ‘If a man can’t drink when he’s living, how the fuck can he drink

when he's dead?' and 'Do infants have as much fun in infancy as adults have in adultery?' competed for space with plastic flowers, rubber breasts, erect penis ashtrays, a bronzed mielie captioned 'Free State Vibrator' and *Scope* centrefolds. From a speaker rasped 'Momma get the hammer (there's a fly on pappa's head)'.

At one end of the counter a drunk, to hysterical laughter, entertained a group with his false teeth trick. With sleight of hand he removed his dentures and returned them, apparently without opening his mouth. I made for the other side and sat on a stool.

'Howzit, stranger,' greeted the grizzled, yellow-bandannaed barman, pulling himself away from the clown. 'What can I get you?'

'A toasted cheese n' tomato, chips and a Lion Ale.'

He stuck his head through a hatch and shouted the order before taking a beer from the fridge and opening it. No glass was offered and I drank from the bottle.

'Come from far?'

'Yeah,' I replied in a tone that implied I did not want to indulge in barroom chat.

But he did not take the hint, 'So what brings you here?'

'I want to interview Nukain Mabusa, who I believe lives just down the road.'

'The crazy man, he's about two kilometres from here,' he sneered. 'I know him pretty well. Would you like me to take you there?'

'Thanks, but I'd prefer to speak to him alone.' So as not to offend him, I added, 'Have a drink.'

He smiled, took a bottle of brandy from a shelf, poured a shot, downed it neat, winced and wiped his mouth. Within ten minutes he told me his name was Danny Brink; had been a cycling champion in the 1950s; and was working for a construction company in Barberton when a travel writer arrived looking for someone with the right features to pan gold for a photo shoot. ‘A sudden realisation came over me while I panned that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. So when the pictures were taken I climbed out the river and went in search of a telephone so I could tell my employer to fuck off.’

‘Had any luck?’

‘Not yet, that’s why I have to work behind the bar,’ he said, cleaning the counter with a soiled rag. ‘I know there’s a reef under the river that runs in front of the hotel, but even if I don’t find it, it’s OK, because I found something more important. Myself.’

‘That’s great.’

‘So what you want with crazy man?’

‘I’ve just started an investigation of extraordinary people.’

‘OK,’ he said uncertainly. ‘If that’s the type of people that get your rocks off, then you may be interested in the artist who passed through here about forty years ago.’

‘Who?’

‘German dude by the name of Conrad Frederick Genal. When he turned nineteen he joined the French Foreign Legion in North Africa and deserted a few years later by jumping ship as it sailed through the Suez Canal. He managed to make it to shore, even though a guard on the boat shot him in the side. While lying near death in a Cairo hospital he claimed he was visited by an angel who

told him to walk through Africa. Which he did, painting friezes in churches for the love of God, and in hotels for his keep.'

'How do you know he was here?'

'Easy,' he said, ducking beneath the counter. 'Come with me to the dining room, a band below the cornices is covered with his stuff.'

I followed, beer in hand, to view Genal's work, which reminded me of illustrations in nineteenth century colonial books. There were missionaries in canoes being punted upriver, elephants drinking in the shallows, and tribal women walking in file with baskets on their heads.

'What became of him?'

'From what I know, he passed through Barberton in the late 20s, early 30s, and married when he got to the Wild Coast. He tried to settle, but couldn't, and left his family for Durban where he died from an asthma attack in 1939.'

'Do you know if there was a period in Egypt between being shot and his setting out?'

'There might have been, but I don't know,' he said, scratching the side of his head. 'All I can tell you is that he followed the Nile for some time disguised as a Somali trader.'

The following morning I took my coffee on the lawn. There was no sign of the previous night's fog, other than a sweat in the air. Towards the bottom of the garden, which bordered the Noord Kaap River flowing fast through moss encrusted undergrowth, I sheltered under a tree. On a plaque at its base was a sign: *The Hanging Tree – Last Stop for Bent Bert*. Below, a wit had added: *Always Crooked – Gone to be an Angle*.

In the shallows, intently scratching in a pan of scree, was Danny. He was chasing a dream of fortune in a region that had seen its fair share of speculators and gamblers. It was an illusion that had brought a ragtag rush of thousands to what had once been the Valley of Death when Edwin Bray in 1875 hacked at a vine with a machete to reveal Sheba Reef – the richest single find of gold in history. This strike sparked the shortest, wildest gold boom ever and new mines – including New Chum, Twice Rejected, Nil Desperadum, Gould's Salvation, Joe's Luck, Honeybird Creek and Lost Ten Tribes – quickly opened near Bray's Golden Quarry. Over one hundred companies were soon floated on the two stock exchanges in nearby Barberton.

'A carrion crow like gathering,' moaned French Bob. 'They came to snatch the spoil from the hands of the toil-worn ragged men who had hunted and brought down the prey.'

It was wilder at Eureka City atop the hill behind me. Prospectors arrived by the score; among them the colourful Bob Buck, Spanish Joe and Dirty Dick. The town began when Durban businessman J Sherwood opened a butchery and the Queen of Sheba Hotel, named in honour of his famously ugly wife who was jokingly compared to the beautiful monarch of legend. Soon there was a racetrack and innumerable saloons that radiated light, music, laughter and gunshots by night. Most popular was the Red Light Canteen where Cockney Liz was auctioned every Saturday night – once receiving £200 of Kimberley Imperial Shares for her services.

But the end came quickly, and by 1887 the prospectors had left for new finds on the Witwatersrand to the west and the Murchison Range to the north; the Barberton stock exchanges had collapsed; and Eureka City had become a ghost town. It was now consumed by subtropical jungle so that the ruins were hardly distinguishable from the rest of the boulder strewn granite hill with its steep crags and strange rock formations streaked with lime-green stains. It was returned to a time when the area was a natural pharmacy containing one of the greatest assemblages of life on earth. The ideal environment for herbalists.

*****

Nukain Mabusa's mother was descended from a long line of Tsonga healers and diviners for whom this valley was sacred. As was tradition, she was taught from an early age about ancestors and culture and plants and wildlife and climate and physiology and psychology. Amalgamated into this were the Christian beliefs of Catholic missionaries pushing into the interior from the Portuguese colony of Mozambique to the east, which she enhanced with her own idiosyncratic observances. She would stare at a stone for hours trying to understand its shape, the history that made it the way it was. If an ant or spider crossed it she transferred her attention, trying to fathom what God had in mind when he conceived them. And, in due course, she integrated what she saw into a rhythmic, all-embracing cycle of life.

She came to believe that when God created the universe He was making a work of art in which all things, even a blade of grass or a mosquito, played a crucial part. On that divine canvas He gave each plant a rustle, insect a sound, animal a call, every bird a song and people different colours, shapes and languages.

'His garden would have been boring had it just been green and contained one note,' she would say, spreading her arms to heaven. 'But God wanted it all because this was His image – all of it. Isn't it beautiful?'

Her ability gave her the status of a walker between worlds, with the wisdom of a god. But that early part of her life was a golden age, another time, because she was barely in her twenties when the first troop of prospectors arrived to decimate the land and her clan. Rather than servitude, she chose to move to Moamba in southern Mozambique where she married. While pregnant with Nukain she was visited in a dream by God, who instructed her to take special care of her unborn son because great things were expected of him. For he was Mapenhlan, the prophet who opens paths.

When he was about seventeen, Mabusa heard a frantic screaming from the river near his village. He left the headrest he was carving from a piece of honey-coloured kiaat and ran to an outcrop where he could see what the fuss was about. On the bank villagers surged in panic, witnessing the horror of a crocodile thrashing and spinning with what looked like a pile of rags, which Mabusa knew were the remains of his mother. Shortly after the funeral, he decided to honour her by returning to the valley of her birth to erect a cairn in her memory.

'I'm going into the hills for a while,' he said to his father.

'Do what you must. And don't forget to take an extra blanket, it gets cold up there at night.'

He reached the mountains on the second day of his journey, the escarpment shrouded by clouds that had banked against it from midmorning. As he ascended, visibility became reduced to two paces until he crested a steep incline to find himself in a clearing bathed by sunlight. He blinked a few times to accustom his eyes to the brightness, then noticed a thatched hut.

'I had walked all day without seeing another soul,' he remembered. 'Suddenly I came across a place where somebody lived, and it didn't make sense. As is the nature of boys, I was curious and approached the hut, taking off my sandals at the door before entering. I was immediately enveloped by a sense of warmth and peace. Maybe it was the golden light from the hundreds of tiny candles or the sweet, strong smell of the bouquets of herbs scattered everywhere except in the middle of the room. There the floor was covered with beautiful grass mats on which stood an altar draped with red and white cloth. Behind it, on richly embroidered cushions, was an enormous, smiling diviner in ritual attire.'

'I've been expecting you,' she said in a half-whispered voice, while motioning the flabbergasted boy to sit opposite her. 'You've come into the mountains to

build a monument to your mother. But the one you have in mind is not what God wants.'

'What does He want?'

'Something special. Close your eyes and lie back so I can show you.'

Mabusa resisted, but a great force overcame him and he closed his eyes and slumped back in a deep slumber. In a dream the diviner took him into heaven and showed him all eternity. There was yesterday, today and tomorrow. And in the Garden of Eden he was shown the whole universe, all life and the afterlife filled with birdsong.

'Now be one with what you've seen,' instructed the diviner.

'Why have you shown me this?' screamed Mabusa on waking.

'Because, Mapenhlan, you're a prophet. A messenger of heaven. A very important one because it is your duty to pave the way for the Second Coming by recreating Paradise on the side of this hill. It is the place where the new Messiah will descend from heaven.'

'No,' screamed Mabusa, as the enormity of what she said began to sink in.

He burst from the hut, lurched across the clearing and pitched down the slope, his mind a turmoil of conflicting thoughts. A responsibility had been placed on him that he could not contemplate. It was an unfair burden and he was going to flee from it.

'Mapenhlan!' shouted his father in joy as he caught sight of his son rushing towards the kraal. But his tone turned fearful when Nukain got closer, 'My God! What happened to you?'

‘I never want to speak of it,’ he blurted throwing down his blanket. ‘I’m leaving tonight for Johannesburg to find a job.’

‘This can’t be,’ responded his father, perplexed. ‘Your mother said you were to be a prophet. Johannesburg is not the place for you.’

‘You knew what awaited me? And you let me go?’

‘It’s the will of God.’

In Johannesburg Mabusa hid from God by suppressing all evidence of who he was. He took a cheap room in Vilakazi Street in Soweto, first making sure there was not a blade of grass or a tree in the postage stamp garden. He found employment as a machine minder in a factory that packaged tea, where, for ten hours a day, he mindlessly stared at a piece of moving metal that sealed just the right amount of leaves into a plastic packet. At night, when he was finally freed from automation, he returned to the township and disappeared into his lodgings so that he would not see the moon and stars.

But Mabusa could not shut God from his dreams. He tried staying awake, but kept dozing into a state where someone was trying to have an urgent conversation with him. He would sit bolt upright, wipe the sweat from his brow and sink back – only to experience the sensation again. It got so bad he feared he was going insane. Then he fell ill with stomach cramps so severe that he doubled up and fell to the floor. He knew instinctively that Satan was devouring him from the inside.

As his condition deteriorated his employer gave him an extra week’s wages and told him not to come back. That evening he alternated between a bone chill and fever. The next morning brought convulsions, his eyes rolling back in their sockets. On the third day, lying in despair on his blanket as one fly after another gathered round his mouth, he decided that the following morning he would drink the sap of the oleander bush growing down the street. That night, as he lay

contemplating suicide, Jesus and a companion appeared to him. They came out of the east and when they drew alongside they took Mabusa under his arms and made him sit.

‘You’ve faced death, now for reincarnation,’ said Jesus. ‘Sleep, and when you wake you’ll be healed – reborn a prophet ready to fulfil your mission.’

Mabusa fell into a deep sleep; one in which a surge of power coursed through him. And when he woke he was healed; filled with a spirit he could never have imagined.

‘I was so ecstatic that I leapt about the small yard and shouted to everyone who walked past that I was going home to prepare the Garden of Eden.

‘Against incredible odds, Mabusa began creating his visionary garden in the late 1960s,’ explained Meredith. ‘He had to negotiate with the farmer who owned the land to allow him occupation, which was agreed in exchange for labour; he had no money; and the spot had no water supply for irrigation, while the rocky and sloping ground was not conducive to cultivation.’

I pulled up at the Panzela Store opposite the Painted Mountain. Stretching up from the decorated two-hut homestead, was an elated garden in which every surface had been painted with bright geometrical patterns. It reminded me of the pictures I had seen of Australian Aboriginal art, but on an immense scale. I entered the shop and bought a five litre can of yellow paint, which Meredith had said was his favourite.

I left the motorbike there and crossed the road to the kraal, where I was met by a tall, middle-aged man wearing clothes painted with stripes and patterns. He had large ears, a protruding Adam’s apple that appeared to float freely up and down his long neck, distracted charcoal eyes, and hollowed cheekbones that caught the sun. His distinctive face was made outlandish by oversized spectacle rims fashioned from a tomato box.

I introduced myself, handed him the gift and asked, rather obviously, ‘Would you be Mr Mabusa?’

‘I am.’

‘Professor Meredith Crimp has told me a lot about you, and I was wondering if I could see your beautiful home and garden?’

‘Yes, of course, you are most welcome,’ he said standing aside. ‘Everyone calls me Mapenhlan, let me show you round.’

The triangular kraal area consisted of two rondavels with facades painted with yellow, black and white circles and squares inspired by traffic signs and chevrons. Inside the main hut, which he called his studio, the walls were covered with similar patterns and hung with various objects and framed newspaper clippings. One, from *Vulamehlo*, read:

> Step inside Mr Mabusa’s shack, an array of colour strikes one. Cherubs and the Premier Mr John Vorster stand shoulder to shoulder with King George V1 and his family, General Smuts and Captain Devil, while several bright coloured wall hangings pose grave questions such as what a house without a mother would be worth.

Mabusa’s mission started when he removed the backs from two dining-room chairs and replaced them with wooden decals. He then decorated them with yellow markings, a theme continued on the remaining sparse furniture, the inside walls, exterior walls, the second hut (which he called the kitchen) and his garden. There was no vegetation in the garden, but two painted crucifixes; a striped self-portrait statue which bore no resemblance to him; the stump of a tree that died when he painted it; many painted rocks and boulders arranged into paths leading to two rock-cluster focal points; and an elaborately painted stile over an equally vibrant split-pole fence embellished with old paint lids, which defined the boundary of his living area. Beyond this, every rock surface and

boulder up the mountain had been painted; predominantly with his preferred patterns incorporating red, blue and gold animal and bird motifs. At the top a large black and white striped boulder resembled the haunch of a zebra.

As I admired his work, Mabusa called, ‘Come, it’s at its very best from over here.’

He led me to a boulder to the right of the studio, which was identical to the zebra rump on the crest of the mountain. ‘Now keeping these aligned, look downwards from the top and you’ll see how it appears to be flowers tumbling from heaven; now look back up and you’ll see how it narrows into the distance as if you were looking along a railway line. These two rocks are my sacred altars: one on earth, the other in heaven, both separated, but linked. This is where the Messiah will land and walk down when he returns.’

‘Is there anything more you plan to do?’ I asked.

‘Oh no, it is finished, but it needs maintenance. Like a gardener waters his plants, I touch up my rocks. When I get to the top, I start again. It must always be perfect so that God will be pleased when He returns on Judgement Day.’

‘I’m sure God is delighted with your work.’

‘Yes, I think He is,’ he said, gazing up the mountain. ‘I have the most beautiful garden in the universe.’

Chapter 4

I drove through Canyonlands, a wild looking landscape on the Eastern Escarpment between Ohrigstad and the Abel Erasmus Pass. Here were steep crags, spectacular ravines pocketing tropical foliage and strange rock formations streaked lime-green by lichen. I was heading for my last stop on a twenty-thousand kilometre journey before returning home to Johannesburg to write the book I had provisionally titled *Extraordinary South Africa*.

I intended the book to go further than an exploration of the relationship between trauma and eccentricity. The extraordinary people I was going to profile offered important lessons in that nothing beyond the mediocre could be found in an ordinary, one-dimensional, risk-free life. No new ideas, no doors were ever opened there. It was only through the passionate venturing into uncharted waters, into the untamed Edens of the mind, that life could take form, and we could prosper and move forward. Until here I was on safe ground, but I also wanted to suggest that the portal through which these people accessed their unimaginable potential was epiphany. It was in this timeless moment of enlightenment that they experienced something so powerful that most believed it to be the word of an external God, but I was convinced they had woken the true God. The one that resides within.

Because I wanted to avoid being this provocative I had procrastinated ever since meeting Helen Martins twenty-five years before. In that time I criss-crossed the country dozens of times to interview hundreds of eccentrics, many of whom appeared in the travel features I contributed to scores of publications. I had found that while each person's story was different, there was a pattern. What I had become particularly interested in was how suffering was converted into callings by epiphanies so powerful that each character was able to become supremely successful in their world. This was to be the central theme of the book, which came about during a drunken lunch.

*****

As the fourth bottle of wine arrived at our table while celebrating the release of my book on the Soweto Uprising, I began recounting stories of the characters I had met to my publisher, Marilise Cook. I told her of Mickie Lindbergh, heir to the CNA fortune, who developed a canal system that circled his farm Vaalboschfontein near Wolmaransstad so that he could float around in a gondola singing opera to the cows; artist Sibusiso 'Punch' Mbhele who has constructed an aeroplane home, which is on stilts and appears to be taking off, from scrap metal, boarding and shells of minibus taxis; and Elaine Andrews who lives in a Beatrix Potter fantasy in Grahamstown.

Then there was Outa Lappies Schoeman, the Patchwork Man of the Karoo, who had recently retired. He was nearly killed in a train accident in the 1960s, and when he recovered he went to live in Prince Albert. A coloured man, he was nevertheless able to farm a smallholding in the town until the municipality tried to evict him in 1980. He fought back, of course, and over the next two years won eight Supreme Court cases against the town. They, in frustration, had him arrested and held for eight days without food, and he was only released when he became so weak that he required hospitalisation in George. Undaunted, he returned, only to be stripped naked and chased out of town – followed by a few bullets for good measure. He responded by turning himself into a living work of art using rubbish to constantly prick the collective conscience of his abusers.

At Botterkraal he built a rickshaw entirely from scraps and decorated it with old boots and lanterns made from discarded cans and broken glass that he fashioned into hearts and hands. At the back he attached a string of toy carts, one smaller than the next, each with a candle inside and plumed with an ostrich feather to simulate a steam train clattering through the night. When it was complete he crouched beneath the yoke and, using his arms like the wings of a bird, lifted his burden and inspanned himself as if an ox and set off on a sixteen-thousand kilometre journey through the Karoo.

‘I read about him,’ said Marilise, catching the eye of the waiter. ‘Wasn’t he the one who was honoured as the 2000 Western Cape Tourism Personality of the Year?’

‘That’s him,’ I said, now in full stride. ‘And what about performance artist Steven Cohen? Heavily made up as a mongrel and wearing only high heeled shoes, a white tutu and a plug up his arse, he cartwheeled into the arena and performed tricks for the gaping audience at the 1998 Goldfields Kennel Club championships. The image will always be etched on my consciousness of the hysterical organiser yapping, “Fuck off, this is a dog show.”’

‘Come on Pat, when are you going to do a book on all these characters?’

‘I’m not ready.’

I would probably never have been ready, because this was my life’s purpose and there was a finality to writing the book. I had then been married for twenty years and had two daughters, but even so I could not picture myself doing anything different. The only thing that had changed was my wife’s insistence that I get rid of my motorbike, but that was easy as by then it had lost its allure. But to bring the curtain down on that which was essentially me was a step too far. Then Marilise ordered a fifth bottle and cigars…

And so I set out to revisit all the people I had interviewed over the years; a type of farewell grand tour. Along the way I stopped in Pietermaritzburg for Meredith’s eightieth birthday. As a present to herself she had Prince Twinkletoes exhumed from the garden and his skeleton lovingly cleaned, reassembled and hung with dog chains in the kitchen window, where he clattered in the breeze like a wind chime. And celebrated her own milestone in the form of a raucous wake where hotdogs and hamburgers were washed down with a never-ending flow of gin ‘n tonics.

‘I had my wake while still alive because I hate the idea of missing a party,’ she said, lighting a cigarette. ‘It’s all about having fun. That’s what life’s about. Fun. When it stops being fun you have to move on.’

And it was to end in Nelspruit with an interview with the only person I had not previously met. He was the one my best friend, Bridget Hilton-Barber, had said, ‘You can’t do this book without him. It just wouldn’t be complete.’

From Canyonlands I took the road through Bourke’s Luck, detouring to God’s Window to take in the view. Below, the Blyde River Canyon opened up to the north. Verdant. Then the sear Lowveld plateau, a step between the jagged mountains behind me and the lowlands of the Indian Ocean further east. It is a sweeping acacia tableland on which the Kruger National Park, Mala Mala, Sabi Sands and the Klaseri were set before me. A barely tamed landscape in the mould of the Wild West and Outback, which are so attractive to people of similar nature. First were the Bushmen, then ironsmiths from east and central Africa, followed by whites. Slavers and adventurers. Fractious Boers decimated in this *godforsaken* place by Shangaan chief Manukosi and the anopheles mosquito. Prospectors driven by fanciful legends of King Solomon’s Mines and the land of Monomotapa. Hangers-on: traders, preachers, robbers, barmen, prostitutes and politicians. Hope, hype and honky-tonk. Hunters – from the blood crazed to whisky-sodden sporting gentlemen.

It was a hard place that appeared absolutely inhospitable for my last subject, the gay artist John Anthony Boerma who I was to see the next morning.

*****

‘My darling, what happened to you?’ exclaimed John Anthony Boerma on seeing the waitress that served us the day before in the coffee shop in the centre of Nelspruit. ‘Yesterday your hair was so beautiful. Now look at it. It’s like a rat’s nest. Please tell me who did this to you so I can hunt them down and kill them.’

‘Oh Johnny, you’re so funny,’ she sniggered self-consciously.

‘Jabu, this is no laughing matter,’ he said playfully, showing a set of dazzling white teeth when he smiled. ‘Your hair is a crime against good taste.’

‘I change it every day. I did it myself.’

‘Did you use a mirror? Because if you did you should be spanked.’

‘Yaayaa! You’re very cruel.’

‘Not as beastly as you’re being to my eyes,’ he said, standing and raking up her hair into something like a gushing oil well. To me he said, ‘Do tell, isn’t this better?’

Rather than being offended, Jabu seemed to appreciate the attention from one of those rare people able to transgress personal boundaries with abandon. I let my eyes follow her as she left with our order; jinxing round scattered tables and pot plants containing green shrubs which reached nearly to the ceiling. Watching until she skirted a curved glass counter displaying chocolate cakes and pastries and custards and quiches. When she reappeared her hair was done as John Anthony recommended. On a tray she carried our order of coffee and carrot cake, which was topped with a blob of cream and a purple bougainvillaea petal. It was a colour not dissimilar to the plum suit with matching shirt and silk tie that John Anthony wore. An ensemble that in most cases appeared hick, but on his slight, angular frame was regal, elegant. Like a prince.

‘Darling! That’s so much better.’

‘Johnny, I think you should come to my house every morning to help me get ready.’

‘That’s not necessary. Just remember to keep it elegant, not like the riffraff on the streets.’

Plunging a fork into the cake, John Anthony said to me, ‘You’re not looking too good either. You need to be careful: I’ve been in rehab twice and it’s a bitch. So where were we?’

The implication of where I was had not fully sunken in, but the situation was dire. And the previous night I grappled with it the way I dealt with all problems; with whisky. This morning I woke on the floor of the hotel room with my head between the legs of a chair and a fearsome throb between my eyes. Somehow I had managed to get my shirt off, but was only partially successful with my jeans which were knotted round one ankle. I kicked them off as I stumbled to the bathroom to drink deeply from the tap. It was a distress brought on by John Anthony’s unfolding story in which it became increasingly obvious that his progression was the virtual opposite to what I had come to think. For his overwhelming purpose, which he pursued from early childhood with a singular passion, was a desire for recognition. Not mere acceptance, but messianic benediction in which he expediently used all the tools of identity at his disposal – talent, politics, sexuality and religion. It was a singular ambition not brought on by trauma and epiphany, but ended in that manner after he broke both ankles when he leapt from a window of the Transvaal Hotel in Volksrust following an assault.

John Anthony Boerma was born after a difficult pregnancy on 25 January 1969. His aquiline, high-cheekboned mother, Maureen, was delighted. It was the son she had foreseen. With his arrival she was able to push his grey, Dutch immigrant father Willie further into the background. Into the converted garage of their Jones Street house where he carpented grandfather clocks and jewellery when not at work.

From his father John Anthony inherited the ability to squirm from difficult situations; and from his mother a world-view in which anything was attainable.

But John Anthony was not what Maureen had anticipated. She envisaged a rugged outdoorsman. Instead he liked dressing in his older sisters' clothes, wearing outrageous hats, playing with dolls, dancing to his mother's Shirley Bassey records and visiting strange places through Enid Blyton's tales of a Faraway Tree:

> They all went up the last and topmost branch of the Faraway Tree. It went up and up through the purple hole in the cloud. At the very end of the branch was a little ladder.
>
> Joe climbed the ladder – and suddenly his head poked out into the Land of Topsy-Turvy!
>
> Then one by one all the others followed – and soon all seven of them stood in the curious land.
>
> Rick was not as used to strange lands as the others were. He stood and stared, with his eyes so wide open that it really seemed as if they were going to drop out of his head!
>
> And, indeed, it was a strange sight he saw. Every house was upside down, and stood on its chimneys. The trees were upside down, their heads buried in the ground and their roots in the air. And the people walked upside down, too!
>
> - Enid Blyton, *The Magic Faraway Tree*. London: Egmont Books Limited, 1943

Though the part of Jones Street in Nelspruit where he lived was distinctly lower-middleclass, this was his Land of Topsy-Turvy. It was a big 40s ranch-style house set well back from the jacaranda and flaming flamboyant lined street. In the front was a succulent rockery and out the back an avocado tree so massive that it offered cold shade even on the hottest day. Behind the garage was a flatlet in which an elderly couple stayed until John Anthony passed one morning to see the old man sitting in his chair, his lifeless eyes fixed on the ceiling. Round half the house was a deep verandah hung with flowerboxes of Barberton daisies. Inside were wooden floors, airy rooms, ball 'n claw furniture, green geometric sunfilter curtains and Venetian blinds. And on the walls were 60s pictures and family photographs: holidays and birthday parties; John Anthony as Jimminy

Cricket and Spiderman and being fully submerged for his baptism; and a dramatically staged shot of him proposing, on bended knee, to his mother.

This was his theatre where he choreographed his imagination and created spaces and ambience: especially his bedroom, where he was given free rein. This he treated as a stage and painted and repainted and hung it with posters. His references were the sounds of Hollywood musicals blaring from the turntable and the sights of the amusement park he visited while holidaying in Durban. Tinsel and tacky glamour and stuffed toys and ghost trains and women with huge black eyelashes and pink fishnet tights.

Maureen, however, accepted this order of things as she believed that what was ordained would be…So much so that she encouraged his art and spurred on his camp, dancehall allure. There was the perfection of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, the beauty of Michelangelo's David, the imagery of Botticelli's The Birth of Venus, and the exuberance of Annie and Showboat and A Chorus Line and the Can-Can. And she helped him construct school projects so elaborate they are still on display, and pushing him to play the piano. The last of which was his least favourite creative pursuit as he was continually compared to his sister Felicity, who was better.

On a few occasions Willie emerged to voice his displeasure.

'He should be playing sport like other children.'

'He's not other children, he's very sensitive,' snapped Maureen. 'He's obviously taken with the creative life and we should leave him to find his own path.'

'That's not the duty of a parent,' blustered Willie. 'He should do things.'

'He paints, plays the piano, decorates. Is that not enough?'

‘He needs physical activity.’

‘He’s a member of the cheerleading squad.’

‘For God’s sake,’ he said, with a bitter laugh.

‘Please don’t blaspheme.’

‘And he dresses the dog.’

‘So?’

‘I’m going to take him to judo classes.’

‘He doesn’t like hurting things, especially people.’

‘I can’t really see him doing any serious damage to anyone.’

‘Then take him,’ she said, lowering her voice. ‘See how that affects the sliver of a relationship you have with him. Remember when we were at lunch at the Victory Hotel and you told him it was chicken he was eating, and he had us wrap his food and bury it in the garden, and he never spoke to you for weeks. Expect the same here.’

‘We can’t have our lives dictated by what John Anthony feels. He’s only a boy. In any case, you over-protect him. It’s not fair on the rest of us.’

‘That’s ridiculous. I feel the same for all my children.’

‘Then why was Felicity crying the other night? She was screaming that everything in this house is about John Anthony.’

‘She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. But if you feel you must get involved in some small way with his upbringing, then go ahead.’

John Anthony only attended a few judo lessons before Willie gave up. But his father again intervened a few months later when his son got out of a school field trip. School, for the boy, was bad enough as it was devoid of creativity: a place of uniform olive green shorts, gladneck shirts and grey socks. And it lurked with danger. His awakening eight-year-old sexuality perking up as he caught sight of the naked vice-principal and physical training teacher Clive van Rooyen changing for swimming practice. His gaze lingering long enough for the master to see him; igniting a fury that earned him six lashes when he was caught doing handstands in the passage the following day.

But the beating did nothing to dampen his nascent ardour, and years later the gym instructor was still in his mind when he wrote in his diary: ‘One coffee cup, darkness – light only from the fire, soft classical music – there’s a mistake. Shouldn’t there be two coffee cups. I’m always fantasising about a romantic, passionate relationship with a man…yes, that’s right, a man. I don’t know why. I’m attracted to them. I want to feel his hands, long bony hands, stroking and massaging my back. I want to feel the roughness of his beard against my cheeks. I want to rub my fingers through the hair on his chest. I want to feel the softness of his lips touching mine. Most of all, I want someone to touch and hold me. My god! If someone ever had to read this diary. Mum or perhaps dad. Shit!’

And a field trip was the icing on the cake of this monstrous unimaginativeness. Revealing a plan to break his leg, someone added that if one soaked a limb in vinegar it became brittle. But after doing this and jumping countless times from a wall he was still nowhere near injuring himself. When his mother found out, she said he was being silly and that all that was required was pretence. So she went to the chemist to purchase plaster of Paris to caste his leg.

Willie was furious.

‘This is completely unacceptable. What type of person are you raising? One who doesn’t know the difference between right and wrong.’

‘Oh Willie, you’re so tiresome. Why don’t you go back into your workshop and amuse yourself?’

John Anthony’s high school years began with melancholy when his best friends Mark du Toit and Michael Prowling excluded him from their group. It was a circle of three shunned as freaks by the macho scholar mass. And the chasm separating him from his father was ever widening. ‘I went to bed after having the usual fight with daddy last night,’ he wrote. ‘I wonder sometimes why I can never love him. It seems as though one day it will be too late.’

It was an alienation the increasingly defiant boy did little to counter as this was a time of youth preparedness and cadets, and he was going to have none of it. He refused to handle the rifle he was given at the shooting range and put his foot down over drill on Friday afternoons. His only concession was to join the marching band.

‘Putting on a uniform must have been as traumatic as handling a gun,’ I suggested, standing and looking round for the toilets.

‘I hated the bugle and the idea behind the setup,’ he laughed. ‘But there was an element of gaudy cabaret with the epaulettes and skins we wore; and the drum majorettes we practised with. And the smell of sweat and polish and boys in the band-room was every porno-writer’s dream. I loved that.’

And with teenagehood came the final dawning he was homosexual. ‘I hate gays!! They make me feel uneasy. Why do they have to show their abnormalities – their sickness. Why, why, why do I have feelings for men – not gays – men. MEN – WHY? Is it a stage? Or is it a life choice?... It was ten days ago that I had my first visit to the psychologist. I was so nervous and confused about seeing Mrs Laubser again. So much had changed since the last time I saw

her. I explained to her exactly how I feel. I seemed to talk in such a confusing way, but she understood. She explained to me that before I became confused about my identity I had developed a basic identity. I was pleased with myself and all that I did. When, last year, she placed my true character in front of me I realised things about myself. Things that I had been trying to escape and hide away. The main thing was the fact that I saw myself as gay. When I realised these things I refused to come to terms with them. With the result that I gradually threw everything away. Every reason for existence I threw away.'

But there was solace in Topsy-Turvy Land. Maureen, increasingly fearful that John Anthony was lonely, shuffled her three jobs so that her lunch hour coincided with his return from school. They talked then had a nap together, and he watched as she applied her makeup before going back to work. Entranced by the idea of transformation. As Maureen exited, so the maid, Minah Ndlovu, was finishing her chores and he sat with her as she dressed to go home to Kwa Nyamazane township, which was wracked by upheavals. She told him of her son's underground activities for the African National Congress Youth League, and of the fiery petrol-soaked necklace awaiting those breaking the boycott of white-owned stores in Nelspruit. And he helped her strap groceries to her body and fixed her outfit so her potentially deadly corset did not show.

Then an hour of fantasy in which he was alone. With Shirley Bassey at full cry, he raided wardrobes for dresses – especially Wendy's, his oldest sister who worked for First National Bank and spent most of her income on the latest fashions. Creating not a drag show, but an illusion. 'When I'm alone I escape from reality. I escape from this cruel world to a world of my own. A world created by me. It's so beautiful. There is peace. There is happiness. There is truth. Truth – the streets of Paris become real to me.'

It was a figment reinforced by the Baptist Church, which he joined as a reborn Christian. Here God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit became his essence, the saviours and protectors who heal all wounds. While the teachings of the Bible indulged his creativity: burning bushes and trumpets bringing down walls and a wooden

ark with ornate golden lid, which contained the fragments of the stone tablets inscribed by God with the Ten Commandments and the sacred drum – the instrument used to summon God, who appeared in the form of divine fire. So powerful that its drummer needed to wear a breastplate embedded with the twelve Stones of Fire for protection. To this was added rituals, song and the opportunity to dress up. Grand theatre.

But his growing rebellious angst put him at odds with conservative Baptists. 'I'm very confused at this very moment. Inside I have this awful feeling of fear. That feeling that I want to run away – far away from everything and everyone – everyone in that church stinks. Fuck them! Fuck everyone I know. The day will come when the height of their conversation will be me. If it's the last thing I'm going to do then that's make a success of my life. A great big fat mass of success.' It was time for the more campy Catholic Church. And more art and less maths, accounting and science, which brought him to a face-off with his father.

'I absolutely forbid you to change subjects,' ordered his father.

'I'm not asking, I'm telling you,' he sighed defiantly, running his hand through his hair.

'What are you going to be with art and history and all those airy-fairy subjects?'

'The person I want to be.'

'A beggar on the streets,' snorted his father. 'I can see it because these things are worth nothing.'

'And they helped you?' sneered John Anthony, his hands on his hips. 'Thirty years without a promotion at the citrus institute?'

The changing of subjects occurred at the same time Maureen offered John Anthony the outside flatlet.

‘Suddenly everything fell into place,’ he recalled. ‘I had my own pad with even greater freedom to do with it what I wanted. It became my stage and I decorated it accordingly. And when I walked into the history and art classes it was a revelation. These were the smallest grades in the school, filled with kindred spirits. Soon I was top of the class, taking control. It was as if I’d walked into a salon and had a makeover.’

John Anthony enrolled for additional art classes on Thursday afternoons at the nearby Afrikaans high school, looking fabulous as he walked Van der Merwe Street wearing tight black running shorts, black shiny vest, long white socks and black clogs taken from his irate sisters’ rooms. Pottery, expressionism and pop art. Dinner at his place on Friday nights at which he catered for his growing band of friends, including Judy Streak and Tracey Rattray from the genteel, wine-drinking end of Nelspruit society. Les girls and pyjama parties.

‘I saw *Witness* this afternoon, brilliant, but so sad.’

‘Who knows what’s going on in *Death of a Salesman*?’

‘Did you see Allan the other night? Threw up all over Dean’s car.’

‘What about Angie’s hairdo? Gross.’

‘Is there more wine?’

‘John, what does it mean to be gay?’

‘It is to be a girl’s best friend.’

‘Just don’t make a move on Neil, I saw him first.’

He even challenged his rock: Maureen. A piano player, she envisioned him taking the musical world by storm. But his heart was not in it, the joy stolen by his virtuoso sister Felicity – the darling of Nelspruit who won the local eisteddfod five times. He only continuing the tradition because it was a way to avoid school sports. Good enough, though, to take the honours three times after his sister had left for university: tradition dictating that the trophy belonged to the family after nine consecutive victories. Something his mother cherished. But on the night, he a racing certainty and the headline act, he had been out drinking and arrived just in time to hear his name being called. Dressed as David Bowie with white pointy shoes and stonewash jeans, a forelock over his right eye, he launched into Beethoven's Opus 1.

'Half way through something flashed across the keyboard,' he said. 'It was like a question: "What are you doing here?" It was in the middle of the adaja movement and I stopped there, stood and walked out. Not touching the piano again until I needed to make money years later. I think it was a tragedy for my parents, particularly my mother because small town folk take these things very seriously.'

The three hours a day he had devoted to music were now channelled in an artistic frenzy: a calling through which he could vent his frustrations against villainous institutions. He registered at the local technical college for drawing, interior design and ceramics. There he met Caroline Anderson, a wild, frizzy-haired girl from the wrong side of the tracks. The friend who took him to Johannesburg, Hillbrow and the Res Club where he experienced true glamour for the first time. Gave him a rush with a Thinns tablet and alcohol after smoking a joint. An explosion he could not comprehend, but adoring the accompanying confidence. A power he displayed on his return by wearing his school tie backwards, narrowing his trousers to stovepipes and listening to black radio stations. And his flat he painted black, laid the floor with a white carpet and hung pictures of pirouetting harlequin dolls.

Then triumph as the worm completed its metamorphoses into a butterfly.

‘Mom,’ said John Anthony as he lay on her shoulder after school, ‘I’m thinking of putting on a show at school. Maybe sell tickets and give the proceeds to a needy school in the township.’

‘Yes dear,’ she said dismissively, twirling his hair with her hand.

‘I’m serious. The other day I had this flash of inspiration. Saw everything clearly. A musical, I think I’ll call it Broadway ’85.’

‘You’ve always got such great ideas, but you know we can’t afford it.’

‘But that’s the beauty, it won’t cost you anything.’

‘I’ve heard that before.’

‘You’ll see, he said confidently. ‘There’ll be a cast of hundreds. I’m going to have strip lights in the front of the stage, and arched ones at the back leading to a stairway into the audience. It’ll open with drum majorettes followed by Star Wars, Mame, Grease and Saturday Night Fever features. Breakdance, Flashdance, Volksdanse, Be-Bop-Alula, Music Box Dancer and the Can-Can. Blue Suede Shoes, Bojangles, Hello Dolly, Ipi Tombi, Send in the Clowns and Shirley Bassey’s I Knew Him so Well. And for the finale – We Are the World. So what do you say to that, big spender?’

‘Oh John Anthony, your imagination.’

