EIGHTIES: THE ACCIDENTAL ACTIVIST

By Graeme Bloch

(297191, University of the Witwatersrand

Supervisor: Prof Gerrit Olivier)

CONTENTS:

DECLARATION:

I certify that this is my own unaided work, and has not been published elsewhere.

Signed: Date:

Prepared for Wits MA in Creative Writing, SLLS.

(MA by coursework and research report)

January 31,2011

Chapter One: 1976.

“Scream!” I still remember myself saying.

It was a disembodied voice but clear and controlled. I was thinking quite calmly, talking to myself. There was an argument going through my head: “If you don’t scream, he’s going to think it’s not working. He’ll get worse and find other stuff to do. Then it’s really going to hurt”. He would carry on. “Scream!” I said, “he’s got to know it is hurting.”

I could see myself lying on the ground, a body on the floor with a tall and overweight man over it, spread along it, hunched and bouncing up and down. As if from a great distance, I heard a loud and piercing scream of agony coming from inside me. “Good! Scream again, some more.” From somewhere up in the corner near the roof, the sound came, a howl of agony. It was me.

I was nineteen at the time. I was lying stomach down on the ground. My head was bent sideways against the edge of the carpet. The leg of the chair I had been sitting on was quite close to my cheek, a round wooden leg looking like a pole within reach that ought to have helped steady me if I were to get up from the floor. Alongside and looming above me, the polished but stained pine table.

Five minutes before this I had been staring across the table at a pile of brown cardboard files, very government-looking, at the way he was scribbling strange doodles on a piece of paper. He held a file at a shallow angle and was peering under black thick-rimmed glasses at me. His forehead was deeply furrowed, his eyebrows more smeared than bushy. There was a deep hateful stare from under his lenses and there were dark rings around his eyes.

He was sitting on my back now, facing towards my feet. Somehow he was pulling on my hair and banging my head down on the floor at the same time, again and again. I couldn’t understand how he managed it. A debate was going through my mind. I could almost hear the clear and rational thoughts as if I was having a discussion with someone. He had shifted from behind the chair, but I don’t remember him throwing me to the ground. It all seemed too easy; it happened before I could think.

Now he was on my back. My legs were bent up backwards at the knees. How was he doing it? He was facing backwards as he sat on me, squatting on my buttocks as he jammed my bent knees under his shoulders. It was incredibly painful. He bounced up and down with his body, leaning towards my feet. He seemed to arc my legs up even more as he exerted force from his shoulders and the top of his body, from under his arms where my feet were pinned. As he pushed down, my legs bent upwards. It didn’t make sense. My hamstrings were tight. It felt as if my knees were cracking. There was a pulling and pulling along the tendons above the knee; the cartilage felt as if it had been stretched beyond its limits.

I yelled on the floor, cheek pressed on the ground, screaming through my compressed mouth. It was a peculiar and distorted sound, half scream, half gurgle. He pushed down hard again on my knees with his shoulders and body. As he did this, he thumped my head. Still facing backwards, he reached behind himself and grabbed me by my hair. Then he pulled my head upwards and

towards him, my spine starting to curl up and my back arched. At the same time he bounced up and down.

I was hurting really badly, hamstrings and knees were stretched and the crook of my back arced as if it would snap. A small patch of hair came out in his hand. He cursed, grabbed again to secure a grip. He continued the rhythmic banging as he shouted a stream of questions.

In another corner, his two young children grinned apishly and huddled together as they watched. One was a gawky boy, about eleven, tight curls on his head, his hands clutched behind his back. His shoulders were hunched, even curved. His head bobbed up as he looked at his pa doing his work.

You could see he always smiled around his pa as if he knew it was best to please the old man. At the same time, he seemed worried, not quite sure if this scene was real or if it was what he wanted to see. He could get it wrong and then be beaten himself. He was giggling and making a low whinnying sound under his breath, shifting from foot to foot.

The other boy next to him was younger, about eight. He looked intrigued, mouth open, his eyes fixed on me and his dad, fascinated like any young boy, curious as to what would come next.

Pa doing his work, making a communist shit. Making him learn to tell the truth. Me screaming my lungs out, lying humiliated on the ground as I was beaten up. It was all in slow motion. I was seeing them all, taking in the details of the whole room as if from a great distance even as I lay there on the floor.

After two days of me refusing to answer questions, the Branch had brought in their hard nut that evening. He had probably been summoned from his supper, as there was a strong smell of brandy on his breath. I laughed when he claimed he was Spyker. I had heard of Spyker, and this was just some overweight Boer trying to intimidate me, surely? Initially he just stared, picked up and dropped the files as he sat opposite me. He would doodle as he questioned, strange drawings of upside down springbok heads, of ox wagons and uniforms. I felt awkward in the round wooden seat of the chair with its rickety legs, facing him across the desk.

“I am not going to talk,” I said to him. Then he jumped up. He looked like he had had enough. There was spittle at the side of his mouth. His eyes were on fire, burning hatred. He moved around the desk amazingly quickly. I barely had time to jump up from the chair before he threw me to the ground. He had huge hands with black grime under his nails as if he worked with cars over the weekend.

There had been a stream of invective, of which I was going to hear pieces all evening. He loved his insults. His oldest son grinned and laughed sheepishly when his dad made these jokes. ”Het ’n hoender ‘n etter in die straat gemaak en die son jou uitgebak*?”* “Were you born, or issued? Ha ha!” In front of his kids.

I refused to answer anything. I was not going to answer any questions. Once you began, how would you know where to stop? I stared back at him defiantly and repeated my consistent line that it was unfair to be held like this. Why would I wish it on someone else or give him names of other people to terrorise?

There was lots of shouting about the Jews. “What did your people ever do for the boere in the War? Huh?” I answered him, I wanted to talk, and these things were fine. It was a distraction, a chance to show some form of defiance. “They probably sold them guns like they sold everything else from their *smous*-wagons. There was even a Boer general who was a Jew. You didn’t know that?”

He probably was pissed off to be called out from his house and the brandy was working. He would show his kid who was *baas*.

Next to the chair, face pressed down on the ground, eyes up against mine, was the other interrogator. A stupid man. This interrogator irritated me. He had pretended all afternoon to be friendly. It was up to me if I wanted to talk, really. He had a British accent, ginger curly hair beginning to thin, ruddy face, sun burnt skin. The whole afternoon there had been lots of stuff about his times in Rhodesia, idle boasting about what a big man he was. He could hit a target from any distance. Tall but flappy and thin, not quite fitting in his clothes. A bully, as I told him to his face. “Why would I want to talk to you? I didn’t choose to be here. You’re a bully; I had them all through school.” He giggled.

Now his face seemed close to mine on the floor. I hadn’t seen him moving around the table. He was shouting aloud, over and over again, about how we never paid our taxes. “You fucking students,” he said. North England accent. He started jumping up and down. They hated students, the assumed lifestyle of loafing and the accessible girls who wandered around in skimpy khikois and braless vests, as they never stopped telling us.

His face was screwed up, breathing on me and shrieking; there was a squeaking bullying yelp. He was off. Nothing could stop his angry cries.

Again, I heard a disembodied voice. Calm, rational, but it gradually became louder and more insistent. It was talking about me. About my holiday job. “They do take off tax, I’ve got the forms. It was just a holiday job but I paid.” More yelling; it was me again.

Spyker pushed hard down on my knees as he pulled back my hair. My head and neck lifted off the ground, bent upwards towards the ceiling. There was a crack as his hand slipped and came away with a fistful of hair and skin. My head shot downwards, my forehead bounced on the ground. A splodge of blood began to trickle down my scalp towards my nose.

Then it was quiet again. There was an enormous stillness. The whole room seemed to rock gently. Everyone was where they had been before. They no longer seemed real. I could hear nothing. I was floating right up near the ceiling, in a corner of the room looking down on this strange scene.

Then it was hours later. They made me stand, kept me awake, their lips moving and pens writing down page after page of notes on the sheets in their files. After that they took me down to my cell. I hobbled down the stairs with bent knees. I was holding on to the side wall. Hardly looking at the cell as I got there, all I saw was the scratched graffiti on the walls. There were charcoal pictures of Anna van Saldanha, that I had laughed at before they took me up, and pleas from prisoners hoping for a good judge, giving the dates on which the prisoners were brought in. Now everything was blurred, I felt sleepy and sore. I collapsed on the mattress rolled out on the floor. I drew the scratchy grey blanket up over my head and fell into a deep sleep.

Then I was woken again. There was a loud thumping on the door, boots stomping around me. They swore and laughed as they told me to hurry up and put on my shoes, to stand up. They took me upstairs to the same room, two walking in front of me and one at the back. They made me stand again. It felt like hours passed: one, two, three, until I stopped trying to count. Spyker got up and left with his children.

A mousy looking man joined the crew at the desk, his hair pressed down and carefully parted. He was talking about God, about doing what was right. After the shouting, his voice had a slow gentle edge. There was no intonation. He was filling in time while I decided what was possible and what I should do. I could feel myself nodding off as I stood. “Sit down,” he said. Once again, I collapsed into the wooden chair. I looked at him. It felt like it was time to talk; at least for the moment this man was being nice.

And now a statement was in front of me: about where we marched, why we did, where we thought we were going. There wasn’t much that differed from what we’d said all along. We had explained it all aloud before the march to students in the hall, to get them to join the march, so what was I saying now that was new?

I spoke a lot. A long list of lecturers who kept us going, including everyone who ever spoke at our meetings. I gave a lot of names, including them all, as many as I could, to make it harder to identify anyone in particular. The names of our executive. Did I give anything away, not really? We liked to say that everything we did was public; we assumed they had their spies and we accepted that they knew the details of most things. So if you had to talk, it wasn’t the end of the world, it was okay to splab about things that were public anyway. Now I must sign. The God man looked triumphant smiled at me as he swept out of the room with most of the brown files. My papers were tightly closed up in the old folio on top of the pile.

Quiet. I waited. I was alone in the room for a while.

Then the security policeman in charge came in, Captain Basson I think he was. He was pacing up and down, a lit cigarette in his mouth. “You know”, he said, “I don’t like this stuff. It’s true. If you didn’t cause us this *kak*…I’ve got a farm in Malmesbury; it is where I come from. We’ve still got some land, we could grow mealies again. Maybe one day. When this stuff is over.”

He had a very boyish face with a clean-cut look. His grin was friendly. His hair was short but spiky, and he had big hands. He looked like you could find him at rugby on Saturday afternoons at the agricultural grounds down the road from his farm.

“You guys don’t know what you’re playing with,” he said calmly. “For your own good, please. Just stop your *kak*. Serious: Just watch out! Your mother is pissed off with you. You’re hurting her, and your family. You want my advice? Pay attention to your studies.” He was almost fatherly in the way he sent me on my way, put his hand on my shoulder, and patted me on the back. He asked if the scab on my forehead was OK and if my knees were feeling better after the stiffness, as he softly put it.

And then I was out. I was at Mowbray police station. I recognized it as the police van swept in through the front to drop me after curving down the road from De Waal Drive. My mother and my girlfriend Alice were there, crying and hugging me. I was blinking as we stepped out into the sunlight on Mowbray Main Road and it was all over for now.

Six months later, I was banned. Nothing much had happened in the intervening time. I concentrated on study and got myself ready for my exams at the end of the year. The period in jail began to feel quite distant; daily chores and the bureaucracy of university life caught up. It seemed like things would be over for now; I got on with my life.

Then suddenly one day the Security Branch was a part of my life again. This time one of the policemen also had ginger hair like the one interrogator, but his face was unashamedly old. He looked tired and worried when I saw him, always. The first time he came looking for me, he slipped across the polished floor on the stoep, and landed with a crack on his elbow as he left from waking up my mother. “Jeremy’s somewhere on holiday and anyway still lives down the road in Observatory,” my mom told me that she had explained to him before he slunk off.

Sweetly, no doubt in her overbearing and authoritative way, she promised Griebenauw she’d tell me soon that they had come for me, if I did call in. My sisters laughed as he crashed on the ground, the rain from the night before sweeping his leathered shoes from under him. He walked off clutching his arm.

So I got to know the Security Branch a bit better in this new game we were to play over the years. For me, it did begin suddenly and a bit roughly when I was dragged out from a crazy night of year-end partying to take the call from my mom. I still have a vague memory of shapes the night before, of coming into a huge ballroom and setting up some band equipment, falling asleep, getting up feeling thirsty, vomiting and vowing never to touch tequila again. The party continued and I joined in shouting and dancing with everyone. Then the phone call from my mother. “You’d better get yourself together, and decide when to call these guys. They’re going to come back soon,” she said. She was sounding tough and in charge, my mom, and I began to feel sober quickly.

When they turned up again, with me waiting this time, I gave a hard shiver. For these bastards I wanted to look confident, not feel thin and shaky, especially as this conversation was supposed to be on my terms. I had to look dignified; the vomit had been cleaned up, but my eyes kept pounding in my head. I signed their papers that would change all sorts of things in my life, the first being to chase me out of my student digs in Observatory into the next magisterial district to which I was now restricted.

Now Cape Town and Wynberg became administrative boundaries that would rule my life. I moved back in with my mom and sisters as the student digs were on the wrong side of the dividing line. We kept the curtains closed in my mother’s home at dinner. The banning order forced me to run upstairs every time there was a knock on the door so I wouldn’t be found with more than one person at a time; an illegal gathering.

I would grab the plate and the whole setting, so that no-one could know I had been sitting there.

Invariably it was just a friend, or some boy coming to visit one of my sisters. Still, even without actually being there, the Branch was always present. I became my own jailer, enforcing their restrictions through my own fear of getting caught. A first time – even if it meant only a suspended sentence – would put you in that terrain where you risked a second conviction on top of the first. This could be real jail time. The fear was enough to make me cautious, to act as if I were being watched all the time.

The way this order worked, I did it to myself it seemed.

Occasionally, like a cliché from a B-grade movie, they would sit ten meters down the road in a car, reading the newspapers. Their classical, brushed moustaches and slicked-back oily hair only made them look more out-of-place in our middle-class suburb. No-one would come speak to them from the block of flats opposite. They wouldn't go to any of the houses. The game was just to let me know they were around, not to hide or disguise themselves, really. They could appear again; any time they could knock on the door. Somehow, the thought itself was scary, more so than the reality when it happened from time to time.

Now and again they *would* actually appear, and knock, mostly quite polite and friendly, just to let me know they were around. Also to introduce themselves, I suppose, so they wouldn't feel like ciphers either. A human touch that I didn't expect to get from them. The ginger-haired man, who was called Griebenauw, once even asked my mom for medical advice for his sick aunt. "As a friend," he said, without irony.

Sometimes we played a different game. My restriction order was extended, and I was now allowed to go to work in town. I worked in a dark room without windows where I classified books for the City Council libraries, giving them the right markings so they could be put in order on the public shelves. It was a concession by the Branch to allow me near books, but I assume they wanted me to have a job and become respectable, none of this ongoing student stuff where we lay around and could shout and *gaan aan* as we chose.

One day, I bumped into a young officer at the lunch-time poetry readings in the Gardens. It was Mr God, who had tried so hard to convert me in Caledon Square when they interrogated me some years before.

As long as I went to the poetry event by myself, I was just part of the audience and not technically in a gathering. I could enjoy the outdoors and the presence of others, who were not legally part of my doings.

In the Gardens, gamin-like sylphs with blonde hair walked around as they read their poems and waved and proclaimed loudly about love. An odd man with a toothy grin and a nasal voice read serious-sounding verse and pranced up and down reading poems of the kind that lacked punctuation. The audience shouted and whistled its approval.

One man, more heavily set, intoned Brecht down at us. We nodded wisely. Around us, the sculptures and lawns and ornamental flower-beds were a backdrop that contrasted with my dark office in the City Hall library down the road. In the bright sunshine, I forgot I was supposed to be under siege.

I loved poetry.

At high school I had written for school magazines and writing competitions. I went up whenever I could to the university above my mother's house in Mowbray to listen to students in the Students' Union where the combination of words with the very cool-looking older students was always a thrill for me, their long hair and faded coats holding out the promise of a future that would soon be mine as well. The readings happened at coffee-shop evenings with vast jugs of wine from which small huddles of students took the occasional sip. I felt mature and naughty, and somehow the words from all over the world protected me from the rough days to come.

Words took me away from reality, and created a space where things around me could be sloughed off, allowed me to live for a while in my own head and explore a pleasure that was almost tangible. Words spun out this new reality, so that for a while I could ignore that there was something else going on in the world around.

In public, or rather in a group of people, I was quiet and unexpressive. When writing, I felt like a part of my heart was out hunting, alone, searching for some missing piece or fragment that could help me hold my life together. Words arranged with rigour made me suck in my breath. I would gasp at the intensity of description and meaning.

For me the best poetry should be performed, be read aloud, and be accompanied by flourishes and music that took all my senses into their space.

Van Rensburg, God man, was amused when I went up to him to talk. His whole image had changed since I had last seen him. His fringe was thrown back; he had an open-neck shirt and cowboy boots with fine engraving. He was wearing jeans, not too tight-fitting, but enough to look cool. He was clutching a can of Coke and looking like he loved nothing better than submerging himself in poetry.

His demeanour seemed to say he was going to go far. Not just an ordinary policeman, if you could even recognize him as one, educated at the best Afrikaans university, promoted to officer way ahead of some of the thugs he worked with on a daily basis and felt disdainful of. He was one of those who had knocked at my mother's house, who had been quite friendly, almost charming, as if to try tell me he wasn't really like the rest. Jesus and culture were his things, the Security police just the work he did.

In Caledon Square, he was a poor second, sent in just to occupy me, to fill in time and to give me a feel for the 'good cop' so the bad ones could work their thing and get the results. I still had a picture of him escaping the interrogation room, clutching my file with its signed statement.

"Didn't know you like poetry?" I said. He gave a short "harrumph!" and grinned sheepishly. "Ja, well."

"I suppose you might learn something. What kind of questioning do these people get from you? Just don't end up too sensitive," I said.

Listening to poems was not the last time I saw him; I still wonder if he lost himself in between as much as I did.

Every time I wanted to go on holiday, it was complicated and bureaucratic. There was a whole procedure to leave my magisterial districts. Technically, it was the local magistrate who had to give permission; in reality we all knew who was behind the choices allowed. I had to get all the plans in place, make the bookings, and send in a list of guests' names to the Branch.

I also needed a good reason such as an established family tradition. There was only one main trip allowed, our annual journey to the *kloofs* in Ceres. For five days, I could hang out with my sisters and brother, who would time his break from the army in order to join us. Sometimes one friend of theirs would be brave or curious or naïve enough to come along.

I had to sign out at the local police station in Mowbray as I left, and confront the cops in the police station at the Ceres end.

The words “Security” would invariably make them jump to attention at the Ceres police station. Some unfortunate, well-tanned and blond-haired boertjie would be sitting behind the desk over Christmas. In a small hot town like Ceres you would rather be out in the shade of a tree near the river than swatting flies in the heat and boredom inside an office.

Suddenly we would come in with official looking papers, confident in what we were doing and in our knowledge of what was supposed to happen next. For the cop, treated with no respect and never informed by the Branch - but in trouble if he got it wrong - this was risky territory. He could not really help himself. So he jumped to my commands. *Sign here, give me a copy, take this yourself*. “Yes sir. No sir. When will you be leaving? Sir.” You could see his heart beating in the veins of his forehead; he looked nervous while I felt in charge; my family looked impressed.

And then we would be off, me and my three sisters, my brother and my mom, scrambling down the rocky cliff sides, into the river, following the kloof that headed upstream, along the beautiful clear water of the Western Cape mountains and the rock pools folded in by giant round boulders. We clambered and jumped from rock to rock and dived into clear deep pools. For a few glorious days, life melted like the stones as they glowed and the water rushed down over them. Cicadas wailed in a high-pitched monotone, the craggy rocks of the cliffs above baked to a deep orange and metallic colour in the afternoon.

It was in Witels my mom told me some of our sordid history. I always knew my great-grandfather was an immigrant who had fled the East-European pogroms to find freedom and acceptance in a new land. He spoke no English when he arrived with his brother, just the name of his trade, a blacksmith. We were from Minsk, now Belarus, at various points belonging to Latvia, Poland or the Russian Empire.

Yet there was no contact with any of my relatives or cousins. She told me why – the two brothers who arrived had a pact to set up my great grandfather in business. As soon as he succeeded, he broke with the relatives, and a legacy of silence ensued.

When my sister said: “You know you cause a lot of shit in my life,” I was already switched off except for a vague unease that was swept away by the clear waters sounding over the rocks.

“We can’t all do it right all of the time, nor can we take responsibility for ancestors we didn’t even know,” I told her.

When my bobba died, or rather when her stroke first hit, I once again had to do the paper work before I could go and see her. “Listen, she’s in a serious state, they’ve got her in Fish Hoek Hospital, she’s on a breathing machine and won’t last long.” I couldn’t tell what the Branch was thinking on the other side of the phone. They were very formal and officious.

“We need the forms, please. As soon as you’re ready. Don’t worry, we’ll sort it out quickly and get you on your way,” they promised.

Once again there was the ritual of getting a magistrate to apply his legal mind to my petition to leave the magisterial district for a few hours. Behind the ritual, the cops gave the actual okay. My bobba was in a coma by the time I finally drove through Muizenberg where my normal

boundary ended. There was spittle coming from the side of her mouth, heavy breathing, and a few hairs that grew energetically from her cheek.