‘Listen. I’m going to have invitations made in the form of the Lancome rose and there’ll be posters featuring a woman in pink fishnet stockings. Nelspruit’s never seen the like.’

Maureen thought nothing more of it until a frantic call from John Anthony on a Saturday afternoon a few months later. She got into her blue Mini and rushed to the Bergvlam High School, to find him with his head in his hands.

‘John Anthony, what’s the matter?’ she asked breathlessly. ‘And what are you doing here?’

‘Mom, it’s such a disaster. One of the teachers from the school was supposed to bring the tape for the rehearsal, and she’s not here and people are going to start arriving any minute.’

‘What rehearsal?’

‘Broadway ’85. I told you about it,’ he said, throwing up his hands in frustration. ‘The show’s in two weeks and today is our first dress rehearsal. Next Saturday there’s a procession through town and the gala opening the following Wednesday. But I’m screwed without that tape.’

‘Then you’d better give me her address.’

Maureen returned forty-five minutes later to a scene of utter chaos as traffic officers battled to control the arrival of the six-hundred-and-eighty participants in the extravaganza. It was a sold-out show he single-handedly organised with finance from local businesses and the assistance of volunteers. A sensation that contained only two changes from his original vision: Ipi Tombi was dropped as it was to be performed by a group from the township and the beneficiary became the proposed Dinkieland Crèche for poor-white single mothers. A plaque in the grounds reads: Donated by John Anthony Boerma.

‘Child Welfare threatened to pull out if it wasn’t one of their projects, and Bergvlam refused to allow blacks to take to their stage,’ explained John Anthony. ‘It was not a fight I could’ve won, so I backed off.’

John Anthony, after encore after encore, was a star. And he took on the persona of James Dean with leather jacket and cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. ‘I think maybe I’ve changed a little,’ he wrote in his diary. ‘Outwardly, I’ve pierced my ear, and have been dressing differently – more to the way I feel and not to please other people. I’m still the same old John. Striving to be different.’ It cost him his virginity.

Judy fell in love with Marcel Roberti, the son of a French contactor working on a bridge crossing the N4 highway. ‘He was in my art class,’ said John Anthony. ‘A mix of the don’t care character of Marlon Brando in A Streetcar Named Desire with the menace of Vito Corleone. He had an earring and a permanent shadow of stubble, and the sweet smell of someone who smokes tons of pot. Not only beautiful, but a rough, raging hormone that was pure sex. The problem was that Judy was desperately trying to preserve her virginity for some future event.’

In the July of their matric year, Marcel arrived very drunk and stoned at one of John Anthony’s Friday parties. By four the next morning all had left except the Frenchman who was passed out on one of the two beds arranged in an L in the bedroom beneath a poster of Broadway ’85. John Anthony took the other, waking later to the smell of freshly cut grass as the gardener mowed outside. He poured two vodka oranges, put on a Teddy Pendergrass CD and returned to the bedroom where Marcel was waking.

‘Jesus, that lawnmower sounds like that motorbike of yours,’ said Marcel stretching. ‘What make is it?’

‘A Yamaha MR. My mom bought it for me.’

‘It’s cool. Can I take it for a spin?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied John Anthony after a long pause. ‘I’ve never let anyone else ride it.’

‘Oh come on. I’ve ridden lots of bikes.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ frowned John Anthony. ‘Maybe later.’

‘Say Johnny, why don’t you have a girlfriend?’ said Marcel, pushing himself up onto his elbow. ‘You’re a really good looking guy.’

‘I thought it was common knowledge that I was gay.’

‘Then what about some fun,’ smiled Marcel, pulling away the sheet to expose himself as a David with a hard-on. ‘Come suck my dick.’

All John Anthony can remember from that morning is the aroma of sweaty cut grass, vodka-orange, exquisite sensations and Teddy Pendergrass. Close the door, turn off the light, I can’t live without your love. I oh oh oh I.

‘Very suburban,’ he said. ‘That is, sleeping with your best friend’s guy. And we had sex often, setting the trend for all my future relationships. Always with straight men, and always on their terms. When he wanted a fuck, he came to me. I could never go to him.’

The Monday afterwards he received a letter from the fine arts department of the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) that he was to present himself for an interview at The Wedge.

‘I’m absolutely opposed to you going to WITS, especially to do fine arts,’ fumed Willie, when informed.

‘Then I’ll do ballet.’

‘Don’t be stupid. What career is that?’

‘A creative one, which is my choice.’

‘Don’t I have any say? I will, after all, be the one paying.’

‘Then don’t bother,’ said John Anthony defiantly. ‘I’ll go off and become an artist without your money.’

‘I might feel different if it wasn’t WITS.’

‘Felicity’s at WITS.’

‘You can hardly compare yourself with your sister. She’s studying music and in a serious relationship with a minister. In any case, it was her that warned us against you going there. She says there you’ll become a drug addict and a homosexual. I don’t know what’s worse.’

Chapter 5

John Anthony arrived at The Wedge with his hair neatly trimmed, a fringe down one side of his forehead. Wearing a multi-coloured jersey and grey pants, he was the flower amongst scruffy bramble. And when it was his turn to present his portfolio to the godfathers of local art – Alan Crump, Penny Siopis, Neels Coetzee and Colin Richards – he tripped as he entered the room and landed face first in front of them. Notwithstanding, he was accepted. Maureen walking Braamfontein with him until he found a flat at Estonia Mansions.

WITS promised a new beginning for John Anthony. He could dress as he wanted, go to nightclubs, be gay, get involved in politics, immerse himself in art. But it was not as simple as that. In his diary he wrote: 'So happy on my first day, then crushed. Alan Crump and Colin Richards seem to take absolute delight in ripping a country boy to shreds. They're absolute vultures, wanting a piece of me, my youth, my innocence. Again the system is intent on breaking me down. I'm worthless. Fuck everyone.'

'Mom.'

'John Anthony, it's so lovely to hear your voice. You have no idea how much I miss you.'

'Mom, I'm so down. The whole first year consists of drawing, and I haven't the slightest idea of what I'm doing.'

'You'll learn.'

'How? I'm going to fail. I know nothing.'

'In Nelspruit you showed everyone. You'll do the same in Johannesburg. Wherever. We've spoken of this before.'

‘It’s not the same. Nelspruit’s a small town. Here you get gobbled up and spat out and trampled on.’

It was an experience that again had John Anthony on a rollercoaster exploration of himself. Who was he? What was the purpose of his existence? What made him unique? What related him to others? Questions of sameness and unlikeness charged with foreboding and conflict. Most importantly, he began to ponder how to transcend ever having to be in this position again. To this there was no immediate answer, but there was hope, which sent his spirits plummeting and soaring.

‘It’s been a week – I still feel the same,’ wrote John Anthony. ‘All I want is a strong, loving, gentle man whom I can feel and love. I’m very depressed. I’m sitting on the floor in the flat. Yesterday was an absolute waste. Today’s heading the same way. The ballet is fully booked. Shit! Why do I always have such bad luck? Anyway, perhaps I should just enjoy myself. I’ve got to go for bloody lunch now at some shit’s place. God I’m cross. All I feel like doing is being on my own and crying my heart out…

‘I feel very much better, I actually enjoyed lunch very much. And after I’d felt so depressed I stopped at the Civic Theatre to find that there were still tickets available… The difference between deep depression and a good mood is often no more than $50’…I’ve discovered myself this weekend. I’ve found my true character and now I’m going to live it. Fuck everyone else…Something seems to have changed. Perhaps it’s because I’ve come to discover peace with God and myself. God used to save me – even more so Christians. But I’ve realized that God judges me and shows me the way because he loves me like a father. Always wanting what is best for me. But the best thing is that he wants to help me to find the right way. I’ve been going through bad states of depression, which is not necessary. I have a happy life. But because I’ve been trying to live according to an image or a model, in order to satisfy society, this has led to disappointment. I’ve been trying to live a perfect life. But it’s not possible. If you aim for imperfection, there’s a chance of success, if you aim for perfection,

there's none. It used to really bug me when someone didn't like me. It was almost a failure in my life. But now I realise that I am my own character. If people wish to like me and share their lives with me, I'll be happy to do the same. If not, well, fuck them. It's taken me a long time to assert myself. And through asserting myself I've come to terms with myself. I'm not going to like things because other people tell me to like them. I'll things because I want to. And at no time in my life will I allow people to judge me. They have no right. They have no fucking right!'

In this mist of uncertainty John Anthony started to make his way in the wider world. At WITS Penny Siopis showed him how to paint and Karel Nel taught him to use texture and draw, see and conceptualise. It was enough to allow him to pass, even though bottom of the class. He joined the left-wing National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), but resigned soon after because they made him feel uncomfortable wearing velvet. He was as uneasy as he felt in the tight knit gay sphere, which he regarded as essentially racist. He reserved a special contempt for their exclusive clubs.

'They were and still are places for exhibitionist mincing queens.'

What John Anthony did not add was that he was not prepared to play second fiddle in either worlds of student or gay politics. Nor fit in with established structures, which he saw as little different from other forms of institution. So he set about establishing a radical group who were as much for political liberation as fermenting a glamour revolution. They especially despised people who did not shave.

'So what does that say of my beard and distressed jeans?' I asked, looking at John Anthony over my glasses.

My quip seemed to momentarily throw him, and he stammered, 'I'm long past that. But then I aspired to be the creator of beautiful things. Those that found ugly meanings in beautiful things were corrupt without being charming. This I

believed was a fault. Those who found beautiful meanings in beautiful things were the cultivated. For these there was hope.'

His group partied by night at Jamesons and Studio 54, and with mascara running and feather boas rustling joined protest marches by day. He was arrested and spent two days in prison for attending an illegal rally addressed by Winnie Mandela, and at the beginning of his second year was elected a representative to the Fine Art Student Union.

'I was chosen because of my looks,' he said. 'By then every man and woman was chasing me, loving the blend of bumpkin, innocence and prettiness. It became obvious that the body has immense power, and I used it. Gelling my hair, dressing beautifully, sleeping with whoever I needed to get things done. A tease, a gay heartbreaker.'

But it was not enough for passing grades, and by the end of his second year there was little chance of progression. Then someone mentioned that he was being followed, that questions were being asked. In panic, he drove to Nelspruit.

'Never! Never! Never!' said his father, his voice rising.

'Dad, I've not asked much from you before, but I'm in danger,' pleaded John Anthony. 'I need you to help me get a Dutch passport so I can go into exile.'

'I told you this WITS place was going to be a problem,' he said, pointing. 'But no one ever listens to me. Now I'm telling you that Holland is not the place for you. And on this I'll not budge.'

'Dad, I beg you. Do you know what they'll do to me, a gay man?'

'What do you mean gay?' he said, the colour draining from his face as he lifted his head to the heavens. 'Oh God, I should've listened to Felicity.'

‘Dad, there’s no time for this. We have to move fast.’

‘What’ll happen to us here? I work for the government. We live in a conservative town. Did you ever stop to think what this would do to us?’

‘Please.’

‘Never.’

*****

When John Anthony got to Holland just before Christmas he realised that he knew virtually nothing of my father. Suddenly he had a step-grandmother, two uncles, an aunt and a bunch of cousins.

‘The timeless tale of long-lost family becoming reunited,’ I said. ‘Was it awkward?’

‘Not at all, they were as excited as I was surprised,’ he said stirring a fresh cup of coffee. ‘It was like I was the returning prodigal. They opened their houses, helped me find my bearings, bought me clothes. There was a standing invitation by my Uncle Dick for Sunday lunch, which I couldn’t turn down because his wife was a cordon bleu cook. She made these amazing winter puddings: fruit crust pies with peach filling, upside-down gingerbread and a chocolate and double cream gateau Diane. Unbelievably decadent.’

‘Was it not strange that your father had never spoken of his family?’

‘Absolutely not,’ shrugged John Anthony. ‘We weren’t close and I could only recall two conversations outside of the normal “can I have this”, “give me a lift” or “I need money”.’

The first was when his mother was desperately unhappy when he was fourteen, and she told him his father was having an affair. John Anthony confronted him in the garage and told him to stop, which, as far as he knows, he did. The other time was when he was at WITS and battling with a bronze. I knew his father had all the tools and was good with his hands, so he drove to Nelspruit and asked his help. They spoke quite a bit, but nothing of substance.

'But you and your mother were exceptionally close, surely she was aware of her in-laws and mentioned them,' I persisted.

'She knew of a step-mother-in-law, but we never spoke of these things,' replied John Anthony. 'It didn't seem important. But it became so when I got there. So much so that I went to his birthplace, Groningen, a university town much like Oxford. I went to all the places he had stayed and must have visited, and tried to imagine what it was like to be him. The funny thing is that I fell in love with the place and enrolled at the Academy Minerva to continue my studies. They gave me credit for my first year at WITS.'

John Anthony reached into his shirt pocket and took out a black and white photograph, which he pushed across to me, 'That's me at the Academy at the end 1989. I had it made into Christmas cards for the family back home.'

In it, John Anthony is standing next to a bicycle in a cobbled square in the centre of which is a sculpture of headless nude. John Anthony is very thin, made to look more so by dark clothing and boots with large buckles. Above his head is a bubble, which says, 'Is it a man? Is it Superman? No it's FATHER CHRISTMAS!!!'

'You seemed happy,' I said, passing it back.

'On the surface things were OK, but I didn't want alright. I wanted the universe.'

At university he became absorbed by the work of Vincent van Gogh, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol. He was convinced Warhol was God because of his ability to elevate mundane objects to works of art, and his ability to blur the lines between art and life. Also how surrogates could be used to create art in which title remained with the visionary.

'Before we met, Bridget showed me photos of some of your work,' I said, putting down my pencil and flexing my fingers, which were beginning to cramp. 'I can see Warhol's influence.'

'Those were the pictures taken by her brother Steven,' said John Anthony lighting a cigarette. 'Warhol changed everything, he was like a messiah. But he meant more to me in another way. I have these very intense images in my head, but technically I'm not that proficient. The penny dropped when I saw how he used assistants in his Factory.'

'Surely you're not suggesting that his ability was lacking,' I said. 'All art, including writing, requires a balance of creativity and craft.'

'Yes,' he smiled. 'But how do you define craft? Is it the ability to personally transmit an image, or to get it out there by whatever means? The choreographer or director seldom perform in their own creations. Why should it be different for fine art? My view is that it's not only acceptable, but incumbent on the artist to use whatever means or medium at their disposal.'

And Warhol's infatuation with the writing of Truman Capote had John Anthony seeking out the author's books. While completing his honours, John Anthony put down Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Suddenly his checkerboard life fell into place – Holly Golightly, the central character, was him. He wrote:

> She was really a hillbilly named Lulumae Barnes who, like Norma Jean, realised she could not be a star with a name like that,' he said. 'By changing it she also changed her identity: giving form to her every aspiration, expression to every feeling and reality to every dream. It was

a release that allowed her to yield to every temptation and touch things forbidden. But underlying that façade was a feeling of tragedy. For me it was the point where art and life intercepted and I began to change my name.

The ‘John’ in my name remained. This was after all the madman of Patmos, the envisager of the four beasts of the Apocalypse, the man who permits a figuration of the plague as the Apocalypse, the man who is up for grabs by mystics of all political shades, and the writer of the fourth gospel. John 3-16: ‘For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son. So whoever believeth in him, should not die but have eternal life.’

John, who is also every hooker’s trick, the fishes in the sex workers as fishers of men. John, bread and butter, loaves and fishes, cold hard cash when you’re lucky to assorted people in beds, on street corners, on piers, in bars, everywhere. John is also the john, the place of excrement, the home of glory holes, the name delightfully dirty with titillation and taboo, the jail, the cage, the closet of suburban malls, cottages, tearooms, also just a place where everyone goes, a fundamental place of biology.

I got rid of Boerma, literally ‘farmer’s mother’. This was the name on my passport, the name that the system called me. But I did not want my Afrikaansness so publicly displayed. I did not want to be a farmer’s mother, let alone a farmer’s son, when I left home to go to Johannesburg to become an artist, to become gay, to try and give birth to myself. But I couldn’t do it under that name, whereas Johnny Golightly had endless potential.

Johnny was the infantilised form of John, the cuter baby version, the boy next door, the boy in the next cubicle. Johnny Rotten, Johnny Golightly, John Anthony…John Anthony Boerma, John Doe.

‘Gogentle, golightly, going, going, gone,’ he said. ‘How I’d love a drink right now.’

The ecstatic experience of changing his name to the fun-loving, wistful and outrageously camp Johnny Golightly filled John Anthony with an enormous energy that he frenetically expended on a film inspired by the event. Titled *Breakfast with Holly Forest*, it contained the themes that would be a constant for Johnny Golightly – the Last Supper, crucifixion and the hustler’s bedroom.

‘Don’t you mean *Breakfast with Holly Golightly*,’ I asked.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘The title was a play on the names Holly Golightly, Hollywood and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. My intention was to get inside a painting, make it come to life. Music videos were just becoming big at the time, so I used this format in a type of rebirth of surrealism.’

The film opened with a televised boxing match. As one contender was knocked out, the angle widened to show the TV was fixed in the junction of a gold cross plastered with images of the American flag, Ken and Barbie, pornography, Elvis, Superman, Shirley Bassey and a kitsch Catholic rendition of Jesus to which had been added a Dayglo pink halo and a fried egg in place of the heart. From the crossbeam hung a pair of fur-lined handcuffs. As it widened further it showed a room papered with newsprint on which Johnny Golightly, with pencil thin sideburns and wearing dark glasses and a white T-shirt, was painting large pink flowers on one wall and a Swiss pastoral scene on another.

The camera cut away to the door, which was flung open by the star of the movie, Topsy-Turvy Tina played by John Anthony’s friend Tina Dieke-Rinds. She had a large bust, short black hair, a pronounced jaw and was wearing electric-blue eye shadow, a feather boa, leopard-skin top, black miniskirt and red boots. In one hand was a cigarette, in the other shopping bags which she dumped in the corner. To the Bee Gees *Staying Alive*, she put on a gold tinsel wig and started a slow, sensuous twist before the cross. A storyboard appeared:

‘Holly Forest is a glittering socialite, generally upwards, sometimes sideways, and once in a while down. She’s up all night drinking chocolates and breaking hearts.’ Followed by another:

She’s a shoplifter,
A delight…
A tease…
She has no past…
She doesn’t want to
Belong to anything
Or any one

Except to the…
Silver Screen

The movie cut back to the dancer, then a storyboard:

Pleasure is the only
Thing one should
Live for…
Nothing ages like happiness…

When the music ended, Topsy-Turvy went over to a cow in the pastoral scene and masturbated the penis-like teat until it produced an egg, which she broke onto a plate before painting fried eggs onto the places set for the Last Supper. A storyboard:

Give yourself over to
absolute pleasure…
Swim the warm
waters of sin
…of the flesh…
erotic nightmares
beyond any measure
Bad daydreams
to treasure forever

Then nametags at each setting: Jacqui Kennedy, James Dean, Holly Golightly, Marilyn Monroe, Jeff Koons, David Lynch, Divine, Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, Madonna, Diane Friedland and Salvador Dali's wife Gala. When done, Topsy-Turvy poured herself a glass of champagne, blew a kiss at the camera in the style of Marilyn Monroe, then sat on the floor to shovel dozens of pills into her mouth. As she fell dying on the floor, she took out a pen and began to write on the screen: H-E-L. She paused before continuing, the viewer anticipating she would add a P, instead she finished it as H-E-L-L-O.

The film crackled to an end, before starting again with a short scene. In this, Johnny Golightly, wearing gold shorts and the same eye shadow as Topsy-Turvy, removed the TV from the cross and puts his head and arms through the hole, in one hand a geographic globe, in the other a bunch of grapes. He then put the cross down and lay on it to smoke a cigarette, before rising and smashing it with an axe. It faded out with him in the arms of Mary and he was resurrected with a hairdryer in his hand to the sounds of *A Star is Born*.

When filming was completed, Johnny Golightly and Tina Dieke-Rinds went to Mykonos on holiday. The first thing they did was head for an all-night party accessible only by ferry. On their return the following morning, both dressed in white suits, they disembarked below Piros Bar by falling backwards off the boat, lying in the shallows to let some of their hangover wash away. When they stood a group on the verandah raised their glasses.

'One of the most elegant disembarkations I've ever seen,' pronounced one of the men, standing and waving. 'Please do us the honour of joining us.'

Johnny Golightly bowed, 'The honour is all ours.'

When they got to the table an Andy Garcia look-alike introduced himself and the man next to him, 'Chris Contingorous. This is my brother Spyro. We are the

owners of the Petrafina marble company in New York and we reserve this table every summer for our friends. You're welcome here at any time.'

On the day they returned to Groningen, Spyro wrote a number on the back of a cigarette box. 'If you're ever coming to New York, call us.'

Shortly afterwards a letter arrived for Johnny Golightly. *Breakfast at Holly Forest* had won him a bursary to do his masters at Cooper Union School of Art in New York. Like Holly, he was on his way to the Big Apple.

The night before he left, he telephoned Spyro.

*****

'Johnny, Chris and I have a proposal for you,' said Spyro in the back of a limousine, as they drove in to Manhattan from JFK airport. 'You have a style that's a perfect fit with a small, funky section of our clientele. We want to grow that side.'

'You do realise that I'm here to attend school.'

'What you want with degrees?' said Spyro with a dismissive wave. 'We'll give you much more. Let me tell you, this town's not interested in pieces of paper, but who you know.'

'I'm listening, but Cooper Union has been a dream and I'm not going to just throw it away.'

'Yeah, yeah,' mocked Spyro, looking out the window. 'We'll talk about that some other time. Like I was saying, we like you and we want you to come work for us as co-manager of our premier showroom on 3rd Avenue.'

'I've never done anything like that before.'

‘We’ll show you,’ he said, turning to look John Anthony in the eye. ‘We’ll also help you find an apartment. New wardrobe. Introduce you to everybody that is anybody. And sponsor a solo-exhibition of your work.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘Not at all. You come work for us and you’ll get your first New York show. All to yourself. Now see if that fancy school can match that. And I’ll tell you this as well, design is the present. Understand that with your own art and the sky’s the limit.’

When he accepted, the Contingorous brothers paid the deposit on a flat in midtown and filled the wardrobe with Hugo Boss, which Johnny Golightly took scissors to – cutting the legs off trousers at the knees and the arms off jackets at the elbows. Perfect with Doc Martens. And so it was that John Anthony’s creation hit Manhattan, and he put his head back for an ‘if Nelspruit could only see me now’ moment. It was caviar and champagne and laughter and frivolity and all night parties. Like Holly, always on the way out to seriously have fun.

‘On the edge of the work ethic, and you betta work, Johnny wants to play, play, play knowing that it also works to play.’

It was time to seriously define Johnny Golightly. He loved to be loved, which he was when sober because he was terrified of abandonment. But he was expected to be drunk or high, to be on the cutting edge. A dangerous, vulnerable place beyond the boundaries of unconditional love. A theatre piece in which he climbed off the cross of conformity.

‘Christ and the cross are a major presence in your work, and you’re very religious,’ I said. ‘Weren’t you concerned that Golightly and his art were blasphemous.’

‘I don’t think they were,’ he replied. ‘Golightly was a parallel form of Christ. But where Jesus came to take away sin, Johnny came to remove parameters. Because in a perfect world these are the two things that are absent.’

This was the thought at the core of the exhibition sponsored by the Contingorous brothers at 53 Crosby Street in Soho. Titled *Young, Restless and Socially Aware*, it received rave reviews in the *Village Voice*, *New York Native* and the *Daily Express*. For this the small gallery was turned into an installation, at the centre of which was an empty chair before a television broadcasting pop images. On the walls were burgundy, red and pink flowers; and through the window a lavender White House with flag fluttering above. A dream of the perfect post-AIDS future. Away from this were jockstraps, handcuffs, photos of a young John Anthony, another of him with a Dayglo pink halo, religious icons, empty champagne bottles, teddy bears, Tiffany shopping bags, and a lipstick posing a question: ‘Is penis envy just a phallusy?’ There were paintings of Mickey Mouse in bed with a stick figure; penises and Venuses; Archie and Betty, the icons of middle-America consumer society; crucified revolutionaries, their blood dripping into martini glasses; the birth of the little Bobby Shafto, that perfect boy who ran off to sea after promising to marry me; and a green, expressionist Frankenstein dream date.

‘The painting is a reference to a Blueboy cover,’ wrote John Anthony in the brochure. ‘Of course, the boy is green, green for naïve. Green for Oscar Wilde’s green carnation. Green with envy. Becoming gay is a natural thing, as natural as Archie and Betty, as natural as Archie’s bottle red hair and artful freckles, as natural as Betty’s clinched waist and dainty pumps, as natural as the hot, sinful, daring and stylish dick-flesh of the text on my picture. As natural as pop-culture, the cerebral and social equivalent to mother’s milk. As natural as two fried eggs symbolic of broken fertility.’

The latter was a reference to the four-hundred canvasses of double-yoked fried eggs – inspired in part by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente and Andy Warhol’s *Alba’s Breakfast* – which were sold for $20 each; the proceeds going

to the charity God's Love We Deliver that provided meals for home-bound people with AIDS. 'Since ancient Egypt, the unbroken egg has symbolised fertility,' noted Leonore Skanazy in the *New York Daily News* on 17 November 1992. 'His eggs symbolise an age when sex does not necessarily lead to fertilisation, when making love is potentially dangerous but potentially nice as well; sort of like eating a cholesterol-laden breakfast.' And a deeper reference to the Biblical miracle of the loaves and fishes multiplied to feed the masses.

John Anthony, unable to devote time to Cooper Union, made a break from the Contingorous brothers. He took a flat in the East Village and a graveyard shift at the all-night Yaffa Restaurant. At a club he met Allan Friedman, the New York correspondent for *The Times*, and his Austrian prince partner Dietzie, who took him under their wing to teach him blackjack after he revealed that his dream was to travel through Europe to Monte Carlo in a green Karman Ghia. At one of their dinner parties they introduced Johnny Golightly to the straight, sallow Frenchman Benjamin Wiel, a critic for *Art Nuevo* and the son of an old-money Versailles family. He was not handsome; being too thin and his features too sharp to be angular. And his skin too pasty for the dark stubble and his clothes too plain, though of a good cut. In short, he was everything Marcel Roberti was not. But he did have an aura of breeding, which was deeply attractive to Johnny Golightly.

'Nelspruit's in the bush, about fifty kilometres from lions and elephants,' explained John Anthony, resting his head on his hand as he leaned in towards Benjamin.

'But you don't look like someone from the wilds,' said Benjamin in a heavily laced accent.

'Oh darling, I can be very wild,' said John Anthony putting his hand on Benjamin's arm.

‘Benjamin, Johnny wants to go to Monte Carlo,’ said Dietzie. ‘Wants to find a rich husband.’

‘That’s the last place I’d look,’ sniffed Benjamin. ‘Awful village.’

‘What are you saying?’ squealed John Anthony, bringing his hands to his face. ‘Princess Caroline, Catherine Deneuve, Bridget Bardot, kings and queens. All that glamour!’

‘It’s fake.’

‘Fake darling,’ smiled John Anthony, again leaning in towards Benjamin. ‘But real fake. Those buildings and the lights and glitterati and Maserati. Ooph! I think I’ve just come.’

Seventeen hours later Johnny Golightly woke in Benjamin’s bed. In a week they were in love, and in two they were driving in a green MG to Avignon in France after John Anthony attended his graduation at Academy Minerva. In a month they were back in New York for Johnny Golightly’s exhibition, *Getting Dressed to Get Undressed*, in an abandoned restaurant. The blurb read:

> A modern day Saint Sebastian reveals his soul and wardrobe secrets in a new series of rituals of the closet. Immaculately conceived and dressed, he talks as both sacrifice and altar-boy in the temple of contradictory desires. He offers a communion of tears in a martini glass – olives are extra.
>
> As a new prophet of feeling good, or feeling good about feeling bad, or just plain good for a feel, Johnny believes in a cocktail of boiled blood and semen, faded rose petals and greeting cards as the only elixir of the nineties. To be drunk by true lovers only, even if only once…
>
> I’m inviting you to peak through my veil of tears into the pockets of my leather jacket. I’m asking you to take communion with the banal objects that make my life possible, if not sacred. I will show you the soul of a cigarette, a condom, a subway token, I will show you the wrapping

> of bareness, the packaging of nakedness. I will not show my underwear, it has been seen too often elsewhere.
>
> To be specific, the show is a multi-media installation, part hustler's bedroom, part séance supermarket. It's about consuming desire.

An amalgam of his previous work, it was a failure. At the centre was the short crucifixion film tagged onto *Breakfast at Holly Forest* and four installations. There was *Disposable Income, Coming in Disposables*, which showed an unfurnished room with a painting of a double-yoke fried egg on the wall, aphorisms like 'there are 42 positions in a one night stand', and a suitcase, cheap boom-box, Levi's, Calvin Klein jockstrap, condom and a Kleenex saturated with sperm on the floor; another, decorated like the one in *Breakfast at Holly Forest*, was set for the Last Supper; a black basement with a large, bright pink mattress in the middle; and a child's room featuring John Anthony's school blazer, an old South African flag painted with a pink heart, a toilet knotted with the school tie and chained with a ball, and a rhyme:

> Johnny shall have a new bonnet,
> and Johnny shall go to the fair,
> and Johnny shall have a new ribbon
> to tie up his bonny brown hair
>
> And why may I not love Johnny?
> And why may Johnny not love me?

It was a pertinent question, because things were going badly in the relationship. Johnny had no heart, and Benjamin was in love with Golightly; not with John Anthony, who was in love with Benjamin.

Johnny Golightly's luck had run out as he was confronted with the dangers inherent in taking on a different identity. He fled for South Beach in Miami, where, at Hannah and her Scissors hair salon, he put on an exhibition of two-hundred postcards of martini glasses for the benefit of a local AIDS

organisation. While he was sitting having his hair dyed different colours, a friend from the past walked in.

‘My God! John Anthony! I thought it was you in the photo, but I wasn’t sure as it was captioned Johnny Golightly,’ exclaimed South African art co-ordinator Sue Glanville.

‘Sue! Darling!’ shouted John Anthony jumping from the chair and hugging her. ‘What a joy to see a familiar face.’

‘So what’s with this Johnny Golightly?’

‘Don’t ask. He’s very depressed at the moment. He forgot to take Holly’s advice: “You keep them a stranger; a stranger who’s a friend.” Now the shit’s all banking up again in my life.’

‘Well I might have something for you if you’re interested in coming back to the crazy New South Africa. I need someone to do a series of thirty glamour portraits, and I think you’d be perfect.’

*****

Johnny Golightly jetted into Johannesburg on New Year’s Day in 1995 with only the clothes he was wearing and his copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. On arrival, he instantly suffered another identity crisis – was he a glamour queen, an artist or a returning exile? But he was not ready to make a decision straight away, telling one reporter: ‘Holly Golightly just brought everything to life and I thought if she can, I can. Since then I’ve lived both egos but I want to try and combine the two…I want to try and get them on a balance. That is someone fabulous, like Grace Kelly or Jackie Kennedy.’

It was Johnny Golightly who shone through in his glamour paintings, which included Miss South Africa Jacque Mofokeng as the country’s first Barbie doll,

ex-Miss World Anneline Kriel as Tretchikoff's Blue Lady, and a tiny figure of artist Kendall Geers huddled in a corner masturbating. But he remained desperately confused and on completion headed for Nelspruit, placed himself on a diet of Prozac and built *Hollywood* – a little reed-and-mud hut outside the town.

'Shit,' I snorted. 'That must have been some culture shock after New York.'

'It's all an illusion,' he said. 'It's the same old thing darling – you're still stuck with yourself whether in Manhattan with a martini or in a mud hut with cheap hooch.'

It was the exile who joined the provincial government as an art coordinator. It was John Anthony who went on holiday to Ethiopia at the end of the year. It was Johnny Golightly who took a detour to Djibouti to entertain the troops, ending up under house arrest for three months because he entered illegally with a madam who got him in by inserting his passport in her vagina. And it was John Anthony who returned to find out that his parents had divorced after Maureen moved in with her Lesbian lover.

'All I could say was "Well helloooo!" when I heard the news.'

It was the exile who proposed the Nice People/Nice Places roadshow, which taught rural communities and schools in Mpumalanga the possibilities of tourism for local development. It was Johnny Golightly who was forced to save his life by leaping from a hotel window in Volksrust. It was John Anthony who telephoned his father from the hospital. It was John Anthony who took a forty day road trip with old school friend Jennifer Schormann to go and lay Johnny Golightly to rest. And it was Johnny Golightly who was resurrected for an art exhibition. Or was it John Anthony in disguise?

'When I was lying in hospital thinking "what now", my father walked in,' said John Anthony. 'The man who I'd always regarded as distant at best and who

had just gone through a divorce was there for me. It was extremely humbling that no matter what I'd done, even so far as to renounce his name, he was still my father.'

Back in Nelspruit his mother was reluctant to take him in. She was in a new relationship and their previous closeness had ebbed. When John Anthony returned from his road trip it was to find that his father had given notice to the tenants in the large house in Murray Street he purchased with his pension payout. In the time John Anthony was away he converted the garage to a flatlet, made the property wheelchair friendly and welded a huge double bed for his son.

'Dad, thank you so much,' sobbed John Anthony. 'But you know that this isn't going to be easy.'

'We'll find a way,' said his father, placing his hand on his shoulder. 'Now, not only do we need to get you well, but we have to find something for you to do.'

'I don't want to talk of that at the moment.'

'You must, or else you'll go crazy,' said his father as he pushed him into the flat. 'You've always been a live wire.'

'Daddy, please, not now. I've got to first sort things out. I once thought I could take the world, but the truth is that a hotel in Volksrust was too much. The only thing I'm probably capable of is killing myself.'

'What nonsense. I've had an idea. I'd like to work with you on one of your exhibitions. It will be good, because both of us need healing. And it will also help us get to know each other.'

'I can't,' said John Anthony as his father helped him onto the bed.

‘I’m not going to have you lie around feeling sorry for yourself.’

‘It’s not just that, something else happened in Volksrust and I’m terrified.’

‘The doctor said post traumatic stress is normal. It’s probably that. We can go to the doctor and get medication if you need.’

‘That won’t help. Daddy, God appeared to me when I was lying in the snow and told me he doesn’t want me doing art anymore.’

‘Are you sure it was not shock that made you hallucinate?’

‘No, of that I’m positive. And he revealed a way forward for me. But I can’t discuss that now because it’s still not clear to me.’

‘Then do something in the meantime,’ said his father looking him in the eye for the first time in his life. ‘Do it for me.’

And so they began to work on *Love – a Retrospective*. While John Anthony conceptualised the installation, his father made the chairs for the centrepiece: the Last Supper. With hearts for backing, each was connected to a fake red fur filled drip leading into martini glasses filled with pink plaster of Paris. Behind the table was a painting in which Jesus said to Bobby Shafto: ‘Here’s my blood, drink of it as often as you like.’ Bobby replied: ‘Gee, that’s great, but I can’t drink on an empty stomach. Can I have a piece of your heart instead?’

A tacky, pink fur bedecked shop sold thirteen packs containing the essentials for a night out – gun, postcard, lip ice, condoms and cigarettes. On a wall was one thousand plastic bags containing a coloured feather and a bullet, each with an aphorism of the silly things we say when in love such as, ‘I knew that you would come to rid me of this pallid chastity.’ The bed his father made was in the corner as a reminder that one can fall heavily. ‘What did it mean to golightly? It meant walking on eggshells. It meant to be as light as a fairy, as stealthy as a

spy, as gay as a blade. It meant to party till you dropped and be gracious with a hangover. It meant to hang on without looking like a hanger on. Being Golightly was also a problem. How could you golightly in a time of crisis, when being gay meant having the saddest experience around? What did it mean to tiptoe around death's door on demi-point when one's chunking Doc Martens were made of lead?'

Those wishing to catch a glimpse of Johnny Golightly at the opening in Sandton were disappointed, because it was John Anthony with a plaster stuck on his head who arrived on crutches wearing khaki shorts, red check shirt and caterpillar boots.

'Golightly fell heavily in more ways than one,' smiled John Anthony. 'A hospital ward with starched, white sheets was just not the place for a frenetic queen and he became sad, angry and even too scared to masturbate. But it began to occur to me through my melancholy that God may have chosen to immobilise Johnny Golightly to give me time to reassess who I was and what I wanted to be. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to be like Holly when she returned to being a normal girl – and I love it.'

*****

'John Anthony, there are a few things I want to go over with you,' I said as he turned to catch the attention of Jabu. 'What did God say to you on the train in Volksrust?'

'He told me that if I wanted to make a difference I had to change my ways. It was all very well having fun and doing things just for me, me, me, but I wouldn't achieve anything meaningful by living like that. It changed my life in seconds as I suddenly realised I had to focus on what I was doing for Him.'

‘Do you believe this was really God, or a moment of inner confirmation of a route you were already taking? You were, after all, already doing community work when you were assaulted.’

‘Pat, how can you doubt it was God?’ he said, leaning in.

‘I’m not insinuating anything. I’m merely stating that God was not giving you an injunction, but endorsing a course you had already embarked on.’

‘I suppose, if you put it like that,’ he sniffed, signalling Jabu to bring the bill. ‘I need to get back to work.’

‘Please. There’s one more thing. Before Volksrust, did you ever suffer a serious physical or psychological trauma?’

‘I was hardly ever ill, if that’s what you mean. But I broke my wrist when I fell from a tree.’

‘Did you experience anything at the time?’ I asked as Jabu placed a folder on the table, which John Anthony pushed to my side. ‘Like a sudden revelation, or something similar to what happened in Volksrust.’

He shook his head. Then he began the motions of preparing to leave. As he stood, he said, ‘but I was traumatised. Being gay in this fucking place was awful; the bullying just terrible. But no accompanying epiphanies, if that’s what you want to know. Pat, I’m sorry if I don’t fit in your box, but that’s how it is. There’s always an exception.’

Chapter 6

I saw John Anthony three times over the next six years to do profiles for various lifestyle magazines. In this period he resigned his local government position and established Art Aid, which nationally offered training in arts and crafts. Each time appearing more fulfilled than the last. I, on the other hand, entered a period of emptiness I staved off with workaholism and alcohol. Putting on thirty kilograms in the process, which gave me the appearance of a fat baby with grey hair.

Extraordinary South Africa after the interview with John Anthony became *Eccentric South Africa*, a light celebration of things wacky rather than the serious study I contemplated. There was an element of relief in having avoided confrontation, and I often wondered if I had not stepped back too readily. But while I stopped analysing eccentricity, I kept going back to aspects of the subject with a morbidity akin to revisiting the site of a tragedy. From this emerged a rather offbeat story for young adults, which I hoped would pull me back from the brink of despair. Which was why I was sitting in the bar of Poplars Restaurant in Durbanville waiting for Marilise Cook.

It was part of a wine estate and guesthouse, into which I had booked. Further on the vineyards appeared soft and beautiful in the orange afterglow of evening against the lower slopes of the Durbanville Hills. There was a pretty garden with roses and manicured grass and flagstone paths and a small lake bordered by tall poplars through which a breeze rustled. Perfection spoilt by the buildings. They appeared to be original gabled Cape Dutch, but could be a reproduction. Chrome and glass and dove-grey paint and artworks that degrade Jackson Pollock. The place was in virtual darkness, lit only by candles, and I took a table on the verandah. I was on my third whiskey when I saw Marilise walking briskly from the car park.