I wasn't there when she died, either. I don't know if she was really thinking about us ever. Even alive her thoughts often seemed in the old country, and she would suddenly shout at us in Yiddish. Her death felt like an odd requiem to the new country she'd grown up in. Her death, my difficult absence, and then my brief and bureaucratically endorsed presence, all underlined the circles and distance our respective generations seemed to travel.

I was banned, yet in an odd way I felt quite privileged. I couldn't do everything I wanted, sure, but life felt quite comfortable. I could think, I could go on holiday, my family was around. I had a job in the libraries, surrounded by books that I loved.

So I sat in my back yard in Harfield Village. Time had passed. For the moment, a small rent-controlled cottage in a narrow street was mine to call home. Harfield was out of the intense communal hubbub of students in Observatory where I used to live before I moved back in with my mom and then out again.

Unlike the cement-filled streets of grimy Observatory, Harfield had a slightly older crowd and a lot more soul. There were sympathetic people where I could pop in and talk even if we invariably spoke politics. In a way the situation around us dominated our lives, despite everything. But there were not enough people for me to feel crowded in.

Harfield Village was on the brink of being wiped out by the Group Areas Act. A few coloured families still lived nearby but we seldom mixed. The subway at the railway station was filled with graffiti like "Terssa loves Hakkels, so what?" and "Slow Poison wus here". "We are not trouble makers but virgin breakers" was sprayed in big from one end of the subway to the steps at the other side.

There was some greenery in the Village. Loquat trees projected into the streets. There were small gardens, little tended patches, in front of most of the houses. The houses were crammed together, low cottages with low-walled stoeps looking onto narrow roads. It was ramshackle but hardly shabby. Owners and renters alike had some pride in their little homes.

I took a puff of weed I'd scored from a guy called Chicken up the road in Second Avenue. I blew the smoke into the branches of the loquat tree. I felt mellow, smooth. Cut-off cable-barrels formed a platform where I loved to sit. The leaves hung over me where I sat in an old yellow tubular-steel chair. The leaves were deep green, oily, healthy and full of growth. Even at night, they seemed to exude solidity and life.

I felt good as I breathed out the smoke. Like a medicine, I could feel the herb beginning to do its work. I relaxed and felt fuzzy. I contemplated the stars. Down the road, I heard the trains rattle past on the tracks. I felt lapped up by a warm and balmy Cape evening breeze.

Chapter Two: May-July, 1983.

It was a beautiful day, one of those rare early winter days in the Cape. There was a chill that marked the turn towards winter. Now the sun had emerged after a few days of howling rain and drizzle. The sun had been out long enough to completely change my mood. The sky was light and thin but blue.

Sometimes, things happen in simple yet surprising ways. Before you know it, you are in the middle of things and up to your neck.

I went for my usual run through Harfield Village. I crossed through the subway, smiling at the crazy graffiti I had seen a hundred times before. I was on the other side of the tracks and ran along the railway line towards Kenilworth and Wynberg. I sweated and became more absorbed yet more tuned to the world around in a blurry kind of way.

There were thin shadows under the trees which had lost their leaves, sharp against the brightness of the sun. I turned back at Wynberg. There was very little traffic. From the corner of my eyes, I registered the mountain running like a huge wooded spine in the near distance. A single train clacked past me as I jogged along. In the carriages, a few faces seemed to look down at me as I ran. Approaching home, my spirit lifted. The sun glowed on the rows of cottages leading up from the station in the narrow street where I lived.

School had closed since I had started out on my run. Schoolgirls, out and about, greeted me cheerfully. “Haai, mister, maar jou boude lyk lekker!” someone said. I laughed. This was supposed to be a Unity Movement school, tied into the serious politics of Cape teachers. The schoolgirls seemed normal enough. There were a few boys around too, but it was the smiles and shy bravado of the girls that I noticed.

I fiddled with the latch on the wooden gate to my cottage. It was low, in the middle of a wooden picket fence and was painted a bright yellow. Most of the slats were intact, though a few had been re-attached during my more energetic bursts. The gate stuck and wouldn’t open.

I cursed myself. The rust on the latch caused it to jam endlessly; I always promised myself to put oil on or replace it. The girls laughed. Feeling loose and relaxed, I leaned against the pocked cement pillar of the gate post and flipped myself over the low wooden gate.

The lace on my trainer caught in one of the points on the top of a wooden slat as my other foot reached the ground. I hopped on my foot, gave a twist, turned and faced the gate and tried to extricate my captured leg without losing my balance. Once before I went flying into the weed ridden patch of garden in the front. I had my hands free now with no books in them, and at least there was no rain. I hopped around with one leg hooked up.

The schoolgirls laughed, then broke into giggles. They staggered down the road clutching each other and covering their mouths to stop themselves laughing too loud. I saw their fine black hair, long against the back of their uniforms. I blushed, felt flattered that they were watching and tried to come up with a fast and clever reply. They had disappeared by the time I managed to unhook my leg from the gate and look vaguely cool.

From the gate across the road, I heard a rattle and glanced up There was Prega standing, flustered as usual, scratching his head. Prega was lank and sometimes clumsy-looking as a result. He had long curly hair, framing his head against a wide afro, dark eyebrows and stubble of black beard. He seemed a bit more wild than usual, as if he had just jumped up out of bed or a deep thought was troubling him. He whistled to make sure he had my attention.

In the background was a long stretch of bushy garden, overgrown and never tended. The house was set back, with a sheet metal outhouse near to the gate. There was a concrete piece of yard where I sometimes used to teach kids karate in the days when I was still banned.

“Hey, man!” Prega said, “How are you doing?” He waited till I was staring directly at him and was smiling.

“Listen, man, we want to have that meeting in about half an hour.” The tone was casual and matter-of-fact but there was just the hint of an order in it. I felt a flicker of excitement. Then something else, a worry and a memory I couldn’t quite place. His voice sounded far away.

“Huh?” I said, buying time.

Last week Prega had been talking about a meeting he went to a month back, follow-ups, activists getting together. I had avoided the discussion. Now the talk was back and Prega seemed to think I wanted to get involved. It was all starting up again. I wished I hadn’t come back so soon from my run and I told him that.

“I’m sorry, man,” said Prega. “I should have warned you. It’s the new organisation we’ve been talking about. I thought I told you about it. I’m sure you can help.”

I felt put out. Why would he want me involved now? “I suspect I’m out of my depth,” I said.

My muscles were already starting to cool down. I wanted to get inside, and do some stretching at the back. “Where are you guys meeting?” Then I felt stupid for hesitating. “Why not?” I said suddenly, as if to finish off the conversation.

I scratched the back of my legs where a drop of sweat was rolling towards the inside of my knee. The dreamy feeling from my run was coming to an abrupt end and I wanted to get away. I needed a joint.

“No, no! You’ll be fine!” Prega said cheerfully.

I didn’t need this enthusiasm. “People like some of the things you’ve said. They know you used to be banned. You’ll be alright.” Prega was looking pleased, he pulled himself up, less sloppy and more like a determined activist. Confident suddenly. I felt like a fool and wished I had shut up.

I could feel myself blushing. I was pleased to be asked, I suppose. Maybe it only meant lots of loose meetings and big talk at best. “I’ve got to jump in a bath. I’ll be right over,” I said. I hated the way I sounded, so clipped, almost terse. “I assume I’ve got time?”

I turned away and went up the steps to the stoep. I fiddled with the key to the front door, turned it in the Yale lock and opened the front door. I walked straight down the passage through to the back, turned on the hot tap in the bath. There was just enough time to add the ritual few drops of Arnica for my muscles. The herbal, medicinal smell reminded me of the concoctions my mother would bring home from the hospital when she was still a nurse.

Sitting in my towel after the shortened wash, cooling down in the back yard, I rolled a quick smoke, partly out of habit, partly to calm down from the rush I had been put into by Prega. I pulled the packet from under the drain where I had it hidden. I took out a small handful of dope, churning it up and throwing out the pips. I rolled a perfect joint, mostly using my right hand, while I kept the towel from slipping too much. I lit the joint, took a few puffs and blew the smoke upwards. It wisped through the leaves of the loquat tree.

The afternoon light seemed to stream through the leaves as the smoke curled upwards and out from my nostrils. In the background, even from my back yard, I had a view of the mountain, the twin edges and the ridge above Mowbray, the sharpness of Devil's Peak. It was in stark contrast to the steeper but more wooded and darker glades further towards Newlands that I could see as I walked to the back of the small overgrown garden, and peered between the houses.

I drew another puff, relaxing almost instantly, slowing down. Thoughts seemed to take longer, linked and joined together. I thought about the mountain and its great familiar bulk, how it was always there, only the wind and sky around it changing. I finished the joint, pulled myself together, and hurried inside to change. I felt vague but my cheeks were stinging slightly as if flushed.

I walked over the road and pushed open the gate to Prega's. It scraped on the concrete underneath, rocked slightly and swung open as I walked quickly through the overgrown garden, crossing the yard where I used to teach karate, went in through the wooden door at the back and wiped the back of my hand on my forehead, sniffing my fingers in case they smelt of weed.

Inside, it was dark as I went through the kitchen. It looked as if no one had realised the afternoon was coming to an end. Dishes with uneaten bits of pasta and meat were stacked up in the porcelain sink. There was a red patterned melamine table in the middle of the kitchen with some bowls and old bits of food on it, chipped cups and a few books. In the corner, facing the kitchen entrance was an ancient frigidaire like an overweight, middle-aged man stuck away and standing with hunched, curved shoulders.

The fridge door was covered in stickers which shouted out loudly with slogans in bright red. "Don't buy Fatti's and Moni's!" "Release detainees!" Underneath, on the same sticker in defiant black, the words "Take forward their fight!" appeared.

There was a photograph of Prega standing in the middle of a demonstration, holding a poster with a drawing of Mandela, or what the poster-artist thought he would look like. The artist had made Madiba seem cherubic, hair parted in the middle, very old-fashioned and serious, face taking up the whole poster, disembodied and shaped like a lemon if one stared from a distance. We often laughed at the imagination in the picture.

Held up by a fridge magnet, there was also a photograph of Prega's girlfriend, her blonde, wispy hair blowing in the wind on a beach that looked much like Noordhoek or somewhere up the West Coast. I never had asked where the photograph was taken, because I thought I would

expose myself to Prega. He would be able to tell that I quite liked her, the way she looked and smiled. The water behind her in the picture seemed cold and icy.

I went through to the lounge and its furniture, familiar from afternoons of reading borrowed books, arguing with Prega and his mates, exploring deep and serious topics fuelled by too much liquor. An old couch was pushed up against the wall. The covering of faux corduroy material had long faded into a light brown. A dirty looking rug was thrown over the back of the sofa. Scuffs and a few holes showed on the rounded armrests.

Plastic beanbags, brightly coloured, were spoiled by spreading dark blots that could have been some kind of oil stain. A number of kitchen chairs with steel tubing and flimsy plastic seats like 'Made in Hong Kong' toys, were spread around. The black rubber non-slip bottoms were missing from the legs except on one. On the walls, there were a couple of posters with slogans, and a cheesy photograph of a fishing harbour with a smiling Cape fisherman holding up his catch in the foreground.

It was dark in the lounge, with the light from the only window mostly blocked by the corrugated metal overhang covering the porch outside. There were already quite a few people in the room.

Prega looked up from where he was crouching in front of the sofa in serious looking conversation. The man he was talking to blew streams of smoke out of the side of his mouth. He was tapping pages of paper that he had on his lap. He seemed agitated or angry, his eyes looking fierce.

"Oh! This is Jeremy," Prega said to no-one in particular. He jumped up and went over to put on the light switch. A low single bulb hanging from a wire was switched on. There was no lampshade. Prega looked at me as if he were surprised to see me in the light. I blushed.

"I think I told you about him," said Prega. "Jeremy lives just over the road. He wants to see if he can help."

People in the room looked up, with two of them waving laconically by way of a greeting. A white man sitting on one of the tubular chairs nodded and stared as if he knew me, the only one who gave any impression he was expecting people to pop in to help.

The man Prega had been talking to held out his hand as I went round the room. His grip was surprisingly limp for a man who appeared to be in charge. He had deep black eyebrows, raised quizzically, uneven. One of his eyes seemed to squint across the room. The other eye was very direct, and the jet black pupil caught me in a fixed unsettling stare. It wasn't so much a welcome as a once-over that made me feel under pressure.

I was convinced he could smell the smoke on me. The man had a dark pock-marked face; his black hair was disordered, even unwashed. His smile was an insincere mixture of amusement and curiosity. His whole demeanour made me feel as if we had met before or he knew all about me from someone. My voice cracked as I said "Hello!"

Letting go of the man's hand, I felt put out that no-one seemed to care that I had made an effort to come. I couldn't think of any witty comments to relieve the tension. As he dropped my hand, the man looked down at his papers again.

I shifted attention and shook hands with the other man sitting on the sofa. This was an older African man. He sat up very straight. He had on an unfashionable check shirt with a knitted tie and wore a jacket. He had a graying moustache that was almost joined to mutton chop sideburns down the side of his face. He was wearing old-fashioned thick plastic spectacles, which he removed before he took my extended hand. He put his other hand over mine in a firm clasp as we were introduced by Prega.

“This is Jeremy,” Prega said. “The man who was banned before.”

“Good. We’re going to need all the help we can get.” He spoke a name but I instantly forgot what it was.

I edged round the room and waved. In a cheery voice, I said “Hi, everyone!” and sank relieved into one of the beanbags on the floor. No one was responding. I took a couple of deep breaths and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. No-one was looking in my direction. My mind drifted back to my cottage. I glanced around. I threw my arm backwards and leaned casually in the beanbag, trying to seem relaxed.

In the beanbag right next to me was a very pretty woman, the sole woman in the room. Only after I sat back did I realize she was there. Her hair was curly in an Afro-style that reminded me of Prega’s. Whereas Prega was always slouching, she had a perky and outgoing manner with lovely oriental-looking eyes.

She was talking to a man in the chair next to her. As she spoke, her hands kept on moving. Every now and again she pointed slender fingers towards the man and her lips would move into an expression that was poised for an answer. There was no pause before she moved on to another set of rapid fire words.

Her skin was a lovely glowing olive, her arms muscular as if she exercised regularly. Her skirt fell open at one knee. I took in a glimpse of well-formed thigh and soft-looking skin. Stop staring and focus on the meeting, I thought.

The only other white person in the room, the man with whom she was speaking, was wearing a priest’s collar. He was talking to Lizet, saying her name emphatically a few times as if he were trying to stop her stream of words. He had a very pleasant open face. His hair was white and thinning.

He was starting to get chubby around the waist, judging by the folds where his blue cotton shirt was tucked in. His pants were pulled unfashionably high. He and the African gentleman on the couch were the only ones not smoking.

I was already feeling dizzy with the noise and new people, who were all talking together. Still, the smoke and half darkness in the room suited me. With all the smoke in the room I felt reassured that it would be likely to hide any smell of weed. I shouldn’t have had that stuff, I thought, beginning to spin out of my depth. My head was turning as a few more people dribbled into the room. They gave confident hand slaps to friends in the room and seemed to ignore me or – if they came to greet – stared curiously as they took my hand.

I remained leaning back in the beanbag. These must be the heavies, I thought. They've been working together for a long time the way their intense arguments begin within seconds, as they resume old debates with each other. I couldn't pick up any detail.

The older man coughed. He sat up even straighter than previously. He looked at his watch. "We are already six minutes late," he said, and began with the agenda immediately. He announced the items in a formal way and waited to see if anyone had anything to add. It was all about the rally, about the launch of the organisation and decisions that had already been made somewhere else, from what I could tell.

The chairperson gave people plenty of time to talk and make their point. Twice he stopped speakers and wouldn't allow them to go on, very strict about the subject at hand. They all spoke with some deference to him, more than just respect for his age or his dignified bearing. Twice there was a burst of laughter as everyone caught a joke that was completely obscure to me. The man held up his hand to stop the hooting and laughing.

Peter Hendricks was the man with the roving eye. He laid out plans and pushed ahead with the detail. There were references to other regions and people he knew there. There were places I had been to, like Athlone, but I had never been near Ravensmead, Bonteheuwel, Welcome Estate or the newly established Coloured township of Mitchell's Plain and had no idea what they looked like. Of course I had heard of the African townships Langa, Gugulethu and Nyanga, but had only seen some of these areas alongside the highway when travelling the freeway on holiday from Cape Town to the mountains and the countryside.

There was lots of talk from Hendricks about the Boere this and the Boere that. His responses to his own rhetorical questions were incredibly detailed as if he had long thought about what he was going to do. Buses had to be arranged; the hall must be booked. People in the meeting were assigned to go and talk to various contacts, to Comrade So-and-so in this area, Comrade Y in that. Agendas, seating plans, banners, transport, ways of keeping contact, were all listed and dealt with. Someone had to take responsibility for each matter.

The pretty woman was going to do the publicity. A club of ham radio enthusiasts had agreed to monitor delegates as they came in over the mountains. Nothing must be left to chance. The details made me even dizzier.

"Comrades, it's got to work," Hendricks said with some finality. He looked around. His squint eye caught me, stared at me. "We've got one chance. The time is now," he said. "If the Western Cape messes it up…that's it for any influence we want to have!"

Lizet had moved her legs and stretched out her calves as she uncurled on the beanbag next to me. She made a remark in Afrikaans, a joke about his influence being more than the Cape, and pointed her long fingers at Hendricks as everyone packed up.

And suddenly they were all looking at me. Lizet's eyebrows were raised and her lips were stretched downwards as she pushed out her jaw. Both Hendricks's eyes seemed to focus on me for a moment. I felt as if I were being pressed back into the beanbag by the whole room staring.

"What would you prefer me to do?" I said lamely. Everyone laughed. There were voices, a conversation; the priest was looking more kindly than the others. A couple of names were

thrown around and again, they all laughed when Hendricks said to send me to Langa to work. Finally, they made a decision.

“I’ve never done food before,” I said, “but it should be okay. I mean, I can do a pretty reasonable chicken. I can’t say how it’ll work for seven hundred.” Nobody took it as funny.

“Good, then that’s the catering sorted. The last item is what we do if we get locked up!” Hendricks said quickly. This rounded off the discussions, it was another joke, it seemed. The old African man called them to order and summarised quickly. They agreed on the date of the next meeting. Everybody was standing up, looking at their watches. They kept talking to each other in little huddles, lighting cigarettes. Prega seemed to have disappeared, perhaps into the kitchen or the bathroom.

I scurried off back home over the road and into my cottage. I only started to feel relieved once I had managed to light a second joint in the back of the garden. I leaned back in the rickety chair on the platform I had built in the back. It was night. The stars were blinking, dimmed by city lights. There was a cool chill in the air, almost damp. The slow smoke twirling upwards dissipated against the dark sky and flickering pinpoints of stars.

I looked at the small scrap of paper on which was written the name of Mrs Abdullah, a Muslim woman from Wynberg. She was some comrade’s mother apparently. Lizet had come over at the end of the meeting and smilingly wrote down the phone number. She had laughed and winked. “She will be invaluable in getting the catering going,” she had said. “Start with her.” Then more gently: “Don’t worry, they do catering all the time. It’s not such a big deal.”

A small deal, then: Cooking for hundreds of politicised delegates. Catering at least had the virtue of sounding technical. It should just be pots and food, no running around trying to inspire comrades about this or that. No backroom thoughts or caucusing about who was on my side, no questions about my credentials. I was happy to leave the politics to the heavies who knew what was going on. I took another deep breath, felt the smoke doing its work. I gave a big sigh.

“Yussis!” I said, to no one in particular. I shook my head. “Yussis!”

--+++--

Two days later I found myself sitting around a deeply polished table in a neat contained dining-room in Wynberg, talking to Mrs Abdullah. She was slender, warm, welcoming.

There were ducks on the wall. A flock of porcelain birds headed in serried formation towards the far corner of the room. Small porcelain cups with gentle folds were stored in a glass-fronted cabinet. Next to the cabinet, above and to the left, was a frame with bright red script in Arabic. The background was painted to look like gold inlay peeling with age. On the opposite wall, there was a Tretchikoff print of a green-tinted oriental woman.

Mrs Abdullah looked as friendly as she had sounded on the phone. Her hands were folded neatly on the table. She raised her thumbs and rolled her hands when she wanted to make a point. The back of her hands were filled with dappled freckles, her fingernails carefully maintained. Her hair was kept under control by a carefully folded doek around her head. Occasionally she reached over and touched my hands. She swept a stray wisp of hair back under the edge of her head-covering.

She insisted on pouring a sweet flavoured tea herself from a china pot decorated with roses, the milk already warmed up and mixed into the tea. There was a lovely smell of spices; I recognized cardamom and cinnamon.

She was scared for her daughter, Mrs Abdullah said. Mishra was very caught up in the affairs of the new Front that was to be launched. She hardly gave herself a break from her last detention and was back in the thick of things.

"Mishra's going to end up there again. In jail." Mrs Abdullah sighed.

"There's nothing to be done, isn't that so?" she said. "We can't stop our children. You young people do what you want. I'm right aren't I?"

I kept quiet. Mrs Abdullah carried on, answered her own question: "I suppose we can't. Stop them."

"But we have to do what we have to do!" I said sharply. I jumped up with a little cry. Mrs Abdullah nodded. She looked at me surprised.