‘Pat, so sorry I’m late,’ she said hugging me and air-kissing each cheek. ‘The traffic’s a nightmare, these power cuts have knocked out half the robots.’

‘No problem, it gave me time to try their bar.’

‘Seen the menu?’ she asked, looking round for the waiter. ‘The lamb shank is superb, as is the duck breast.’

‘Duck sounds good.’

A waiter dressed in starched whites came over with menus, but Marilise waved them away.

‘It’s OK,’ she smiled, looking up at him. ‘The lamb shank for me and the duck for him. And a bottle of Thelema Shiraz, and another whisky for him.’

‘Sorry mam, we’ve been unable to prepare the shanks because of the outages,’ said the waiter, tapping a stubby pencil on his order book. ‘May I recommend the chops?’

‘Sure.’

‘And how would you like them done?’

‘Medium-rare.’ Turning to me she continued, ‘That proposal you sent me. It’s *way* removed from anything you’ve done before. Interesting.’ (Delivered in the tone of ‘what-are-you-thinking?’)

‘It’s a young adult story about identity as a metaphor for the country’s problems in defining what and who we are.’

‘Yes, I get that,’ she said tossing her hair. ‘But you need to run the story by me.’

‘Remember when we had lunch and you asked me to do the book that became *Eccentric South Africa*?’ I said putting my hands on the table. ‘And I told you about the relationship between trauma and calling and all that.’

‘Yes. Vaguely,’ she said, distracted by a man talking loudly on his cellphone. ‘But didn’t that guy Johnny Golightly fuck that one over?’

‘You put it so delicately,’ I said, starting to tap a finger in frustration. ‘Yes he did. But I’ve done quite a bit of work with Venda artists and they have a similar take on calling, what they refer to as the revealing of a gift by the ancestors. What I want to do is tell a story of a young girl, based on artist Noria Mabasa, who is deeply traumatised by the death of her father, a sort of Jackson Hlungwani-type. The night of his funeral she has a dream in which he appears to her and tells her she is to gather clay from the river and make a doll. She goes into a whole thing of denial, gets sick, da-da-da-da-da and eventually follows her calling to become a highly acclaimed potter. Interwoven is conflict with the chief when she has another dream and starts woodcarving, which is the preserve of men.’

Our food arrived, and another drink for me.

‘Pat, this is obscure stuff.’

‘I did a shorter version, which was shortlisted for the Sanlam awards. I attached it to the proposal. Did you read it?’

‘Not yet,’ she said, distractedly examining the label on the wine bottle before replacing it. ‘Shit, I’ve got so much other crap I barely have time to breathe.’

‘Marilise, I’ve never asked for much, but I really need this.’

‘If it was up to me I’d say yes, but it has to go via the committee.’

‘Accountants who don’t know the difference between Shakespeare and the guide to pass the learner’s licence.’

‘Which sells twenty times more than all our fiction combined,’ she said, shrugging her shoulders in irritation. ‘The reality is that if they don’t like it, it won’t get done. And this will be a hard sell.’

‘Look how many books I’ve done for you. Sold my soul with most, now give something back.’

‘You know it doesn’t work like that,’ she said lowering her voice as the tables round us began to quieten. ‘The truth is; I’m not sure I’ll even present it. If I push stuff that’s guaranteed to be shot down it’ll affect my credibility.’

‘Fuck the lot of you.’

‘Pat, calm down,’ she said, her eyes narrowing. ‘You’re getting drunk and not seeing things rationally.’

‘So? All I want is a story that will give me some dignity back.’

‘You’re making too much of this,’ she said, folding her serviette. ‘Your joke book’s in its fifth reprint, which most writers could only dream of.’

‘My dear, taking jokes off the internet is not writing. And “why does an elephant have four feet, because six inches would look ridiculous” is not funny.’

‘It is, actually. Now let’s talk about stuff that’s going to work for both of us.’

‘A good fuck.’

‘Yeah, likely,’ she hurrumphed, rubbing the side of her eye. ‘I’ve been given the go ahead for a book on the funny side of marriage. You know, like the couple

who got married in Cullinan dressed as the Flintstones and instead of “I do” said “yabba-dabba-do”. And, of course, divorce and all the messy shit.’

‘Forget it Marilise. I can do that dross with my eyes closed, but it’s over. I have to move on.’

‘Think about it. It’s been lovely seeing you, but I must run as I told the babysitter I’d be home by ten. Let’s do this again when you’re next in Cape Town.’

After paying the bill, she hugged me and was gone, the master of the planned exit. With nothing to do, I headed for the bar. But it was empty and I purchased a bottle of Chivas and four cigars and returned to my room. There I poured a drink and flicked through the television channels. Finding nothing, I sat on the patio and lit a cigar. And decided to commit suicide. It was as undramatic as that. What shall I do now? OK, I think I’ll kill myself.

This was not the way it was for Nukain Mabusa and Helen Martins and the others who had taken their lives? Mabusa dug his own grave at the top of the painted mountain before burying himself under a pile of rocks and willing himself to death. And Martins cooked her insides by drinking caustic soda. She had often contemplated suicide, saying: ‘One should not have to be bashed over the head. There is no greater waste than to be of the living dead.’ And in her house was a poem from Arthur Nortjie’s *In Notes from the Middle of the Night*:

> Untold anxieties through the dark
> cannot at random exorcise themselves:
> it is me, black, menacing among the shelves
> of books and intellectual rubble, who loves the both-end candle life with benzedrine
> and must answer to the seven devils.
> A world of memories swirls
> and the gallstones of fear jab at my shredded nerves.

Inside me blooms a sudden wish
to calm fright with a little yellow pill,
lull it to a predawn slumber,
escape by soporific in an orange capsule
There blows a flowering death release
in winds from Lethe, Styx or anywhere
forgetfulness resides.

What was the protocol? Did one leave a note? I chose not to, because nothing I could say would wash away the guilt my family and friends would feel. If that was the case, then it had to be done in a manner that did not appear premeditated, which precluded walking in front of a truck on the road two-hundred metres away. It soon became obvious that to snuff oneself in a natural way was not a simple proposition, that is, until I looked up at the Durbanville Hills silhouetted against the deep blue of the moonlit sky. Climbing mountains at night was just the sort of thing people would expect of me, and as silly as it sounded, the walk would be good for me.

I pulled on my walking shoes and favourite T-shirt, which displayed an SABC test-pattern captioned: Fuck Off – It's Bedtime. I slipped the remaining cigars into a pocket of my shorts, took a swig of scotch and set off with the bottle in one hand. The walk, at first, even for someone of my level of unfitness, was gentle along an eroded path running between vineyards. The way, too, was illuminated by a silvery wash, but the moon began to set as I reached steeper ground. I sat for a while to catch my breath and took a long drink of Chivas; then continued, leaning further and further forward into the slope, sometimes slipping on stones, which started mini avalanches that scuttled into the darkness. As I got closer to the top, so ascent became more difficult, and I was forced to stop more often.

I reached the summit at about midnight, by which time the whisky was almost finished. I stumbled about for over an hour in the dark finding the most suitable ledge, choosing one that seemed high, but was probably no more than twenty

metres. Then, without fanfare, I stood sideways and let myself fall. I remember my bum hitting something hard and flipping me outwards to land feet first, blinding pain up my left side, then my head struck a rock.

I entered a period of timelessness; an illusionary spell in which I was sitting on a ridge looking down on my unconscious body. It was a twilight world in which clouds of molten orange swirled so near that I could reach up and touch them. There, I relived my epiphany in which I was called to be the chronicler. I saw how I had envisioned recording the lives of extraordinary people so I could learn how to access the portals of the kingdom of god which reside within us all. Then there was denial followed by an awakening in which I had subverted my purpose. Suddenly it was clear to me why I was lying below; I had failed myself like Helen Martins and Nukain Mabusa had done before. She had reduced her vision of bringing light to the world to changing her home, and he of recreating the Garden of Eden to painting a mountain. It was this realisation that we had sold ourselves short that made the destruction of self so essential.

I'm not sure how long I lay there, but it was still dark when I came round. I tried to stand, but my left leg collapsed under me. When the agony passed I looked down, just able to see my foot twisted in a grotesque shape. I turned on my stomach, pounding the ground in anger with my fists. I was furious that I had wasted so much time; frustrated that now I had been given another chance I was helpless on a hillside. And getting off was going to be more problematic because I had not brought my cellphone, and was unsure how many people came this way. I was in serious trouble and the only way I could see out of it was to roll down the hill towards the lights below.

It took most of the rest of the night to move two kilometres, where I landed in a ditch. I pulled myself out, tumbling a little further to a tree next to a dirt road. Under it, I heard a rustle and lifted my head to be confronted by a porcupine, its quills flared in outrage. We faced off for a few seconds before the animal slunk into the darkness, and I lay back exhausted, cut and battered, the nearest lights a tantalising hundred or so metres away. But I could go no further, sure that

someone would pass this way. And so it was, the sun already up, that I saw a woman jogging with her great Dane. I called to her, but she took one look at me and decided I was a hobo and continued. In an extraordinary turn of events, I was saved by the dog, which attacked me, sinking its teeth into my right arm and shaking. The woman, in panic, came running back to pull the dog off. Before she could apologise, I told her she was an angel and that I needed help.

They operated on my ankle, which was dislocated and broken in five places, at a clinic in Durbanville. Two days later my wife arrived to drive me home. Alarmed at my toes turning purple, she took me straight to an orthopaedic surgeon at the Sandton Clinic, who booked me in for further surgery. The next morning I was lying in bed enjoying the morphine, my foot elevated, when John Anthony, wearing jeans and a turquoise striped shirt with matching shoes, blew in.

‘Oh darling! I was in town and Bridget told me of your awful accident.’

He put a gift packet on the bedside table and hugged me before taking Koki-pens from his jacket pocket and drawing a cupcake topped with a cherry on my exposed big toe.

‘There, that looks better,’ he said, standing back. ‘Now you’ll have something to look at other than these ghastly pussy-pink walls. What were they thinking? Just imagine, if you died in here this would be your last memory of colour. So, tell me all about it.’

‘I was an idiot,’ I said, looking out the window.

‘Aren’t we all? He said, pulling over a grey chair. ‘But darling, don’t you have anything better to do at night than wander in mountains? What happened to sleeping or partying or sex?’

‘Don’t ask.’

‘This is such a coincidence that the moment I heard of it I knew you were the one,’ he said, sounding suddenly hesitant. ‘I’ve often wanted to ask if you’d write a book about me, but when I’ve picked up the phone I’ve lost my nerve.’

‘When I initially interviewed you, did you tell me everything?’

‘Darling, don’t be silly,’ he smiled impishly. ‘I’d never reveal all on the first date.’

‘Like, what, didn’t you reveal?’

‘Know this, there’s many a thing you don’t know about me.’

‘Was what you told me the truth?’

‘Don’t be so naïve, darling,’ he said, slapping the bed. ‘What is truth but altered circumstance? Like what happened to you in Durbanville, or me in Volksrust. Or Johnny Golightly. Was he real even if I made him up? Surely he was if people fell in love with him. Or the wife who wears dark glasses to hide her black eye? Now stop with the questions and please, please say yes.’

‘You know what, John Anthony, you’re not going to believe this, but the night of my fall I was punting a book on identity to my publishers. I’ll do it. Yes, I’ll do it.’

It was not the whole truth, but I certainly was not going to reveal that his story was to be my first proper chronicling based on epiphanies.

‘Really?’ he squealed. ‘And here I was thinking you’d say no, or I’ll think about it.’

‘If I say I’ll do it, I’ll do it.’

‘To keep you interested, a triviality. How do you think Johnny Golightly afforded his glamour lifestyle in New York?’

‘Your patrons and lover.’

‘No. Between them,’ he replied, sitting back and crossing his legs. ‘Do you think being a waiter or working in a florist did it? No chance. He hustled. Gave straight men blowjobs at Rounds Restaurant off Wall Street at $150 a pop. Semen down his throat so he could eat oysters. Truth-fiction, oysters-sperm, glamour-sleaze, my darling, the veneer separating them is paper thin. If that.’

Part 2

The Book of John

Chapter 7

‘Darling, I’m so sorry to do this to you,’ said John Anthony when he phoned on the Friday afternoon. ‘I cleared the whole of next week for your visit to Nelspruit, but something’s come up and there’s no way I can get out of it. I train a number of crafters’ groups in northern KwaZulu, and when there I stay in Mtubatuba at the Fairy Tree Guest House. I exchange my décor services for free lodging, and they’ve built a premier suite that I need to attend to. The problem is that next week is the only time I have.’

‘Do you want to reschedule?’

‘Not necessarily. I was thinking that maybe you’d be a honey and meet me there. I could get the labourers going with tiling and painting in the morning; then we’ll get together in the dining room, which is close by if I’m needed. We’ll just have to accept there’ll be distractions, but that’s not all bad as that’ll give us a break. The owner’s name is Ilse Vermaak, and she’s happy to put you up as well.’

I said yes because Mtubatuba was one of those places I had long wanted to visit as its name reverberates with the tone of an African drum. I was disappointed the moment I arrived. It sells itself as the ‘Gateway to Zululand’, but was little more than a frontier town: rough, impermanent and unwelcoming. There was no structure or flow to it as it had been built on a jumble of terra firma reclaimed from dank swampland. Charmless. The architecture was faceless, especially in the suburbs where prefab housing predominated – with little to differentiate this from the profusion of military barracks erected during the regional civil war of a decade ago. And everywhere there were florid, paunchy roughnecks who habitually fidgeted with their crotches constricted by skin-tight khaki shorts as they lounged round mud-spattered 4x4s.

But there was a hint of soul in the town centre. Jalopies were being washed at the Death Wish Car Wash while hooting taxis, their radios blaring distorted

kwaito, were disgorging passengers weighed down by provisions in candy-striped bags. Some made straight for the lopsided dirty-yellow buses of the DIVINE DRIVE company; others lingered at stalls selling avocadoes, mangoes and blood-red tomatoes. But most headed for the loud women cooking green mielies and sheep's heads on grids over braziers.

Whatever my feeling about the place, I was glad to be here. I once again had purpose and I was eager to begin work with John Anthony. I had often contemplated the outsider identity of eccentrics, and his story appeared to be the perfect allegory for the fractured national spirit. This was to be the heart of a book, which I had provisionally titled *Johnny Golightly Comes Home*. In it, he and the Lowveld were protagonists. It would begin with the story of a confused gay boy running away from an uncompromisingly macho environment; and end with him returning as the prodigal to a region plunged into turmoil by rapid transformation. While I was aware that assigning character to a landscape was romantic, I was convinced I could pull it off. So were my new publishers and WITS who had accepted the idea for my masters.

Because of the layout of the town, and John Anthony's cryptic directions, it took a long while to find the guest house. When I arrived I was met by a tall woman with jet-black pageboy hair and lips of bright crimson set against pasty skin. She was wearing a red kimono with gold patterning and thick tortoiseshell-frame glasses. The overall effect was to leave enough doubt as to whether she was attractive; maybe because it made her of indeterminate age, which I reckoned to be late thirties. She introduced herself as Ilse, after which a maid led me through the garden designed for an Asian emperor: pagodas, shrines and koi ponds crossed by delicate curved bridges.

I had hardly started unpacking in the high-ceilinged, airy room when John Anthony entered carrying a large cardboard box, which he placed on the table. He was wearing jeans cut off just below the knee, a light green Lacoste golf shirt with white collar, sand shoes and sunglasses pushed onto his thinning crown.

‘God, that woman’s driving me insane,’ he said, flopping onto the bed and covering his face with his hands. ‘Here we are on the edge of Zululand, iconic Africa, and she wants a Chinese wank. You know, Pat, the only thing I retained from my Johnny Golightly days was the idea of releasing people from their parameters so they can see unimagined possibilities. But Ilse is forever blind. May she burn in hell.’

‘It’s not like you to take shit. Tell her to fuck off.’

‘Darling, what of the bill for all my accommodation?’ he said, sitting up. ‘She has me by the balls, and knows it. Let me tell you what she wants. Red walls, black skirting and cornices, gold ceiling, all lacquered; lanterns, ebony floor tiles and sunken bath; ivory carvings; and sheen curtains, which I still have to choose and have made. It’s a crack whore’s hallucination.’

‘Sounds as if Golightly possessed her after being exorcised from you.’

‘Golightly would have done it in pink, with mirrors all about so that the Barbies and Kens who stayed in it could marvel at their cellulite wobbling performance,’ he said, patting his bum. ‘I wanted to make it Zulu, but her only compromise has been the lacquer paint and the inclusion of beading on the curtains. The result, I fear, is going to be an Afro-Asian fusion fuck-up.’

‘At least you won’t have to live with it.’

‘I’m a perfectionist. I’ll know I did it,’ he said, standing and arching his back. ‘I’m quickly going to check up on the workers, then I’m driving into town to organise the curtains. Come with.’

I followed John Anthony up the stairs to the suite, where Ilse was plonked on a chair fanning her face with a brochure for light fittings. The room was a mess with dust everywhere as men lifted the old tiles and sanded the walls. A team of

four carried out a beautiful antique ball and claw bath, which was making way for a black plastic seashell-shaped one propped in a corner. In the bathroom John Anthony stood for a long while staring at a blank wall, then out the window and back again. Turning sideways, he cupped his head in his hands as he contemplated another spot. Finally he looked round until he caught sight of one of the men.

‘Meshack,’ he called. ‘Please come here. I don’t want you to put the cabinet where we originally discussed. Rather, I want it over here.’

With that Ilse pushed herself up, stalked over and demanded, ‘John Anthony, what is it you want to change now?’

‘The cabinet, I want to put it there,’ he pointed.

‘Absolutely not. I want it where we decided.’

‘Look Ilse,’ said John Anthony facing the window, his hands on his hips, ‘the morning sun will shine right in the mirror. It will blind the poor dear trying to make up her face.’

‘Then find another spot. I’m not happy with your suggestion,’ she said.

‘I’ll think about it,’ said John Anthony, throwing up his hands. To me he said, ‘Darling, let’s go and organise curtains.

In the car he said, ‘There’re three people you must speak to. My mom and dad, and school friend Jennifer Schormann who went on a road trip with me after I broke my ankles. I’ve warned them you’ll be calling and I’ve left their numbers in the envelope taped to the box. You need to get to my dad quite soon; he’s in the late phase of prostate cancer.’

‘You always said he was never part of your life, other than after Volksrust. Will he have anything of value to contribute?’

‘More than you know. It was because of him that I became Johnny Golightly,’ he said, pulling into a parking spot. ‘We’re at the curtain place, so we’ll pick up on him later.’

Carol’s General Dealership was the last place one would expect a designer to enter. The fading royal blue paint was flaking in places and the red-on-white sign was rusted round the riveting from the salt air blown thirty kilometres inland off the Indian Ocean. But once inside it was a sensory delight catering for every need from plough spares for him to feather hats for her. There were blue paraffin lamps, red plastic plates and silver nuts and bolts; gas stoves, shovels and postman-style bicycles; glass counters under which were drawers filled with nails, batteries, clamps, curtain hooks, knitting needles, beads, a rainbow of sequins and multi-hued cottons; and behind a long cutting board were hundreds of shots of fine fabrics displayed at an angle against the back wall. More could be seen on a rickety mezzanine above.

‘John Anthony, it’s so long since we’ve seen you,’ exclaimed a tall, elegant black woman in turquoise kaftan.

‘Yes, Ilse’s new suite. Haw! That woman.’

‘Before you go you must speak to the ladies at the back. They’re sewing beading onto the garments, but not the way you taught them.’

‘I’ll go see them now. What sheeny black curtaining do you have, I’m looking for about eight metres? The problem is the four metre drop.’

While they were busy I explored the shop, buying spares for my wife’s Elna sewing machine the agent had said were unavailable, bangles for the girls and three Zorro clocks with alarm bells on top that I had last seen in the 70s.

Slipslops, pearl buttons and a fabric emblazoned with the Zulu monarch for my office. I had hardly scratched the surface when John Anthony emerged an hour later from a door at the back.

‘Darling, let’s get coffee,’ he said, a swatch of fabrics in his hand. ‘I have to keep away from Ilse as much as possible, and I don’t have the energy to go back just yet. The only place with anything approaching palatable is the Nando’s across the road. Believe it or not, fast-food outlets in these parts are regarded as top restaurants.’

‘Don’t tell me. I’ve experienced some shockers.’

We found a table in the packed seating area, a waitress hovering.

‘You must order at the counter, and I’ll bring it to you,’ she said.

‘We only want coffee,’ responded John Anthony. ‘Do you make latte?’

‘What?’

‘Never mind. Two coffees. Decaf for him.’ To me he said, ‘We’ve not really spoken since the hospital. How’s the ankle?’

‘OK. The pins are coming out next week. But the physio’s a bitch. Not the therapist, but the therapy.’

‘God! Don’t I know? I think they take joy from hearing grown men scream.’

‘I’ve been doing plenty of that.’

‘Pat, let’s quickly talk about the book. You said when we last spoke on the phone that the publishing proposal had been accepted.’

‘Yes. And WITS has accepted it for a masters thesis.’

‘That’s fantastic,’ he smiled, fiddling with a bottle of peri-peri sauce. ‘Just think, little old me the subject of a book and a dissertation. That’ll really make Nelspruit sit up and take notice.’

‘What I had in mind was…’

‘Pat, let’s not go into that now,’ he cut in, taking a photograph from the inside cover of his diary. ‘What I want to know is: Will I be on the cover?’

‘That’s something…’

He slid the picture towards me and said, ‘I think this one will be perfect. Steven Hilton-Barber, Bridget’s brother, took it for *Love – a Retrospective*.’

It showed John Anthony in profile with a bullet in his mouth, the barrel of a gun to his head. He was wearing a crown of cosmos.

‘Thorns are so passé,’ he said as we finished our coffee. ‘I don’t have any cash on me. Can you get the bill?’

*****

Ilse was waiting when we returned. She was wearing a smile laced with venom.

‘John Anthony, sometimes I don’t know what you’re thinking.’

‘What now, Ilse?’ sighed John Anthony.

‘Ismail’s delivered a white shag carpet. I sent it right back.’

‘I wanted it for contrast,’ he said, flapping his arms.

‘John Anthony, don’t take that attitude with me,’ she said, her expression tightening. ‘We’ve discussed this. I want oriental; it complements the garden.’

He turned to me and shrugged, ‘I need to get back to work. I’ll see you at dinner at seven and then we can chat.’

I returned to my room where I changed into a pair of shorts and hiking boots. Before setting out on an hour-long walk I stretched my ankle, which was throbbing from the long drive and high humidity. Once out the gate I limped for the first hundred metres, but as the pain eased I found an even pace. As the sun set, the moisture laden orange sky soaked with the odours of decaying vegetation, I concluded that Mtubatuba was the slavering dog capital of the world as Dobermans, mastiffs and Rottweilers threw themselves at fences as I passed.

When I got back I poured a J&B from a bottle I had brought along. I took a sip, placed the glass on the coffee table next to John Anthony’s box, and pulled up a wicker chair. Rummaging, I took out a fistful of loose photographs and a number of photograph albums. Amongst these were pictures from his travels, exhibitions and a mock-up for an Absolut Golightly vodka label. I put aside one of him in checked shirt sitting in a chair covered with so much pink fur it appeared he was on a cloud. There were reviews, magazine articles, a floor plan for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a Post-it on which was written: I am scared. I reached in again and pulled out his 1985 school diary, his copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and a notebook.

On the day Broadway ‘85 premiered he wrote: ‘This was the best day and moment in my life. My dream eventually came true. I showed everyone that dreams can be real.’ After the Saturday finale he scrawled: ‘I’m so depressed. I sat in the garden thinking about everything.’ In *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* he had underlined numerous passages, but one caught my eye because he also boxed it in heavy ink:

> Holly wanted to know about my childhood. She talked of her own, too; but it was elusive, nameless, placeless, an impressionistic recital, though the impression received was contrary to what one expected, for she gave an almost voluptuous account of swimming and summer, Christmas trees, pretty cousins, and parties: in short, happy in a way that she was not, and never, certainly, the background of a child who had run away.

In the notebook was an outline of a play he intended writing. It told of the journey of discovery of a boy growing up in a rather poor Nelspruit family. There was loneliness, the realisation he was gay and the exploration of artistic talent. This was against the backdrop of an Oedipus complex, fights with his father and battles between the parents. When divorce was mentioned he became more insecure and sought someone to love.

I thought little of this, looking more specifically for things that supported my big idea for the book. In particular I wanted post-Golightly material, but there was little. My plan was to chronicle John Anthony's life, then use his story as a metaphor for South African identity. It would contrast how he successfully resolved his issues in a country that was increasingly polarising. When I looked at my watch it was five to seven and I dumped it all back. After a quick shower I dressed in jeans and T-shirt before heading for the dining room. There, to my irritation, John Anthony and Ilse were deep in conversation.

'I've always wanted to do a book,' said Ilse after I sat. 'I've had such an interesting life and I thought it would be a bestseller if I did a combination of anecdotes, recipes and lifestyle hints on things like decorating and gardening.'

'She's a phenomenal cook,' added John Anthony with a wink to me.

'Yes,' she continued, unaware that she was being teased. 'Family recipes passed down the ages. Prime minister Smuts knew my grandparents and he said the impala with herb stuffing we're having for main course was the best he'd ever tasted. You know what the secret is?'

‘Oh, do tell,’ teased John Anthony.

‘I will, but please don’t ever repeat what I’m going to reveal.’

‘I promise,’ said John Anthony leaning in with a mock conspiratorial look.

‘The magic comes from a teaspoon of dagga in the stuffing,’ she smiled proudly.

‘No,’ exclaimed John Anthony in exaggerated shock.

And so it went on through to dessert, of which John Anthony had three helpings. And into coffees when John Anthony’s head began to loll. I took this as an opportunity to say goodnight.

Back in my room I continued to explore the contents of the box, feeling like a voyeur as I read postcards and letters from friends. In one pile I stacked the things I wanted to return to, in a bigger heap I discarded boarding passes and a myriad other mementoes. Of particular interest was a scrapbook in which John Anthony conceptualised a series of paintings of Superman. The first was beautifully rendered, but as they progressed they became untidier until the last one which was so heavily scratched out that the paper was shredded. On the facing page he had written: WAR IS NOT A MOVIE!!!

At three in the morning I stepped outside to roll a joint. I was leaning on the railing of the stoep when I saw the light in the dining room go on as John Anthony, wearing only a red thong, went through to the adjoining kitchen. I followed, to find him looking in the fridge. I cleared my throat, which made him jump.

‘Darling, you’ll kill me if you sneak up like that,’ he squealed as he turned, his hands over his ears. I noticed that he had put on a substantial amount of weight around the middle since the photographs in the box were taken.

‘John Anthony, what are you doing?’

‘I was hungry. Ilse makes the most decadent chocolate brownies. I could swear the recipe was given to her by the devil.’

He put half a dozen on a plate and returned with me to the porch, where he ate as I sipped a scotch. After the second cookie he took my drink and sniffed it.

‘What shit,’ he said, turning up his nose. ‘I haven’t touched the stuff since I gave up Golightly.’

*****

The first opportunity we got to ourselves was early the following afternoon.

‘Pat, this is not working,’ he said with and exasperated expression. ‘Ilse’s not going to let me be, even though she promised. There is, however, one thing I must speak to you about before you see my father, and she’s assured me that she’ll leave us alone for the afternoon.’

‘I have other things I want to deal with.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ he said, dropping his head into his hands. ‘But my mind’s all over the place and I can’t function like that. When we’ve finished today we’ll set another time. I’ll even come to Johannesburg if you want.’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

‘I’ve not spoken of this to anyone outside my family, and I only do so now because my father has agreed to talk to you,’ he said, lifting his head. ‘It’s amazing what looming death can do for one.’

*****

John Anthony arrived in Holland during a snowstorm in December 1988. There he found an extended family on his father's side that he was completely unaware of other than for his step-grandmother who he first stayed with in Dinxperlo on the border between Germany and Holland. Besides her there was an aunt older than his father, and two younger uncles: one of whom had two sons from a previous marriage to Wishie. As John Anthony flipped through a photo album he stopped at a picture of a woman with two young boys.

'That's Wishie with the boys when they were younger,' explained his step-grandmother. 'Dreadful woman, very bitter. She's been trying to take revenge on your uncle ever since he left her. And she's poisoned the minds of her sons.'

'She looks nice,' said John Anthony, running his finger down the side of the photograph. 'Could I meet her?'

'I'd rather you didn't,' replied his step-grandmother, who was becoming increasingly agitated.

'Why not? It's so exciting to find family you never knew existed.'

The following day John Anthony went through his step-grandmother's telephone book and called Wishie in Amsterdam. She was delighted to hear from him and invited him for lunch the following Sunday. When he found her apartment, the elegant, beautiful woman, a concert pianist in her early fifties, hugged him warmly and ushered him into a pink marble-floored room decorated with fine period furniture. There were a chaise-lounge upholstered in a pale green fabric embossed with vines and walnut cabinets filled with blue and yellow Venetian glass and reproduction Van Gogh's and open velvet drapes before a window overlooking a canal on which glided a glass topped barge filled with tourists. She sat him down to a feast that started with a sweet potato soup followed by fish baked in banana leaf and crème brulee flavoured with a hint of

ginger. John Anthony asked for another helping of dessert. Through the meal she spoke of her music career and sons, while John Anthony told a glossed version of his childhood. In this was interwoven his dream of choreographing fine art to the point where reality and imagination blurred.

When lunch was finished she opened another bottle of champagne and played a few classics on her Steinway. John Anthony, eager to show off, did an impersonation of Jerry Lee Lewis at his manic best with *Great Balls of Fire*. He followed this with a Liberace tune, during which his tall, blond cousins arrived and asked if he would like to go with them to a nearby pub for a drink. Thinking it wonderful that he was getting to know his family, he joined them. When their beers arrived, the brothers toasted then turned on him.

'Do you have any idea what life is like in Holland for us because of your father and our grandfather?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' said John Anthony taken aback.

'It's a nightmare because they made the Boerma name shit. Left a stain we can never get rid of.'

'Please tell me what you're on about. I've never got on well with my father, but he's hardly the type.'

'You think not.'

What they told John Anthony shocked him more than any other thing in his life. They revealed that his father and grandfather had been members of the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland (NSB), the Dutch fascist organisation that was enamoured with Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Founded by Anton Mussert and Cornelis van Geelkerken in 1931, it was part of an authoritarian wave sweeping Europe in the wake of the Great Depression. This was particularly attractive to the middleclass and military that hankered for strong

government, order and solidarity. For them the problems besetting the world could be traced to the door of democracy, and they advocated restricting the franchise, curtailing the freedom of the press and enforcing military service for all men. The more reactionary, such as the NSB, also believed that people should be forced to work and strikes be outlawed. And corporations be nationalised as they were controlled by the Jews who were sucking the lifeblood from Europe in a conspiracy to establish world domination.

Worse, it was to learn that his father and grandfather were not just members of the NSB, but actively involved. His grandfather joined its paramilitary organisation, the Weerbaarheidsafdeling (WA), which wore uniforms and saluted with the Heil Hitler-like Hou Zee. And his father became a member of its agrarian youth organisation, Jeugdstorm, which provided the Nazis with auxiliary services during World War 11 so as to free up men to fight on the Eastern Front. The NSB supported the occupation of Holland by Germany in 1940, and was the only party permitted to function after that. And it was one of their members who betrayed Anne Frank.

‘This can’t be,’ said John Anthony, tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘Then why do you think he ran off to South Africa after the war? To be with his own kind. People like you.’

‘But I’m here in exile,’ protested John Anthony angrily. ‘Even if what you say is true, it doesn’t mean I’m the same.’

‘You think not,’ said the younger of the cousins poking John Anthony in the chest with a finger. ‘Then try living in Holland with a name like Boerma. You’ll soon learn what it means when they speak of the sins of the father.’

*****

‘Pat, it was devastating,’ said John Anthony, a film of tears in his eyes. ‘Here I was, a communist sympathiser, who’d grown up in a house with a Nazi, and never for a moment suspected it. What else did I not know of my family? So I caught a flight home to confront him.’

‘But you were in exile.’

‘I was allowed home for thirty days a year; that was the regulation,’ said John Anthony turning his head from my gaze.

‘John Anthony, you’d have been arrested.’

John Anthony twisted and turned like Houdini to escape the question. He became aggressive, then pleaded, and when neither worked he threatened to walk away from the project. But I stood firm and eventually he relented. In the late 80s the South African government decreed that sons of emigrants still had to do national service even if they held a foreign passport; and John Anthony was called up. While it was true that he was being followed by the security police, it was the army’s refusal to give him any further deferments that sent him into exile.

‘Do you have any idea what happened to gay men in the army?’ he asked, now looking at me so intently that I was forced to turn away. ‘Do you know of Ward 22 where homosexuals were subject to brutal therapies and experiments? Look at me, how long do you think it would have taken for them to realise I was queer? And does it make any difference if I say I was a political or gay exile? No it doesn’t. So let’s continue. When I spoke to my father he confirmed everything.’

‘Were your mother or sisters aware of his past?’

‘No,’ he replied, sitting back with a look of relief that I was not pursuing the details of his exile. ‘And I didn’t say anything until well after my return in 1995.

I couldn’t deal with it myself, let alone lay it on them. But it became clear to me on the plane back to Holland that I couldn’t keep my name. And the book I was reading at the time gave me a way out. It was *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and I was Johnny Golightly. If my father could lose his past and make a new life in another country, so could I.’

Chapter 8

My cellphone rang as I drove into Nelspruit.

‘Mr Hopkins?’ enquired a voice tinged with guttural Hollander and Germanic formality.

‘Yes.’

‘Willie Boerma. We are to meet today. Where are you now?’

‘Just driving into town,’ I replied, wedging the phone between my shoulder and ear. ‘Passed Hall’s.’

‘You were going to come with John Anthony, but he was called away on urgent business. Do you know how to get to me?’

‘No. I’ll need directions. Could you hold on while I pull over?’

After explaining, he said, ‘John Anthony normally brings me lunch, but he forgot. I am unable to get away from here, so could I ask that you go to Woolworths at The Crossing shopping centre? It is on your left.’

‘No problem. I know where it is.’

‘Thank you. I only eat smoked salmon with cream cheese on pumpernickel for lunch, and shaved beef and salad for dinner. As John Anthony is not back until Saturday, could you get me enough for five days? And I like the Lindor hazelnut balls and tennis biscuits.’

I was still smarting over the grocery bill when I found the entrance to the Macadamia Retirement Village, known to the residents of Nelspruit as The Nuthouse. I pressed the buzzer for Number 33, and when I got no answer I tried

again; the heat and humidity so intense that I got out of the car to wait. Through the security palisading I could make out a few red rooftops and the occasional uniform face-brick house integrated into the swales and crests of the hillside landscaped with dense subtropical vegetation. It was an Eden in which the elderly inmates were as much confined by their rugged surrounds as they would be in a home for the aged. On my fourth attempt the automated gate slid open and I followed a twisting, steep road to Willie Boerma's unit where he was waiting in the shade of the verandah.

His shoulders slightly hunched, and holding the back of a garden chair for support, he was shorter than I expected. In old photographs with John Anthony he was taller than his son. No more. Shrivelled. In those pictures he had a pencil moustache, but he was now clean shaven. His facial skin was the texture and colour of parchment, like that of a mummy. It was made to look more brown-papery by filmy blue eyes and white hair combed forward in the Roman style. Regardless of the heat, he seemed cold and was dressed accordingly: orange long-sleeved lumberjack shirt, black polar-fleece tracksuit pants and sheepskin slippers.

He smiled as I approached and held out a delicate, well-manicured hand that reminded me of John Anthony's. 'Mr Hopkins, delighted to finally meet you.'

'Please call me Pat,' I said, handing him the packet from Woolworths.

'Thank you very much, and I'm Willie,' he responded as he shuffled to the door and held it open. 'Do come in. Tea or coffee?'

'Do you have cold water? I'm in a bit of a sweat.'

'Of course,' he said as he went into the kitchenette separated from the lounge by a counter. 'Sorry to have kept you waiting, but it's sometimes difficult to get off the bed.'

I placed my briefcase on a small table and looked round as Willie busied himself with drinks. There was a television set before which was a tatty olive Lay-Z-Boy recliner, which from the books and magazines scattered round appeared to be where he spent most of his time when not in bed. To the side was a threadbare couch, a bookshelf crammed with popular fiction, a display cabinet with family photographs in silver frames, a fish tank, a crumbling elephant's foot waste bin and three enormous grandfather clocks – each more hideous than the next. Two were encased in honey-coloured wood laminate gaudily inlaid with gold plastic; the other a gleaming dark wood affair with ornate wildlife scenes. It was a sort of African cuckoo clock on an immense scale. At ten o'clock they all chimed in unison.

'Ah. I see you are admiring my carpentry,' said Willie carrying two glasses of water. 'Grandfather clocks were my passion when I could still enjoy my hobby. These are gifts for my children when I die. The similar ones are for my daughters, the one you're looking at is for John Anthony.'

'They're beautiful.'

'A grandfather clock is more than what you see,' he said, stroking the giant cuckoo clock. 'They are us.'

'How so?'

'Ha. John Anthony has told you the outline of my past, and I'm sure you are thinking how different we are,' he smiled, tapping the side of his head with his index finger. 'But you'd be wrong.'

'I try not to prejudge.'

'Nonsense. It's only human to prejudge,' he huffed. 'Now look at the clock and imagine it as a person. At the top is the face with the mechanism behind – the brain, if you will. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock it goes as it soothingly traces

the circle of life. The beginning, adolescence, adulthood, death. It tells us when to get up, when to eat, when to leave for work, when to come home, when to go to bed. Order. Further down are the pulleys, innards and the chime – the heart, maybe. Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, a glorious celebration of milestones reached. Beautiful, but maddening if continuous.'

Willie entered a series of musings on humans as automatons. The trick in life was finding harmony between the assurance of the tick-tock and the occasional release of the ding-dong. Essentially, what separated us as individuals was how often we were programmed to chime. John Anthony might go off every fifteen minutes, I on the hour, and he once a day. I was left in no doubt that it was preferable to ding-dong less often; that the line between anarchy and order was a mechanical setting. Moreover, what was true for the individual held for the family and society. In this world of clocks, however, it was not the timepiece that was important, but the clockmaker.

'If the clockmaker is a master then the clock will be good, if not, rubbish,' he stated, a flash of fervour in his eyes.

'And who is this clockmaker?' I asked, growing increasingly irritated with the conversation.

'Whoever you or society want him to be,' he said, ignoring my bluntness. 'God, Jesus, Mohammed, Mandela, Hitler, Mussolini.'

'Good and evil?'

'There is no such thing,' he retorted dismissively with a flick of his hand. 'Only fine clocks and bad clocks.'

'But if you were the clockmaker of your family, then you must have had the power to mould John Anthony in your image.'

It was an utterance I regretted as it came out, suddenly fearful the old man would take offence and end the interview before it began. But he was unfazed.

‘I did not make John Anthony, there was a greater power. But you did not come to discuss timepieces, shall we get started?’

‘Certainly. May I use the bathroom before we do?’

‘Of course,’ he pointed. ‘Through there.’

I was happy for the break so as to compose myself, angry that I had been drawn in. But as soon as I entered the bathroom I wanted to flee as it was the source of the hospital odour that permeated the house. Medicines and lotions and tonics were everywhere, all tolling the end of life. An atmosphere relieved only by ‘his’ and ‘her’ toilet roll holders, which I assumed was a dig at his marital difficulties as the paper in hers was single-ply. And two books: *1000 Reasons Why You are the Perfect Dad* and *1001 Things to Do and See Before You Die*.

*****

Willie was born in 1924 to a reasonably well-off Groningen family. His father was the local agent for Magnet bicycles, a Jewish owned Amsterdam firm. They were not close, the father resentful that the son was virtually inseparable from his deeply religious mother. It was a coldness Willie became desperate to remedy after he turned six. Passionately involving himself in his father’s outdoor activities: skating, fishing and sailing. But to no avail. Then a door opened a year later when the Great Depression pounded the market for bicycles. While his father survived financially, he was deeply affected by the sight of queues of unemployed men waiting to have their cards stamped so they could get their meagre food rations while unaffordable farm produce was destroyed or left to rot.

‘It’s madness,’ screamed his father one evening from the sailboat to an out of earshot wagon skirting the lake as it returned from the market with its load unsold.

‘Pappi, what is it?’

‘There are people dying of hunger, but they throw food away.’

‘That’s silly.’

‘Of course it is, but try telling that to our idiotic leaders. What this country needs is a Herr Hitler at the helm.’

A few years later Willie knew his father was right as he watched trains crammed with Dutch workers heading across the border into a resurgent Germany. As business picked up, the Boermas in 1936 bought a double-storey lakeside house on an exclusive part of Paterswolde Meer outside Groningen. Set in a cluster of trees, it was a brooding place, with deep carpets and heavy curtains and dark wood panelling. On the walls were coats-of-arms and other heraldry and shelves of leather-bound books not meant to be read.

One evening, while out on the lake, the sun shimmering off the crest of ripples, Willie caught sight of his father standing under a tree wearing a brown uniform with officer insignia and wolf-hook flashes. He was like a knight in the books for boys which Willie kept next to his bed. The following day he joined the Jeugdstorm, and that evening, wearing his new uniform with emblems of a dove flying over water, he saluted his father with the Hou Zee. His father harrumphed and turned away, which made Willie even more determined for recognition.

His father was detained in the run-up to the war, which caused his suppliers to cut their ties with him. The rightwing Franzen brothers stepped in with Cyrus bicycles, and Willie managed the business until his father’s release when Germany occupied Holland in 1940. On his return Willie increased his efforts

for attention. When his father polished his boots, Willie boned his own. When his father marched with his division through the streets, Willie goose-stepped higher. And when his father volunteered to assist the local Nazi command, Willie decided to contribute to the war effort. He was fervently convinced, more so than his father, that this was a struggle that could not be lost.

'Mammi, the Germans are recruiting people,' said Willie as he sat for tea with his mother.

'Are you crazy?' she said, putting the teapot down with such a thump that the cutlery on the plates rattled. 'Why would you want to go and get yourself killed? For what?'

'If the Germans win the war they will restore pride to Holland.'

'That's rubbish your father believes, but you should think for yourself.'

'I do,' said Willie, straightening his back.

'You think I haven't noticed,' she said, leaning forward and hitting the table. 'You do everything to attract your father's attention, but he continues to cold-shoulder you. It's no different to how the fools in the NSB have tried to ingratiate themselves with the Nazis. For what? Mussert told us that he would be made leader of an independent Dutch state. That's not happened. Your father said we'd be first in line to get military contracts. Where are they?'

'Then we must redouble our efforts,' he said standing and saluting her.

'For what,' she said in disgust. 'To be double the fool and quadruple the traitor.'

Taking advice from the local branch of the Jeugdstorm, who informed Willie that Germany needed food as much as guns, he enrolled at a nearby agricultural college. This campus was itself a battleground between the boys of his division

with their utopian attachment to the land and members of the Dutch underground who sought refuge in rural hideaways when the heat got too intense in the cities. When they reported this to the authorities, the institution was promptly closed. Rather than take a menial job, Willie approached the local German commander who had him sent for farm management training in Germany.

*****

Willie's first stop was Dresden, where he and other Nazi sympathisers from the occupied territories were treated as heroes. Beer gardens, fine restaurants and an excursion to Berlin for the opera. Then to Danzig where the VIP treatment continued as they were given a crash course in Nazi ideology. And a farm near Graudenz on the Polish border for their apprenticeship, where he was placed in charge of the Dutch contingent. Here he chose not to notice that labourers were brought in on cattle trucks.

On the second day, while organising his men and their workers, Willie caught sight of a man in striped prisoner uniform making a break from a potato field towards a grove. Out of the corner of his eye he saw an SS officer, his horse flying, veer off the road in pursuit. A woman raised her arms and started to wail, at which the prisoner turned to see the soldier. The distraction caused him to stumble, and by the time he had regained his composure the horseman was only two-hundred yards away. He had no chance.

Bearing down, the soldier unravelled the bullwhip he carried and let his arm drop to his side, allowing the whip to trail behind him. As he approached the running man, his arms pumping for all their worth, trying vainly to outrun the horse, the soldier raised the whip, releasing it like a fisherman his line. As the tip was pulled through the air, it seemed to take an age to catch up to the man, and then, with a quick flick, straightened out and hit him on the spine. As it connected, his arms went up and he fell. The officer let his horse run on then turned, coming back to the stricken man. As he approached he rolled up the whip, hung it from his saddle

and unsheathed his pistol. The prisoner was now up on one knee, facing the soldier who came up and spoke to him.

Willie, who felt a tinge of excitement at the chase, decided to make his way back to the main complex when he saw the prisoner get up and walk in front of the horse. He had hoped the man would put up a better show, but he was doomed from the moment he turned round. But Willie's curiosity was getting the better of him and he wanted to see what the authorities were going to do.

He arrived at the yard as the officer was escorting the man up the drive. The soldier led him to a tree just outside a shed, and after dismounting he called over a guard and instructed him to gather every living soul on the farm to meet here in an hour. While he was doing this, the prisoner stood dejectedly by, holding his crumpled cap to his chest. His trousers were torn and dirty from his fall, and he had lost a sandal. He was sweating profusely, his face contorted with fear, his eyes scrunched up and tears were running down his face to his mouth, which was slightly open. His teeth were chattering, the sound mixing with the whimper and moan that came from his throat. But the soldier would not show pity. He had something to do and he was going to do it.

When the officer had dispatched the guard, he turned his attention to the quivering prisoner and, in German, ordered, 'Take your clothes off.'

The whimper from the man grew louder.

'Please sir, please.'

'Take your clothes off,' repeated the officer, his voice getting menacingly softer.

The soldier again unravelled the whip and rounded on the prisoner, who turned sideways.

‘Please my master, please, I beg of you,’ pleaded the man, kneeling. ‘Please forgive me.’

But it was useless as the officer wanted to send a message to new arrivals. He straightened the whip, and, with his arm down, gave a flick of his wrist which sent a wave down the length of the thong, ending in a loud crack at the end. ‘Do you want more of this? Take your clothes off.’

The man put his cap on the ground and took his top off. He folded it neatly and looked round for a place to put it.

‘On the ground near your hat,’ ordered the soldier.

By this time people were starting to arrive at the yard. The man carefully put his shirt down. Next to come off was his remaining sandal, which was placed on top of the jacket. Quivering, he looked up at the officer, as though to ask if that was enough. The officer pointed with the whip handle at his trousers. The man’s shoulders drooped to a point where they could go no further. Slowly he undid the cord of his trousers, looking up at the officer, his eyes pleading with him to relent. But that would not happen. As they came off they were folded and added to the pile. He was left with an old pair of underpants and he looked up at the officer, who merely motioned him to get them off too. As they came off they went to the top of the pile and the quivering man put his hands in front of him, protecting the last of his dignity.

The soldier pushed the man against the tree and went into the shed. He emerged with a length of rope and began tying the prisoner, face down, with his arms hugging the trunk. Having finished, the officer led his horse away, over the pile of clothing, which was flattened, and gave the reins to a young groom with the instruction that he would not need it any more that day. The soldier re-entered the shed and re-appeared a few moments later on a little tractor, which he turned and reversed up near the man. He jumped off and, with another piece of rope, tied the man’s legs to the back of the tractor. When he was sure the ropes would hold, he

climbed onto the tractor, easing it forward until the now hysterical prisoner, who had lost control of his bladder, was strung between the tractor and the tree.

The crowd was hushed. The only movement was a woman who came out to speak to the officer. Willie could not hear what was said, but imagined she was appealing to him. The soldier gave her a slap and ordered her back into the group of onlookers. When he was ready, he went to the group and addressed them in German. Issuing dire warnings of what would happen to the next person who tried to escape.

When the soldier finished, he went up to the whimpering prisoner and tested him with a flick of the whip on his buttocks. The man tensed. The first blow came from up high, the whip bent upwards as the thong opening up, to catch up with the rest of the whip. As it landed, a red cut opened. There was a second's delay, while the whip was lifted again, before the shriek came. He continued to shriek as the whip was lifted and brought down another thirty times. Then the man began to grow quiet – his back and legs cut, the blood flowing freely. With one last blow the officer jumped on the tractor, reversed it, jumped down, untied the prisoner, took out his pistol, and shot him in the back of the head.

It was an act of brutality that made Willie want to get away from there. This was no way to run a farm. After spending Christmas at home in 1942, he joined the Nederlandse Oost Companie, which placed Dutch supervisors on farms along the Eastern Front. A few months later he was sent to Ilinzi, one-hundred-and-fifty kilometres northwest of Kiev, to manage nine adjoining farms. There he was given the finest accommodation, a horse drawn carriage and an interpreter, Vera, the beautiful daughter of the mayor. With square shoulders, she had hair of fire against an alabaster skin scattered with freckles below golden eyes. Slightly taller than Willie, she wore a long black cloak pulled closed against the sharp spring breeze by long hands with nails painted crimson. Her Dutch was heavily accented, but good after spending two years studying drama in Amsterdam.

‘I was going to be a movie star,’ she pouted. ‘There was nothing worthwhile in the Ukraine, so I dreamt of Paris and Hollywood. But my father’s so, what do you say, stuffy, and he refused to let me go. He said it was to be Berlin or Amsterdam or nowhere because the Saxon people know how to behave. If he knew what went on in those places he would have fainted.’

‘Why do you not dream of Berlin instead of France and America?’ he asked on their first Sunday together. ‘It’ll be the capital of the world.’

‘Ach, Willie, it no longer has the magic,’ she said with a twirl of her coat. ‘Come, tell me what it is you want to become when it’s all over.’

‘I don’t know, I haven’t thought of it much,’ he shrugged. ‘A farmer.’

‘You joke,’ she scoffed. ‘My father’s a farmer; and no matter how rich you become you still have to get up at four every morning and work like a slave until nightfall. Me, I’ll wake with champagne at midday then drive into the countryside with my scarf trailing in the wind and a leading man at my side. Later, we’ll make love in every room of a fairytale palace.’

‘That’s fantasy,’ he said with a dismissive wave.

But Willie had his own dreams, which revolved round Vera in peasant costume running through the fields. His fields. He was so convinced that this was also what she wanted that he saved his wages until he had enough for an engagement ring. The next afternoon he rode out with her to the river and after tethering the horses he set out a picnic lunch. She kicked off her riding boots and as she sat she arranged her white cotton skirt embroidered with red flowers about her. She sat on the edge of a wool blanket and flexed her toes in the cool grass, leaning forward to pick a dandelion and blow silver filaments into the warm breeze. When she bent, Willie peeked the swell of her breasts in the V of her black blouse as he popped the cork of a bottle of champagne and went before her on bended knee.

‘Willie, what’s this?’ she laughed.

‘A ring,’ he replied clumsily. ‘Will you marry me?’

‘That’s so sweet.’

‘I never know when you’re mocking.’

‘I’m not,’ she smiled, not looking at him. ‘Willie, how much do you love me?’

‘I’m absolutely mad about you,’ he stammered.

‘Mad enough to risk a bit?’ she asked, looking up as a Stukkas flew overhead.

‘Anything you ask,’ he said taking the ring from the box after it passed.

‘You sometimes go to meetings with the local Nazi bigwigs,’ she said, twisting a strand of hair so it caught the sun. ‘So you know in advance when important people are coming to the area. Maybe you could pass this information on to me.’

‘Is what you’re suggesting treasonous?’ he asked hesitantly, wanting to take her hand so he could slip the ring on.

‘Never mind,’ she said, putting her hands under her knees.

*****

Willie made no effort to find out what Vera implied; nor did he want to know. Soon after he was transferred to a small farm near Lowe, where he stayed until just before it was overrun by Russians in May 1944. Joining a wagon train of refugees, he endured a horrendous journey of bog, mountains and bombing back to Germany. He made his way from here via Belgium to Groningen, which he

reached two months later. He was so exhausted that he had to be hospitalised. In all this time he never gave up the idea that his love was doing anything other than awaiting his return.

When he was discharged he put on his uniform, straightened his tie in the mirror, and spat on his finger so he could flatten a tuft of hair just below the rim of his cap. He walked past Segal's Bookshop, which was now boarded up with a Star of David painted on the door, and straightened his shoulders as he passed a food queue. He did not see the three young men break away and was not aware they were following him until round the corner when he received a vicious blow to the back of the head, which knocked him against the wall. The next one took him off his feet and as he lay on the ground he was kicked in the face and all over the body. He was saved only when a German motorcyclist turned into the street.

Willie recuperated at home, fearful even to venture out of doors. There his mother simmered with anger at his betrayal and that of his father who, contrary to all evidence, still fervently believed Germany would win the war. Unable to take it any longer, and pining for Vera, Willie returned to Germany in August 1944. Working his way east through the chaos, he spent Christmas in Poznan. Then on to Griefswald by train and Hanover by bicycle, which he reached on the day of the German surrender. Taking a horse, he got to Potsdam, but could not enter because of the allied conference. Back to Berlin then to Warsaw clinging on the side of a crammed train. And on to the Russian border, which he reached at midnight.

'Where are you going?' asked a guard, his bayonet prodding Willie's chest.

'Ilinze in the Ukraine,' he said, taking the ring from his pocket. 'My fiancée lives there and we are to be married.'

'Are you completely out of your mind?' snorted the guard, poking him harder. 'If I let you through you'll not make it more than fifty kilometres.'

‘I’ve got this far.’

‘My friend, orders are to shoot anyone without proper papers, which you don’t have. The first patrol you come across will put you against the nearest tree. Go home.’

Broken-hearted, he returned to Groningen to find that members of the NSB, including his father, had been detained. These were the lucky ones; others, who Willie saw, were strung from branches and lampposts, their bodies swaying gently in the warm summer breeze. When he got home he found that his mother had walked out and he tore his uniform off, bundled it with stones and dumped it in the middle of the lake. He was now destitute, spurned, and he took to begging until his father was released the morning Anton Mussert was executed. It was one year and one day since the end of the war.

His father, renewing his contract with the Franzen brothers, re-established his bicycle agency. Willie joined the business as a salesman, but orders were slow and his relationship with his father even more strained.

‘Willie, there’s not enough for you here,’ said his father one morning. ‘If you want to work for me you need to open a new office.’

‘I don’t want to work for you, but if you haven’t noticed there are no jobs for people who were members of the NSB,’ he said, showing a rare streak of defiance.

‘You didn’t have to join the Party,’ replied his father, standing. ‘It was your choice.’

‘Pappi, I did it for you,’ said Willie, the brazenness gone.

‘That’s one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard,’ snorted his father. ‘Willie, I’m going to tell you this for your own good. You’re weak, and I don’t have place for such people in my life or my business. May I suggest you consider South Africa, many of our people are going there.’

*****

Willie arrived by ship as the National Party were celebrating their surprise 1948 election victory. ‘The cloud has disappeared and the sun is shining once more on the Afrikaner,’ trumpeted the new Prime Minister, DF Malan. He could have been speaking for Willie, who first tried his hand at farming. But agricultural conditions in Africa were vastly different from those in Holland, so he took a course in industrial instrumentation and moved to Johannesburg.

Ten years later he was driving through Modderfontein with a friend, Cyril Robins, when he spotted a pretty blond walking into a pharmacy.

‘Hey check that girl,’ exclaimed Willie.

‘I know her. That’s Maureen, the postmaster’s daughter.’

‘Do you think you could organise something for me? I’ve got a ticket for the Red Cross Ball and I’m the only one without a date.’

‘There’s only one way to find out.’

*****

As I stood to leave after the second day of interviewing Willie, he clutched the arms of the Lay-Z-Boy and cleared phlegm from his throat, ‘Maureen hurt me very much when she left me. I never suspected she was having an affair, especially not with another woman. And let me tell you this, she was the cause

John Anthony is like he is. That vision of hers made her insane. She pushed me completely out of his life; wouldn't let me near him.'

'A vision?'

'Yes, ask her about it,' he said, becoming so angry that spit bubbled at the corners of his mouth. 'It's so crazy she ruined him with it. You can't do that to a boy.'

Chapter 9

Maureen Boerma's first vision was in 1941 when she contracted diphtheria as a six-year-old. The family home in Modderfontein was quarantined and a white flag hoisted above the front gate. Her mother was the only one permitted to have any contact with her as she lay critically ill with sandbags packed round her head to protect her neck during violent contortions.

As she lay near death she dreamt she was in an otherworldly valley through which flowed a wide river. As she stood on a rocky knoll an ugly black cloud swept in, driven by a northwest wind that came low and fast, tearing a sprig of thorns that flew across her forehead, drawing blood. Suddenly, from heaven, came scissoring tongues of fire ridden by a long-haired, bearded man carrying a staff. He was wearing a rainbow robe and a large necklace with a wooden cross, which dangled to his waist. But it was to his intense, penetrating eyes, which radiated great authority, that Maureen was drawn.

In a language she had never heard before, but understood fully, he said 'Hallelujah! Maureen, I'm a messenger of God. Let's go down to the river.'

She skipped after him; it all appeared blissfully normal except for the surreal light from the sun and a galaxy of stars, which intensified the greens of the grass and deepened the purple of the surrounding mountains. When they got to the river the man waded in to his knees and beckoned dramatically. Maureen took off her shoes and as she straightened a gust caught her dress, billowing it like a balloon. She smoothed it before sitting on the bank to ease her feet into the clear, pale green water until the golden sand layering the riverbed squished between her toes.

When surer of her footing, she began to slowly walk with a swimming kind of motion towards the man. As she drew alongside a pink fog rolled in; so dense she could only see her hands in blurry outline. When it passed he pointed to the

middle of the river – to a regal woman wearing a cream scarf and dress, over which was a light blue cloak.

‘Come to me,’ instructed the woman with a tilt of her head.

Maureen eased onto her back and floated out; drawn by the sounds of a reed flute. When close, a lap of water covered her face as she broke the surface; blinking and spluttering to find herself weightless at the woman’s side.

‘The mantle is passed to you, oh chosen one’ she said, taking off her cloak and handing it to Maureen. ‘Soon an angel will appear to you with a message from God. Before this you’ll meet a man who has no past; he’s to be your husband.’

‘No,’ said Maureen, shrinking back. ‘My mother says I mustn’t accept things from strangers.’

‘Take it.’

‘I don’t want it. Leave me alone.’

In that instant the man lost his temper. In a rage he broke off a reed and splashed towards Maureen, beating her with the cane.

‘Get out of the world of the dead,’ he yelled, bringing the cane down again. ‘And start living the life planned for you.’

When he stopped the woman again said to her, ‘Maureen, take this mantle.’

Before she could reply, the sun and the stars began to fall from the sky in a dazzling shower. She woke then, knew she had called out, and sat bolt upright. As she rubbed her face her mother came in, her hands to her mouth.

‘Oh God, Maureen, my darling, you’re well. It’s a miracle, we thought we’d lost you.’

From then Maureen was able to feel the presence of spirits and have out-of-body experiences. And whenever doubt flared she received a sign: a voice, moving objects or maybe a wisp in a mirror.

*****

Maureen was born in the eastern Johannesburg suburb of Malvern to an Irish mother and Afrikaans post office worker, John Nel. Her father was a Freemason, eventually rising to grand master of the Phoenix Lodge in Germiston, and her large-boned mother was a rather eccentric housewife. Though a Presbyterian, she read to her daughter from *The Watchtower*, and told hair-raising stories. One of these was of poison murderess Daisy de Melker, who disposed of a fiancé, two husbands and at least one child.

‘She didn’t live far from here,’ recounted Maureen’s mother. ‘At 67 Terrace Road in Bertrams.’

‘Will she come and get us?’

‘No, she was hanged shortly before you were born. But you must be careful, her ghost’s been seen at many places round here.’

‘Mommy, I’m frightened.’

‘There’s no need to be if you’ve been good.’

So it was with some relief when Maureen’s father was promoted to postmaster at Modderfontein and they moved to a smallholding. It was here, soon after, that she fell ill with diphtheria. When she recovered she told her mother of her vision.

‘Mommy, the woman who gave me the cloak was similar to pictures I’ve seen of Jesus’ mother.’

‘Don’t say that, Maureen,’ scolded her mother. ‘Poltergeists see things. You know what a poltergeist is?’

‘No.’

‘A poltergeist is the naughty spirit of a child, which leaves the body and causes lots of damage. Is your spirit naughty?’

‘No mommy.’

‘Then no more of this,’ instructed her mother, wagging a finger at her.

But the visitation had been so powerful that she was not going to dismiss it as easily as that. After her illness her family had started attending the nearby Methodist church, where she confided in the minister.

‘You say that while you were sick you had a dream in which the Virgin Mary gave you her cloak?’

‘Yes, and Joseph was there as well.’

‘You know, Maureen, this is what I think happened,’ said the priest, bending to her height and placing a hand on her shoulder. ‘Your sickness was caused by the devil entering your body.’

‘But I love God.’

‘I know you do,’ he said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. ‘The devil is most interested in those who open their hearts to the Holy Spirit. So it was trying to

get into you to make God angry, which is when you felt ill. But Jesus won, which is why you got well.'

This was good enough for Maureen, and though the vision remained central to her being, she was able to once again concentrate on being a child – one who loved typically boyish pursuits. Their new house adjoined the golf course and she was soon taking lessons, beating most of the boys. Regardless of her mother's efforts in plying her with Shirley Temple dolls, tea sets and prams, she preferred climbing trees, riding bicycles and helping the neighbour repair his Austin A40. And she copied the mannerisms of the boys in her class. How they behaved; how they dressed; and even how they crossed their legs.

When she got to Highlands North High School she found she had feelings for Beatrice Rowse, not Gavin Jeffrey, who kissed her. These were conflicting emotions she could not speak of. But she was able to hide behind her blond hair and pretty features and outgoing personality. Not letting anything slip as she accepted lifts home on the crossbars of boy's bicycles; jokingly dismissing those who stopped halfway for something extra.

It was a mask she made more convincing over the years, the only hint a lack of encouragement for suitors. After completing school she took a job with General Mining, and tested with South African Airways. The day she was accepted as a trainee flight attendant, she walked into a pharmacy while on the way home. As she emerged she found Cyril Robins waiting outside.

'Hi Maureen,' he said, placing a hand on her arm. 'I haven't seen you for ages.'

'Cyril, gosh, where have you been?' she exclaimed, moving slightly to the side to avoid the touch.

'All over,' replied Cyril, making a circle with the offending hand. 'I install instruments in power stations.'

‘So you’re seeing the country like you always wanted.’

‘Yeah, it’s great. Lots of freedom.’

‘Still seeing Jill?’

‘Practically engaged,’ he smiled. ‘I’m going to pop the question on Christmas Day.’

‘That’ll be a wonderful surprise.’

‘Not for her,’ he said dryly. ‘She knows. But it’ll certainly be one for her folks; they can’t stand me.’

Turning his head towards his car, Cyril continued, ‘Look Maureen, there’s this Dutch guy in the car. I work with him, and we’re quite friendly. He’s looking for a date for the Red Cross Ball. Would you be interested?’

‘Straight off, I don’t do blind dates,’ she said, pursing her lips.

‘But you’d be coming with us.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘Nice guy. Very shy. Got manners you’ll never believe. But other than that I don’t know too much,’ shrugged Cyril. ‘He came to South Africa about ten years ago, but never talks about his past. It’s as if he doesn’t have one.’

‘Tell him I say hi, but I think I’ll pass,’ she said, starting to walk away. ‘My parents are quite strict about whom I date and they’re unlikely to let me go with someone nobody knows.’

‘OK, but let me introduce you,’ he said, again putting his hand on her arm. Gesturing to the car, he shouted, ‘Hey Willie, come here so you can meet Maureen Nel.’

When the introductions were made, Cyril lied to Willie that Maureen had a prior engagement on the night of the ball.

‘I must be getting home,’ said Maureen, looking at her watch. To Willie she said, ‘So nice meeting you. And Cyril, you and Jill must come over for tea.’

‘That’ll be great. I’ll speak to her.’

As she was walking away, Willie ran up, ‘Pardon me for being so forward. But I’d like to call you, if you don’t mind.’

‘Sure. My father’s John Nel. The number’s in the book.’

It was an encounter she would normally have dismissed, but something that Cyril said intrigued her. It struck her when she arrived home: ‘It’s as if he doesn’t have a past.’ Was this the man referred to in her vision? And was her lack of interest in other men God’s way of saving her for this eventuality?

*****

‘Maureen, what’s happened to you?’ asked her mother as she divided the apple tart into eighths, cutting with such exaggerated determination that the knife screeched on the glass cake holder.

‘In what way?’ asked Maureen, putting her elbows on the table and resting her head on her fists.

‘Every which way,’ replied her mother, lifting pieces onto two plates and passing one to Maureen. ‘Before Willie appeared two years ago you had

ambition. You wanted to travel. Even though daddy and I were against it, you were accepted as a flight attendant. By now you could have seen the world.'

'Yes, I wanted that,' said Maureen, stretching for the custard. 'But there are more important things.'

'Granted,' said her mother raising an eyebrow. 'But Willie?'

'He's a good man,' sighed Maureen, who was growing weary of her mother's constant questioning of her relationship with him. 'Look how he's helped round the house. When you wanted a chicken coop, he was there. When the gutters needed fixing, he was there. When the wall needed painting, he was there. Where was daddy? At a Lodge meeting.'

'Don't speak of your father in that way,' said her mother sternly.

'I'm not speaking of daddy in any way. I'm just saying that you've never warmed to Willie, no matter what he's done for you. He's given no reason for you to feel the way you do.'

'You could do better is what I'm trying to say. If you'd become a stewardess you could have had any man you wanted. A rich one.'

'Oh mommy, that's not important,' remonstrated Maureen.

'It wouldn't be important if Willie had something else to commend him.'

'That's not fair,' moaned Maureen, sitting back and folding her arms. 'Have you ever met a man with finer manners?'

'Those aren't manners,' said her mother with a fake shudder. 'He's slimy.'

‘That’s not fair,’ said Maureen uncrossing her arms and placing her hands on the table. ‘There’s nothing wrong with Willie. The only thing is he’s very shy.’

‘Timid, meek, mousy are better descriptions,’ smirked her mother. ‘In body and soul. That’s not all. After a few years you know nothing of him other than that he came from Holland. Mark my words, he’s hiding something. He’s creepy.’

‘Willie?’ sniffed Maureen. ‘Now you really are being mean. He’s the least scary man on earth.’

‘And the least ambitious.’

‘Mommy, stop it. Just the other day he was telling me of his dream to buy a farm in the Lowveld. And once he’s paid that one off he’ll get another then another then another.’

‘That’s a laugh. Willie farming in the Lowveld. Has he ever seen that part of country? But I’m not worried about him; it’s you I’m concerned about. Maureen, he’s not good enough for you.’

‘Well, I don’t agree,’ said Maureen standing. ‘And this might surprise you, but if he asked me to marry him, I’d say yes.’

‘Heaven forbid!’

‘That’s your opinion,’ she said, turning to go. ‘But I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be than in the Lowveld with Willie.’

When Maureen got back to her apartment she took a shoebox from her cupboard. Placing it on the bed, she removed the lid and reached in for the notebook in which she practised her poetry, and turned to a fresh page where she wrote:

Joseph of Galilee

Willie from across the sea
They have no history
They are free of devilry
Willie is the one of my reverie
My Joseph of Galilee

*****

Despite her parents' protestations, Maureen and Willie were married two months later and their first daughter, Wendy, was born the following year. Shortly afterwards they secured a loan and packed their Willey's Jeep with a primus stove and mattress before heading for the Lowveld in search of a farm. Each with their own reasons for going there. For Willie it was about as geographically removed from his past as he could get. For Maureen it evoked the freedom and the adventurous landscape of her childhood dreams: a mythical place in which she pictured great herds of buffalo kicking up clouds of powdery dust; lions gathering round a kill while vultures circled on ever-rising thermals; crazily painted wild dogs panting loudly as they loped through thorny thickets; giraffe splaying their legs to drink while keeping a watchful eye on crocodiles lazing on the bank; and, as the sunset turned the bush purple, the loud blowing of hippo mingling with the piercing cry of a fish eagle. It was a scene in which she could see herself sitting against a baobab with a mug of coffee boiled over an outdoor fire as dusk passed into velvety dark and the stars came out wonderfully close.

Reality intruded on this reverie. It took months to find a farm within their budget, by which time Willie had come to the realisation that marriage was the biggest mistake of his life. Maureen was continually criticising him for how he drove on rugged roads, to not helping with the child. Nor was she delighted, though her expectations had been lower. By now she was seriously wondering what God had in mind with this man. Worse, was he the man referred to in her vision, or had she been too impetuous. And he did not measure as a man.

On the day they arrived on their farm, Willie was the first to enter the small mud brick house. He came shooting out a few seconds later.

‘Get back in the car,’ he ordered, panic etched on his sweating brow. ‘There’s a python in the kitchen.’

‘We can’t sit here forever,’ snorted Maureen. ‘Go and get it out.’

‘Are you mad,’ he glared. ‘I’ll get killed.’

‘Then find someone who will do it,’ she said staring at him, her hands on her hips.

This was not necessary as a labourer, Nimrod, emerged with the snake draped around his neck. He cheerily informed the new arrivals that the place crawled with reptiles and that he sidelined for a snake park. He had caught the baby python in the morning and left it in the room while he did his chores. At this point Willie threatened to beat the man up for frightening the family, but he did not follow through. Which was a good thing as he hardly came to the chest of the enormous man.

Nor did the farm fulfil its promise; and their lives were a constant struggle. He tried cattle then pineapples and she planted a garden of tomatoes and cucumbers and spinach and onions which died and withered on harsh land without electricity or water or size to be viable. And at the end of the five year lease they packed it in after Willie was offered a job and housing at the state sawmill at Elandshoek, where he initiated the first of a number of affairs.

*****

Maureen, pregnant with their second daughter, was fanning herself on the stoep when a recklessly driven white pickup skidded to a halt next to the gate. From it

emerged a seething man who Maureen recognised as Tom Handly from down the road.

‘Hello Tom, is there a problem?’ asked Maureen, standing and walking to the stairs.

‘You’re bloody right there is,’ replied Tom, slapping the bonnet. ‘Is Willie here?’

‘He should be home shortly,’ she said, arching her painful back and placing her hand on her side. ‘Is there anything I can help you with?’

‘Maureen, he’s been with my wife,’ said Tom, taking off his hat and turning his head to look down the road.

‘That can’t be,’ responded Maureen, stepping down onto the pathway to the gate. ‘He’s always home on time.’

‘Think what you want, Maureen,’ he shrugged, the fist of his free hand clenched. ‘But I’ve had them watched.’

‘Tom, you can say what you want, but Willie’s not like that,’ said Maureen unconvincingly.

‘Do you work?’ asked Tom, walking over to the gate.

‘You know I do. I’ve a half-day job at Nelspruit Glass.’

‘What time do you get home?’

‘About two.’

‘And when does Willie take lunch?’

‘At twelve-thirty.’

‘The same time as Patricia,’ he said, lifting his hands like a preacher inviting the congregation to pray. ‘And they’re together every day.’

Willie arrived as Tom was turning to leave. Instead he stormed over to the driver’s door, yanked it open and pulled Willie out.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ shouted Willie, breaking from Tom’s grasp and cowering in anticipation of a punch.

‘You’ve been with my wife,’ hissed Tom, grabbing Willie by the collar and pushing him against the car.

‘I’m with her every day; we work together,’ stammered Willie.

‘That’s not what I mean,’ said Tom, bringing his face up to Willie’s and thumping him with his hands still holding his collar. ‘You’ve been seen coming home with her at lunchtime.’

‘We’re friends, that’s all,’ said Willie, the colour drained from his face. ‘We don’t like staying in the office so we take our lunch to your place. I’m actually offended you think anything happened between us.’

‘If it’s so innocent, why did she not tell me; or you your wife?’ asked Tom, thumping him again, but with less force.

‘It was no big deal. Tom, you’re overreacting,’ shrugged Willie, his mouth dry with fear. ‘But we’ll stop if you feel so strongly.’

‘You’re bloody right I do,’ stated Tom, giving Willie a last thump before releasing him. Pointing, he said, ‘Heaven help you if the two of you are ever seen together again.’

As Tom drove off, Maureen followed Willie into the bedroom where he had gone to change.

‘So this is how you spend your lunch hour, you disgusting pig,’ she shrieked, her face flushed with anger.

‘Don’t you start,’ he said, taking off his shoes.

‘Tom should’ve beaten you up,’ she said contemptuously, throwing a cushion, which missed.

‘Stop with this rubbish,’ he said as he dropped his long trousers and pulled on a pair of blue shorts. ‘I’ve always been faithful.’

‘Willie, I always thought you weren’t man enough to attract another woman,’ she screamed, walking up to him and pounding him on the chest with her fists.

Willie pushed her away, hard enough for her to fall over the edge of the bed. Before she could stand he slammed the door behind him as he went to the garage to continue crafting a grandfather clock.

Maureen responded by being reborn under the guidance of the local Baptist Church. ‘I gave my heart to the Lord,’ she said.

*****

When Felicity was born Willie took a job at the Citrus Research Institute in Nelspruit. The family moved to the house in Jones Street, where, despite precautions, Maureen again fell pregnant. It was a difficult one, which

culminated near term in her being rushed to hospital with an inflamed appendix. While the doctors operated, doing a partial colostomy in the process, they also performed a caesarean. While under anaesthetic, Maureen had another vision in which she was returned to the valley of her first visitation. There her Maltese poodle, Shatze, appeared to her.

'I am Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to tell you that your prayers have been heard,' said the dog, wagging its tail. 'A son is being born to you and you are to name him John Anthony. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice and come to the Lord because of this birth, for he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.'

'This is an immense honour you bestow on me,' said Maureen, bending to pick up the dog.

'It is greater than you think because he is being sent to fulfil the prophecies for the coming of the Kingdom of God,' said the dog nuzzling her neck. 'He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom. And he will rule over the world and be called the son of the Most High.'

'What am I to do?' asked Maureen, holding the dog out before her.

'You are to care for him and show him the ways of God,' replied the dog, raising its head towards the heavens. 'You are to spend as much time with him as you can to prepare him for his destiny. The Lord Most High is with you, and he has blessed you and set you apart from all other women.'

*****

'I think the title should be The Book of John,' suggested Maureen when I met her. 'He's a messiah, you know. I thought he'd be a priest, but things don't necessarily turn out as expected. Before he was born I'd always wanted a boy,

going so far as to Brylcreem Wendy and Felicity's hair and dressing them as boys. When John Anthony arrived I was over the moon, thought here was the son through who I could live my life. I pictured him growing up as this sort of rugged hero. But God had other ideas.'

'He works in mysterious ways.'

Maureen had severely short auburn hair, slightly longer in a brush-cut on top. She looked thirty years younger than seventy, with not a hint of grey or wrinkles on her olive complexion. She had no makeup, but her thin lips had a natural purple tinge, which lent a harshness to what was still a handsome face. High cheekbones, straight, thin nose, defined jaw. She was wearing tinted aviator glasses, a khaki shirt tucked into tight jeans secured high on the waist by a cowboy belt, and Hi-Tec hiking boots. The overall machismo exaggerated her smallness.

We sat in the pokey lounge of the tiny townhouse she shared with her partner, who Maureen said was outside as she wanted no part in my project. The room was cluttered with the 60s furniture of the Jones Street house, and on the walls were a number of hokey three-dimensional boxed scenes made by the couple for sale at craft markets. One was of a bathroom in which the toilet below a frilly lace curtain occupied pride of place; another was of a church altar. All were arranged round a poem composed by Maureen, which ended:

> Precious little components
> We make with love and care.
> We try to please all persons
> So come and have a flair!

There were other poems Prestiked to the wall. Among them were odes to her companion, the church, Jesus and friendship. One to her family included the verse:

> My children dearer to me than
> life itself; Jesus helped me
> to train them for all joyous

clean and Christly living.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ said Maureen, standing. ‘I like going into town and watching cleaners at work or buildings under construction. It will also allow my partner to come back into her house.’

‘As long as we take it slowly, my ankle sometimes plays up,’ I said, getting to my feet.

As I battled to keep pace, I said, ‘Willie…’

‘How’s he? He took the split very badly, but it was his fault.’

‘He looked fine, but he does seem to get tired,’ I replied breathlessly. ‘He’s of the view that the break-up happened when you fell in love with your partner.’

‘That’s the straw that broke the camel’s back, but plenty of water had flowed under the bridge before that,’ she said, slowing so she could look me in the eye. ‘Did he tell you that he had another affair after Elandshoek? I think there were more, but of this one I’m certain.’

‘He made vague references to a friendship at the institute, which ended after John Anthony asked him to stop.’

‘That’s the one,’ she said, again picking up the pace. ‘You could read Willie like a book. Or should I say clock? He’d finish work at four, and be home by ten past. You could set your watch by him. At the time I had three jobs, including driving the school bus. I knocked off at half-past-three and was always home when he arrived. Suddenly he started getting home at five, sometimes six, and I thought to myself, Ah ha! The schmarmy tomcat.’

John Anthony wrote in his diary: ‘Mommy’s again gone to follow daddy from work. What’s going on? I’m so frightened. And it means she can’t be here with

me. GOD!!! I hate daddy so much. Why can't he love mommy like I do?…Mommy says she saw a blond woman with a very pale skin in the passenger seat of his car. Her friend Edith told her that this bitch's name is Margaret, and that she's Polish. Why doesn't she fuck off back to Poland and leave our family alone. Why is daddy doing this? FUCK HIM!!! FUCK HIM!!! FUCK HIM!!! And that cunt of a woman…Mommy and daddy are screaming at each other in the garage because mommy phoned his boss at work. I wish they'd stop. Stop everything. Fuck everybody, I'm so depressed…I went and spoke to daddy in the garage. I asked him to stop his shit and he started crying. It was horrible. He said he'd break it off. I told him we love him. But I don't. I hate him for hurting mommy. And me. When I was back in my room I heard him shouting at mommy for involving the children. What is she supposed to do? Mommy and I have no secrets…Mommy went to see a lawyer, but he told her that it wasn't worth her while. Good. Now she can stop talking about divorce.'