She made notes in a small notebook, using a sharp pencil. She rubbed out mistakes diligently before writing over the space she had just cleared. She kept on referring to me to reassure her and confirm what she said. I answered more firmly as if I had done this before.

The delegates will be coming in the day before the rally. They will arrive from all over, mostly on buses. No, we don't have to work out where they stay; they'll give us the list. There will be transport when they first arrive that will take people to where they are sleeping over. People will split up to stay all over, in halls, private houses. If we can find places to cook at the venues where they stay it will help; there are madressas or church halls that should have kitchens there.

"It all seems very straightforward," I said. "And the next day, of course, they'll meet in the same civic hall where the rally is, so we have to get food in and out of there as well. Feed the delegates like an army. We must clear the place, let the meeting end, and finish in good time to decorate the hall before the masses arrive for the big rally." I was repeating what Hendricks had told us.

"There is a proper kitchen at the civic hall," I said authoritatively to Mrs Abdullah, "so that's okay."

I explained how specific Peter Hendricks had been. "They have looked at every issue like in a war," I said. "They'll adjust things if we come up with good reasons to change the plans," I noted. "We meet at least twice a week. Late, after everything else is over."

I wanted to add I had never seen the hall in Mitchell's Plain – I had never even been in Mitchells' Plain. I had not the slightest idea what the layout was of the average madressa or how you were supposed to behave in a place like that. What kind of toilets did they have, how many? I had never even heard of the word *madressa* until they instructed me to contact the madressas for assistance. I swallowed and paused as if waiting for confirmation myself.

“Peter Hendricks says we must just get out and about and see the places. They gave us the names of quite a few of those who will be helping.” I smiled, feigning wisdom.

At the mention of Peter Hendricks’s name again, Mrs Abdullah looked up, stared straight at my face from over the table and frowned in a worried sort of way.

“No, we should get it sorted out soon,” she said. “The sooner we know what we’re doing, the more room for last-minute changes. Things always change. They never work out like you want.”

She giggled and looked hard at me again. “We’ve got each other to make this happen, partner.” She patted me on the back of my hands. I smiled back at her dark, furrowed eyebrows, her kind look.

“They always leave these things to the women,” she said suddenly. “It’s so nice you were prepared to help.” Her smile was lovely and without a hint of irony.

On the logistics of catering, she was completely in charge. She reeled off the names of some of her friends, women from other areas who were part of the women’s organisations. There would be no shortage of volunteers. “Sometimes I think the women are braver than the men,” she said with a naughty expression on her face. “They just get on with the job, you know.”

“Boeta Dawood has big pots,” she mused. “He can round up more if we need. We should need about eighteen or nineteen gas rings to keep the food warm, I think. We can cook a lot of the stuff in advance. Not everything! Eggs will go off if we leave them standing around too long.”

“And soup! Hot soup is always a hit. It fills you up,” she said with enthusiasm. “You can put in lentils, vegetables. Lots of carrots, peas, make it thick. And make it hot-hot so when they step off the buses, you can put a cup straight into their hands.” There would have to be some fruit for breakfast, something fresh.

I began to feel excited. The pictures in my mind were starting to become real. I listened as she reeled off options. What would make people feel good? What would work easily?

Into Mrs Abdullah’s book went the details. How many people you would need to do the cooking and the preparation. How long it would take to peel all the boiled eggs. Should we do it at the venues, or cook it all up and then take food out to where the people were? “That’s one thousand four hundred boiled eggs, and more for the breyani,” she told me. “Oh yes, and we’ll need salt and pepper.”

She nodded carefully when I asked a question, as if my opinions were carefully considered, important, and I knew what belonged and where. She wrote down figures, names, addresses.

She added up weights, speaking in pounds and ounces. How much of what spicing had to be put in, how much water for the ingredients, how much salt. She rubbed out with the eraser on the top of the pencil, added, re-wrote the details. Every now and again she would look up at me, ask me something with an affectionate smile as I made a joke or offered a comment.

“And fruit! You can never have enough,” she said again, suddenly, as if we had just thought of it. “People are going to be stressed. They need fresh,” she confirmed with me. “They can also just

help themselves as they need to. Don't you think?" She lowered her eyes as I nodded agreement. "Lots of fruit, then!"

She reminded me of my mother, practical, without fussing. I remembered my mom coming home from shopping at the markets, bringing home boxes of fruit for me and my sisters, waiting for her, excited and chattering from early in the morning when she left. Then when she returned, we dived into the boxes of apples. We would all sit around and shell green plastic string bags of peas, throw the peas into large plastic bowls and discard the pods. Lots of fresh, even then.

----++++----

About a week later, Mrs Abdullah and I took ourselves to the Salt River Market to buy fresh and in bulk.

It was a bright cheery place, some ten or fifteen kilometers from the central market in Epping where most of the wholesale buying was done. The front of the market building was Victorian colonial. It had large whitewashed walls with a huge steel gate at the entrance. The gate hung dangerously on its rusted hinges as we drove in.

The paint was cracking, though the signs of welcome were bright and hand-done with flourishes, luminous colours and writing that was bold and childish. There were painted paw paws, bananas, apples. They seemed to spill off the walls out of baskets that had no limits to their depth. There was no order or attention to size or realistic colours.

Inside the market, things were even more hectic. I squeezed my Toyota Corolla between a small delivery truck and a battered looking bakkie with dents and huge rust holes on the side. On the far side of the car was a larger delivery vehicle, its canvas flaps blowing aside in the wind to reveal boxes of bananas and green tufts of carrots stacked up.

People were shouting from all sides. I could smell the ripeness as I pushed open the car door and moved it gently to avoid hitting the bakkie. I slithered out, locked the car and gave Mrs Abdullah a big grin. She was already out of the car on the other side and looking around for something or someone.

"This is amazing!" I shouted above the wind and the other noise.

She nodded and pointed to a stall at the far end of the large courtyard in which we were standing. All along the side of the courtyard were stalls of varied size. From what I could see as I glanced around, they were all selling different things.

Osman's Spices was the nearest stall. It had rows of yellow, turmeric-orange and desert-sand powders. Baskets held whole wrapped sticks of cinnamon or star aniseed. The smell of the spices was overpowering. Further on, someone else had bananas stacked high. One stall displayed only greens: broccoli, beans and cabbages.

Khan was the "Orange King", judging from a huge sign that was painted above the large front of a building to the left of the courtyard. Below this sign his orange stacks took up the space of four or five of the smaller stalls, spreading across a number of squat pillars. The sign above Khan's was dominated by a bloated Oros man throwing fruit into the air. He was trumpeting into a speech bubble and "Never get colds!" was his unambiguous and emphatic message.

As I rushed along to keep up with Mrs Abdullah, I noticed that many of the smaller stalls actually repeated the same menu choice of fruits and veggies, only arranged differently. What was in season was sold by nearly everyone. Only a few sellers actually seemed to specialise after all, or to have enough of a monopoly of supplies to hang onto a particular product.

I passed a display of tomatoes of various sizes. They included big firm fruits and all sorts of smaller varieties I hadn't seen before. I paused. "I want to come back later for some of the small bright red tomatoes," I said loudly. By then, Mrs Abdullah was a good stall or two ahead. She didn't hear anything; I hurried along following her.

"This is Hajeera," said Mrs Abdullah, stopping suddenly. I almost bumped into the two women at the stall. I caught myself and brushed back my hair with my hand. Mrs Abdullah spoke again as she said in a confidential way, "Hajeera's husband is in the Unity Movement."

"Oh!" The Unity Movement people were mostly disdainful of the white left.

"Thanks for meeting with us then!" I felt silly; it was hardly a meeting we had come for.

At the same time, I was taken with Hajeera and the way she looked. She had a beautiful face and smooth skin, with large bulging eyes that examined me in a questioning sort of way, making her seem both wise and curious at the same time. She was wearing the same kind of head scarf as Mrs Abdullah, of a much bolder colour and far more elegant. Hajeera somehow wore her headscarf with an air of jauntiness.

She was dressed in an overcoat that was buttoned up over a soft ribbed polo-neck. Below her neck hung a lovely brown obsidian stone set in a silver piece. In her market-gear, Hajeera still looked trim and elegant. She held my look with a straight and open stare.

I took an instant liking to her as she shook my hand enthusiastically.

"Hell, we're going to get somewhere!" she said brightly. "Whatever my husband says."

"Yes. We've got to say no to things," I answered. "It's time, isn't it?"

She laughed riotously, then looked at me curiously. "I don't think we really know each other," she said and I moved off.

Hajeera and Mrs Abdullah went to the corner of the stall, nattering away under their breath. They touched hands. Hajeera put out her arm and held Mrs Abdullah by the shoulder. They kissed once or twice in a sisterly way. Then Hajeera was on the phone, an old black receiver wired to a black bakelite base that rested precariously on the edge of a tomato box. The phone had a wind-up arm on the one side, a pinched cradle on the phone for grip.

I stood and watched as Hajeera spoke in an animated way into the receiver. Occasionally she lowered her voice and I could see her whispering earnestly, gesturing with the other hand, the receiver cradled between her shoulder and tilted head. She held her hand over the mouthpiece and shook her head, looking towards Mrs Abdullah. Then she raised one finger, pointing upwards and leaned over backwards as she laughed silently. She stared across the stall at me.

I smiled back.

“Come!” she said. She rushed across the stall, grabbed my hand and went off in the direction of my car, pulling me along with Mrs Abdullah following.

“This is Osman’s. He’s promised us all the spices we need!” she said. “And lentils and beans!”

Then she laughed. “I told him he’d better give – or all the woman of Athlone will stop having sex with their husbands,” she said. “We’ll also tell them how he’s been treating the women at his stall!”

She laughed again. “Never mind, luvvie!” she said patting me, “I’m just joking.”

“…but he is giving us the spices.”

She rushed past Osman’s stall. I glanced sideways at the rows of spices again. They were stacked in baskets and bowls, all neatly arranged. Each spice had its name and price written in Koki, on thin peach box planks that were stuck into the mountains of colourful powder. Osman himself was pottering around in the back and weighing powders on an old-fashioned spotty steel scale, his red fez balanced on his graying head. From under his rimmed glasses, he looked up, gave a faint leer as Hajeera hurried on.

Mr Khan, a wizened old man who hissed from the side of his cracked and gold-capped teeth, sold apples, not oranges after all. There were five or more different varieties, stored in a mixture of boxes. The biggest of these were huge canvas containers on a steel frame with wheels. Vast amounts of Golden Delicious apples were stored in this big skip. In front of his stall, Mr Khan had parked a bakkie, the back of which was filled with red crisp-looking apples.

“Appelsss,” he hissed lovingly, waving towards the bakkie.

“You’re white!?” he said to me, suddenly, looking up at me with his head cocked quizzically to one side. Like a wild bird, I thought.

“Yes. We’ve all got to say no, all of us!” I said, the slogan of the new Front that was still to be launched.