While they did not divorce, whatever was left of the marriage died for Maureen – the end coming when she and Willie visited John Anthony in New York. During the Gay Pride festival she saw Lesbian couples openly expressing their love for each other. They seemed so happy, while she was so sad, and when she returned she took up golf again, where she met a woman who had recently left her husband. Maureen invited her to move in with them, which sent Willie into a fit of rage in which he asked Maureen for a divorce and threw her out of the house.

There was another shock in store for Maureen. The Baptist Church, to which she had given her heart, informed her that divorce was contrary to the laws of God and forbade her from attending services. For nine years she never put a foot inside a church, but was wooed back when Jesus spoke to her. He told her that God loved her, but not her sin of having a lesbian lover. So they stopped having sex, and she rejoined the Methodist Church. On her wall is a poem about her experience, which contains these lines:

> When my foot slipped
> and I have known the bitterness

of sin; Jesus believed in
me and wooingly he called
me back to live within the
heights of myself.'

At the top of a long hill, in a small park enclave, she sat on a bench, tapping it for me to join her. Before us was a building under construction, a large metal shoe at the end of a crane opening to pour concrete. Further on were the buildings that had risen in the last decade as the town experienced a boom. There was an ugly glass building of an insurance company, which reflected a distortion of the semitropical bush of a nearby hill, and further off an infestation of the red roofs of a security complex on another slope.

'Willie had an outburst when I was leaving,' I said, wiping sweat from my forehead with a handkerchief. 'He claimed you pushed John Anthony right out of his life. Ruined him.'

'Willie was never there for anything other than his clocks,' she replied. 'And he never accepted that John Anthony was a gift from God. That I needed to protect him, be with him when he was lonely, and teach him the ways of heaven to prepared him for his mission.'

'How, exactly, do you see that mission?' I asked.

'That's easy, to be a teacher, like Jesus was in his later years,' she smiled. 'Their destiny is the same; to bring people to the light.'

Suddenly my niggling doubts about the truthfulness of the story John Anthony told me six years before congealed into an inner panic, which distracted me from Maureen who obliviously continued speaking. My uneasiness related primarily to the disaster this implied for my current project, which was premised on the idea that John Anthony had resolved his identity crisis. But Maureen was implying something different – that he assumed another persona after he jumped

from the hotel window. Worse, if this was correct, it went some way to vindicating my ideas of trauma and eccentricity which I so quickly discarded. Was it possible this man could completely upset two of my books? And into this wiggled another thought: was it possible that too much love together with too much expectation could be as distressing as physical or psychological hurt? Before I could contemplate this, Maureen stood.

‘Will you be staying with us tonight? There’s a camp bed in the study.’

‘Thanks, but I’m meeting Jennifer at her office in White River. I’m having dinner at her place and she’s offered to put me up for the night.’

Chapter 10

‘Something to make you passionate,’ said the tall, slightly overweight woman wearing a flowing black dress, matching feather boa and blood red, wide-rimmed hat hanging on like a rodeo rider atop crazed, fizzy black hair, as she handed out bottles to patrons sipping sundowners in one of the courtyards of Casterbridge Shopping Centre outside White River. I had not seen a woman like her since meeting Meredith.

‘Hey Jennifer, come join us,’ called a man sitting with a group at a table under an oak.

‘Can’t, I have a date,’ she replied in one of those husky, sexy voices that is cultivated on a sixty-a-day habit and a shot or two of straight bourbon. ‘And I’m already a half-hour late.’

‘Poor guy, does he know what he’s in for?’

‘Not yet.’ Looking around she shouted, ‘Pat Hopkins.’

I raised a hand, all eyes turning towards me as she swept over.

‘Hi,’ I said, half standing.

‘Jennifer Schormann,’ she smiled as she shook my hand. Passing me one of the bottles filed with verdite dust she’d been handing out, she added, ‘My calling card.’

Jennifer Shormann: managing director Afri-Diziac Public Relations – Passionate About Africa. She was not beautiful, or even pretty, but mesmerising. Statuesque in size and features, her ivory-complexioned face was dominated by a Roman nose, which she told me was an inheritance from a Mediterranean ancestor. Her mouth, which smiled often and emitted regular,

throaty guffaws, was painted the same colour as her hat. And her eyes were more gold than green with lashes mascaraed to complement the dress and boa, which was wrapped round the neck to frame her face. It was not surprising to learn that she loved throwing costume parties, which she did regularly to encourage people to have fun while exploring beyond their limits.

'It never fails to amaze me how quickly people lose their inhibitions when you take them out of the cage they lock themselves in,' she said, flicking away a feather that was tickling her ear. 'Like the release a caged animal must feel when set loose in the wild. Unfortunately for most, they revert to type the moment their uniform of choice is back on.'

Jennifer's family have lived in the area for three generations, her grandfather the most easterly stationmaster on the Oostelyn between Pretoria and the then Lourenco Marques. He purchased a farm at Hermansburg on the road to Barberton, not far from the Painted Mountain. When her parents married, her mother ran the farm – ploughing it with donkeys – and on the hillside built a sprawling Spanish villa, where Jennifer occupies a self-contained wing. Here the children were encouraged to be flamboyant and different, all raucously discussing their dreams and desires at the dinner table. It was fine grounding for her cartoonist brother Rob who was discharged from the army after three days for pretending to be Jesus. He went on to make his fortune from a light-hearted political statement in the eighties with the release of the R0 note.

A balding man wearing a loosened tie, the top button of his white shirt undone, saw Jennifer and sidled over, 'Hi, been meaning to call you, how's the brochure coming along.'

'I'll have it ready by Friday at the latest, it's looking great,' she smiled, shading her eyes as she looked into the setting sun. 'I'll bring it over; that's if the baby doesn't arrive before then. How's Brenda coping?'

‘Just,’ said the man, running his fingers through his hair. ‘I wish she’d pop, it’s driving us all crazy.’

‘You’ll let me know when anything happens,’ she said, turning back to me.

‘Of course.’

As the man walked away, Jennifer leant over and whispered, ‘What a cunt. A real sleazebag who thinks he’s God’s gift to women. Regardless that his wife’s due any day, he’s on the prowl. And she’s blissfully unaware.’

‘I think people in that situation choose not to know,’ I suggested.

‘Probably, but not her. She’s so stupid he could be fucking someone else in the bed next to her and she wouldn’t realise.’

‘Then maybe they deserve each other.’

‘Christ, just think of the child that’s going to emerge from that union. If it’s a boy it’ll be bald, brainless and with a constant hard-on.’

‘Anyway, what are you going to have to drink?’ I asked, calling over a waiter.

‘G ‘n T.’

‘Pink?’

‘Of course.’

After we ordered, another man came over and chatted to her about business.

When he left, she said, ‘Problem with small places is that everyone knows everyone. And they think because they do business with you that you’re

available all the time. Normally I am, but can't they see I'm with someone? Tell you what, let's have this round and head off to my place. There we'll be able to talk in peace. I've got dinner for us. Roast chicken OK?'

'Sounds great, I'll help if you want,' I offered. 'Can we stop on the way so I can get some wine?'

'Not to worry, I've got plenty,' she said lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. 'So you're doing a book on John Anthony. Who'd have ever thought. But, then, he always said he was going to be famous. The boy from Nelspruit who makes good.'

'You've known him long?'

'Since kindergarten, but we really only became friends with Broadway '85,' she replied, waving to a passer-by. 'I was the leader of the drum majorettes and we suddenly clicked. It's amazing to think it took a decade or so to find each other when we sat at adjoining desks. We must have been invisible to each other.'

'Now that's something neither of you can be accused of.'

'Flattery will get you everywhere. The funny thing is that we even had similar interests. We both wanted to travel, were both religious, both politically aware, both rebels, and both loved dressing up. We were soul sisters; we just never knew it. But, then, as many things that joined us, also separated us. He hated sports, I loved hanging out with the jocks. I liked rough parties, he loved pyjama parties. Never worn any in my life. He hated the outdoors, I loved skinny-dipping in the Crocodile River. And our concept of adventure was completely different. His would be New York or Paris, whereas mine was the ocean.'

'He was very close to Judy and Tracey, but you seem the only one he's stayed good friends with.'

‘Then he hasn’t told you about Marcel Roberti,’ she said sitting back and smiling.

‘Quite a bit.’

‘Did he tell you about summer break after our matric exams?’ she asked, pushing a lock of hair away from her face.

‘No.’

‘That’s when things fell apart between him and the others. John Anthony and I were staying together in a beachfront flat in Durban so we could dress up and all that shit. The rest, including Marcel, stayed at the Malibu. He was going back to France, and had a ticket from Durban. It was either the fourth or fifth evening that he was leaving, and the night before we planned a huge farewell party at Father’s Moustache. Well, we’re all getting completely plastered when Marcel, who was in a worse state than anyone, stands to give a little speech. It was a few sentences of dynamite. He basically asked us, Judy in particular, to care for John Anthony because he loved him very much.’

‘Oh shit,’ I chuckled. ‘That must have gone down a treat.’

‘You have no idea,’ she said in a sing-song voice. ‘The penny dropped for everyone at about the same time and I thought they were going to lynch John Anthony.’

‘Why not Marcel?’

‘He was one of those people you expected and accepted everything from. But John Anthony was frozen out.’

‘But not by you.’

‘No, by his beloved in-crowd, which I was never a part of,’ she said, grinding her cigarette in an ashtray. ‘All he had in Nelspruit after that was me. Now let’s get to my place for dinner.’

*****

Jennifer loved things that open out, and wide doors yawned onto a patio from which a staircase spiralled towards an oyster-shaped pool partly surrounded by crumbling walls that resembled an Athenian ruin. This airy feel was carried through to flower filled rooms decorated with bright paintings and old, easy furnishings. There were lumpy sofas with Indian throws over them; a drinks cabinet from Indonesia on top of which was a burgundy decanter with matching glasses; coffee tables scattered with travel books – Ghana, Mongolia and Zanzibar; icons from Ethiopia; and an ornate silver candelabra from Mexico stood on the old dining room table. And in the kitchen was a Golightly painting of a mountain topped with a double fried egg and on the fridge was a magnet: ‘Discounts given to customers who have sex with the staff.’

‘I’ll do the chicken,’ I volunteered. ‘I have a wonderful recipe, and it’s the least I can do.’

‘God, a man who can cook,’ she squealed. ‘Go directly to the bedroom and take off your clothes. I’m never letting you go.’

She threw together a salad of ingredients from the fridge and herb garden just outside the kitchen, regularly wiping her hands to take a swig of wine. I first made a stuffing of pear, bacon and pecan nut; then seasoned and filled the cavity of the bird. I placed it in a baking dish, poured over olive oil and lemon juice, and slid it uncovered into the oven. We took our drinks on to the patio.

While John Anthony was at WITS, Jennifer started and dropped courses in tourism and public relations before enrolling at the University of Pretoria

(Tukkies) to study anthropology. In her second year she was asked to leave after a heated row over evolution with a lecturer.

‘God, that place was so way up its own arse,’ she said, as an owl whooped. ‘They actually thought that the only reason women came to university was to find a man and settle down to domestic bliss like other nice Afrikaans girls. But nice girls don’t make history, they only go to heaven. I, on the other hand, wanted to go everywhere.’

Her travels began while at Tukkies when she performed for the troops on the border between Namibia and Angola as part of an entertainment group.

‘It was so structured,’ she said, waving away a mosquito. ‘We went from one end to the other, from Ruacana to Katima Molimo. We were treated like VIPs, but ushered everywhere like children. It seemed they were desperate for us not to mingle with the guys. I’m not sure what they were protecting us from; maybe how disheartened everyone was.’

After she was expelled from Tukkies, she decided to return to the border so she could form a more balanced impression. With two girlfriends, she hitched to Grootfontein where they caught a lift with a Koevoet unit to Popwa Falls. The section-leader, a barrel of a guy by the name of Mossie Mostert who wore a necklace of human ears, said they would show them round if Jennifer could beat him in a drinking contest at Suzy’s Pub. The bar was adorned with pictures of dead SWAPO soldiers. There were bodies strapped to cars, in mass graves and blown up.

Mostert tumbled over after thirteen Stroh rums, and the soldiers took them on a four-day safari. It was chaos because the United Nations peace keeping force had started moving in, while the South African troops were busy plundering the whole shebang from ivory to diamonds in a final orgy. Nobody knew who was who, but it is unlikely that those who were there will ever forget the three women drinking gin ‘n tonics while cruising the river topless in a rubber duck.

On her return she again studied public relations before resuming her travels. And she wangled a job at Club Mykonos on the West Coast, where she lost her virginity to a yachtsman. ‘It was no big deal,’ she said pouring more wine. ‘Should have done it years earlier, and not with a sailor. God, they’re clumsy, have nothing on which to hone their technique. I bet he was a great wanker.’ After this she followed the coast to Durban, from where she led white-water rafting excursions until she had saved enough money to get to Europe. She returned in 1994 to vote in the first democratic elections.

‘I couldn’t miss that, not for anything,’ she said as we went through to the kitchen where I took the chicken from the oven. ‘I planned to go back, but then I received a telegram from an old friend, Christo Englebrecht, who was sailing round the world. It read: “Lonely, please, please, please come and join me. About to leave the Labrador Coast, will wait for you in Gibraltar until 1 October.”’

‘My big problem was that I had only enough money to get to Europe, and I couldn’t arrive on the boat with nothing,’ she continued, as I took the chicken from the pan and placed it on a carving board. ‘So I caught the next flight to Athens where I waitressed every shift I could for four months. I had quite a tidy sum when I met up with Christo.’

‘You had sailed before?’ I enquired, as we served ourselves dinner onto African design plates featuring guinea fowl and zebra.

‘My friend, the only time I’d ever been on a yacht was to get deflowered,’ she laughed, as we carried our plates to the verandah. ‘And that was while moored in calm water. But I knew enough to have a complete heart attack when I saw his tub. It was a wooden, thirty-three-year-old van der Sandt with no fridge or navigation equipment. All he had was a school atlas. Only one of the two plates of the stove worked, and the toilet had been converted into a storeroom. It was replaced with a bucket, which doubled as the shower.’

‘That gives a new dimension to the shower scene,’ I said as we sat.

‘You have no idea. Whatever inhibitions I had before then disappeared,’ she said, cutting a piece of chicken breast and bringing it to her mouth. She looked at me, ‘Fuck, this is superb. Where did you learn to cook like this?’

‘Self-taught, other than a basic French cookery course about ten years ago,’ I replied, taking a sip of wine. ‘I was once told it was very attractive for a man to be able to cook.’

Christo and Jennifer were together for six months, first sailing the islands of the Mediterranean where he taught her the ropes; then Turkey, Israel, Cairo and through the Suez into the Red Sea. There they were petrified of pirates, always on the lookout, when something potentially worse happened. They got stuck on a reef at two in the morning during Christo’s watch. Over the next few days they could not budge it. On the fourth day, their drinking water running out, Christo suggested they pray. That night a swell lifted them off. But this was no miracle as Jennifer was knocked off her feet and gashed her head.

There were no medical spirits or anaesthetic on board, so Christo had to stitch the cut with Jennifer cursing him and the heavens. That was followed by a huge storm, which lasted for five days. It nearly trashed the boat, and they lost most of their remaining water. They just made it to Djibouti; and while the boat was being repaired they found someone with an 1890 nautical map, which they photocopied. It was pinpoint accurate because they used it to get to a minute island in the Maldives. There Jennifer met a hunky German dive instructor, Max Muller, who swept her off her feet and into his bed.

‘And on the beach, and in the garden, and in the bushes, and everywhere,’ she giggled, picking at a tooth with her pinkie finger.

When Christo said it was time to go, she waved him off. When Max's contract expired she went with him to Germany, where he asked her to marry him. It got her thinking about whether she wanted to be Frau Muller in some damp little flat in Hamburg. The answer to that was a resounding no, so she returned to South Africa to learn that Christo had been killed off Zanzibar. He had been helping fishermen free a stingray, which barbed his leg and he bled to death.

'You know,' she said, turning away to stare beyond the garden to where an orange tinted full moon was rising. 'The sea gives you a whole new perspective on life, but it also enthrals you. Grabs you by the nuts and never lets you go. Christo would have sailed on until something got him. If it wasn't the ray, it would have been a wave or tanker running him down.'

'So it was a good thing you bailed.'

'Probably. But I would have stayed with him had it not been for Max. He pulled me out of the spell, though the magic has stayed,' she said with a hint of nostalgia. 'But let me tell you what the ocean did for me. Before I joined Christo I was defined by the seven devils of Mary Magdalene.'

'Gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride and lust.'

'The whole lot,' she smiled. 'They were exorcised from me by the sea.'

'The ocean as Jesus.'

'Not quite,' she said, pushing her plate away and staring at me. 'I kept one sin, which I'm never going to relinquish. Lust. Great heaving, bumping, grinding vessels of it.'

'Don't want to get too saintly.'

'Doubt I'll ever be accused of that.'

‘John Anthony must have been back by then,’ I said, steering the conversation back to my purpose.

‘Oh yes, he’d already made his glorious leap from the hotel window,’ she said, sitting back and pulling a foot under her. ‘And I also learnt that my best friend Niel was dying of cancer. It was like, hello, all my friends being taken away in one swoop.’

‘How was John Anthony?’

‘He was really fucked up by the experience. And weird. I first saw him after his father drove him from Volksrust to here. The doctors at the government hospital recommended that he see an orthopaedic surgeon. Said it would be unlikely that he’d walk again unless he received specialist care. We all urged him as well, but he kept saying that he was a communist and until every South African could receive equal medical care he would not utilise private services. Part of me admired him, another thought it was odd shit. Then his step-grandmother in Holland died and left him some money. Suddenly he’s off to Pretoria to see one of the finest surgeons in the country. Then it occurred to me that neither he nor his family had the money. That I can understand, but the story he wove round it has always made me wonder.’

‘Did you say anything to him?’

‘Even if you’re as outspoken as me, there are some things better left unsaid.’

When John Anthony was discharged he decided to undertake a forty day road trip with the money he had left. The main purpose was to bury Johnny Golightly in Smithfield, where friends had recently opened a restaurant. At first he advertised for a nurse to drive and accompany him. Then Jennifer, who had her own issues she wished to deal with, said she would do it.

‘We planned it like a Thelma and Louise experience, except ours was very styled,’ explained Jennifer, running her hands down her side. ‘We had the whole caboodle for the perfect trip, loads of magazines, paints and easels, boxes of Ballentine’s scotch and cake tins filled with dagga. And suitcases stuffed with fabulous clothes. The only thing we forgot was the music, so we were stuck with the tape that was in the player. On one side was Nirvana with Shaun Phillips on the other. I’ve never since listened to either.’

Their route was through the eastern Free State to visit Niel in Clarens; then to Nieu Bethesda and the Owl House, which was a pilgrimage for John Anthony to the shrine of a kindred spirit.

‘But John Anthony was as interested in tracking down Koos Malgas,’ added Jennifer. ‘We found him living in a shack, really the worse for wear from cheap wine. I didn’t take in all they spoke about, but I do remember that John Anthony was especially interested in the whole idea of reproducing ideas through others.’

From there they went to Knysna, which was the only place they had booked, and stayed until the first petal dropped from a bunch of flowers they bought on arrival. When this happened they followed the coast back through the Eastern Cape to Durban and home via Volksrust.

Every stop they turned into a piece of theatre. On one day alone they had two punctures and each time the procedure was the same. Jennifer put out the wheelchair, helped John Anthony in it, covered his legs with a tartan blanket, placed a fedora on his head, poured a scotch and wheeled him to the best vantage point. Even when she bathed him was a performance. She lit candles and once he was in the tub poured wine so he could relax while she washed his feet.

‘You really are the complete Mary Magdalene,’ I said, standing so I could go and take a pee in the garden.

When I returned, she said, ‘No matter how good a friend, when you’re with someone for that long who needs care you begin to feel like a saint.’

Before they left they agreed they were going to unpack all their issues then neatly fold them into Louis Vetton luggage and leave them for good. Some days they spoke non-stop, going through every emotion; on others they never said a word. As they went it became obvious to Jennifer that while she was fulfilling her side of the bargain, John Anthony was only dealing superficially with the things he was supposed to attend to.

‘I packed all my shit away, was ready to move on,’ she said, picking at a piece of lettuce from the salad bowl. ‘He just threw his stuff in.’

‘But he did get rid of Johnny Golightly. This was, after all, his primary purpose for undertaking the trip.’

‘Not as planned, nor satisfactorily,’ said Jennifer, packing the dinner plates on top of each other. ‘We were in full costume that evening in Smithfield, with a whole ceremony planned. And the following morning we were going to have breakfast, after which we would erect a memorial. But it didn’t work out like that. At the last minute John Anthony decided that killing off Johnny Golightly would be like the shooting of JR Ewing in *Dallas*. It was too final, and he wasn’t prepared to take that step. Instead, he packed Golightly into a box marked “Winter Hats” and placed it in storage for another time.’

Chapter 11

It was a beautiful, warm October morning. Not yet fully summer, but the drabness of late winter in Johannesburg was finally banished by the scent of a possible afternoon storm and new blooms attracting a shrill of birds. I found a table under an acacia at the Europa Café in Rosebank and eavesdropped an adjoining conversation as I awaited the arrival of my friend Shona Bagley, the editor of the South African Airways in-flight magazine, *Sawubona*. But what promised to be lovers' mutterings turned out to be a mundane business meeting and I was glad when I caught sight of her walking along the avenue of shops. Tiny and pretty, with sensual mouth and green eyes and short blond hair curled behind her ears, she was dressed in her usual eclectic manner – a violet Ethiopian silk scarf hanging simply over a jade neo-hippie suit with matching sequined pumps. She had a hint of mascara and lipstick of the lightest pink and a delicate perfume that made me feel I was sitting in Paris.

'Sorry I had to cancel lunch, but the wankers I work for have given me another two magazines to edit,' she said as she hugged and kissed me. She leant over and wiped lipstick from my cheek with her thumb before settling back, 'God, I was so looking forward to a long afternoon of wine and laughter. Instead I've got to get back to their latest acquisitions: babies and weddings.'

'Sounds perfect for you.'

'Fuck off,' she glared. 'I can't for the life of me work out what they're thinking. It's like asking a Catholic priest to do the sex advice column for *Playboy*.'

'Heard anything more about that job in Cape Town?'

'Seems as though they're going to make me an offer I can't refuse,' she said while fiddling in a yellow handbag for her cigarettes. 'If they do, I'm out of here. By the way, I loved your story on the ghost hunter outside Kimberley. Sometimes I think you make these people up.'

I was commissioned by Shona to do a monthly travel article featuring an eccentric. The one she referred to was of Dr Peter le Sueur who lived as a phantom in an unused house at the Riverton railway siding. He only rose after the sun had set, the dusty branches of bluegum trees snaking eerily above the house. He then dressed in a three-piece tan suit, fastened his paisley tie and crossed the room to his computer in the quest to prove scientifically that ghosts exist. For his purposes, this region was the Holy Grail for it had a cataclysmic history and the right density of ether for observing the paranormal. What was remarkable about him was that he was the youngest-ever recipient of a doctorate in mechanical engineering from Queen Mary College at the University of London.'

'He's real,' I said. 'And he has an IQ virtually off the scale. Like Johnny Golightly.'

'Jeez, the waiters here are slow. What does one have to do for a coffee?' she said, looking round. 'By the way, how's the Golightly book coming along?'

'Don't ask.'

'Oh dear,' she said, lighting a cigarette as a waiter arrived to take our order.

'Espresso for me and cappuccino for her,' I said. To Shona I added, 'At least their coffee's good.'

'So what's up with Johnny?' she asked, wiping ash from her top.

'I can't put my finger on it,' I replied, looking away. 'When I first met him I was so impressed, but I keep exposing layers. The problem is that the more I reveal, the further I'm getting from finding John Anthony. It's as though I'm uncovering someone else. But what I really can't understand is that he appears to be choreographing this. And every time we're supposed to meet in Nelspruit,

he changes the venue. I was to see him next week, but now he's off to Durban. He suggested I go there, but I insisted we meet halfway in Volksrust. I've got to inspect the scene of his fall, so he may as well narrate it for me.'

'What a coincidence,' she said as she again tried to attract the attention of a waiter. 'Could you go a bit earlier? The regional publicity association has been nagging me to do something on the area. They've started a historical tourism route that takes in the First Boer War, amongst other things. It's being set up by a guy named Hector Macdonald, who seems quite interesting. And this you'll love, it's the town's annual festival.'

'Oh joy!'

'Stop whining, you get paid top rate.'

*****

Volksrust is a psychotic blend of picture postcard residential areas and bland fifties strip development along the main road that snakes through.

Set in a bowl of hills where the Eastern Escarpment meets the northern Drakensberg, the town is dominated by an imposing sandstone Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church. Away from the centre flow flower-fragrant streets adorned with houses featuring gables and filigree framed verandahs. But it was to the main road which I was drawn in search of the Transvaal Hotel, where I planned on staying. At first I did not find it, but on my second run I saw a broken mustard plastic sign with red lettering that read Tran---l H---l. It was obviously no longer used as originally intended. There was a mattress shop in what had once been the bar and a cheap electronics dealer in the lounge. The entrance hall was denuded of furnishings, and where the print of the Great Trek scene once hung was graffiti: Sex Appeal – Give Generously. The wooden stairway led to rooms now let to Asian immigrants.

Disappointed, I found lodgings at Elmarie's Bed & Breakfast. And I groaned when the bottle-blond proprietor excitedly informed me that Steve Hofmeyr and Kurt Darren were headlining the country music festival on the school sports grounds on Saturday afternoon. Along with this, proclaimed banners and posters strewn around the town, would be cycle races, horse trials, drum majorettes, a classic car parade and the crowning of Mr and Miss Majuba.

Things began improving early the following morning when Hector Macdonald came to take me on his tour. A Scot, he had a shock of grey, disorderly hair and an expanding web of spidery red veins in his cheeks. But he was still strong jawed and his back ramrod straight. And he was immaculate. Boned shoes, kilt, folded handkerchief in jacket pocket and white driving gloves. All topped off with a blue cap that was fashioned from the foreskin of an elephant.

Hector was one of the first British helicopter test pilots. His dream as a boy growing up in Edinburgh was to fly – a desire that would have remained unfulfilled had it not been for fate. Shortly before being demobbed after World War 11 his commanding officer entered the mess and said, 'I need a volunteer. There's an agricultural implement out front with a propeller on its roof. They call it a heliopolis or something and they're looking for some idiot to fly it.'

From the moment he put up his hand, Hector entered a world of adventure and glamour – a mix of missions in exotic places to aviator of choice for members of the Royal Family and celebrities such as Frank Sinatra. That all changed in 1987 when he came to South Africa while retracing the footsteps of his great-uncle, Major General Hector 'Fighting Mac' Macdonald, who was one of the few British troops to cover themselves in glory at the Battle of Majuba Hill, which decided the First Boer War.

Hector junior was so taken with the area that he decided never to leave. From Volksrust he sent his wife a telegram: 'Not returning. Please send Rolls Royce.' It was this metallic blue limousine that carried us through the upper reaches of Laing's Nek Pass to the foot of Majuba Hill. Leaving the car, I battled to keep

pace with the man at least twenty years my senior as we followed the route taken by Commandant Joachim Ferreira, one of three leaders of Boer storming groups. On the summit, Hector pointed out where the British commanding officer, Major-General Sir George Colley, was killed by a bullet to the head. Further along, Hector's chest swelling with pride, he showed me where his relative entered legend.

'He was then a lieutenant in the Gordon Highlanders,' he explained. 'It was about one in the morning, dark, chaos all around, with Boer marksmen picking off disoriented British troops at will. Several Boers caught my great uncle, who went into a rage when one grabbed his sporran. He kicked the man in the balls, and fought off three others before being wrestled to the ground. He put up such a fight that a Boer officer ordered that he not be killed, saying he was too good a man. So impressed was the officer that after the battle he presented Macdonald to the Boer commander, General Joubert, who gave him back his sword and set him free.'

On the south summit Hector pointed out Ingogo where the film *Zulu* was shot, and Charlestown round to the east where Mahatma Gandhi's awful journey from Durban to Johannesburg was made worse when he was forced, because of the colour of his skin, to take an outside seat on the side of the coach box rather than inside the carriage.

*****

It was getting late in the afternoon when we returned to Volksrust. The evening sky had turned livid, then softened to lilac, and a cool breeze had got up carrying with it the hint of jasmine.

'Hector, can I buy you a drink?' I asked.

‘Of course you may,’ he smiled. ‘There’s not much in the way of bars, but I usually stop at the Laingsnek Park Pub. It used to be the Railway Services Club, but when the Transvaal Hotel closed the two bars merged.’

The packed pub, which backs onto the railway line, was in a timewarp. Everyone was singing the chorus to *My Dingaling* when we entered. On the walls were trophies of various antelope once common in the area, photographs of steam engines and a picture of Joel Stransky’s 1995 Rugby World Cup winning kick. The only item from the present was a team photograph of the 2007 Proteas World Cup cricket squad – with a bullet hole through captain Graeme Smith. Behind the bar was a tall, buxom woman with permed hair: her one breast tattooed with a butterfly that fluttered to the rose on the other when she danced. She slowed only to serve a lanky man with a mullet haircut and few teeth who had been energetically gyrating across the bar from her.

‘What became of your great uncle?’ I asked after we toasted each other with a double J&B on the rocks.

‘Oh God, he fought in nearly every battle the British got themselves into – Toski where he received the DSO, Omdurman where he was proclaimed the hero by General Kitchener, and the Anglo Boer War as a major general. But things turned sour after that. He was posted to Ceylon as the commander-in-chief of the British forces, but soon after was court-martialled for sodomy with local boys.’

‘Any truth in it?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Hector scratching his chin. ‘They say the charges were trumped up by his enemies, but there was a fine tradition of repressed homosexuality in the services. Whatever, he committed suicide shortly afterwards.’

‘On a related subject, there’s something I’d like to ask you.’

‘Fire away, but let me tell you I’m not queer if that’s what you want to know.’

I smiled.

‘Do you keep abreast of local news?’

‘This is a small town, it’s difficult not to. As they say, it’s one of those places where everyone gets a whiff when you fart.’

‘In March 1996 there was an unseasonal snow storm…’

‘Snow here is never unseasonal, but less likely at that time,’ he corrected.

‘A gay Nelspruit artist, who was then going under the name Johnny Golightly, was attacked in his room at the Transvaal Hotel by thugs, and only saved himself by jumping from the window. In the process he broke both his ankles.’

Hector thought for nearly a minute, then said, ‘No, you’ve got me. Doesn’t ring a bell at all. Why not try the police? The station’s just round the corner from here? They should have a record.’

After another long pause, he added, ‘Strange that I don’t know. And it doesn’t sound like the type of thing locals would do. They’re rough, but not in that way. If anything, they’re over hospitable. But then it could have been boys from the power station; there’re some nasty pieces of work there.’

The following morning, Friday, my head throbbing, I vowed never again to match a Scotsman whisky for whisky. At breakfast I struggled through a plate of bacon and eggs before driving across town to the police station. I explained my purpose to a constable in the charge office.

‘Do you have a case number?’

‘Unfortunately not.’

‘Then it’s going to be very difficult,’ she said, looking disinterested.

‘Please, I’ve come all the way from Johannesburg.’

‘All I can do is look in the incidence book,’ she sighed.

‘I’d appreciate that.’

She came back after a half hour with a journal under her arm.

‘You say March. Do you know the day?’

‘Sorry.’

She frowned and turned the book to me, ‘You have a look and see if there’s anything there.’

I found nothing.

‘Nope,’ I said, closing the book. ‘Is there anyone who worked here in 1996?’

‘Maybe Sergeant Pelser, he’s been here forever.’

‘Could I speak to him?’

She took the book and again disappeared through a door to the side. Returning shortly, she said, ‘He’ll be with you now.’

As I thanked her a short, portly policeman came through and asked, ‘Who is it who wants to see me?’

I thought it a strange question as I was the only one in the charge office other than for the constable. ‘I do,’ I replied, before introducing and explaining myself.

‘You know, I remember something about the case,’ he said, tapping his chin with a pen. ‘It was a strange one because a charge was not laid with us, but through the public prosecutor.’

‘Where would I find their office?’

‘At the magistrate’s court, but I wouldn’t bother.’

‘Why?’

‘Firstly, they’d never find anything,’ he snorted, ‘and, more importantly, the matter was closed straight after. I got a call in the morning to investigate, but before I could go see the victim I was informed he didn’t want to press charges. What was odd was that all the instructions from the prosecutor originated in the provincial premier’s office.’

Despite the advice from Sergeant Pelser, I tried the prosecutor’s office. As warned, my efforts were to no avail; as were my enquiries at the hospital. So I decided to leave the matter until my meeting with John Anthony on Sunday morning. In the interim I researched and took photographs for the *Sawubona* story.

On the Saturday the streets of Volksrust were transformed for what promised to be a huge party. Among the pavement stalls were food-and-drink stands that blanketed the town in a flavoured haze. There were barbeques grilling an assortment of meats from sausages to heavily marinated steaks, and spits on which whole sheep turned. I tried artichoke hearts, pears in port, and preserved figs and feta. I washed these down with a firewater called Pig Mampoer, which

carried a sketch of a pig on the label and the following inscription on the back: ‘The pig behaves as a pig. It eats like a pig. It looks and smells like a pig. They love dirt and will eat anything. In short, this is just a pig. If you overdo this, it could just as well be you on the front.’ Along with this I sampled a range of lethal cocktails. Most exotic was a pink one with a banana, sculpted in the shape of a penis, thrusting from the centre. The only problem was that when I tried to drink it the banana kept poking me in the nose. Besides this there were places selling catapults, village-idiot hats, embossed ostrich eggs and instant poems.

Then there were the people. Donkey carts ferried some, others chose to walk. Some wore khaki and bush hats trimmed with faux leopard-skin, their wives adorned in floral crimplene. Other men wore kaftans, while their girls pranced around in Indian-print dresses. There were crew cuts, coifs, lacquered hair, braids, ponytails and green, spiked hair. A beautiful man paraded around in tiny leather shorts, an open jacket that revealed pierced nipples, and fishnet tights – his hair brushed into what appeared to be a meringue. He was frantically pulling a styled poodle from a lamppost.

‘Come, hound dog,’ he shrieked as it tried to cock its leg, ‘you’ll ruin your hair.’

At midday, following the drum majorettes, was the classic car show, which was more of an ‘if-it-moves-enter-it’ affair. A vintage floral Jaguar Mk11, sporting a phallic leaping silver cucumber and a pair of coconuts on the hood, attracted attention. And a Ford pickup was covered with bumper-stickers, one which read: ‘A man’s view of safe sex is a padded headboard.’ All these had to contend with a matador who jinxed in and out the traffic. Also in the road a juggler knocked cigarettes from a woman’s mouth; a magician pulled coins from a boy’s ear; and a toothless man strummed a guitar and sang *When the gold in your hand turns to silver*. In the grounds of the town hall couples danced to traditional Afrikaans music on a floor bounded by hoarding advertising the latest in farm equipment.

At two o’clock I headed for the school grounds for the music festival. During the build-up, strongman Gerrit Badenhorst announced his retirement and

informed the crowd that he was considering his options. A short while later, Priscilla Talbot, the opening act, fainted from the heat during her performance and he grabbed his opportunity and the microphone to deliver a passable rendition of a Josh Grogan number. But he did not leave it there and took the applause as an exhortation for more, breaking into a tortured version of *O Sole Mio*.

As it became dark I decided to head back for my room. A television tower on one side of the main road broadcasted sports programmes; the beer drinking devotees barely tolerating a heckler in a yellow leotard singing '*Hier Kom Die Bokke'*. No such restraint was shown across the road at the open-air revivalist film show when a clown created a shadow puppet of a grazing donkey to follow Jesus on the screen.

*****

'Can't say I'm sorry to see the demise of this place,' said John Anthony when I met him outside what had been the Transvaal Hotel on the Sunday morning. He was wearing gold-rimmed sunglasses, a red T-shirt, cut-off jeans and black canvas shoes.

'And I won't be sorry to see the back of this town. I've been here since Wednesday; the highlight of which was listening to Kurt Darren.'

'You poor dear,' he chuckled.

'John Anthony, you need to get to Durban and I want to get home, so let's go to the Laingsnek Park Pub and talk. Then we can be on our way.'

'Darling, you know I don't drink anymore.'

'I'm not going to drink either, but I can't think of anywhere else,' I lied, wanting to see how he reacted to a bar in the town.

But he appeared unfazed and I told him to follow me. He drove behind as we negotiated road closures because of the cycle race. In the bar we sat at the counter in the far corner where it was least likely we would be disturbed.

‘I really battled to find information,’ I said.

‘What are you looking for?’ he said, pouring himself a glass of water from a jug on the counter. ‘You know you can get everything from me.’

‘I need to verify things. It’s the way it works.’

‘Like I told you before, I was forced to overnight here when I was caught in a snowstorm,’ he said in an irritated tone while rubbing the back of his hand. ‘The first place I saw was the Transvaal Hotel, and I said to myself: No way am I staying here. So I went and booked in at Stucky’s Bed & Breakfast.’

‘You’ve never told me this before.’

‘These are minor details, be patient,’ he said, more irate. ‘In my room it began to occur to me that Johnny Golightly had lived without fear, conquered whatever he wanted. Now he was in the heart of the beast. A place that contained every fear of his existence; varnished slasto, macho white men in shorts, cowering blacks. It was his opportunity to cross the final frontier. So I moved out and drove back to the Transvaal Hotel, where I checked in. It was Golightly’s great test.’

‘You were looking for trouble.’

‘Pat, stop being so aggressive, it’s not my fault you’ve spent four days here. No, I was not looking for trouble. It was something entirely different. On one level I wanted an affirmation of the new South African democracy. I wanted to see if a gay man could walk with his head high into a backwater bar. I needed to

experience if things had really changed. And Golightly was attracted to the idea of the villain; in this case the macho, racist white Afrikaner male. So it was also sexual. There was something deeply sensual about the whole idea of a lamb going to sit amongst lions. It excited me as much as when I first entered the Palladium in New York.'

I wondered aloud to John Anthony if it had not occurred to him that a gay man wearing a Communist T-shirt might in turn prod this community's deepest, darkest fears. He responded that this made it all the more seductive, especially as there was a baby present.

'The setting couldn't be more perfect if you wanted to create a lions den,' he said with a gleam in his eyes. 'Think of it, they were also protecting their young. If Golightly could escape unscathed then nothing was impossible.'

'It's a great story, but I'm not buying it,' I said, shifting again. 'I've been here for some time and I've seen a number of openly gay men at the festival, and their presence hasn't attracted the slightest attention.'

'Pat, how can you doubt me? I'm talking ten years ago. Things are different now.'

'My experience of small towns is that they change very slowly. But I have a more compelling reason. No charges were laid. A complaint was initiated from the premier's office, but withdrawn soon after. It doesn't add up.'

'I contacted Premier Matthews Phosa, who I know personally,' he said, picking the top layer off a coaster. 'But I decided to withdraw straight away because the province was dealing with such shit that I thought confronting homophobic whites in a small town was the last thing they needed on their plate.'

'John Anthony, I sense there's something you're not telling me.'

‘That’s the story,’ he said impatiently.

‘A story, not necessarily the truth.’

‘Pat, I’ve asked you this before: What is truth?’ he smiled coldly.

‘You’re not going to get out of this one that easily. Either you tell me what happened or I’m withdrawing from the project.’

‘There’s nothing more to tell.’

‘Then drive safely, I’m going back to Johannesburg to find something else to occupy my time,’ I said standing.

‘Pat, don’t go,’ he responded in surprise. ‘This book’s very important to me.’

‘Likewise, but I’m not going to continue until this is cleared up. Goodbye.’

I was pulling away when John Anthony rushed out and waved me to stop.

‘If I tell you the complete story will you continue with the book?’ he asked, his hands on the window.

‘Only if I’m satisfied with what you tell me.’

‘Remember what I asked earlier: What is truth?’ he said with a crooked smile. ‘Well, you might be getting closer to my truth, but will you be closer to THE truth?’

‘Only time will tell. Shall we go back inside?’

After we had retaken our places, John Anthony sighed, and recounted the events of that night. At the hotel he was given a room on the first floor; where he

smoked a cigarette, took a shower, got dressed and went for dinner where he ate a mixed grill. The only other people there were three permanent residents of the hotel; Indian men with long black beards. After dinner John Anthony went through to the bar and ordered wine. Near the fire were four enormous white men, exactly the types he expected to encounter.

'They were joined shortly afterwards by a very handsome piece of white trash,' said John Anthony. 'You know the type: bleached hair, tanned, dirty nails. With him were his pretty wife and their brand new baby, which they came to show off to the four guys at the bar.'

John Anthony went to the fire and made as if he was warming his hands. There he gurgled at the child and got into a conversation with this group. While they were pleasant enough, he found he had little in common with them so decided to go and talk with the Indians. They were very engaging, telling him about how they missed their families and could not wait for when they joined them in Volksrust. Then one of them invited him to his room to see pictures of his children. Upstairs, John Anthony told the man he was quickly going to his room to take a pee, but instead sprayed himself with cologne and snorted a line of cocaine.

John Anthony believed the man had invited him for sex; was convinced of it when he entered the man's room to see him holding what John Anthony assumed was a wallet, which would contain a condom. While these were leaps of logic, they made sense to him in his drunken, drugged state. John Anthony walked over and flung his arms round the man's neck and began to passionately kiss him, stroking the back of his head with one hand as he reached down for his crotch with the other. Hearing something drop, he looked to see what he had thought was a wallet was in fact a pocket photo album. Regardless of his condition, he pulled back, knowing he had made a grave error. He was sure of it when he saw the look of rage on the man's face.

‘I’ve never seen such anger,’ said John Anthony taking a deep breath. ‘The rest of the story you know. I went to my room to pack; he went to fetch his buddies for an honour killing.’

‘That I believe. There’s only one other thing; then we can move on. Why did the prosecutor drop the matter so quickly?’

‘Darling, that’s easy,’ he said, drumming his fingers on the counter. ‘If white rightwingers fuck up a gay boy they prove they’re dinosaurs. If Indians do it, it’s not that simple. The reality is that there’re different parameters for different people. That’s what Johnny Golightly was taught, and that’s why I had to dispose of him. He did not possess the subtlety to deal with our world.’

Chapter 12

What is truth? John Anthony had posed this twice to me, and the more I pondered it the greater the realisation that this was not a question. Like Holly Golightly, his truth was a fabrication; '…in short, happy in a way that she was not.'

As I went through the notes of all the people I had met over the years I began to insert red question marks. With Helen Martins I highlighted the accepted truth that she was shunned by the community, especially the Dutch Reformed Church; despite the fact that the minister's wife, Gertie Retief, had taken her a hot meal every day without once receiving any acknowledgement from the artist who would otherwise have starved long before she took her own life. In the column I wrote: 'Maybe Helen Martins spurned Nieu Berthesda.' At Nukain Mabusa I underlined the story of his vision, and circled the detail that Outa Lappies Schoeman had pulled his cart sixteen thousand kilometres. And I thought about myself, because since my fall I told everyone, including my family and closest friends, that I climbed the hill in Durbanville while it was still dark so I could get to the top in time to see the sunrise.

What troubled me was why John Anthony was exposing his truth. For this I returned to the box he gave me in Mtubatuba. I had an idea that the answer to this lay in the present, but all I could find was a short prospectus of his company, Art Aid, and an uncaptioned photograph made up entirely of pictures taken at a provincial department of arts and culture function. The pamphlet included details of his mobile craft clinic that he takes into rural areas, craft exhibitions he has coordinated and the curating of the Mpumalanga Story: a twenty-four panelled embroidered and beaded historical panorama of the Lowveld, which was now mounted in the chamber of the local legislature. As I was flicking through the album a piece of paper fell from the back. On one side were quotes from photographer Alison Jackson. Amongst these were: 'Making photos lie; one foot in truth, the other in fantasy'; 'I always shoot through something to extend a feeling of voyeurism in the viewer'; and 'I'm trying to

deal with a reality confusion'. On the reverse were scribblings by John Anthony such as 'real fake' and 'search for the myth that makes sense to a changing culture'. Next to a sketch of an onion he had written, 'This is my onion. That's your opinion'. And in the bottom corner:

I go crackers after I drink gin
My poor brain is wearing thin

I decided to go and see Angie Dunn, a white African traditional healer who was one of my subjects for *Extraordinary South Africa*. Included in the work she did was a study of sangomas.

*****

Angie grew up in a conservative non-practising Christian household in Toronto, and she would probably still have been living a Canadian suburban lifestyle had she not taken a holiday in Israel. There she met and fell in love with her future husband, a South African, who convinced her to join him in Johannesburg.

'I remember arriving in South Africa in 1994 with crazy preconceived notions,' she laughed when I first met her. 'I was nervous, excited and unsure what to expect – imagining I would see lions and other wild animals mingling with exotic people on the streets.'

Impulsively, the lovers decided to sell everything and hitchhiked through Central and East Africa; living as Africans. During their eight-month odyssey they passed through strife-torn Rwanda, stayed with Masai in Olitoktok and supped with Tanzanian peasants in Mtwara where Angie fell desperately ill with amoebic dysentery and malaria. So serious was her condition that she was airlifted first to Nairobi in Kenya, then Johannesburg and finally Toronto for specialist care. As one sickness was cured, however, another disorder raised its head and she became virtually bedridden. As a final resort she sought traditional medical help among Native Canadians at the Four Directions Camp outside Toronto where she immersed herself in the sacred Red Road teachings.

‘The most important thing I learned here was that life is now and death is then,’ she said. ‘We are so obsessed with our mortality that we sabotage and destroy our lives in the quest to live forever on earth. This is unnatural and results in our disconnection from the ecosystem. If we had trust and faith we would stop worrying and live the lives we were meant to.’

She was on the path to spiritual awakening, but, on returning to South Africa, she suffered a relapse and consulted a sangoma who threw the bones. ‘She saw it all,’ enthused Angie. ‘My whole life was clear to her and she told me I had the calling to be a healer, a sangoma, and could only get well by fulfilling my mission.’

In 1997 Angie found a sangoma teacher in Soweto and moved in for three months to learn the ancient ways of healing and the rituals for summoning ancestral spirits. Covered from head to toe in medicinal clay and sleeping only on a blanket on the floor, she was woken every few hours to drink an emetic potion to cleanse her system. During this time she was taught how to access her psychic powers, throw the bones through which spirits and ancestors communicate, source the right herbs, and drum and dance. Regardless of these rigours she began to put on weight and regain optimal health.

After her initiation she opened a traditional healing practice in a room of her Melville home that was infused with the sounds of drums and the sweet aromas of African incense. It is filled with antelope horns, dried bushes wrapped in newspaper, masks, shelves laden with bottled powders and colourful tinctures, two altars and a length of shrivelled goat’s fat hanging between framed certificates, qualifications and excellence awards. On her desk were papers she was preparing for a presentation at a conference in Calcutta on the role played by the sangoma in health care.

*****

I parked outside Angie's domed Victorian house on the hill bordering Westdene. Over the low wall I saw her planting seedlings in soggy black soil. She straightened and stretched her back before waving as I entered. She kissed and hugged me, without her dirty hands touching my T-shirt.

'It's so lovely to see you,' she said standing back. 'Why is it that you only visit when you want to know something?'

'I mean to pop in, but I'm so busy,' I apologised.

She was short and slim with eyes of Antwerp blue; and dressed in a red, white and black sarong, long tasselled earrings, goat-skin bracelet, medicinal beads and rattling wooden anklets with her long blond hair pushed back by a broad band of shells.

'Sit, while I make tea,' she said, going inside.

I flopped down into a wicker chair. From behind me wafted the trumpet of Hugh Masekela, ahead the setting sun cut a golden fissure through charcoal clouds. In a young tree to my left a grey loerie called as it struggled to balance on a thin branch. When Angie returned she placed a tray with two mugs and a plate of biscuits on a glass-topped table and sat across from me.

'So what is it you want to know?' she asked, taking her mug in both hands and sitting back.

'How do you know if a sangoma concocts their experience?'

'I hate the phrase, but there is only one way,' she smiled. 'You have to sniff them out.'

*****

It was of no surprise when John Anthony telephoned just before our next appointment to say he was running a course at the Graskop Hotel during that time, and I was to meet him there. I knew the place well as over the years I had done a number of stories on Harrie Siertsema who had converted it into South Africa's first art hotel, and who had a vision of the town becoming a centre for the arts.

I found John Anthony in the 'A' Gallery. He was standing at the head of a trestle table round which sat a group of six students drawing in black crayon. All were handicapped. Two were deaf, a couple had withered legs and were in wheelchairs, one was a hunchback and another had an arm amputated at the shoulder. Their prop was food, the centrepiece of which was a silver bowl packed with ice on top of which were two trout. Round it were five loaves of bread.

'Stop everyone,' said John Anthony raising his hands to the students as I entered. 'I'd like to introduce you to Pat Hopkins. He's like my brother.'

'Hi,' I waved self-consciously.

'Pass what you've done to the front,' instructed John Anthony as some of the students battled to turn towards me while a sign language interpreter communicated with the rest. 'I'm going to put them up so Pat can choose the one he thinks is best, and tell us why.'

I gestured my discomfort, but John Anthony already had his back to me as he taped the works to a board. He was wearing a light pink shirt under a Polo sweater, jeans and red shoes. When he finished he stood aside and indicated I should make my selection. I decided on a more abstract rendition, which belonged to the now beaming hunchback. After stammering my reasons, John Anthony told the students they could take a ten-minute break.

John Anthony and I went through to the new bar, which had a Golightly painting hanging next to a Karoo road sign. He poured a glass of water and I ordered a beer, which we took to a table round which were leather covered art deco chairs. We sat, facing out the high windows onto the garden where there were a series of metal stencils filled with birdseed on the grass.

'Harrie has it done every day,' explained John Anthony. 'It leaves amazing patterns on the grass when the birds are done.'

Pointing to his painting, I asked, 'Do you miss creating art?'

'There's no time to talk about that now, but it's very important that I teach,' he replied.

'Couldn't you do both?'

'We'll speak at lunch,' he said, standing and looking out the window. 'But do come and observe before then. What you'll see is how I spend my life showing people how things like loaves and fishes can transform their lives. Multiply and multiply so that they transcend who they are now.'

As he walked away I had a feeling that there was no coincidence to the day's chosen prop. But I did not think much more of it as Harrie came out of his office behind the reception desk and came and sat with me, where we chatted about new developments since I was last there. These included the Jo Ratcliffe Photographic Gallery, a studio of West African art and a video installation room.

Harrie, a second generation South African of Dutch descent, had three passions: art, travel and food. The first began as a schoolboy when he purchased a painting with money borrowed from his father. Then he caught the travel bug as an architecture student while on a working holiday through Germany and Italy,

being especially taken with the art village of Spoleto that is crammed with small galleries and is famed for its annual music and arts festival.

‘Being out in the world made me realise that working in an office was not for me,’ said the tall, deep-voiced Harrie with a sweep of his arms when I first met him. ‘So I gave up my studies and joined South African Airways as a flight attendant. Everyone said I was crazy.’

They would think him even madder three years later. While working for the airline he formed a lifelong friendship with another steward, Griet van der Meullen. She grew up in Graskop and would often bring him along when she visited her family. He knew from the very first that this was where he wanted to be and when the run-down Ria’s Pancakes came up for sale he jumped at the opportunity to indulge his love for food.

His doubters appeared spot-on when the total of the first day’s sales was a packet of fudge. But they had not reckoned on the drive of Harrie or the appeal of a restaurant that offered a mix of contemporary art décor and a Dutch pancake menu stuffed with sweet and savoury delights. Soon he had made enough to purchase the property where the restaurant stands, which included a house in which he and a number of partners opened Delagoa Arts and Crafts as an extension of the pancake bar – a concept that has been successfully replicated elsewhere. Then, in 1993, the seriously dilapidated adjoining hotel came on the market and Harrie and his partners made an offer.

His critics again had a field day when the first thing Harrie did was close the bar; the hotel’s only income generator. Out, too, went the red carpets with floral overlay and just about everything other than the shell. In came the things that would make the Graskop Hotel a leading art hotel. Everywhere, including in the garden, were the works of artists like Jane Alexander, Brett Murray and Willem Boschoff. And each room was decorated by a different artist.

Complementing this, in the space left by the old bar, was the ‘A’ Gallery of Contemporary Art, which featured artists such as Penny Siopsis and Daniel Mosako.

*****

John Anthony and I had lunch at Harrie’s Pancakes, I ordering a chicken curry filled wrap and John Anthony beef strips followed by an ice-cream, banana, nut and honey pancake. The heat was close and stifling and the European tourists alighting from the buses starting to pull up outside were wiping their red faces with handkerchiefs. John Anthony snorted at the sight of an elderly man with tight tie-dyed shorts, Hawaiian shirt, short socks and sandals.

Still staring outside, he said, ‘Darling, earlier you really threw me with your question.’

‘Why? I only asked if you missed the creative process.’

‘Only asked,’ he turned, flushed with anger. ‘Did it not occur to you that art was my life?’

‘John Anthony, I meant no offence. But I really would like to know how you feel about it.’

‘Suicidal is how I feel about it,’ he said, hitting the table hard enough for those around us to quieten.

‘Then why not create in conjunction with your teaching?’

‘Because I can’t, I’ve fucking lost it,’ he said as our pancakes arrived. ‘What you’d call writer’s block. It hurts so bad that I’ve fallen off the wagon three times since *Love – a Retrospective*. Each time I’ve tried to kill myself.’

He was so emotional that I did not query that he had told me on a number of occasions that he had not touched alcohol since the demise of Johnny Golightly. As he ate, distractedly picking at his food so that it remained half uneaten when the waiter took his plate, he recounted the attempts on his life. The first was after the road trip with Jennifer.

'That one was hardly life threatening,' he admitted, turning his wrists to me. 'I took some tablets and cut myself, but more scratch than slash. It was a cry for help, nothing else.'

Even so, Maureen had a premonition and rushed to him. It was a foreboding that would save him when he next tried to kill himself two years later. He was working on two sculptures, which were not shaping out the way he wanted. He went out and purchased a bottle of vodka and sleeping pills and on his return he wrecked his flat and smashed the sculptures before washing down the drugs with the alcohol. His mother again sensed all was not well and arrived to find him unconscious on his bed. She was convinced he was possessed by demons and bowed her head to recite the *Lord's Prayer* before beseeching the evil spirit to leave his body. With that he sat, completely sober, and went to take a shower.

In mid-2004 was his most serious effort. He loaded his blue jeep with petrol and drove to a spot near Hendriksdal where there was a sheer drop off the side of the road. Parking he opened his laptop and typed a suicide note: 'If I could take Manhattan, then I can take my life. Living is worth nothing to me now because I have lost my creativity and my beauty is fading. How can one be creative when not on your own terms? How can one be glamorous when flat-lining? I know now that I had it too early, that everything came too soon. All is stagnant here and I no longer want to live in this world. Mommy and daddy, I love you.'

Placing the computer on the side of the road, John Anthony doused the jeep and himself with fuel. He then got back in the car, started it, lit a cigarette and drove off the edge. The vehicle was completely wrecked, but did not explode and he walked away unscathed. Maureen again had a hunch and telephoned the police.

A short while later they received a call from a passing motorist to report an accident. When John Anthony was found alive, sitting against a rock and humming a tune, Maureen knew he had been saved by the hand of God and proclaimed it a miracle.

'I just want my life to stop, because I don't want it to be like the story of the red dancing shoes which never ends,' he said as his banana pancake arrived. To the waiter, he put up a hand, 'Take it away, I don't feel like anything sweet.'

After I paid the bill we walked in silence to the hotel. At the entrance to the 'A'Gallery, John Anthony put his head in his hands and said, 'I've always toyed with taking my life. That's what *Breakfast at Holly Forest* was about. But I can't succeed because God still has work for me to do. I wish He'd hurry, though, because there's not much time left.'

'Time for what?'

'To fulfil my dream,' he said, climbing the stairs. 'I've always wanted my parents to take me down from the cross, wash me, then carry me to my grave where they'll present me to God as an offering. With my father's illness there's virtually no time left.'

It was obvious to me that John Anthony needed help, but I did not feel it was my place to suggest it. Rather, I changed the subject.

'John Anthony, when we first met I asked if you ever experienced an epiphany, other than when you broke your ankles. Are you sure that was the first time?'

'Pat, are you questioning my honesty? If I said no; I meant no.'

'Then let me rephrase. Have you ever had vision?'

'But of course. I have them all the time.'

‘When was the first?’

‘How should I remember? Maybe when I saw the dead man in the garden flat.’

‘And you say you had others between then and your fall?’

‘I’m not sure where you’re going with this, but I’ve said I have them all the time.’

‘Could you describe them?’

‘I see God. I see Him all the time because He’s always at my side. But I’m too drained, and I don’t wish to continue talking. I’ll be finished here next week, then I’m going to White River where I’m taking delivery of The Divine Shirley Bassey.’

‘John Anthony, I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.’

‘It’s my version of the Heavenly Colt; you must know what that is,’ he smiled with a gleam of mischief in his eye.

‘OK,’ I said, still in the dark about what he was on about, but not wanting to show my ignorance.

‘I’d like you to be the first to see it, but not in Nelspruit,’ he said, rubbing his temples. ‘I’m going to be in East London next week; so what about later the following week?’

‘Sure, but I can’t keep driving to all parts of the country,’ I said firmly. ‘This time there must be no distractions.’

We agreed to get together at Kings Walden, the guest house owned by Bridget Hilton-Barber's parents at Agatha near Tzaneen, where we would work from the Thursday through to the Sunday. He would book into the lodge as he was close to Bridget's mother, Tana, and I would stay with my friend at Stone Cottage; her house next-door.

Chapter 13

In my office I searched the Internet for the Heavenly Colt, which I quickly learnt from the Gospel of Luke 19:28-48 was the humble donkey that triumphantly carried Jesus into Jerusalem:

> And when he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he drew near Beth'phage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village opposite, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" you shall say this, "the Lord has need of it."'…And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their garments on the colt they set Jesus upon it. And as he rode along, they spread their garments on the road. As he was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen.

From his box I took out *Breakfast with Holly Forest* and fast-forwarded to the insert in which he was crucified and resurrected to the sounds of *A Star is Born*. At first I saw nothing new, but when I rewound I went too far back to the credits of the main film. There it stated: A Film by Johnny Golightly. When I played the crucifixion film again I let it run on past his ascent into heaven with a blow-dryer in his hand. The credits here ran faster than the main feature, blurring with speed as it neared the end. But I managed to catch it as it whizzed off screen: A Film by Johnny Gochristly.

'How could I have missed it?' I screamed, slapping the side of my head as I again replayed the segment. 'This is the reason I'm being dragged to out-of-the-way places, because he wants me to see that he's a wandering teacher. And Nelspruit is his Jerusalem.'

I returned to the box and began to sift through once more. On one side I piled items with a biblical reference, which grew so quickly that it soon heaved over

and spilt across the floor. There were photographs of his paintings of crucified heroes, Ethiopian crosses and pictures of Catholic kitsch. And interspersed among ‘My bum is a slot machine’, ‘I generally avoid temptation unless I can’t resist it’ and ‘I knew I was gay when I woke up with a penis in my mouth’ on the list of one-thousand aphorisms for *Love – a Retrospective* were ‘Jesus the son of Mary has been slain’, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that whoever believeth in him, shall not perish, but have eternal life’, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is upon you’, ‘This is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’ and ‘I see angels…I see you driving a red horse, I see the future, there is no death, you and I are angels’.

I hardly slept as I researched before leaving for Kings Walden. I concluded that when John Anthony jumped from the window in Volksrust he did not revert to John Anthony Boerma, as thought, but took on the more extreme character of Johnny Gochristly, which he had toyed with since the advent of Golightly. Integral to this new persona was the emphasis on the parallels between his life and that of Jesus. In this world his father was Joseph, his mother was Mary and Jennifer was Mary Magdalene. I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was Judas, the disciple some see as the betrayer and others as the indispensable link in destiny.

*****

My hangover was so bad I could hardly see when I walked into the parking area of Kings Walden two mornings later. It was not yet eight and already I was sweating, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. All I could taste were cigars. The cause of my malaise was a lunch the day before with Bridget at the Coach House, which had extended into evening and continued into the early hours of this morning at her house.

The only vehicle there was a huge black Isuzu 4X4 double cab. It had chromed mirrors and bumpers and mags and door handles and bull-bar. And the windows were blacked out. As I cast a jaundiced eye over what appeared to be gangster’s

wheels, David Hilton-Barber wearing cream trousers and a checked blue shirt came out of his office that faced onto the car park.

‘That’s The Divine Shirley Bassey,’ he said, shaking my hand. ‘I never thought I’d see the day with John Anthony in something like this.’

‘My God, what possessed him?’ I said, still staring in awe.

‘It’s not just the car,’ said David, scratching his grey beard. ‘He was in an awful state last night. He was so drunk he had to be carried to bed. And I think he was on more than just wine.’

‘Oh shit.’

‘I’m not sure when he’ll rise so you may as well have breakfast and relax,’ said David going back into his office.

I walked through the arch into one of the most beautiful places on earth. In an ‘L’ running from my left were low ivy covered buildings, with the main wing straight ahead. All the way along was a porch under which brilliant green sunbirds nested in constructions like a shaman’s talisman. Here, on worn tile and against white walls, were concrete benches which could recount tales of love stories and tell of wild parties. At the far end the verandah widened and beneath this was garden furniture and loungers with green cushions.

At the kink of the ‘L’ was the kitchen with bunches of dried herbs hanging densely from the ceiling. From here came the smells of cooking bacon and the sounds of dishes being arranged. Next to this was the dimly-lit dining-room furnished with cottage furniture topped with antique silver ornaments and condiment holders, the walls covered with photographs and prints of Victorian exploration. As I moved through, a bantam on a bookcase, which I mistook for a wooden sculpture, stood and fluffed its feathers in irritation at the intrusion. It did not concern itself with the two Dalmatians who ran through to greet me,

their tales wagging furiously. Beyond a curtain was the lounge, where I stopped for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the brighter light. It was airier, too. Round the fireplace were pink sofas and rockers with a table littered with books and travel magazines. In the corner was a large mirror which reflected an Irma Stern painting.

The house was welcoming and cool, but it was to the grounds high above the Letsitele Valley to which I was drawn. Once described as the most romantic garden in the world, it was styled as a ship sailing out to sea. While she did not begin the garden, this was the vision of Tana Hilton-Barber after she was flung from the bath as a twelve-year-old when a bolt of lightning hit a nearby giant blue gum; its fossilised skeleton reaching into the sky as a ghostly reminder of that storm.

The house was the bridge and the railings were stone walls within which the terraced deck with sweeping staircases was a wonderland of moss encrusted colonnades and white pergolas and grey statues and lime-coloured fever trees and spouting water features on which geese and ducks swam. As I passed two Egyptian ganders got up, with wings spread, to loudly peck at each other over the affections of a female who was swimming away. Complementing this was a carnival of colour provided by a profusion of red-hot pokers and yuletide poinsettias and pink begonias and baby's breath and mustard yellow roses and others of ocean blue and mauve pansies lining the borders. The scent was from the honeysuckle and rosemary and sage and the song from bees and birds and frogs.

The hills far below the starboard were like waves, and when lights twinkled there at night it was like crabbers out at sea. Beyond were forest covered hills over which ran the Old Coach Road and further off were Kruger's Head and the Twelve Apostles and Cypress Point of the Northern Range. The Bow was ploughing its way to the cycad forests of the Rain Queen of Modjadji, and from the port side I could just see the red roof of Stone Cottage where workmen were cutting down pines to open Bridget's view towards Tzaneen.

*****

John Anthony only emerged after eleven and I caught sight of him as he walked across the lawn towards me. As usual, he was dressed immaculately. Now he was in white vest, distressed Old Khaki jeans and white strollers. But he was pallid, with mirror sunglasses hiding aching eyes.

‘Oh God, Darling, what am I doing to myself?’ He groaned as we walked back to the verandah, where a pot of coffee was waiting for him.

‘Have you considered that the telling of your story is awakening the demons you’re purging?’ I suggested as we sat.

‘Pat! Stop it with the questions. Just stop it,’ he shouted, slapping his thighs. ‘Can’t you see I’m not well? Yet the first thing you do is throw a question at me.’

‘I thought that was the whole point of us being here,’ I said as he poured coffee for himself.

‘Well I’m sick and tired of this fucking book,’ he sniffed. ‘And your fucking questions.’

‘John Anthony, I’m also getting fucking tired of it,’ I said, my anger rising. ‘Tired of fucking touring small town South Africa to be given a snippet and my marching orders.’

‘Darling, please don’t be cross with me,’ he said, dropping his head. ‘It’s a very difficult time for me.’

‘I’m not angry, I’m frustrated,’ I said, settling back. Changing tack, I added, ‘I’ve met The Divine Shirley Bassey.’

‘Have you?’ he said cheering up. ‘Isn’t she beautiful?’

‘She’s very you,’ I teased.

‘Do you think so? Really?’

‘I do.’

‘I feel so powerful in her. Like a god.’

‘Talking about that…’

‘Pat, let’s leave the questions for today, we’ll talk tomorrow,’ he said taking a sip of coffee. ‘There are other things I want to tell you.’

‘Then can we start early in the morning,’ I said. ‘There’re a lot of things I want to cover.’

‘I promise,’ he said. But his attention was distracted by something in the lounge, and he uttered, ‘I could just die.’

‘What is it?’ I asked, following his gaze, but seeing nothing.

‘I can’t take it any more,’ he said turning back sulkily. ‘I’ve just seen myself in the mirror. I’m a wreck. Pat, am I beautiful?’

‘You’re handsome…’

‘I didn’t ask if I was handsome. I asked if I was beautiful,’ he said, his voice quavering.

‘I’m not an authority, but I’m sure people find you beautiful,’ I replied, starting to feel uncomfortable. A shimmering emerald sunbird flew passed and hovered at the entrance to its nest, and I said, ‘Look at that. Isn’t it gorgeous?’

John Anthony frowned and stood, ‘You think it’s gorgeous, but you’re not prepared to tell me I’m beautiful.’

‘You misunder…’

‘Don’t bother to explain; I don’t want to fight. I bought a case of chardonnay and I feel like a glass of wine. When I get back we can talk about something else.’

John Anthony was away for some time, and when he returned he had an open bottle of wine and two glasses. His spirits seemed revived and when he sat and poured I noticed a few specks of white dust on his upper lip.

He took a sip, then stood again, ‘Darling, your question in Graskop about whether I missed creating art has fucked me up.’

‘I didn’t mean for it to have that affect’

‘I needed you to ask,’ he said, rubbing his head hard. ‘I actually have been busy with some stuff, which I’d like you to look at. It’s in my room and I’ll get it now. But before I do I want to say that the thing that’s been holding me back is that I’m petrified of mediocre art.’

‘My wife and oldest daughter are perfectionists,’ I said. ‘I know where you’re coming from.’

‘I don’t think you do,’ he contradicted, flashing me a look.

Drinking three glasses of wine to my one, John Anthony explained that artists had to be prepared, without fear, to place their life on the line for their work. That only twee art emerged from those not prepared to risk. And that he could only access the key to wisdom with substances which pushed him to the very edge. But with Johnny Golightly he went too far and had decided to bow out gracefully before self-destructing. I refrained from pointing out that he had become a suicide risk since abandoning his persona; leaving him to expound on his decision to return to producing art irrespective of the consequences. With that he left for another long while.

When he returned it was with five canvases, which he propped against the window behind where we sat. As I stood to examine them he took the empty bottle and went to get another. The paintings were the start of a collection titled *The One Who Leaves Before*. They were about a character who lived round the corner from the fountain of youth; about beds that were empty and hearts being taken. In one there was a portrait of Johnny Golightly wearing the blue and white striped naval T-shirt of little Bobby Shafto; the rest collages of nude cut-outs from gay porn magazines. They were awash with crosses and sacrificial blood, especially in one where the penis was chopped off and replaced with a sword. In each there was a notepad on which there were thoughts about death and the taking of life and saying goodbye and love – ‘I love pistols that shoot’; ‘to lose you would cut like a knife’; ‘we never get back our youth’; ‘you have killed my love’; ‘they say that love has a bitter taste’; ‘the stains of my blood are as lovely as rose petals’; and ‘cut love with a sharp knife from my heart’.

John Anthony came back with the wine, and stood sniffing behind me before he enquired, ‘What do you think? They are about testing unconditional love, you know.’

‘They’re interesting,’ I lied, for I had seen it all before. Not only in his work, but in that of unsophisticated beginners who thought the route to success lay in crudely shocking the viewer.

‘Bullshit,’ he shouted, putting his foot through the first one before stomping the others. ‘They’re flat, the product of a boring mind. These are the work of someone who is too scared to cross the road let alone his barriers.’

John Anthony drained and refilled his glass, then told me that during the past week he was not in East London to teach, but to see a man by the name of Mostapha who had served twelve years for murder and hijacking. In prison he rose to leader of the notorious 26s gang. John Anthony’s new idea was to do a washed photographic exhibition of tattoos and body markings. Mostapha was of particular interest as he had the three crowns of his rank tattooed on his shoulders, and their meeting was facilitated by a friend of John Anthony’s who worked with parolees. John Anthony took a room in a hotel in the city and later in the afternoon Mostapha arrived; apologising for not being there earlier as his wife had given birth that morning. Within five minutes he had his shirt off and was showing John Anthony his markings; and within ten his pants were down and he was getting a blowjob from the artist. The next seven days were a blur of sex and drugs and alcohol and when John Anthony came too it was to find that he had been cleaned out; including his wallet with credit cards, laptop, camera and a ring that was a family heirloom. He was too fearful to report it to the police.

As he was telling me this, Tana, followed by her constant companion, Dr Zambuck, a mean-tempered Siamese, came round the corner. Because she was responsible for dinner, she normally rose late, and it was now nearly two. She was tall and slim and her great beauty had not deserted her even though she was in her seventies. Part of her appeal was her gentle eccentricity, the rest her style. She was wearing a silver satin dress, which reached to just above her ankles and shimmered as she walked with the help of a stick, and a bluey-purple tanzanite necklace. When John Anthony saw this piece of jewellery his hands went to his face as he squealed with delight.

He bounded towards Tana and took the necklace in his hands, ‘My darling, this is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.’

Slightly taken aback, Tana stammered an unintelligible reply.

The stutter only increased John Anthony's excitement, 'My God, Tana, I didn't know you spoke Klingon.'

Tana faltered again, which set John Anthony off on a dialogue that sounded something like, 'Lorlod ghawran cha'dich neb qi-yah dor wud bachtta.'

'I'm sorry John Anthony, what was that?' asked Tana, bemused.

'Ting bis'ub bo nantum yergho.'

'Have you been drinking again?'

'Qanwi maryap chen be'joy.'

Tana made her escape and John Anthony continued drinking. At four I said that we needed to get to Bridget, who had invited a group of friends for dinner. I had offered to help, and even though I was only expected later, I was keen for company other than John Anthony. I suggested we walk, which made him agitated.

'I want to go in The Divine Shirley Bassey,' he said, raising his voice like a child.

'You're in no state to drive.'

'But Darling, you haven't been in Shirley Bassey. And I was saving her for you.'

I was also fairly drunk, and gave in without further argument. When we got to the vehicle he first insisted on showing me everything as a car salesman would a

prospective buyer. He demonstrated how the seats shifted; how the satellite navigation worked; and how the stability control operated when in four-wheel drive. And the sound system with twelve-slot CD player, which only played Shirley Bassey songs. From it, at a volume that made the car shake, came *Hopelessly Devoted to You*. John Anthony sang along: 'I'm not the first to know there's just no getting over you.'

'What's the best way to get there?' he slurred.

'There're are two ways. We can either go back to the road, or down that path, but it's a bit rough.'

'Get in,' he said. 'Let's take the wild road.'

John Anthony put Shirley Bassey in reverse, stopping when he bumped the wall. Then, with a whoop, he gunned the motor down the slope, the car battling to find traction as he turned hard in the first corner. He could only see over the steering wheel and it would have been comic were I not so frightened, because there was a sizeable drop on his side. 'I'm your vehicle baby I'll take you anywhere you want to go,' sang Shirley Bassey and John Anthony. In a dip where a stream flowed across the track, he braked hard, bringing the car to a slithering halt under a tree, the late afternoon sun angling in through the foliage.

Looking at me he smiled, 'Darling, would you like a blowjob?'

'No,' I replied in surprise. 'All I want to do is get to Bridget's in one piece.'

'It'll change your life,' he said leaning over and placing his right hand on the handbrake. 'Do you know that I've never slept with a straight man?'

'You've told me. Now can we get to Bridget?' I said, looking at him. Though he smiled, there was a look of cold hostility in his eyes. I remembered then that

Meredith had said the only thing separating extreme eccentrics and serial killers was their particular passion.

‘Darling, think of it this way, it’ll be a major parameter for you to breach. And you’ll never get an offer like this again.’

‘Then so be it. If you don’t drive now I’m getting out and walking the rest of the way.’

With that he put Shirley Bassey in gear and drove even faster. I, in the passenger seat, held on as we bounced and skidded. I seethed. But what made me more irate was not knowing whether my pique was for the familiarity I imagined women must deal with from drunks, or because I was tempted. When we got to Stone Cottage it was to find Bridget barefoot in green shorts and black golf shirt chasing monkeys from her kitchen with a broom.

*****

The dinner was such a disaster as to be brilliant.

Bridget had a mop of unruly, shoulder length blond hair. She was fair skinned and wore no makeup, did not need to, as it drew one to her wild green eyes, which were a window to a free spirit. Raucous and untamed and funny. She was big boned with slim legs; an asymmetry which resulted in a lifetime of knee problems. When Stone Cottage had come on the market a few years back, she had grasped the opportunity, purchased it and moved from Johannesburg.

The small whitewashed house was once the hideaway for a white man married to a black woman in the days when that was a crime. It retained that aspect of isolation amidst an overgrowth of tropical vegetation. Through this were two tracks; one which led up to the main road and forked halfway up towards Kings Walden, and the other that went one hundred metres to the palm fronded pool built out of the slope. Both joined at the back of the cottage, where we parked

and walked down the two steps into the rustic kitchen that ran the length of the building. When Bridget returned from shooing off the monkeys she took one look at John Anthony and ordered him to take a nap.

While she was fixing a bed for him, I went to my room at the back of the garage to get a towel. I walked to the pool and skinny-dipped, holding my head under the cool water for as long as I could to try and clear it. I swam a few lengths then rested my elbows on the ledge of the deep end to watch the sunset which caught a wisp of cloud, turning it pink like a veil of chiffon on a blue sea. When I was sufficiently recuperated I pulled myself out, dried off and returned to change so I could help Bridget prepare dinner. She had told me the night before that she had also invited her new boyfriend, Louis Baxter; a friend, Lofty Cross, who had the hots for her and was unaware of her relationship with Louis; Albie, a fifty-year-old gay horticulturist who Bridget presumed would be an ideal date for John Anthony; and Sue Payne, an old friend of mine, who lived on top of a hill near Magoebaskloof where she made works of ethnic fashion art under the Ba-Rok label.

Back in Stone Cottage, Bridget was on the telephone and I poured a glass of red wine and walked round. Through from the kitchen was a combined lounge dinning room, which had a long trestle table covered in an African print cloth with benches on either side on which were cushions in matching fabric. A breeze blew through from here to the lounge furnished with a mishmash of pieces showing wear from the seven cats that used them as props in endless games. On the floor was a black and white nguni cow skin and on the wall above the fireplace a red neon light in the form of a heart. Suspended above was Bridget's bedroom, while a door on the far side led to another room and the bathroom. Everywhere were shelves crammed with books and CDs. I put on Vusi Masethla and returned to the kitchen. When she finished her call I helped prepare an avocado with tomato sauce soup, roast sirloin and a lemon mousse.

‘Shit, John Anthony’s a mess,’ I said, creaming egg yolks. ‘Which means my book’s been blown out the water. He’s hardly an example of someone who’s come to grips with his identity.’

‘That’s probably a good thing,’ said Bridget, leaning past me for the pepper to season the steak.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ I said, taken aback.

‘It was a poncy idea.’

‘Well thanks, what am I supposed to do now?’

‘Don’t be such a cunt,’ she said, slapping me playfully on the back of the head. ‘Now you can do the book you’ve always wanted. I’d kill for the material he’s given you.’

A car drove down the track and Bridget craned to see who it was.

‘It’s Lofty,’ she exclaimed. ‘I was hoping Louis would be here earlier in case he hit on me. I’m going to disappear for a bath. Please amuse him.’

Lofty was lanky, stick thin, and balding. He was the butcher in Haenertsburg, and moonlighted as an ambulance driver. When he carried patients to Polokwane, he took the opportunity to return with the back filled with meat, which was why it was often seen dripping blood. Albie arrived while he was telling me this. He was short, pierced through the lip and right eyebrow, and dressed in leather. We were no sooner introduced than Louis, who was a microlight pilot, and Sue followed each other down the drive. She was thinner than when I last saw her, and wearing one of her creations – a burgundy dress decorated with skull & crossbones, mirrors and an embroidery inspired by the label of a tin of pilchards. Bridget reappeared soon after wearing an equally

offbeat skirt from Sue, and a necklace of miniature *Drum* magazine covers on tin.

‘Let’s have a drink outside,’ suggested Bridget ushering everyone to the door. To me she said, ‘I’ll wake John Anthony just before I serve dinner. I’m sure he’ll be OK by then.’