Khan nodded vigorously.

“OK. OK.”

He put his hands on the side of his face, holding his head. He scratched a thinning wisp of hair, as if he were considering deeply what to do. Then he spoke firmly. “We’re gonna give you apples,” he said.

“And we’re going to send our bakkie. You just tell us where. Give us about a week and tell us how much you want.” Then he shook my hand briskly.

“It’ssss time to say no!” he repeated.

Then we were saying goodbye to Hajeera. I stood to one side, watching as she held Mrs Abdullah. She rubbed her hands across Mrs Abdullah's shoulders and back. "Look after yourself, Tietie," she said. "Give your daughter a kiss." She held Mrs Abdullah again, softly.

She gave me a quick hug, then held me at arms' length and looked straight in my eyes. "Take care of Mrs Abdullah," she ordered. "Don't get me wrong, please."

I slid into the driver's seat of my Toyota.

"Oh yes. Boeta Mailie is going to give you eggs," Hajeera shouted as the car moved off. "Ask him for soup bones as well."

From the front seat, Mrs Abdullah wound down her window. She waved goodbye.

"Come on, partner!" she said to me. "Let's get going."

I snapped the seatbelt into place. Giving a wave I edged my way out of the parking lot back into the street. We went south along the Lower Main Road heading in the direction that would take Mrs Abdullah home. As the road eased into Liesbeeck Parkway, I started breathing more easily.

Just before the turnoff to Wynberg I realised I had forgotten to buy the small tomatoes.

I put my foot down on the accelerator. The car shuddered and moved faster.

---+++---

Time to report back; I was in Prega's lounge once more. Everyone at the planning meeting seemed quite pleased with the progress.

Even Peter Hendricks had positive things to say. "It's really good the way you're getting all these people involved," he said. "The people at the madressa say how respectful you are. How much you listen for a white man!"

Ha-ha! I thought.

"And a Jewish white man, at that," said the reverend Allan, holding up his pale palms and turning his wrists to display the back of his hands.

"Everyone's so keen to help," I said, unable to think of anything else

"Yes, I suppose," said Hendricks in a distracted way.

He quickly introduced the next report, about the transport arrangements. Mr Thabata, the older man, took over, keeping the meeting moving along.

Just before midnight, Lizet reported. She was animated. It had been a good week for her too. "People are warming to the idea. It is like a critical mass building up," she said. "They get pamphlets at the stations and distribute them all along the line. Then they get off in town, and the same pamphlets are being given out. That weekend, they get the pamphlets in their homes.

This time the activists are talking to them. Everywhere we are telling them the same message: Say no! It's time." She looked around, triumphantly. Here eyes were shining. "Our people will fight!"

Peter Hendricks intervened. "Let's just make the rally happen," he said.

Lizet didn't pause, went on as if she hadn't heard a thing. She started raving about the Buffalo Soldier. She was in gear. Still, the ideas didn't sound very clear to me though everyone else laughed and sat up in their chairs; Rev Allan clapped and slid from side to side, caught up in her excitement. Mr Thabata, stiff and upright as always, allowed himself a smile.

I was lost once again, things moving too fast.

"Jeremy's going to let us use his car this weekend!" Lizet said suddenly, turning to me. There was absolute silence in the room.

"Oh," I said. "Okay. What am I supposed to do?"

Chapter 3: July 1983

“Just pick me up at about seven on Saturday morning.” That had been Lizet’s response. That was it. Another whole adventure was about to begin and I didn’t know how.

There were one or two groans. Prega gave a catcall. “Well, good luck,” said the reverend with a kind twinkle. Laugh lines appeared and he scratched the mole next to his nose. “Don’t crash!” Then the meeting broke up quickly.

“You’re mad,” Beeton said to me when he heard the story.

Beeton was sandy haired, a big, exuberant fellow with a permanent grin. He had large, burly shoulders and had a preference for faded tweed jackets. He had been friends with me from high school.

Now we were standing at the front door of Beeton’s Rosebank cottage. It led onto a small stoep that had last been painted years ago. All sorts of boxes spilled over on the stoep, and broken furniture was stored against a wall. There were bowls with cat food and water in the middle of newspapers that had been laid out.

“You’re effing mad!” Beeton said: “Or I am. I agree to let you get me at six-thirty in the morning. You force me to drink crappy coffee with you.” He took a last sip, and put his empty mug down on a nearby cardboard box which was crammed with books and papers. “And you still don’t know what exactly Buffalo Soldier is or where we are going exactly. Or so you say.”

“I do,” I said slowly. “I do know. You and I know,” I said with emphasis, then paused. “You and I know. It’s a song by Bob Marley: Buffalo Soldier.”

Beeton laughed. “You are an idiot,” he said loudly. “Anyway, it’s your car; it’s your life. If I’m stupid enough to take you at your word, I suppose it’s my problem. I hope someone feeds my cats before it is their problem as well.”

He pulled the front door shut with a bang and gestured as he realised the sound of the door had probably woken his housemates.

“Come on, let’s go,” he shouted over the roof of the car. He waited for me to unlock the door of the Corolla, squeezed into the passenger seat and pushed back the seat to give his legs more room. He buckled up the seat belt.

“Let’s go.”

It took about fifteen minutes to reach the flat on Klipfontein Road in Athlone where Lizet stayed. It was a funny, lop-sided block painted with whitewash, somehow both high and squat at the same time. It stood on a restrained plot of land which had space for a tarred parking area only. There were some washing lines up against the back stairs to the building. The parking lot was hemmed in by a chain mesh fence in poor repair.

Across the side road was a used car dealership that stocked run-down cars like my own Toyota. Ranked together, under multi-coloured awnings, they stood polished and waiting.

There was hardly any traffic on Klipfontein Road at that time of morning. Over the road, there were ugly rows of municipal flats. They had a dowdy, grim feel, low buildings painted in dusty and yellow gloss paint. A few delivery trucks whizzed past. There was mist around in pockets, though the wind and drizzle from the night before had dropped.

“I brought my friend along,” I said, “in case we need to move anything or whatever.” We were on the third floor at the top of the stairwell, in a passageway at the back of the flats that looked over the parking lot.

Lizet was up and about, dancing in a pair of jeans and bright yellow UDF tee-shirt. “It’s time!” was emblazoned across the back. She managed to grab Beeton’s hand and shake it, smiling as she let go and continued to spin round and round.

I saw her well-formed shoulders, slim but strong, beautiful skin on the back of her neck. Then she was tugging at her hair with a long comb. She was jigging the comb in and out to give more of an Afro effect. She didn’t have shoes on or seem to feel the cold.

She was making coffee for everyone. “This is Nescafe Gold,” she said, clinking mugs on a tray. “This is not the usual Ricoffy crap. Everyone gets creamer,” she said. “Sorry. We got in too late for milk.”

There was a motorbike in the room with parts scattered all around it; in front of the bike on the floor a technical manual was open at the index. Oily newspapers held metal pieces and bits of cloth while a motorbike wheel rested in a corner. There was a worn brown sofa and a few cushions were scattered on the floor.

Beeton was talking to Lizet. She was listening intently, looking seriously up at his face, while he seemed amused.

“Oh, man!” she said to Beeton. “Of course it’s a song…”

There was another room leading off the main room. A tall reedy young man walked out through the doorway, thin but muscular, his hair tousled and soft-looking. He was wearing jeans and buttoning up a cotton shirt with long red lines. He seemed quite comfortable with us all, but Lizet barely paid him any attention.

He let his tongue hang out of his mouth then smiled at his rude gesture, scratching his head.

“*Mense*, I’m Jimmy,” he said loudly. “Let’s get the show on the road so I can go back to bed. It’s not worth disobeying this one,” he said and flicked his head towards Lizet. She looked cross, frowned and smiled at the same time.

Myself and Beeton were given loads of parts to carry with wires attached. We took these down the stairwell slowly and carefully. There was a large battery; two big speakers were tied together. Box-like electronic gadgets had a huge row of diodes and transformers which went

into the car boot along with the speakers while the rest of the parts went into the car. The front seat held the amplifier and mike. Jimmy clunked the seat belts on the front bucket seat to hold the machine in place.

“You plug this end into the cigarette lighter,” Jimmy said. “The battery’s just for boost.” He tied a make-shift rack on the roof, attached with ropes that went around and through the back windows of the car. On top was a pair of metallic speaker horns that he gripped firmly down with screws attached to the two wooden rails on the top of the car.

“Sorry, man. You’ll all have to climb in through the front,” Jimmy said. “Don’t try open the back doors or it will mess everything up.” There were squawks as he tested the mike.

Then he was off to go back upstairs, Lizet and Beeton squeezing into the car through the driver’s seat. They clambered over to the back of the car, giggling like old friends; they irritated me, as if this wasn’t serious business we were embarking on.

“My sister,” Beeton was saying, “that’s what you get for a wild Friday night,” or some equally frivolous comment as he clutched his head while Lizet pulled at his sandy hair and laughed.

“Which way?” I sounded sharp as I asked for directions. Lizet leaned forward to give instructions. “Left, left!” she shouted and I swung onto the M5, heading for the suburbs towards the South. “Lavender Hill, here we come,” she whooped and started to sing the recognizable chords of the Bob Marley song that had started us off.

Buffalo Soldier, Heading for America.
Fighting on arrival
Fighting for Survival
Oy yoi yoi yoi yo yo-yo-yoi yo.

Beeton and Lizet joined in together on the last line each time the chorus came up, stamped their feet as much as they could, squashed in with all the equipment inside the car while I tried to steer and change gear from time to time.

We went past the filling station that marked the turnoff into Grassy Park and passed the murky pond with bamboo reeds that was Princess Vlei, where fishermen still fished for carp. I drove past the serried rows of CAFDA houses on our right, the grim sameness of the houses a depressing reminder of wartime efforts to create good families and citizens amongst the poor. Cape Flats Distress Association was one of those charitable organizations set up to help with housing. The same grime as in Athlone seemed to cling to the face brick houses and corrugated metal roofs.

A bit further on and we would reach the boundary of my banning order at Military Road, Steenberg. For years, if I wanted to venture further, I had to apply to travel beyond this south side of the magisterial district. The administrative boundary cut me off from the beaches of my childhood in Muizenberg and I couldn’t visit my bobba without getting official permission. She was active amongst the Jews of the village until she had her stroke. I wasn’t allowed to venture into any of the Group Areas where Coloured people lived on either side of the road.

I was shaken from these thoughts by Lizet. She leaned over and yelled in an excited way. “This is it. Turn left! Lavender Hill.” I swung hard off Prince George’s Drive as the traffic light turned

orange, could feel the metal cone speakers clicking dangerously towards one side on the roof of the car. In the boot, baggage shifted.