I caught up with Sue, while Bridget fussed in the kitchen and the others stood off to the side and chatted. An hour later, Bridget went to try and rouse John Anthony, but returned with a shrug and ordered the rest of the party to the dining-room. After we were seated, and the soup brought through, Lofty pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and looked Bridget in the eye before reading:

> The dictionary has too few words to convey my love for you
> A is your appeal
> B is your breath on my face
> C is your cry of joy
> D is your divine dimensions…

He was at Q when John Anthony danced in, swaying to the music and flicking his head around. When he tired of this he clamped an imaginary violin between his chin and shoulder and jigged round the room. As he circled to serenade Sue, he saw her dress and froze to the spot.

‘Oh my God, where did you find that?’ he shrieked, feeling the garment between his thumb and forefinger.

‘I made it. It’s what I do.

‘Please make me one,’ he said, pushing up next to her. ‘I want a kilt with a frontispiece so that I can walk round with my cock hanging out so people can give me blowjobs on the spot.’

‘Maybe a little see-through plastic cup would be very comely,’ she teased.

But John Anthony's attention was taken by Albie, and he leaned over and said, 'I must show you The Divine Shirley Bassey. While you marvel at her beauty I can suck your dick.'

And so it went on until John Anthony found Sue's handbag and rummaged until he found her Chanel lipstick. He spread two circles heavily on his cheeks and then his lips before Sue saw what he was doing.

'Fucking give that back, that's nearly a month's profits,' she shouted angrily, lunging to grab the cosmetic. But John Anthony avoided her grasp and ate what remained, running round the room with his mouth open and showing off his red tongue.

The party broke up soon after, but when John Anthony wanted to leave Bridget informed him that she was not letting him go anywhere in his state. He went back to the room where he was earlier, but while Bridget and I cleared up we heard Shirley Bassey start to drive away. I ran out to find that John Anthony had reversed her over a low wall and onto a pyramid of felled pine trunks. When safe, I leaned in and switched her off, got John Anthony out, helped him back to bed and drove the vehicle off its perch. We had barely resumed tidying when Shirley Bassey again started and began to leave; taking the track towards the pool.

By the time I caught up he had driven into the pool wall and was passed out with his foot on the accelerator; the wheels spinning and the car bouncing round with nowhere to go. Unable to get to it then, I waited until it shuffled round to wedge between the wall and a palm tree. I jumped on the running board, switched off, got John Anthony out, helped him back to bed, and freed Shirley Bassey. I made the mistake of leaving the keys in the same place, and a half hour later he drove off along the right path.

The following morning a thick fog had rolled in from Mozambique and only the feint outline of Kings Walden, sailing like a luxury liner, could be seen above. When we phoned, it was to find that John Anthony had not returned to his room, though all his stuff was still there. I did not care and walked round the garden of Stone Cottage picking up parts and pieces of smashed taillights from Shirley Bassey. The biggest chunk I handed to Bridget: on it was a sticker which read, ‘I love Jesus’.

Holding it up, she said, ‘I think I’ll hang this on the wall as a memento of the best party I’ve ever hosted.’

Chapter 14

I sat in the Cabin Bar at the Kalk Bay railway station and ordered a Cuban rum on ice. The pub, which overhung the ocean, was being lashed by dirty waves of four to five metres during a rare summer storm. The swoosh as they hit was drowned only by the regular arrival of blue and orange trains, which disgorged passengers who ran for cover with newspapers or briefcases above their heads. Between breakers I could just make out Seal Island in a swirl of grey mist that was a slightly lighter hue than the sea.

Inside, the pub was little different from when it was built in 1930. The old wooden bar, ornamented with a brass figurehead and oars, was carved with marlin and turtles. Round it were naval barstools, and on the walls were a litter of ship's clocks, wheels, rope and casks retrieved from the numerous shipwrecks round this part of False Bay. But much had changed for me since I last sat here, for this was my final stop before I drove to meet Marilise Cook in Durbanville the night I tried to commit suicide. Then I was completing my research for a book on the best bars in the country and another on the ghosts of South Africa; particularly the haunted Clovelly Cave in the mountains behind. There it is said that the cold hand of a hermit who died their many years ago can be felt on the shoulder before the phantom emits a bone-chilling laugh.

But I was distracted then by the emptiness that beset me. Now I was walking away from a book and feeling exhilarated. But while I was prepared to abandon the book, I was not going to do the same with John Anthony as I felt some responsibility for his spiral. When I returned to Johannesburg from Kings Walden there was a letter awaiting me which my daughter said had arrived by courier. In it was an air ticket to Cape Town and a note: 'My darling Pat, so dreadfully sorry about what happened at Bridget's. I just had to, had to, had to run away because I'm not on the edge, I've fallen off. I'm going to teach in Cape Town for two months and have taken an apartment in Kalk Bay. It's above the Café Les Arts, which is part of the Clementina van der Walt Gallery. It's a wonderful restaurant and I'm convinced the chef is in love with me. I've

enclosed an air ticket for next Wednesday and have booked us a table for six-thirty. I beg you to be there, but if you're not I'll understand. Forgive me. Loads of love. Mae West.'

As much as my concern for him, I was intrigued as to how he knew about Kalk Bay because it was too obvious to be a coincidence. When I arrived there was a fierce wind blowing and clouds banking against Table Mountain. I hired a car and when I got to Kalk Bay at midday I found a double story guest house with a deep wooden verandah and lovely views over the bay. At first the owner had not answered the doorbell, but on the third ring the husky voice of a woman crackled over the intercom and told me to come back later. I replied that I did not want to leave my luggage in the car, especially as it included my camera and laptop. She cursed and told me to wait.

She appeared after ten minutes. Fortyish, extremely thin with big breasts, her lacquered hair was disturbed in parts and she smelt of wine. After unlocking the front gate to let me in, she turned to lead the way and I noticed her brown top was not tucked in at the back and that her tight leather britches had hearts with tassels sown on each bum cheek. As she gave me the key a man called from a bedroom to ask if she would be long.

I put my stuff in the upstairs room she allocated to me and left for the afternoon so that she could continue with whatever I had interrupted. The storm started soon after and I took refuge in the Cabin Bar where I had lunch, read the day's papers and drank rum, which seemed appropriate in the setting. Just before six-thirty I left the pub and headed up the street for the restaurant. The rain was softer now, but water still streamed from the thatch of the old church with askance graves in the grounds I passed. A short way on I skipped over a puddle and entered the restaurant, which was warm with the windows on the inside steamed up so that the red and silver lights of passing traffic was distorted. Inside, Canned Heat's *On the Road Again* was playing – She said Lord have mercy on my wicked son.

The small space was filled with the smells of the kitchen, which was open to the serving area. I waved at the bearded chef, who I assumed was the one John Anthony claimed to be in love with him. The cook was in an embrace with a woman with jet black hair when I entered, and after she disentangled herself she poured me a glass of wine. Other than for them, I was the only one there and I took my drink into the pottery gallery that was open to the restaurant. There, among the displays, I recognised work from Ardmore Studio in the Drakensberg. I was admiring a vase on which a green snake slithered up the side, its coils frozen to form a handle, when I saw John Anthony walking past. He was wearing a leather jacket, black jeans and combat boots. He was very drunk, barely able to walk straight, his one arm up and the other out to the side to maintain his balance.

Inside the restaurant he staggered towards the kitchen area, where he threw one arm round the chef's neck and grabbed his balls with his free hand. The cook coughed loudly, but before he was able to react John Anthony was weaving towards where I was standing at a table for two.

'Darling, you came,' he said, hugging me. 'That makes me so happy, because it means you've forgiven me.'

'John Anthony, it means nothing,' I replied, barely able to keep the anger from my voice. 'I came because I was wondering how you knew about Kalk Bay.'

'What are you talking about?' he slurred. 'I always stay here when in Cape Town. Now stop being mysterious and order us some wine.'

'Do you not think you've had enough?'

'Oh darling, do get over yourself,' he admonished as a bottle was brought to the table by the chef's girlfriend. As she uncorked it John Anthony asked, 'How's my book coming on?'

‘I’m not sure I want to continue,’ I said, looking out the window. ‘You’ve not cooperated at all.’

‘Darling, how can you say that after all the time I’ve made available to you,’ he said, reading the menu upside down. When the woman returned he said, ‘I’ll have the salmon linguini and he’ll have the chops.’

‘Don’t I have a say?’ I asked, somewhat petulantly.

‘They make the most heavenly chops, and I want one,’ he replied. ‘Now getting back to the book. Pat, you can’t walk away now. This is very important to me. You know why, because it’s to be the full stop of my life. I want to choose where it ends, and this is it.’

‘You’ll not like what I write.’

‘What’s there not to like about me?’ he said, pulling a sad face. ‘Everybody loves me.’

By the time our food arrived the restaurant was starting to fill. And I was becoming very embarrassed. John Anthony, unable to manage cutlery, used his fingers to eat; getting food smeared round his mouth, which he wiped on the tablecloth. As our argument heated, he took a chop from my plate, bit a piece off, and threw the rest at me. It missed, hitting the window, its sauce coursing brownly down the misted pane. He followed this by flinging the bottle of wine at my head, which also missed, smashing against the wall. We were asked to leave, and with his arm round my neck for support I half dragged him down the road to the bar of the Cape to Cuba Restaurant. There he insisted I buy him a bottle of champagne as a gift, which I refused. He then moved down the bar to speak to an enormous woman, who he convinced to come with him to where I sat.

‘Pat this is Serena,’ he said, holding on to the back of a barstool. ‘She’s a whore. It’s my present to you.’

*****

My cellphone rang as I was driving home from the airport. It was Jennifer.

‘Pat, how are you?’

‘Not so good, had another appalling experience with John Anthony last night.’

‘Yeah, I hear he’s completely off the rails. Sorry it’s such short notice, but it’s my birthday on Saturday and a friend is organising a lunch and a bit of a party just outside Nelspruit. I’d love you to come.’

‘You know, I was going to call you. When I left John Anthony last night I vowed I was never going to see him again, but he needs help. Maybe if I come down we can chat about it.’

‘You’re probably right. I’ll email the directions to you.’

*****

I only suspected a setup when I turned onto a dirt track marked Jacob’s Ladder about five kilometres outside Nelspruit. It snaked up to a dazzling white double storey Middle Eastern style house perched on top of a hill. But the road was barred at the base by an oil drum; to which was affixed a yellow arrow pointing left. On it was written: Disciple Parking. There, under a broad-canopied acacia, was space designated by painted rocks. Hanging from thorns on the tree was a banner which proclaimed: Olivet ’07 – A Show in which the Messiah takes Nelspruit.

There were no other cars there, and I took the spot that promised the most shade on a day when the fierce sun flattened the landscape and drooped the foliage on even the hardiest vegetation. A fat lizard with green body and blue head scurried up the tree as I alighted and followed the suggested *Pilgrimage Route: The Map of Life* along a maze bounded on either side by walls of ochre, rust and honey coloured rocks.

At the beginning, through a semicircular archway framed by trees, was *birth* decorated by papier-mâché sculptures. There were camels following yonder star and a baby in a crib under the Faraway Tree. In an alcove was a puppet stage on which sat Punch and Judy. Then there was *coming of age* in the Garden of Gethsemane, which included statues of a child in a judo uniform playing on his own, two boys in a bed and a miniature stage with a poster for Broadway '85. In the middle of this clearing was a gnarled kiaat with a plaque at its base imploring: 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?'

There appeared no way out of here until I found the secluded exit on the far side. This led to *adulthood* featuring Marilyn Monroe and Shirley Bassey and Johnny Golightly and Little Bobby Shaftoe. Through a recreation of the window of the hotel in Volksrust was *God's Office* – a terraced, half-moon auditorium with an elaborately carved alter from which *God's Spire*, a silver painted wooden steeple draped with tinsel soared through the trees towards heaven. Further on were a healing room for the aged and a hospice for those with HIV/AIDS. Finally, at the narrow block house, was Golgotha, the place of skulls, *death*.

From here I looked over an arc of dusty purple koppies, which opened east to a flat plain broken only by rocky outcrops floating like pearls on the shimmering heat. Off from the house was a pool with a table set for twelve on the far edge. Behind it, resting against a concrete statue of David, was a crucifix. It was similar to the one in *Breakfast at Holly Forest*, except this one was clad with images like those on the paintings John Anthony destroyed at Kings Walden. At each end of the wings were meat hooks for the arms. Off to the right of the main

table, under a green garden umbrella, was a lounger with a candy-striped cushion and a round plastic table on which was a bottle of J&B, a crystal glass, matching jug and ice bucket.

It appeared no one was there.

I walked to the lounger and poured myself a scotch. On the chair was a note: ‘Audience – The final scene in which the viewer is the only one who knows how this ends’. Taking a sip, I went to the main table. In the centre was a bowl filled with bread and before each place was a white side plate on which was a vial containing a red liquid. Except for the two main chairs, the others all had name cards. Among these were Fairy Queen Tea Henna, Dark Wolf, Visi Goth and Ike & Tino.

As I turned towards the house, Psalm 23 was recited from a speaker on the wall:

> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they will comfort me
> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

Inside was a single room with a staircase to the left, which was barred by a padlocked gate. The floor was covered with Persian carpets and on the walls were three massive paintings of a priest, monk and mullah in chains. When I stepped back outside I caught sight of a car as it turned off the road and parked at the bottom of the track. It was followed by three others. From these emerged eleven people, including Jennifer and Ilse. All were carrying baskets filled with rose petals, which they scattered on the track after moving the drum aside. As they ascended they chanted, ‘Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!’

When they got to the top, The Divine Shirley Bassey came into view; ushered up by the strains of the *Hosanna*:

> From Olivet they followed,

Midst an exultant crowd,
Waving the victor palm branch,
And shouting clear and loud.
Bright angels joined the chorus,
Beyond the cloudless sky:
Hosanna in the highest,
Glory to God on high!

Playing my part, I took my seat as a white robed John Anthony got out of The Divine Shirley Bassey and led the group to the main table. On his head was a crown of daffodils; his cheeks rouged and eyes heavily shaded with a blue as deep as that of a starling. Among those that followed him were a pair of men in tight PVC clothing who were extensively pierced and joined at the cheek by a large safety pin. I assumed they were Ike & Tino. No one acknowledged me as they took their places; with John Anthony and Jennifer sitting at the unmarked ones. When all were seated, John Anthony held up the bowl of bread and passed a piece to each. As they ate, he said, 'This is my body.' They washed this down with the contents of the vials, which were unscrewed as John Anthony said, 'Drink this, for it is my blood.'

When they finished, John Anthony stood and said, 'Truly I tell you, one person here will betray me.'

'Who is the traitor in our midst?' shouted Jennifer, throwing her arms in the air. As she did this, the others took up the call.

'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread,' he replied, reaching into the bowl. Walking to me, he handed me the bread, kissed me on both cheeks and said in my ear, 'They hate you, but you must know that I love you. For just as Helen Martins created through others, and Jesus needed Judas to fulfil his destiny; so you are necessary to finish this. You are to leave at the end of the next scene to do what you must. As you go I ask only this of you: What is truth. Answer that and you'll be forever free of parameters.'

John Anthony removed his robe, revealing only tight gold shorts beneath, as he walked to the crucifix, which he carried to the edge of the hill. When he got there, Shirley Bassey's *Wind Beneath my Wings* began to play as Maureen and Willie emerged from the house. Both were bare foot, he wearing the uniform of the NSB and she a blue mantle. They took each side of the cross as John Anthony went to the front and rested his arms in the hooks.

I took this as my cue to leave and I began to laugh as I descended the hill, was still doing so an hour later while driving when Jennifer phoned and said, 'John Anthony's gone. Just gone.'

Johnny Golightly Comes Home

Reflexive Essay

1. INTRODUCTION

Johnny Golightly Comes Home is the story of the writing of two books. The first was *Eccentric South Africa*; published six years ago in 2001. The other was this work, which tells of my relationship with a Nelspruit artist who completely changed my conceptions for both. While I have authored many others, these were central to my being as they dealt with my obsession with extraordinary people and the epiphanies that drive them. This is not a detached interest.

But before I reflect on *Johnny Golightly Comes Home*, I need to explain the structure of this essay. In contemplating how to present it, I considered a number of formats. I reduced this to two possibilities: a discussion of the themes in order from the most important, and ending with a section on the writing process; or a review of notions as they appear in the book, also concluding with a section on the writing process. I decided on the latter as it enabled me to deal with these matters within the overview of the work.

And a caveat. This essay discusses a number of issues such as epiphany, eccentricity, outsiders and suicide. However, this is not a broad deliberation and is confined to a very small group of people who are the main characters of the novel to which this reflexive work refers. Thus, epiphany in this instance is a revelation accompanying trauma, and not visions in general. And the eccentrics here are those who follow a set pattern to embarking on a divine purpose. Moreover, each of these topics is deserving of intense study on their own, which is not the scope of this essay.

2. EPIPHANY

When I was 12-years-old I took refuge in the dark cellar beneath our farmhouse while my father was involved in a shootout with police. In the midst of the claustrophobic terror I recall an illumination pointing the way ahead. It was an eternal instant of such exceptional power that I would suppress it for many years. In essence I experienced a revelation of my own potential, which filled me with greater consternation than that which was taking place outside because it created confusion as to whether it was a fleeting window opening to my soul or a visitation from God. Helen Martins, creator of the Owl House, wrote this of such a moment:

> Light ahead! the star was coming their way and it was growing round like the sun, growing bigger every minute; so bright that it was a white blaze, the white centre of eternity, with time streaming from its spears. That was God, His face was going to show in that white light.

The epiphany of which I speak is thus not the same as the sudden sensation found in most literature, which is sparked by 'the shock of trifles'. For example, in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (Beja, 1971 pg 17), Marlow is in conversation with a French Officer:

> I kept him company; and suddenly, but not abruptly…he pronounced, '*Mon Dieu*! how the time passes!' Nothing could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision…there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much – everything – in a flash – before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence.

Rather, I mean something more mystical; what James Joyce calls 'a spiritual manifestation' and the Greeks 'the appearance of divinity'. Further, my particular interest has been where this flash of enlightenment intersects with deep physical or psychological trauma. In these cases there is hardly ever a falling back into 'agreeable somnolence'. This is because the intensity of the

moment combined with the despairing circumstance nearly always leads the person to believe that God has personally intervened in their darkest moment. Thus, in this instance, when Morris Beja (1971, pp 24 – 27) in his compelling study refers to 'epiphany', 'moments of illumination', 'conversion experiences', 'divine revelation', 'mystical experience' and 'Satori', he is alluding to the same thing.

> The epiphany is one type of moment of illumination, and the main tradition of such moments begins on the road to Damascus with Paul; for, in the West, the moment of vision is a Christian phenomenon, with only a few real antecedents in classical or Hebraic literature. The prophets, for example, had visions of God and visitations from Heaven, but not the same sort of sudden enlightenment that has since been called the conversion experience, or the sense of union with God that we call 'mystical'…Until relatively recent times, in both East and West, the moment of revelation was invariably considered to be of divine origin. The very word 'revelation' presupposes a revealing force bestowing the new vision upon recipients – though not necessarily passive recipients.
>
> The outstanding example of such a divine revelation is the one arising from the mystical experience. Even when understood in its strict sense, it seems at first to have much in common with epiphany: both are sudden and intense moments of exhilaration or pain, and both involve a new sense of awareness. Of the eight characteristics of Satori, or Enlightenment, discussed by DT Suzuki (pages 103-8), four also describe epiphany: the experience is irrational; it involves 'intuitive' insight; it is authoritative (it cannot be refuted by 'logical argument'); and it is 'a momentary experience'. The other characteristics are not necessarily involved in epiphany, though they may be: Enlightenment is affirmative; it provides a sense of 'the Beyond, the Absolute, or God'; it has an 'impersonal tone'; and it produces a 'feeling of exaltation'…

Whatever it is called, the epiphany has a life-changing effect on people when it accompanies trauma. This is because the vision, which most believe is God-given, offers them the light of salvation through a messianic mission. It is in the

single-minded pursuit of this quest that defines the people I have chronicled as eccentric. Again, I must emphasise that this does not encompass everyone that society may label as eccentric, but only those that conform to a specific pattern. However, before reflecting on this group of eccentrics I must briefly return to my childhood.

Shortly after the shootout with police I was placed in a facility for troubled boys attached to the high school in Newcastle. Here I was subject to a regimen that included extreme militaristic discipline, hard labour for the smallest infraction and physical abuse. At first I entered a spiral of depression in which I had a number of flashbacks to the epiphany in the cellar, but as I became increasingly subservient so these occurred less frequently. However, I continually tried to make sense of that instant; eventually concluding that as there was no God, so it must have been the stirring of something within. Madness, perhaps. At some point (it could have been the cellar, though I do not recall) the idea of chronicling my experiences began to emerge.

After matriculating I studied history and political science at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg); followed by an LLB and articles to the leading law firm in the city. During this time I took residence with a rather eccentric English woman, Sophie Farquhar, who owned a number of semi-detached houses in Burger Street. She was an inveterate traveller and over long, gin-sodden dinners recounted tales of the extraordinary characters she had met. Amongst these were Helen Martins and Nukain Mabusa, who painted the mountain at Revolver Creek near Barberton. The more she told, the greater my dissatisfaction at the direction my life was taking. And she fuelled this by continually urging me to follow my dreams while giving me books such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. But more than this, was the growing realisation that there were others out there who had experienced epiphanies and were driven by them. I would not only chronicle my experiences, but theirs as well.

Much to Farquhar's displeasure, I decided to complete my law studies before commencing my quest. However, fate intervened shortly before my final exams

in the form of a serious viral infection in which I was plagued by vivid nightmares followed by compelling dreams. When the fever broke I climbed on my motorcycle and left my old life behind, doing a 20 000 kilometre sweep of South Africa in which I visited most of the people and places my ex-landlady had spoken of. I was reborn, but it was not as simple as that. I had no skill to tell the stories I had set out to do. It was obvious that whatever talents one possessed, they were useless without the craft to express them. I thus spent the next dozen years teaching myself to write and take photographs, which is as essential for the type of writing I wanted to do. In that time I taught in Soweto for two years and held down (if that is the right term) 11 jobs and opened three small businesses. Any excess money I earned was spent on travelling, meeting people, keeping contact with those who interested me and developing a base of stories (and photographs) for when I would be ready. Among these was in interest in the June 1976 Soweto Uprising and the Siege of Mafeking, which came about purely by accident. I was passing through the town during the mid-1980s and decided to pop into the museum to see if there was any reference to my paternal grandmother who spoke incessantly of 'The Siege'. I found no family mention (she was in the Siege of Kimberley), but did come across a snippet about the stationmaster who was linked to the Irish Invincibles, a bloody forerunner to the Irish Republican Army, and the 1882 assassination of the British Chief Secretary to Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish.

In the early 1990s, at about the time I considered myself ready to embark on a full-time writing career, I met the Johannesburg based artist Sybille Nagel. We became friends and when she heard about my interest in extraordinary people driven by unusual dreams, she suggested I acquaint myself with the artists of Venda – especially Jackson Hlungwani, Noria Mabasa, Albert Munyai and John Baloyi. This was a turning point in that they described to me the process in which an artist is called in Venda society, though not all of them were Venda people. It is similar to how traditional healers are called, which involves a trauma accompanied by an epiphany; a period of denial throughout which pressure builds to the point where the person becomes desperately ill; at which stage they have another vision in which the ancestors call them to fulfil their

mission as a conduit between the living and spirit worlds. They are certain that if they do not act upon it they will die; making it their messianic purpose. With this I was able to establish a pattern for a specific type of extreme eccentricity, to which I added single-minded obsession, exceptionally high intelligence and absolute self-indulgence. But while I was able to develop a model, the core answer evaded me – and still does. Why did some people who suffered in the same way emerge unscathed, or respond differently? Though I do not know, and psychologists have been unable to shed much light, I think the keys to this lie in a natural inclination to creativity and spirituality. As Beja (1971, page 65) wrote:

> I have spoken a good deal of the growing disillusion with orthodox religions. But in some men this disillusion was not kind enough to bring with it indifference as well, and a number of artists, especially, continued to feel a need for spiritual emotions or experiences that would produce some sense of revelation and perhaps even of salvation.

The person I regard as this type of eccentric is not the merely quirky or offbeat who pushes the boundaries that society set, but the complete nonconformist. They are often referred to, and treated, as a distinct category of *outsiders*. Even the art community indulges in this, labelling those who do not fit categorisations as *outsider artists*. In South Africa, Helen Martins, Nukain Mabusa and Outa Lappies Schoeman are the most famous of these; with some, such as Susan Imrie Ross in *This Is My World: The Life of Helen Martins*, even arguing that Jackson Hlungwani and Noria Mabasa belong with this group. There is even a tendency to question their sanity. In these cases I defer to William Faulkner's (1987) *As I Lay Dying*:

> Sometimes I ain't so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain't. Sometimes I think it ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It's like it ain't so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it.

When I returned to Johannesburg from interviewing the artists of Venda I began writing travel stories in which these characters featured. They were an instant success and I was soon able to sustain my self as a freelance writer. From the outset my motivations and ethics were questioned; as if I was taking advantage of 'special people'. My response has always been the same: I identify with them and as such I am one of the few people they trust. Then I quote Faulkner. And end with JS Mill:

> The amount of eccentricity in society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage it contained…

More than this, I admire them. They give us the opportunity to contemplate the inner powers we all possess. Certain Gnostic groups believed that Judas did not betray Jesus Christ, but was doing his bidding in revealing his whereabouts to the authorities. If he had not done so then destiny would not have been fulfilled. Judas was chosen for this because he was the only one with the ability to grasp Christ's true mystery. Bart D Ehrman (Krosney, 2006 page XV1) wrote:

> The Gnostics believed that the way to salvation was not through belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but through the secret knowledge (*gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge) that Jesus delivered, not to the crowds but to his inner circle. This secret knowledge revealed how people can escape the prisons of their material bodies to return to the spiritual realm whence they came.

This 'spiritual realm' is within all of us, and it is my contention that this group of eccentrics are so because they have had a momentary glimpse of this inner divine state. As such they have the potential to enlighten us – as have two of history's great eccentrics; Rembrandt and Vincent van Gogh. Both, in their time, were outsiders.

I shall touch on van Gogh later. Rembrandt was at the height of his fame when in quick succession his wife died and he was ostracised for the mocking tone of his masterpiece, the *Night Watch*. Pierre Cabanne (1963, pp 11 – 13) explained:

> [He] had outlawed himself from a society that only saw painting as a means of flattery…Rumour went round that the death of Saskia had

> caused him to lose his reason, that his genius had disappeared in the wildness of his sorrow and that he had no more to say. The *Night Watch* represented the breach between Rembrandt and his public.
>
> All day long he strode through the countryside wrapped in his cape, and, in the minds of those who met him, there was no doubt but that the painter was mad…When evening came he would read the Scriptures alone in his studio, and his canvases were now inspired by the most moving pages of the Holy Book…He meditated and dreamed; the dialogue begun at the feet of the crucified Christ became more serious and more profound…At first Rembrandt defied God and cursed His immutable decisions, demanding that the Christ on the cross should explain himself…
>
> He who seeks to question the Eternal does not know that it is within him with its boundless love, its charity and its tolerance. In the same way, Rembrandt himself, scorned and fallen, did not realise that Holland's greatest painter and, perhaps, who knows, the greatest in the history of mankind, was being born in the awful loneliness, in the anguish and doubt and passion whose grim spectre lived within him. Love, happiness, riches and fame were lost to him, but the master of Amsterdam had found himself. At the time when his enemies believed that all was finished, Rembrandt entered into the complete possession of his soul.

Shortly before the 1999 centenary of the Boer War, I submitted a proposal for a book on the Siege of Mafeking. I received a number of offers, finally deciding to go with Zebra Press, an imprint of Struik Publishing. I followed this with a 25th anniversary account of the Soweto Uprising. While celebrating this book with my publishers, I was persuaded to do a work on the characters I had encountered. It was to be titled *Extraordinary South Africa*. I intended the book to go further than an exploration of the relationship between trauma and an extreme form of eccentricity. The extraordinary people I was going to profile had converted suffering into callings which showed that nothing beyond the mediocre could be found in an ordinary, one-dimensional, risk-free life. No new

ideas, no doors were ever opened there. It was only through the passionate venturing into uncharted waters, into the untamed Edens of the mind, that life could take form, and we could prosper and move forward. Until here I was on safe ground, but I also wanted to suggest that the portal through which these people accessed unimaginable potential was epiphany. It was in this timeless moment of enlightenment that they experienced something so powerful that most believed it to be the word of an external God, but I was convinced they had woken the true God. The one that resides within.

At first I procrastinated because I believed the book would, in a sense, bring the curtain down on what was my life's purpose. I feared I would be assailed by emptiness on its completion. I was also nervous that my ideas on this form of eccentricity would not hold up to scrutiny; especially as I had not solved the puzzle mentioned above. And I was concerned as to what drove most of these eccentrics at some point to contemplate or commit suicide. Despite these misgivings, in early 2001 I set off on a road trip that would take me to all the surviving people I had interviewed over the years. At that stage I did not have the time to add any new eccentrics to my itinerary, then my friend Bridget Hilton-Barber called to say I should include a Nelspruit artist. He changed everything.

3. JOHNNY GOLIGHTLY

As will later become apparent, many of the details in this brief biography of Nelspruit artist John Anthony Boerma were invented or reshaped by him. A clue to this was in a heavily underlined passage in his copy of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (2000, pp 52 – 53):

> Holly wanted to know about my childhood. She talked of her own, too; but it was elusive, nameless, placeless, an impressionistic recital, though the impression received was contrary to what one expected, for she gave an almost voluptuous account of swimming and summer, Christmas trees, pretty cousins, and parties: in short, happy in a way that she was not, and never, certainly, the background of a child who had run away.

At the time I had niggling doubts about certain aspects of his story, but nothing substantial, as what he told me was borne out by profiles done on him in the press during a brief phase of celebrity he enjoyed in the mid-1990s. There were two reasons why I did not probe any deeper. Firstly, I was on an extremely short deadline, and time did not permit my spending more than three days interviewing him. And secondly, and most importantly, his story provided me with a convenient escape route from the form of the book I was contracted to write.

Boerma was born in Nelspruit on 25 January 1969 into a mildly dysfunctional family. The third child, but first boy, his mother, Maureen, was delighted as it was the son she had foreseen in a vision. With his arrival she was able to push his grey, Dutch immigrant father Willie further into the background. Into the converted garage of their Jones Street house where he carpented grandfather clocks and jewellery when not at work.

From his father John Anthony inherited the ability to squirm from difficult situations; and from his mother a world-view in which anything was attainable. But John Anthony was not what Maureen had anticipated. She envisaged a rugged outdoorsman. Instead he liked dressing in his older sisters' clothes,

wearing outrageous hats, playing with dolls, dancing to his mother's Shirley Bassey records and visiting imaginary places through Enid Blyton's tales of a Faraway Tree.

Though the part of Jones Street in Nelspruit where he lived was distinctly lower-middleclass, this was his Land of Topsy-Turvy. It was his theatre where he choreographed his imagination and created spaces and ambience: especially his bedroom, where he was given free rein. This he treated as a stage and painted and repainted and hung it with posters. His references were the sounds of Hollywood musicals blaring from the turntable and the sights of the amusement park he visited while holidaying in Durban.

Maureen, however, accepted this order of things as she believed that what was ordained would be…So much so that she encouraged his art and spurred on his camp, dancehall allure. There was the perfection of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, the beauty of Michelangelo's David, the imagery of Botticelli's The Birth of Venus, and the exuberance of Annie and Showboat and A Chorus Line and the Can-Can. And she helped him construct school projects so elaborate they are still on display, and pushing him to play the piano. The last of which was his least favourite creative pursuit as he was continually compared to his sister Felicity, who was better.

Whatever, these creative pursuits marked him as different in a macho world. Not any macho world, but a barely tamed landscape in the mould of the Wild West and Outback. It was an alienation the increasingly defiant boy did little to counter as this was a time of youth preparedness and cadets, and he was going to have none of it. He refused to handle the rifle he was given at the shooting range and put his foot down over drill on Friday afternoons. His only concession was to join the marching band. And with teenagehood came the final dawning he was homosexual. John Money, in the paper *Hermaphroditism, Gender and Precocity in Hyperadrenocorticism: Psychological Findings (1955),* defines gender role as the term 'used to signify all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or

woman, respectively. It includes, but is not restricted to, sexuality in the sense of eroticism.' What Boerma disclosed of himself was that he was gay in an uncompromisingly straight environment; creative in a sports obsessed region; and camp in a macho world. It was the opposite of everything the group he was born into held dear.

This inability to conform to rigidly held manly norms led to Boerma being sidelined, making him an easy target for bullying. And he was plagued by inner turmoil. In his diary he wrote:

> I hate gays!! They make me feel uneasy. Why do they have to show their abnormalities – their sickness. Why, why, why do I have feelings for men – not gays – men. MEN – WHY? Is it a stage? Or is it a life choice?

At the same time he came under the influence of the family maid, Minah Ndlovu, who lived in Kwa Nyamazane township, which was wracked by upheavals. She told him of her son's underground activities for the African National Congress Youth League. And John Anthony used his oppression to identify with the Lowveld's black population who were in a bitter struggle with the same tormentor. This added traitor to all the derogatory labels pinned to him.

The University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), where Boerma was accepted to study fine art, promised a new beginning. He could dress as he wanted, go to nightclubs, be gay, get involved in politics, immerse himself in art. Here, Penny Siopis showed him how to paint and Karel Nel taught him to use texture and draw, see and conceptualise. He joined the left-wing National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), but resigned soon after because they made him feel uncomfortable wearing velvet. He was as uneasy as he felt in the tight knit gay sphere, which he regarded as essentially racist. He reserved a special contempt for their exclusive clubs. It was apparent that he was not prepared to play second fiddle in either worlds of student or gay politics. Nor fit in with established structures, which he saw as little different from other forms of institution. So he set about establishing a radical group who were as much for political liberation

as fermenting a glamour revolution. They especially despised people who did not shave.

His group partied by night at Jamesons and Studio 54, and with mascara running and feather boas rustling joined protest marches by day. He was arrested and spent two days in prison for attending an illegal rally addressed by Winnie Mandela, and at the beginning of his second year was elected a representative to the Fine Art Student Union. But it was not enough for passing grades, and by the end of his second year there was little chance of progression. Then someone mentioned that he was being followed, that questions were being asked. In panic, he fled into exile in Holland on a passport arranged for him by his father.

When Boerma got to Holland just before Christmas 1988 he realised that he knew virtually nothing of his father. Suddenly he had a step-grandmother, two uncles, an aunt and a bunch of cousins. To find out more, to imagine what it was like to be him, he retraced the steps of his father, falling in love with his birthplace, Groningen, a university town much like Oxford. There he enrolled at the Academy Minerva to continue my studies; receiving credit for his first year at WITS.

At university he became absorbed by the work of Vincent van Gogh, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol. He was convinced Warhol was God because of his ability to elevate mundane objects to works of art, and his ability to blur the lines between art and life. Also how surrogates could be used to create art in which title remained with the visionary. This was particularly important for Boerma as he had intense images in his head, but technically was not that proficient. The penny dropped when he saw how Warhol used assistants in his Factory. When I questioned him on his lack of technical ability, he replied:

> But how do you define craft? Is it the ability to personally transmit an image, or to get it out there by whatever means? The choreographer or director seldom perform in their own creations. Why should it be different for fine art? My view is that it's not only acceptable, but

incumbent on the artist to use whatever means or medium at their disposal.

And Warhol's infatuation with the writing of Truman Capote had Boerma seeking out the author's books. While completing his honours, John Anthony put down Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Suddenly his checkerboard life fell into place – Holly Golightly, the central character, was him. He wrote:

> She was really a hillbilly named Lulumae Barnes who, like Norma Jean, realised she could not be a star with a name like that. By changing it she also changed her identity: giving form to her every aspiration, expression to every feeling and reality to every dream. It was a release that allowed her to yield to every temptation and touch things forbidden. But underlying that façade was a feeling of tragedy. For me it was the point where art and life intercepted and I began to change my name.
>
> The 'John' in my name remained. This was after all the madman of Patmos, the envisager of the four beasts of the Apocalypse, the man who permits a figuration of the plague as the Apocalypse, the man who is up for grabs by mystics of all political shades, and the writer of the fourth gospel. John 3-16: 'For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son. So whoever believeth in him, should not die but have eternal life.'
>
> John, who is also every hooker's trick, the fishes in the sex workers as fishers of men. John, bread and butter, loaves and fishes, cold hard cash when you're lucky to assorted people in beds, on street corners, on piers, in bars, everywhere. John is also the john, the place of excrement, the home of glory holes, the name delightfully dirty with titillation and taboo, the jail, the cage, the closet of suburban malls, cottages, tearooms, also just a place where everyone goes, a fundamental place of biology.
>
> I got rid of Boerma, literally 'farmer's mother'. This was the name on my passport, the name that the system called me. But I did not want my Afrikaansness so publicly displayed. I did not want to be a farmer's mother, let alone a farmer's son, when I left home to go to

> Johannesburg to become an artist, to become gay, to try and give birth to myself. But I couldn't do it under that name, whereas Johnny Golightly had endless potential.
>
> Johnny was the infantilised form of John, the cuter baby version, the boy next door, the boy in the next cubicle. Johnny Rotten, Johnny Golightly, John Anthony…John Anthony Boerma, John Doe.

The ecstatic experience of changing his name to the fun-loving, wistful and outrageously camp Johnny Golightly filled John Anthony with an enormous energy that he frenetically expended on a film inspired by the event. Titled *Breakfast with Holly Forest*, it contained the themes that would be a constant for Johnny Golightly – the Last Supper, crucifixion and the hustler's bedroom. It won him a bursary to do his masters at Cooper Union School of Art in New York. Like Holly, he was on his way to the Big Apple. There he found a sponsor who helped him acquire an apartment in Manhattan, paid for a new wardrobe and funded his first solo exhibition.

It was time to seriously define Johnny Golightly. He loved to be loved, which he was when sober because he was terrified of abandonment. But he was expected to be drunk or high, to be on the cutting edge. It was a dangerous, vulnerable place beyond the boundaries of unconditional love – a theatre piece in which Christ and the cross became a major presence, with Golightly a parallel form of Jesus. But where Christ came to take away sin, Golightly came to remove parameters: because in a perfect world those are the two things that are absent. This was the thought at the core of his exhibition at 53 Crosby Street in Soho. Titled *Young, Restless and Socially Aware*, it received rave reviews in the *Village Voice*, *New York Native* and the *Daily Express*.

Then, just before he completed his degree, he broke all his rules and fell in love with a sallow French art critic. Soon, his emotions were again in turmoil. Johnny had no heart, and the Frenchman was in love with Golightly; not with John Anthony, who was in love with the Frenchman. Johnny Golightly's luck had run out as he was confronted with the dangers inherent in taking on a different

identity. He fled for South Beach in Miami, where, at Hannah and her Scissors hair salon, he put on an exhibition of two-hundred postcards of martini glasses for the benefit of a local AIDS organisation. While he was sitting having his hair dyed different colours, South African art co-ordinator Sue Glanville walked in and asked if he would be interested in returning to South Africa do a series of thirty glamour portraits.