Lizet was half-climbing into the passenger seat. She clambered over Beeton's lap then leaned over the back of the seat as she fiddled with wires, knocking into the gear stick as I tried to change down a gear. She pushed the ends of the wires into the cigarette lighter as we had been instructed.

"Hard left, hard left!" she whooped. "Again." She seemed barely interested in the turns in the road as I pulled the car left and drove into the first road that led into the township flats proper.

Lizet pushed in a button on the amp and a red light came on; sound began to boom over the speakers, the roof of the car thumped. We grinned. Lizet was smacking me on the back and shouting: "We did it!" she shouted.

The car swung from side to side as we pulled to a halt in a huge courtyard surrounded by rows of faded council sub-economic flats. Over the speakers, the fuzzy, rhythmic pulsing of Bob Marley's Buffalo Soldier announced our arrival and the new days we promised were on the way.

Born in America!
Fighting on Arrival
Fighting for Survival!
Oy yoi yoi oyoi yo yo-yo!

I locked the car carefully after Beeton and Lizet scrambled out, all legs and bodies.

I could see curious people looking over stairs, crammed onto landings in front of the top-floor flats. Downstairs, women peered between sheets of washing that hung from long wire lines and children ran towards us, already dancing to the amplified music, hips moving from side to side, screaming and jiving together. I noticed they were mostly barefoot and in patchwork clothes, many with small sores on their faces or scalps. This was a new rambunctious world coming at me.

Beeton and Lizet were already amongst the kids. They leaped up and down, arms moving forward and back as they lifted their knees Rasta-style and shouted with the refrain. Lizet threw her hands into the air, index fingers pointing skywards, her legs splayed back, shouting at the children in Afrikaans. The excitement gradually started to infect me as well.

"Hi! I'm Mrs Bea." A short stubby woman planted herself in front of me and grabbed me by the hand. She wore a flowery dress down to her knees. She was shaking my arm and holding onto me at the same time.

"Thanks for coming. This is great!" She beamed. "Not a lot of whites come here," she said.

She looked around and waved her arm with a flourish. I noticed the folds of flesh. She had strong muscles in her thick forearms and biceps, broad shoulders, a huge bosom. Her arms stuck pugnaciously out from her side or were folded across her chest as she talked. She seemed quite young when I looked at the dimples and the generous smile in her face yet on her arms her skin was worn and weathered.

“Lavender it certainly isn’t,” she said and pointed around again.

Mrs Bea walked over to say hello to Lizet. They kissed and hugged like friends. Lizet introduced her to Beeton. He gave Mrs Bea a big embrace and squeeze. It seemed to come easily to him. He pointed at the little ones still dancing and they both laughed.

The three of them walked back together to the car. Mrs Bea was explaining something to Beeton and Lizet. Then she pointed towards the corner of one of the flats where I saw a number of activists standing around. A few sat in the sun with their backs against the wall, some smoking while others chatted intensely in a huddle. There must have been some fifteen or twenty comrades all in yellow T-shirts, one or two already moving together to the beat from the car that drifted over to them.

I recognized Mr Thabata, looking dignified and relaxed in his black-framed spectacles and wearing a jacket and tie, a bright maroon shirt. “On time as always,” I thought. Then I noticed that there were quite a few comrades from the African areas amongst the activists. An older woman was standing close to Mr Thabata’s old Valiant that I last saw parked in Harfield, now looking perfectly in place at the far corner of the courtyard.

“That’s Mrs Thabata,” said Lizet.

Mr Thabata’s wife was walking over with a small group, smiling and waving. Lizet stepped forward and embraced her, a small frail-looking gogo with one eye almost closed over, that managed to give her eyebrow a laughing tilted look.

Her voice was surprisingly strong. “How are you, my darling?” she said with emphasis. “When are you going to visit like you promised?”

She came over to me, held my hand warmly; her one eye looked quizzically into my face. “You must be brave. But not foolish,” she instructed me and smiled.

The day moved fast. Lizet was near my car, holding the mike. She turned the music down. She was calling people down from the steps. “Stop working on your cars for a few minutes,” she exhorted them. “Vrouens, los julle wasgoed, asseblief.”

“We know you’re busy,” she said over the speakers. “We ask you to listen, asseblief. Our people will just take a few minutes of your time. Let them into your house. Just hear us out,” she begged.

She ended her speech with a loud “Amandla!” The activists in front of the car chanted their reply in unison and punched the air with their fists: “Ngawethu! To the people!” I recognised a few of them from the regional meeting the previous week, including a pretty university student from Grassy Park who had a particularly strong, square face and tightly clenched fists with slender wrists and arms.

Things kept moving. Two of the activists brought over a large box and dropped it on the ground. Mrs Bea distributed wads of pamphlets from the box to the yellow-shirted activists while over the mike a pastor dressed in casual clothes delivered a short prayer.

Lizet brought Mrs Bea over to the mike. Mrs Bea took it and looked at the crowd that had gathered around her in the courts, her squat frame planted on the ground. She directed a short briefing on the area to the activists from the other areas, using their presence to talk to her people around her. She shared Lavender Hill's history, outlining its strong points and some problems, calling residents by name and making jokes about them. From some in the crowd murmurs of agreement could be heard. Mrs Bea obviously knew the people well to whom she was speaking yet they reacted as if many had heard themselves described for the first time.

I followed her speech closely "We've been looking for the lavender ever since we moved," Mrs Bea concluded. "You can imagine…." There was a collective sigh in the courtyard.

I was surprised to hear her shouting, her strong forearms in the air: "We must show the people we're not lost voices forever in the wilderness like John the Baptist."

"And don't lie to the people, either," Lizet added. The meeting over, she took the mike in her hands and dispatched the comrades to do their door-to-door work. Her long fingers waved a warning. "Nothing's *ever* going to be easy."

She was sending Beeton off, telling him to team up with a short young girl from the Peninsula Technikon. She had bobs of hair and a toothy smile, her grin revealing lots of flashing metal in her teeth. "Keep your eyes out for each other, please. Go two-two into each home at all times," Lizet shouted. Yellow T-shirts began splitting up and panning out across the courtyards, Beeton and the girl disappeared, Mr Thabata with a youngster was visible going up a flight of stairs on the opposite side of the courts before he disappeared inside one of the doors. It was incredible; I felt invisible in a whole new world.

I waited around for a few minutes while Lizet turned up the music. As we made our way to the next set of courts, the Toyota blaring to the sound of Buffalo Soldier, the car was followed like the Pied Piper by children running and waving. We moved a little way up the road and turned into the inner courts around the next corner.

The metal speakers made the roof rattle. The base of the speakers resting on the roof with the cords loosened, seemed to cause everything to vibrate even more. The roof rack did nothing to keep the sound from distorting as the music boomed and attracted instant attention.

There was an assortment of people, curious but unfocused stares, a mixture of interest, blankness and disdain.

Always there were those who couldn't resist the beat. The children especially danced.

One very camp looking boy grabbed the mike after Lizet had made her short speech. His hair was in meticulous dreadlocks; he was dressed in tight jeans and a flouncing top. "Do things for the children!" he said with passion. A little child, not much more than a toddler, walked up to me, touched me, held onto my thumb for a few seconds and then ran off.

There were two teenagers hemming me in on either side. The car door was open and the engine was running to keep the music going while beyond the car, there was a small crowd dancing, a lot of noise and whooping. The reggae sound that was coming from the speakers bounced off the dilapidated walls. An old granny, drunk, toothless, was whirling around. She encouraged the crowd to join her as she cackled madly.

Lizet was leaning back against the car door and bouncing the mike from hand to hand. Her head was bobbing to the music as she looked at the crowd with amusement. I noticed with relief that she had started keeping her eyes on me from over the car, her body tensed. She was standing up straight but hadn't moved from where she was.

"Ons is Fancy Boys," said the youngster on my left. He had a sweet boyish face, small nostrils, a pert nose, full mouth. His eyes were shimmering, unusually deep and blue. There was a silver ring in his ear. His body was tall and ungainly. He had curly hair and unbrushed, long golden locks. On both of the boys, their pants hung down low and they were wearing cheap Bata tackies.

His friend on the other side clenched and unclenched his fist. He was deliberately setting up an undercurrent as if something was brewing. His other arm was thrust into the pocket of his jeans, low down on his hips. He was wearing a striped synthetic-wool balaclava worn high above his head like a Dr Seuss character and pulled down low over his forehead in the front. He furrowed his brows and looked down so that I couldn't see him properly.

"*En djy?*" the boy on my right growled. He was moving his hand inside his trousers pocket.

I felt naïve and stupid, looked over to Lizet who was watching closely. There was silence for a while.

Then the sweet faced boy nodded. "We've been listening, man," he said

He snorted. They walked away and mooched around the corner together. All of them had a bouncy swaying walk as if they had just concluded a deal or met up with some friends to agree on a plan for the day. Lizet and I said nothing.

We drove back to the first courts in silence. We waited for the door-to-door work to finish, sitting in the car or leaning up against it with arms folded, occasionally making small talk with some of the people around and pacing outside. The rest of the morning and early afternoon seemed to pass quickly.

On the way home, Beeton was manic. He leaned forward and raved for five minutes non-stop, completely incoherent I thought. "You should have seen how poor they were," Beeton said rapidly, shaking his head. "They sent the kid next door to get me a spoon of sugar for my tea. They thought I didn't see!" he shouted.

Then he calmed down and leaned over from the back of the car, whispering into my ear: "I'm meeting Sooraya next week to play pool in Obs," he spoke quickly. "She's actually quite nice," he added.

Lizet shook her head and said nothing. She was sitting back in the seat with her eyes closed. The car was like a bubble, our breathing causing a fog on the inside of the windscreen. The light changed to evening outside as we drove and the drizzle started up again.

Beeton started up, raving again. He threw himself back and forward in his seat, restless. As suddenly as he had started, he became quiet again and sat back in his seat, staring blankly at the sun that was beginning to go down behind the mountains on the left of the car. When we got to Lizet's flat she helped to untie the speakers from the roof. Apart from telling Beeton and

myself where to put the rest of the sound system, she seemed to have become unusually quiet and subdued herself.

“That was a good day,” was all she said.

“Yes”, I said.

“Just three more weeks to the launch.”

Her voice trailed and was croaky, drained and slow. She thanked me for the ride, patted the car windows with her flat hand, looked up the road after us as we drove off and then went inside.

We were both very quiet on the trip back to Beeton’s. “Something profound is happening,” Beeton suddenly said. “I’ve never seen that before. Or those places. And homes.”

I dropped Beeton off in Rosebank before heading home, put the car into gear as he climbed out, hooted twice, and drove away.

Chapter 4: September 1983.

“You’ve got to come from somewhere,” Lizet was saying. “You can’t keep going over to other people’s areas. How are you going to take people with you? Your own people?” She looked earnestly at me. She had her hands between her legs, held tightly. She was wearing jeans with a bright beaded belt. She wasn’t waiting for a reply.