Johnny Golightly jetted into Johannesburg on New Year's Day in 1995 with only the clothes he was wearing and his copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. On arrival, he instantly suffered another identity crisis – was he a glamour queen, an artist or a returning exile? But he was not ready to make a decision straight away, telling one reporter:

> Holly Golightly just brought everything to life and I thought if she can, I can. Since then I've lived both egos but I want to try and combine the two…I want to try and get them on a balance. That is someone fabulous, like Grace Kelly or Jackie Kennedy.

It was Johnny Golightly who shone through in his glamour paintings, but he remained desperately confused and on completion headed for Nelspruit, placed himself on a diet of Prozac and built *Hollywood* – a little reed-and-mud hut outside the town. It was the exile who joined the provincial government as an art coordinator. It was John Anthony who went on holiday to Ethiopia at the end of the year. It was Johnny Golightly who took a detour to Djibouti to entertain the troops, ending up under house arrest for three months because he entered illegally with a madam who got him in by inserting his passport in her vagina. And it was John Anthony who returned to find out that his parents had divorced after Maureen moved in with her Lesbian lover. It was the exile who proposed the Nice People/Nice Places roadshow, which taught rural communities and schools in Mpumalanga the possibilities of tourism for local development.

The circle was completed when he got to Volksrust. On the last night of his stay in the town, he moved from the guest lodge he was staying in to the Transvaal Hotel on the main street. This was part of an elaborate plan to confront his greatest fear, the white platteland Afrikaner male in his bastion – the town bar.

He wanted to see for himself how real the changes were in the new South Africa. One thing led to another, which climaxed later in him being attacked in his room by gay bashers. To save himself he jumped out the window and fell two stories, crushing both his ankles and breaking four ribs. As he lay in the snow he had an extraordinary vision. In it an Andy Warhol God appeared to him and instructed him to give up his ways. It was all very well having fun and doing things just for himself, but he wouldn't achieve anything meaningful by living like that. It changed his life in seconds as he suddenly realised he had to focus on what he was doing for God. And soon after he reverted to John Anthony Boerma and founded Art Aid, which teaches craft to disadvantaged communities.

In a sense I was relieved by the escape route Boerma provided me. On my return to Johannesburg I contacted my publishers and suggested that *Extraordinary South Africa* become *Eccentric South Africa*, a light celebration of things wacky rather than the serious study I contemplated. They informed me that this was what they had always had in mind. But my interview with Boerma had changed more than the direction of a book. As his story unfolded it became increasingly obvious that his progression was the virtual opposite to what I had come to think. For his overwhelming purpose, which he pursued from early childhood with a singular passion, was a desire for recognition. Not mere acceptance, but messianic benediction in which he expediently used all the tools of identity at his disposal – talent, politics, sexuality and religion. It was a singular ambition not brought on by trauma and epiphany, but ended in that manner after he broke both ankles when he leapt from a window of the Transvaal Hotel.

This caused me to virtually stop analysing eccentricity brought on by trauma, which brought with it the very emptiness I so feared. I had lost my purpose. I tried to fill the gap with drugs, alcohol and workaholism; working on up to four books at a time between regular writing assignments. But Boerma did get me thinking more about an issue pertinent to the group of eccentrics I was interested in – identity. Roger L Shin (1964, page 2), in an essay titled *The American Search for Self-Understanding: The Question of Identity*, wrote:

> Everyone, we are often told, asks one of the most basic of all human questions: Who am I? Closely related to it is another question: Who are we? The first question leads to the recognition, so penetratingly voiced by the existentialists, that every person is an individual, different from all others, unique in all human history. The second question leads to the awareness, so powerful among ancient Stoics and modern humanitarians, that every person is a sample of the whole human race.
>
> In between this individuality and this universality, the person is a member of several human groups. These may be intimate groups, like the family. They may be larger vocational or organisational groups. They may be very large religious, national, and ethnic groups. All these groups have some character, some self-consciousness.

These groups develop rules by which their members are expected to abide, with sanctions of ranging severity for non-compliance. But extreme eccentrics, by their very nature and self-centredness, position themselves very close to or beyond the parameters of society, while society responds by branding them *outsiders*. Howard S Becker (1963, pp 1 – 2) noted:

> All social groups make rules and attempt, at some times and under some circumstances, to enforce them. Social rules define situations and the kinds of behaviour appropriate to them, specifying some actions as 'right' and forbidding others as 'wrong'. When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an *outsider*.
>
> But the person who is thus labelled an outsider may have a different view of the matter. He may not accept the rule by which he is being judged and may not regard those who judge him as either competent or legitimately entitled to do so. Hence, a second meaning of the term emerges: the rule-breaker may feel his judges are *outsiders*.

It was round this conflict between individuality and the pressures from society for conformity that I wrote a book for young adults titled *The Gift*. It explored

the contested terrain in a traditional Venda community where a talented young girl (Noria Mabasa) starts to carve wood, a male preserve. It also looked at other absurdities such as the social acceptance of alcohol, but not of dagga. This work was shortlisted for the Sanlam Awards, but my publishers rejected it on the basis that it was too obscure. I was told this during dinner at a restaurant in the Durbanville Hills; after which I headed for the bar and got very drunk. With this mixture of alcohol and depression, I at some point in the middle of the night decided to climb the highest hill in the area. At the summit I fell and broke my ankle.

While I do not regard what happened that night within the narrow definition of suicide, it was hardly an accident. But it did lead me to contemplate the taking of ones life; though I prefer to think of it as abandoning an existence that no longer fulfils its purpose. Vincent van Gogh shot himself, Nukain Mabusa dug his own grave and buried himself beneath a pile of rocks, and Helen Martins cooked her insides by drinking caustic soda. Anne Emslie (1991, page 13) wrote:

> One cold day in the winter of 1976 Koos Malgas returned to the Owl House. He had been absent for only an hour or so, doing chores for his employer. She was Helen Martins, the owner of the Owl House, and known locally as 'Miss Helen'…Miss Helen was being supported on a couch. She looked ashen and frightened and blood oozed from her mouth. Her tongue was swollen and she could not speak…Koos had noticed when he entered the kitchen, a number of items on the table. There was a spoon and a cup. Next to these were a bottle of castor oil and a packet of caustic soda that Miss Helen used to clean her floors.
>
> Koos knew what Miss Helen had done. Earlier that morning she had said to him: 'Koos, if I had a gun, I'd ask you to shoot me.'

The most controversial suicide in history has been that of Christ. Michael Grant (1977, page 135) in his cogent, controversial study of Jesus explained:

> For he must have seen what lay in store for him. Teaching and preaching in Galilee, he had aroused so much opposition both from the Pharisees

> and scribes, and from Antipas's circle as well, that he had been obliged to abandon his ministry. And now he proposed to carry the same message to Jerusalem – where the hostility was certain to be a great deal stronger.
>
> Already in Galilee there had been Jewish plots to silence his voice – according to the gospels, plots against his very life. And certain of them, it was said, had originated further south, in Jerusalem and the surrounding country of Judaea. Once he got to Jerusalem itself, the centre of his enemies' power, there was no possibility that he would survive. He knew that this was so. And yet, far from evading his death, he went on to Jerusalem.

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, commented that there was 'but one serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. The Christian church labels this ultimate testing of parameters as the 'canonical sin of despair'. Others see it as cowardly rejection of life and the world. But it is not that simple when applied to certain people, in particular those in whom I was interested. Grant (1977, page 135) continued that Christ's suicide was an act of sacrifice to resurrect a lost cause:

> And [Jesus] reconciled himself to his fate because he saw in it, as in all his life's work, a providential purpose. If he foretold disaster, he also looked forward to ultimate vindication. For since he believed that the divine Kingdom he was inaugurating would shortly achieve complete fulfilment, he was also convinced that his death would precipitate this consummation, and introduce the final glorious crisis of history. For one thing, the example his fate would set to men and women must lead them to experience the complete repentance, change of heart, which was needed for their admission to the Kingdom. What his preaching had failed to accomplish his death would achieve.

Pierre Cabanne (1963) wrote that the poet, Antonin Artaud, in *Van Gogh, Le suicide de la Societe* (Paris, 1947), claimed that the artist 'did not commit suicide as an act of madness, but because he had discovered who he was and what he was when the conscience of society, to punish him for having

withdrawn from it, caused him to commit suicide.' Katinka Matson (1980, page X111) asked about the circumstances of her lover's untimely death: 'Although his death was not a suicide in the literal sense, no one who knew him was surprised by the news. How could it have been an accident?' She added that in pursuing death certain artists became 'romantic and sympathetic' figures.

And Elise P Garrison (1995, pp 1 – 2) asked:

> How must one live? The question pervades Greek literature from Homer through Aristotle and beyond. Yet in the complicated world of extant Greek tragedy of conflicting allegiances to self or to society, of tensions between tradition and contemporaneity, of confrontations between civic and family obligations and between religion and politics, of the chasm between divine and mortal or of the equally crucial and basic contrast of human existence, the difference between male and female, the more significant issue becomes…Why must one live? That tragic inquiry, which very often because of pressures beyond one's control is answered…I must die, gives way to the corollary question …How should I die? Astonishingly often suicide provides tragic characters with the resolution…
>
> What motivates characters to commit suicide? Four major categories of motivation exist: to avoid disgrace and preserve an honourable reputation; to avoid further suffering; to end grief; and to sacrifice oneself for a greater good…The practical approach in combination with the theoretical one effectively reveals the nature of tragic suicide to be for the most part noble, courageous, resolute and socially motivated. Notably, victims who commit suicide in tragedy are never condemned out-of-hand and tend to be regarded sympathetically.

But something else occurred to me as I lay injured in the Durbanville Hills. I had failed myself like the others had done before. Grant wrote of Jesus: 'His mission in Galilee, despite moments of popularity and interest, had failed.' Helen Martins had reduced her vision of bringing light to the world to changing her home, and Nukain Mabusa of recreating the Garden of Eden to painting a

mountain. And I had moderated my calling to act as a channel between eccentrics and society to a quest to define patterns of eccentricity. It was this realisation that we had sold ourselves short that made the destruction of self so essential. As Cabanne (1963) concluded:

> On the 16th of March, 1955, Nicolas de Stael was killed falling down the stairs of his home. Some thought it suicide, others accidental, and we shall probably never know the truth. As with van Gogh, his unexpected death is made more tragic by an enigma.
>
> When one of his friends heard of his death he said: 'It had to finish like that…' It is true that death is for many the only way out of exile; the fate of the elect is nearly always failure.

But rather than dying, I severely broke my ankle which was operated on in Durbanvlle and again in Johannesburg. While in hospital I received a visit from Boerma in which he commented on the coincidental nature of our injuries, and said it was a sign that I should write his biography.

I had seen him three times since our first meeting six years before to do profiles for various lifestyle magazines. Each time he appeared more fulfilled than the last. And I readily agreed as I saw within his struggle to come to terms with his identity an allegory for the newly democratised South African struggle to deal with its history and diversity. In a proposal for a nonfiction novel to Penguin and this WITS creative writing programme, in which Boerma and the Lowveld (the villain) would be protagonists, I wrote:

> The irony is that the once assured supremacist identity of the white community of the Lowveld was crumbling at the same time as a confident Boerma returned. And the new black provincial government was also in crisis – overwhelmed and riven by ethnic tensions. Complicating this is the reality of a transitional society with a developing economy…It is a microcosm of the national problem…
>
> The tragedy was on the verge of getting it right. In a moment of great historical eccentricity two combatants stepped back and embraced each other. And the essentially eccentric presidency of Nelson Mandela

nearly defined a national identity most could subscribe to. But since then there has been a massive retreat back to the ordinary, with a corresponding growth in animosity, tension and uncertainty that in many ways is more frightening than pre-1990.

If we are to reverse this slide, then the stories of how Boerma and other eccentrics have resolved their identity crises are crucial. For the white Lowveld community the fulcrum of the devil was the gay man. He was excluded, cast out and demonised; becoming the scapegoat for every evil from Satanism to drought. In the new, polarising South Africa the fulcrum of the devil has shifted full circle to the macho white man. It is not a great leap to believe that one day soon they might become the scapegoat for some national malaise.

But this can be avoided. While it is true the Lowveld (whites) cannot, as Boerma did, flee their geographic location to give them time to work things out; they can take an inward journey of rediscovery. To follow the road of extraordinary people that leads to national embrace rather than marginalisation.

This proposal was accepted for publication, but rapidly unfolding events led to me abandoning this idea and replacing it with something entirely different. This is discussed in detail in the book and elsewhere in this essay, but I do want to emphasise that this change was so complete that specific issues regarding Boerma's identity, such as sexual orientation, were no longer germane. Therefore the need to explore his sexual identity as a gay man fell away.

Notes on Part 1 of the Creative Work

The above is the basis for Part 1, *Epiphany*, of the nonfiction fiction novel to which this reflexive essay refers. The style and genre will be dealt with later, but I do want to note liberties I have taken in the narrative of this section:

- In chapter 1 I imply a close relationship with my father. In reality it was appalling; and not much better with my mother. He was not killed in the shootout, only wounded. While out on bail he attempted, with the whole

family, to escape to Swaziland. We were apprehended on the border and I did not see him again until his release from jail two years later. When he returned he was exceptionally bitter, and a far more efficient criminal. The reason I have narrated the story in the manner in which it appears is because I wanted to mirror the relationship Boerma had with his parents. Further, I killed off my father in the story because I did not believe his continued presence contributed to what I wanted to convey. Neither did my subsequent abuse.

- The character of Professor Meredith Crimp in chapter 2 is a composite of Sybille Nagel and Sophie Farquhar, who both had a profound influence on me. I did this because Part 1 spans more than a quarter century, which I wanted to compact. Farquhar is dead and Nagel is happy with this; preferring anonymity after her appearance in *Eccentric South Africa* complicated her reclusive nature. The surname, Crimp, comes from my alter ego, Trinity Crimp; and the first name comes from a character in the television show, *Grey's Anatomy*, which my daughter was listening to while I was contemplating what to christen Crimp.
- The chronology of the text does not align with actual events. I have done this to facilitate flow.
- The names of some of the characters have been changed.

4. THE DIVINE SHIRLEY BASSEY

I knew *Johnny Golightly Comes Home* was in trouble from the moment I began interviewing John Anthony Boerma, his family and friends. It became obvious that much of what he had originally told me was embellished or fabricated; he had not reverted to John Anthony Boerma after his fall, but had taken on another persona; and, in fact, fitted the profile of eccentricity I began to doubt after first meeting him six years before.

John Anthony's mother conforms to the pattern of eccentricity that I identified. Maureen Boerma's first vision was in 1941 when she contracted diphtheria as a six-year-old. The family home in Modderfontein was quarantined and a white flag hoisted above the front gate. Her mother was the only one permitted to have any contact with her as she lay critically ill with sandbags packed round her head to protect her neck during violent contortions. As she lay near death she had a dream in which the messenger of God appeared and passed on to her the mantle of Mother Mary. From then she claims to have been able to feel the presence of spirits and have out-of-body experiences. And whenever doubt flared she received a sign: a voice, moving objects or maybe a wisp in a mirror. Another messenger, this time in the form of her dog, appeared to her while she was giving birth to John Anthony by caesarean and gave her a similar message as was given to Mary in the Bible. This convinced Maureen that her son was the new messiah, and raised him accordingly.

This placed a huge burden of expectation on the child, which I believe is equivalent to trauma. I came to this view when considering the cases of author Olive Schreiner, Vincent van Gogh and Helen Martins. All three of these are what is known as substitute children, and all grew up to be eccentric. Cabanne (1963, page 76) wrote:

> Van Gogh's childhood at Groot-Zundeet in Brabant, a dismal region of pine woods and marshes, fields and heaths, was marked by a strange coincidence: Vincent was born exactly a year after the death of his eldest brother who had died at the age of six weeks. This might not have

> affected him greatly if his naturally troubled mind had not caused him to consider himself as a sort of substitute, as though he were living for someone else whose name he carried and whose place he had somehow come to take. All his life as throughout his childhood Vincent was in search of his true identity. Who am I? Where am I going? What do I want? He drove himself to work, to live, to prove to himself and to prove to others that he had not usurped his personality and to kill his sense of guilt. He tried increasingly to rise above his destiny.
>
> Thus his childhood was wild and difficult, haunted by the memory of death since each of his birthdays was ruined by the presence of another unfortunate being. And the whole family would go in a procession to the grave of Vincent the first, the real Vincent.

Susan Imrie Ross (1997, page 25) added:

> Possibly one in the series of significant facts which led to Helen's [Martins] unconventional life and art creation, was that she was named Helen Elizabeth after on of her earlier sisters who had died young. She was thus manifestly linked with death right from the start of life. To know that one is a substitute child must have an adverse effect upon any but the most insensitive person. Dr Vera Buhrmann, the respected Jungian analyst and author, commented: 'Replacement children are heavily burdened – they carry the fantasies of the mother. They never form the identity of an integrated person.'

And the aftershock which follows trauma, normally in the form of sickness, came from finding out about his father's past when he arrived in Holland. When I interviewed John Anthony for *Extraordinary South Africa*, he told me his discovery of an extended family in the Netherlands was a joyous occasion. Nothing could be further from the truth with which he was confronted. What they told John Anthony shocked him more than any other thing in his life. They revealed that his father and grandfather had been members of the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland (NSB), the Dutch fascist organisation that was enamoured with Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Worse, it was to learn that his father and grandfather were not mere members of the NSB, but actively involved. His

grandfather joined its paramilitary organisation, the Weerbaarheidsafdeling (WA), which wore uniforms and saluted with the Heil Hitler-like Hou Zee. And his father became a member of its agrarian youth organisation, Jeugdstorm, which provided the Nazis with auxiliary services during World War 11 so as to free up men to fight on the Eastern Front. The NSB supported the occupation of Holland by Germany in 1940, and was the only party permitted to function after that. And it was one of their members who betrayed Anne Frank. It was because of pressure on NSB members after the war that his father decided to emigrate to South Africa.

John Anthony was reading *Breakfast at Tiffany's* at the time, and this is what convinced him to take on the persona of Johnny Golightly. It was an action to deny his father and his country, for individuals are never completely distinct from the social groups in which they are raised. As the saying goes, the acorn does not fall far from the tree; but this was one that John Anthony wanted to get as far from as possible. I can attest to that, but his inability to distinguish between reality and illusion appeared all encompassing.

The more I interviewed Boerma, the more inconsistencies I found in his original story. These are documented in the book and I am not going to repeat them here. But I confronted him on a number of occasions, and his reply was always the same: What is truth? This is a pertinent question because truth is seldom as simple as what the *Oxford Dictionary* defines as 'being true'. Gitta Sereny (1995, Pages 702 and 407), in her brilliant study of Albert Speer, wrote:

> He could no more have told them a lie, than he could have told them the truth…Memory, one knows, is not immune to the influence of emotions and therefore can play strange tricks, magnifying and dramatising some experiences and diminishing or moderating others. It is too easy to accuse Speer simply of lying – about his knowledge of the fate of the Jews, about his involvement in the horrendous maltreatment of the slave labourers and about various aspects of his relationship with Hitler and his work. Many of the facts do suggest that he lied and most of his critics have accused him of it for what is now fifty years.

> The truth, of course, are that lies are nor necessarily simple, nor are the motivations which bring them about. Speer's lies, I think…are a demonstration of his ever increasing need to schematise his life into an alignment of feelings and fears he could live with.

And can we stand too much truth? What so terrible happened in the Helen Martins household when she was a girl that the whole community denied it; in so doing, turned away from her? Beja (1971, page 54) wrote:

> Other men had also come to believe that we all live by illusions, that the real truth remains secret; but the idea that this is fortunate, that somehow the epiphany is undesirable and dangerous, and that we should or even must suppress its revelation, receives an emphasis I find unique in Conrad. Its most powerful statement is Stein's famous plea for us 'to follow the dream, and again follow the dream' (pp 214-215). And in 'Heart of Darkness' Marlow reflects that 'the inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily' (*Youth and Two Other Stories*, p93). Why luckily? Perhaps because if we came upon the inner truth it would reveal to us, as it does at last to Kurtz in his 'supreme moment of complete knowledge' on his dying bed, 'The horror! The horror!' (p149). 'Human kind,' as TS Elliot also notes, 'cannot bear very much reality.' (Burnt Norton', *Complete Poems*, p118). (Page 54)

One of the occasions in which Boerma was economical with the 'truth' was regarding the circumstances of his assault in Volksrust, which led to him leaping from the window to save his life. It was reported by the press that he was attacked in his room by rightwing Afrikaner gay bashers. Their motivation was not explored, and Boerma fudged the issue; implying that this is what these type of people do in conservative towns when they are confronted by an openly homosexual man. It seemed so obvious that he was not challenged on this. But he revealed to me that in fact the group who assaulted him were primarily composed of Indian men outraged because he had offered one of them fellatio. When I asked why he had never corrected the mistake in reporting, he replied: 'Darling, that's easy. If white rightwingers fuck up a gay boy they prove they're

dinosaurs. If Indians do it, it's not that simple. The reality is that there're different parameters for different people.'

So Boerma had let a 'lie' slip by because society has different interpretations of the truth depending on the circumstances. It suited his purposes that the original misconception continued because he would receive sympathy if it was believed that the thugs who assaulted him were white rightwingers rather than Indian men. While the matter did not go to court, it is not a great leap of logic to assume that the presiding officer would have come to a different judgement were the only two differing circumstances the social group to which the perpetrators belonged.

So whatever is thought about Boerma's 'battle with truth', the motivation must be seen in context. It was better to say he went into exile because of his political activities, than a fear of military service; and it was preferable to say he chose the Johnny Golightly persona to distance himself from his Lowveld roots, than reveal it was the discovery of his father's Nazi past. For he is acting no differently to the human condition of distorting the truth. That is why I have populated the book with characters who wear masks and uniforms to alter their reality – the frontiersman father, the lesbian seeking solace in a harsh environment, the husband without a past and the wannabe hippie.

But unlike most who will go to extraordinary lengths to keep 'the truth' from emerging, John Anthony appeared to be at great pains to strip away the fiction which enveloped him. This leaves a question: Is what he revealed true, or a figment of his imagination? It does not matter because he has made his life such a performance piece that it is doubtful whether he can any longer differentiate between reality and illusion. He has, thus, in a sense, become a victim of his own art.

From fairly early in the interview process I became aware that he had not reverted to John Anthony Boerma when he broke his ankles, but had taken on the persona of Johnny Gochristly. I came upon this realisation through a number

of steps. Firstly, his mother is convinced he is the messiah; secondly, during his Johnny Golightly phase, he toyed with the idea of Johnny Gochristly in a short film; his becoming a teacher is consistent with the story of Christ; his continual changing of venue for meetings so that I never saw him in Nelspruit were a parallel to the wanderings of Jesus; and his purchase of the Isuzu 4X4, which he dubbed *The Divine Shirley Bassey*, was his version of the heavenly colt. It was the one in which he would triumphantly enter Nelspruit like Jesus did Jerusalem.

His Christ, as I have mentioned, had come to take away parameters. The same ones that imprisoned van Gogh:

> There is something inside me, what can it be? Men often find themselves powerless to do anything, prisoners in some horrible, horrible, very horrible cage…We cannot say what closes us in, what walls us up, what seems to bury us, but we can feel some sort of boundary, some bars, some wall and we wonder: Dear God is it for long, is it for ever, is it for eternity?

What both John Anthony and van Gogh are railing against, I think, are suffocating parameters. They want a fresh moral order. They are wanting what the writer Viktor Shklovsky says is the duty of an artist: 'By poking fun at a specific set of conventions which tend to degenerate into stale clichés the artist paves the way for a new, more 'perceptible' set of conventions.' (Robert Augustin Smart, *The Nonfiction Novel*, Page X111). I say this because the complete removal of parameters, though attractive on the surface, does not bear scrutiny. For example, would it be acceptable for adults to have sexual relations with children, their own included? Because if you remove all parameters you take away the good with the bad.

More than that, I was his Judas – the one who would 'betray' him by revealing who he really was. At this point I abandoned the book I had proposed, and replaced it with an account of my dealings with him. While the change of *Extraordinary South Africa* to *Eccentric South Africa* left me with a feeling of

great emptiness; this gave me the opportunity to do what I should have done then. I was being given a second chance.

If I was his Judas, then I would need to be in the story. And I saw the relationship that he expected of me as very similar to how he perceived the one between the biblical Christ and Judas. As Bart D Ehrman (Krosney, 2006 page XV1) noted:

> Judas Iscariot, known throughout Christian history as the traitor, the one disciple of Jesus who had turned evil and betrayed his master. According to the Cainites [a group of Gnostics who believed in the Gospel of Judas], however, what Judas had done was not evil. He alone was the one who understood the mysteries of Jesus and did Jesus' will. all the other disciples, who worshipped the false Jewish God, failed to understand the truth of Jesus…Judas is the consummate insider, the one to whom Jesus delivers his secret revelation. Judas is the one faithful disciple, the one who understands Jesus, the one who receives salvation, the other disciples, and the religion they represent, are rooted in ignorance.

I had thus become his surrogate, the one who is essential for the fulfilling of the destiny of another – Christ/Judas, Helen Martins/Koos Malgas. But where our relationship differed is that I never consented to take on the role. Whatever, I found it extremely challenging to put myself in the story as there were issues in my life that I did not want to return to. As I got more into the book so I battled to emotionally hold myself together. I did what I always do in that situation – found solace in alcohol. But John Anthony appeared to self-destruct even more as he recounted his story, and at times began to fear he would commit suicide. His increasingly bizarre behaviour was reminiscent of what Cabanne (1963) wrote of Amedeo Modigliani:

> Modigliani used drink and later drugs either as excitants or as antidotes to boredom and the commonplace, but they also created his hell.

But the new format for the book presented me with a challenge. While there were obvious mirrors in our stories, I still battled linking his story with mine. This was to weave the vertical and lateral threads together, giving it an overall coherency. But these linkages were initially not strong enough; leaving two parallel stories, which occasionally intersected.

This problem was not solved until our last meeting, which was Boerma's interpretation of the Last Supper. It was only then that I realised that he had been creating a new form of conceptual/installation art. One of the great problems of installation art is its impermanence, which makes the existence of the artist even more precarious. But John Anthony saw a way round this by using another medium, literature, to freeze his conceptual work as an immortal statement. The book was to be about his work of art – himself – and that was all he wanted.

But it still took a suggestion by my supervisor for the final piece to fall into place. He suggested that the book was primarily about the writing of the book, rather than a story about two people whose paths cross. I then reworked the beginning of the text and passages at the end the end of Part 1 and beginning of Part 11. While these were not extensive, they had a hugely positive impact on thematic continuity.

While the book fulfilled Boerma's desire for an immortal statement, there remained the questions regarding the ethics of representing a living person. One of my preconditions for writing the book was that I would have absolute discretion, other than that he would have the right to read it and make corrections/suggestions. He has at all times respected this, and has read the completed novel. Other than for two very minor changes, which I made, he is delighted with the work. As is his mother. I have also shown it to the other people mentioned and have received no objections.

While I had reason to be extremely bitter at how Boerma manipulated me, I treated this with humour. More than this, I have been understanding of the

tragedy his environment has wrought on his life. This is because I have empathy with his story, as mine has many parallels. In any case, I have not appropriated his story, but contextualised it in terms of my life. At all times I have allowed his voice to come through, and given him the opportunity to explain his contradictions without commenting on them. Essentially, however, this is my story recounting the influence he has had on an aspect of my life.

Part of the reason I abandoned the idea of a biographical novel (with Boerma as the central character) was to avoid heaping hurt on a person who has endured a great deal of damage in his life. I could very easily have written a vicious denunciation of him and his dysfunctional family, but I saw no purpose in this. For this would have made me no different to the thugs (no matter their motivation or hue) who assaulted him in Volksrust.

But why are ethics only the domain of the writer, and not the subject? Surely Boerma must have been aware that his distortions of truth were going to have a huge impact on me? And did his use of me as an unwitting surrogate in his conceptual work not constitute unethical behaviour? And, if so, does this still preclude me from recounting my experience in a story?

This raises another matter. If Boerma used me to create a work of art (unwittingly or not), then to whom does it belong? Emslie (1991, page 65), commenting on the relationship between Helen Martins and the people (especially Koos Malgas) who gave form to her vision, wrote:

> The fact that Helen did little with her own hands, leaving the making and building to others, has become a stumbling block to those who feel that there is, consequently, something fraudulent about the work. I take the view that an artist can legitimately employ the labours of others. For me this is not a problem. The problem arises in trying to assess the independent contributions of apprentices and employees. In Helen's case, to what extent ought [they] be accredited as co-creators of the space? I feel most comfortable acknowledging the Owl House as fundamentally the work of Helen Martins, for although the others left

> significant personal signatures upon the space, it was Helen who visualised it all. It was her mind and her thoughts that breathed life and significance into the work and made the separate elements and images hold together as a coherent art environment.

I agree with this assessment, but there is something fundamentally different with *Johnny Golightly Comes Home*. He gave me a story, which I used to tell my story. As such I shaped it and turned it into a narrative that is entirely my own conception.

5. THE WRITING PROCESS

By contrast to the rest of my life, my writing is highly structured and disciplined. And I follow the same procedure whether it is a short magazine piece or book. Once I have an idea, I create an outline, including a chapter breakdown. This allows me to decide at the outset what I want to focus on and the information I will need. I then gather the information and group it in order under relevant sections. It is like a cupboard where socks are placed in a drawer, shirts hung in a specific place and shoes arranged neatly in pairs. With *Johnny Golightly Comes Home* I drew on personal experience as well as extensive interviews with Boerma, his family and friends. He also gave me access to his records and diaries, which were in a chaotic state. When I have completed this stage I reassess the project and make necessary changes. Only then do I start writing: very fast, doing as much as 3-4 000 words a day.

Things were slightly different with this book. The workshop component of the WITS creative writing course meant that I had to make concessions to my normal process as I was obliged to submit chapters at regular intervals, which meant sometimes breaking my routine. This was particularly disruptive while the focus of the story was undergoing extreme changes because of what Boerma was revealing of himself.

I have also had some difficulty deciding on what genre the book fits into as it contains elements of biography, autobiography, memoir and the fictional novel. But I have decided that it is what Lars Ole Sauerberg calls ‘nonfiction fiction’, or what the filmmaker refers to as docudrama.

Lee Gutkind, professor in the department of English at the University of Pittsburgh and editor of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, in an interview with CSPAN defined creative non-fiction as:

> Dramatic, true stories using scenes, dialogue, close, detailed descriptions and other techniques usually employed by poets and fiction writers about important subjects – from politics, to economics, to sports, to the arts

> and sciences, to racial relations, and family relations…It allows a writer to employ the diligence of a reporter, the shifting voices and viewpoints of a novelist, the refined wordplay of a poet and the analytic modes of the essayist.

Bruce Hoffman, a past student of Gutkind, added:

> Alternatively known as 'literary journalism' or the 'literature of fact', creative non-fiction is the branch of writing which employs literary techniques usually associated with fiction or poetry to report on actual persons and events. Though only recently identified…as a distinct and separate literary genre, the roots of creative non-fiction run deeply into literary tradition and history. The genre, as currently defined, is broad enough to include nature and travel writing, the personal memoir and essay, as well as 'new journalism', 'gonzo journalism' and the 'non-fiction novel'. (CSPAN. Interview with Lee Gutkind: 'What is creative nonfiction?' *Creative Non-Fiction*. (http://creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatiscnf.htm))

Recent authors who have used creative non-fiction include Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*), Tom Wolfe (*The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*), Norman Mailer (*The Executioner's Song*), Randy Shilts (*And the Band Played On*), Bruce Charwin (*In Patagonia*), Jan Morris (*Venice*), Frank McCourt (*Angela's Ashes*) and JM Coetzee *(Boyhood*). Laurence Pringle, in explaining why he gave a butterfly a character the reader can care about in *An Extraordinary Life: The Story of a Monarch Butterfly*, says: 'I could have written a straightforward non-fiction book about butterflies; what the caterpillars eat, the autumn migration, etc. Instead, I wrote about one caterpillar who became one female adult trying to get to Mexico, survive, then mate and reproduce in spring. Many readers tell me that they feel sad at the end of the book – at the end of the monarch's life. Some people cry – an unusual response to a non-fiction book, I believe.'

There are a number of raging debates regarding creative non-fiction. Purists like Gutkind demand absolute truth and honesty, whereas others such as Aaron Pope

in *Lines in the Mud: Exploring Creative Non-Fiction* look for 'factual adequacy rather than accuracy'. It is in this contested area of the genre that most controversy occurs. Gutkind would argue that James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which was released as a work of creative non-fiction but the author admits was partly made up for dramatic effect, was thus a work of fiction. He feels the same way about Hunter S Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – to which Pope replied:

> What truth are you trying to get at with your story? Can exaggerations of the truth actually help you get closer to a larger truth? Hunter S Thomson thinks so. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson's alter-ego Raoul Duke says, 'Terrible things were happening all around us. Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman's neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge – impossible to walk on it, no footing at all.' Now you can dismiss this acid-imagery for simple shock-value, or you can call it irresponsible journalism – you can call it 'shit' for all I care. But I think you might be missing the point in doing so: Thompson is a careful writer included in the World Library between Thackeray and Tolstoy. Why include bizarre fabulist imagery if it doesn't contribute to something larger? [As John Hellman says]: 'Presenting journalistic events through the perceptions of this maddened, even hallucinating, persona, Thompson presents his black humorist vision of those actual events without violating their actuality. Like a mad seer or holy fool, this persona (Duke) can reveal aspects of events not readily apparent to those with normal perception…Thompson is free to present journalistic material through the licenses of parody. He can flatten and warp his representations of actuality without falsifying them, because he has clearly represented them as products of a flattening and warping mind.'

Lars Ole Sauerberg (1991, pp 21 – 22) questioned why it was acceptable to place fact into fiction, but not fiction into fact. He wrote:

> The traditional distinction between the fictional and the nonfictional is, as the terms imply, a matter of assuming a categorical distinction between factuality and fictionality. A fictional narrative is nonfactual in

the sense that it does not necessarily correspond to actual events or persons. In contrast the nonfictional text reflects a state of affairs existing independently of the existence of any text. However, the precariousness of this distinction has been a matter for insistent comment since the structuralists pointed to the general structuration of meaning. Deconstructionists, in their radical application of structuralist insight, as well as critical metahistorians, have stressed the dependence of signification on textuality and writing. Historians working on empirical lines, considered here as exemplary nonfiction writers, will claim that the truth of their work consists in the possibility of checking it against the sources employed. But these sources themselves are documents, that is texts already results of a prior process of interpretation or rendering into signification. By critical comparison of documents relating to the same matter, will arrive at the 'objective historical fact', a phenomenon perhaps more in the nature of the structuralists' simulacrum…As regards sense-making, the common view is that the (auto)biographer should only transcribe the documented reality before him without trying to superimpose a pattern. But as any reader of biography knows, and as most writers of biography readily admit, the biographer is as much at pains to furnish a key to or a purpose for a person's life as the historian is to discover some dominant principle behind an apparently random collection of events.

With the possible exception of the most obstinate deconstructionist no one would deny an essential difference between a non-literary text like the empirical historian's account and a literary text by an Updike or a Bellow, even though all of them seem to deal with the same kind of reality. But from the reader's perspective the difference is not due to any sense of a clearly demarcated distinction between fact and fiction in the text itself. Our impression of a difference has rather to do with differences between the potential uses or the applicability of the literary and the non-literary texts respectively. (Pages 21 – 22)

It is in this disputed terrain that *Johnny Golightly Comes Home* is positioned. Though fiction and fictional tools have been used, it fits with the definition of 'nonfiction fiction' set out by Robert Smart (1985, pp 5 – 7, 18 – 20): 1) It is a long narrative prose text; 2) the events have been experienced by the narrator; 3) it focuses on the personality of the narrator; 4) it has a consistent point of view; 5) it describes an individual, discreet world not shared by the reader; and 6) it has a clear metafictional quality.

What Sauerberg and Smart do is make sense of a genre that is meant to straddle 'pure' fiction and 'absolute' fact. As with these two categories, it has to be accepted that there must be certain leeway within the genre – making it appear at times to be 'pure' fiction and at others 'absolute' fact. I have stated that there are occasions that I have resorted to 'pure' fiction in the text, but these instances are not central to the narrative and were used as tools to assist flow and as a mirror for Boerma's battle with truth.

This is a genre I like very much as it is the one which most closely approximates real life. All human existence is a blend of fact and fantasy and smoke and mirrors. This is reflected in our institutions; be they social, religious or political. And I intend to make more use of it in future.

The Title

The original title for the book was *Johnny Golightly Comes Home*. However, when I realized that Boerma had taken on a new persona after his leap from the hotel window, I considered *Jesus of Nelspruit*, but decided on *The Divine Shirley Bassey*. Though Penguin liked this title, they pointed out the technical difficulty this would present booksellers. Their concern was that staff unfamiliar with the contents would display it in sections that were misleading – for example, musical biography. For this reason we decided to revert to the original title and it will be called *Johnny Golightly Comes Home*.

Publication

The original proposal for *Johnny Golightly Comes Home* was accepted by Penguin Books, and a contract signed. However, this agreement has technically fallen away as the book subsequently changed form. But I have been in constant contact with them and it appears they are happy with this. In fact, they are currently designing the cover.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Paula R Backscheider, *Reflections On Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001

Howard S Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press, 1963

Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel: Revelation as Art*. London: Peter Owen Limited, 1971

Pierre Cabanne, *Outlaws of Art*. Translated by Denis George. London: Elek Books, 1963

Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. (This edition) London: Penguin Classics 2000

Truman Capote. *In Cold Blood*. (This edition) London: Penguin Classics 2000

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Romance*. New York: Doubleday, 1924

Anne Emslie, *The Owl House*. London: Viking, 1991

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. (This edition) London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1987

Elise P Garrison, *Groaning Tears: Ethical & Dramatic Aspects of Suicide in Greek Tragedy*. Leiden: EJ Brill, 1995

Michael Grant, *Jesus*. London: Rigel, 1977

Lee Gutkind, *Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality*. Chicago: John Wiley and Sons, 1997

Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: How to Live it and Write It*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1996

Pat Hopkins, *Eccentric South Africa*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001

Pat Hopkins & Heather Dugmore, *The Boy: Baden-Powell and the Siege of Mafeking*. Rivonia: Zebra Press, 1999

Pat Hopkins & Helen Grange, *The Rocky Rioter Teargas Show: The Inside Story of the 1976 Soweto Uprising*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*. New York: Penguin Books Limited, 1955

Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. Washington: National Geographic, 2006

Katinka Matson, *Short Lives: Portraits of Writers, Painters, Poets, Actors, Musicians, and Performers in Pursuit of Death*. London: Picador, 1981

John Money, *Gay, Straight and In-between: The sexology of erotic orientation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988

Susan Imrie Ross, *This Is My World: The Life of Helen Martins, Creator of the Owl House*. Cape Town: Oxford University press, 1997

Lars Ole Sauerberg, *Fact into Fiction: Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel*. London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Limited, 1991

Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth*. London: Macmillan, 1995

Roger L Shin (editor), *The Search For Identity: Essays on the American Character*. New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1964

Robert Augustin Smart, *The Nonfiction Novel*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1985

Essays

CSPAN. Interview with Lee Gutkind: 'What is creative nonfiction?' *Creative Non-Fiction*. (http://creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatiscnf.htm)