We were sitting in my car in a parking lot just off the road in Mowbray, facing towards the Main Road almost directly in front of the town hall, a grand Victorian building made of Table Mountain sandstone. Upstairs there was an ornate balcony that went right across the front. People were going in and out to pay their municipal rates after-hours at the small window that called itself the ‘rates hall’. Down the passage inside was the library and opposite it was the oversized double doorway to a moderate sized community hall.

To my left I could see the entrance to the ATM. A bright plastic board was lit up from behind advertising the name of the bank as people came up to a barrier made of perspex.

One by one they went forward to put their cards into the slot. “Cash is cash. I wouldn’t trust myself to a machine,” I said, looking up from her knees to Lizet’s face. Her eyes were burning. She seemed flushed and excited.

Further down the Main Road, on the same side of the street and to my right, clearly visible, was the Mowbray Hotel and off-sales. The off-sales was protected by a mesh grill covered in oil and dirt where the hotel front jutted onto the pavement. There was a briskly moving trade on a Friday afternoon.

Diagonally opposite on the other side of the Main Road – across the traffic lights – was the even darker entrance to the Mowbray police station. There was a single heavy wooden door, a blue light outside and a bunkered shatterproof glass and brick cubicle that announced its function as police station.

I was looking at where I was released from my detention as a student about a decade earlier. They had picked me up after the march down Klipfontein Road and held me for three weeks till they released me at the police station. My mother and a university lecturer were there to meet me, and my girlfriend of the time who had long since moved on.

Over the road was another bottle store which we looked straight at through the windscreen of my faded yellow Toyota. This was where we had purchased the bottle we were now rapidly finishing; Lizet had stopped lecturing me briefly and she was debating whether we would need another bottle immediately. “We should rather leave the bottle to stay cold in the store fridge,” she argued. “If we wait till just before the store closes, it is going to be colder.”

This was my first introduction to bubbly on a Friday afternoon and spending close time with Lizet, which seemed to go together. The drink was Cinzano Spumante, sweet bubbly, ice cold and pink, not really my thing. I shifted my feet on the dashboard as Lizet held out her hand in

mock elegance and I leaned over to fill her glass. I poured myself the rest, my glass balanced between my legs, spilled the last few drops on the crotch of my jeans. I shook the empty bottle, held it up as if pointing to the darkening sky outside the windscreen. I was feeling very drunk very quickly.

“To life! Lechaim,” I said. Lizet repeated the phrases.

I drank the last half glass quickly and laughed happily. I laid the crystal glass carefully on the plastic mat on the floor in front of the car seat, opened the door and climbed out. I looked at Lizet in the passenger seat as I held onto the inside of the doorframe; then I tottered over the road and came out of the bottle store a few minutes later, clutching another cold bottle of Spumante.

“You see,” I said as I sat back in the car, “white people are not really my thing. I mean, where am I from? I don’t have any relatives in Minsk anymore, not that I know of. Anyway they never treated me properly here, we just had to make our own way,” I said. “Jews were also skunks in South Africa. I don’t belong to whites. Why else do you think I am here, with you?”

“And what about coloureds?” Lizet said, sounding cross. “You try being coloured, seriously. You think we know where we come from? My dad was a drunk, an alcoholic.” She herself was slurring. “So what did he have to say about where we came from? We turned out fine, maybe. But anyway, you’ve still got to work where you’ve got to work. The question remains,” she said emphatically, “How are you going to bring white people with you into the struggle?”

Then we spoke about the rally – the launch we had all been working towards and that we were technically now celebrating. “It went so well. People in the rafters. The banners, the yellow flags just like we had imagined…” I said.

Lizet too had featured often in the papers as one of the main Cape Town organisers but her excitement had to do with how we had all pulled it off, little to do with the publicity, front page of the *Cape Times* or not. “Man,” she said, “more people responded than we could ever have imagined. It was huge.”

For me, it was the dance that had really moved me, I had never seen this thing they called the toyi toyi. They poured off the buses, young people from the northern Transvaal who had been traveling all day and night. As we gave them hot soup, they formed into a circle and began with their chanting, knees up, moving together and singing, making clashing, sharp sounds like machine guns and grenades.

It was a dance of fire, militancy and defiance like we hadn’t seen in Cape Town. I shook my head, remembering my amazement at how they let the white comrade whom they had never greeted before, slip into the circle with them.

“The toyi toyi comes from the camps,” said Lizet gently.

As we spoke about the rally again, I laughed and remembered the moment that all the lights and the sound had gone out. There was the booming voice of a short, bearded speaker from the trade unions. “Sabotage, comrades!” he shouted; the whole hall hooted and whistled till power came on again.

“I threw him out of the kitchen when he came to beg for water,” I confessed. “I thought he was one of those chancers trying to get through the kitchen. He didn’t complain, just disappeared from view till I saw him whipping people up about the lights.”

“It was a miracle we got the stuff out on time,” laughed Lizet. I wasn’t sure if she was joking. She caught my hesitation. “Or maybe I should say it was all the planning you guys did.” She patted me on the leg.

“Pour me another drink,” she ordered. The cork popped loudly, held tight in my left hand as I poured another drink for Lizet and myself. My head felt like bubbles.

Now Lizet was telling me the rules.

Number one, you know what you need to know. “We’re not illegal,” said Lizet. “We want our members to discuss everything. But still, you know the story: the less you know…you don’t want to know anything you might have to sign.” She paused. Her head swayed to the side and she held her knees tightly together.

Number two: “You are responsible to get something set up in the white areas. You can’t keep on riding on other people’s issues.” I had heard all this earlier and looked at her, unfazed.

“Have your own rally. Think about it,” Lizet said. “Tell your people about us. Surely even white people will be curious after Mitchell’s Plain?” There was shortness in her breath.

She looked directly at me, something in her face. She held out her glass towards me. I grasped her wrist and tilted her glass as I poured, careful not to cause any foam and waste the bubbles. I thought, I like this girl, her confidence and quiet encouragement.

“Listen,” I said to Lizet suddenly, after a pause. “I didn’t tell you about my brother. He is leaving for London. He’s got a call-up again now that he’s finished his degree.” That was it. “I’ve never told anyone.”

We were quiet for a while. The street lights in Main Road were coming on.

Lizet was explaining again. “You’re not the only one who’s got issues,” she said. She was starting to sound resentful. “We got thrown off a beach once. My dad had to come and tell us to go. I still remember someone talking to him, a cop or something. I must have been three or five. Then dad came over and started to fight with us, telling us to get out of our costumes and come with him. We screamed and screamed but he made us go.”

Her voice wound down. She trailed a finger on the thigh of my jeans and shook her head twice.

We were staring at each other.

I felt surprised and looked aside, seeing the small queue at the ATM, lights bright and garish. People were walking along the pavement, scurrying home with shopping bags; a few people were getting into cars as the parking lot was emptying.

Lizet finished her drink and reached onto the back seat to get her coat. “I must be going,” she said. “See you Monday night.”

Another late meeting. I groaned as Lizet got out of the car, stood there for a few seconds and put on her coat.

She slammed the car door hard. She tapped on the window and smiled. “Safe home!” she ordered. Then she crossed over the road, tripping on the middle island as I watched her. Without looking back, she wagged with her finger and waved as she reached the opposite pavement. Then she disappeared down the side road to Mowbray Station where she had to catch her bus to Athlone.

I started up my car and drove off drunkenly, lurching into the Main Road. I crossed over the lanes and into the opposite side going south, scraping through the robot as it turned orange. Immediately, I passed the Mowbray police station on my left.

I thought again of my brother, the drink slowly settling as I whizzed homewards along the Main Road.

Chapter 5: October 1983.

Lizet was right of course; there was something I had to do, with “my own people”, as she put it.

It sounded easy.

“A blank slate,” I thought. I shook my head, explaining to Beeton. I couldn’t imagine any obvious reason for the thought.

“A blank slate. You start off in the middle of nowhere, and before you know it….” We were about to have our own launch, a rally in Mowbray aimed at whites.

Lizet was right. Whites were curious. More than curious, they were disturbed. They were disturbed about being kept in the dark, they were suspicious that something was going on. Once you beat your way past the dogs – after ringing at the gate and if you managed to persuade them to let you in – they were willing to listen. We did our own version of door-to-door work and listened to what whites were telling us.

The new area committee distributed hundreds of pamphlets, walked the white suburbs. I got to know whitewashed modern houses in Newlands, small semi-detached cottages on Kloof Street, the scruffier back lanes and sidewalks of Observatory where I had stayed as a student. There were issues in each house.

“Nearly everyone was happy to be visited; just the fact that someone is prepared to talk about what is happening. Happy for us to leave a pamphlet, for us to invite them to the public meeting. That’s something.”

I was talking Beeton up and not going to allow his depressed state to affect me. “In fact,” I said, “the black areas came along and learned from us. They will be here tonight to support us again and learn.”

One minute you sat in a car drinking bubbly, the next you had meetings every second night, were on the planning committee, you officially had set up a structure for the white areas and had been voted onto the executive with all sorts of responsibilities. Within a couple of weeks, you were a representative structure alongside all the others on the UDF. You had the privilege of attending long drawn-out general council meetings on Saturday afternoon, dashing out to the University of Western Cape on Modderdam Road to wait two hours for the meeting to start as comrades slowly trickled in.

Now Beeton and myself were waiting for our own public meeting to start. We had arrived early to supervise while banners and decorations were being put up. What we now got for our troubles was a piece of paper announcing that the public meeting was banned. “In the best interests of public order…” and so on, the document said.

I couldn’t read the rest, too flustered to concentrate. The Security Branch officer who stuck it triumphantly into my hand wafted away.

“So you’ve banned it,” I said and continued to stare at the A4 piece of paper with the official stamps and the date stamp clearly marked. “Because we were going to riot all over the place. We were going to tear up the hall. Whiteys burn the town hall and run amok down Mowbray Main Road!” I said. A tall, gangly man in plain clothes, a little wisp of a moustache and hard lined eyes, grey, laughed at me.

“We’re going to appeal. People are going to hear what we have to say, whatever you hope,” I said. The warrant officer sneered and backed off in a leisurely way, joining two of his colleagues outside the hall. He lit a cigarette, the smoke trawling upwards. The plainclothes cops, Security Branch, stood in a group and watched, smirking, interested to see what would happen.

It was 6.30 and already dark. It was an hour before we were due to start and people were arriving for the meeting, threads of them outside the town hall. Some of them knew each other. A few students stood in a huddle. A taxi load of young lions from Bonteheuwel arrived and spilled out of the taxi, chanting and singing in a circle, throwing their hands in the air, clacking like machine guns and whooshing as imagined grenades went off. A crowd was starting to build.

No-one was in the hall. There, the Council chairs inside had been neatly set out in rows of plastic covered seats and shiny tubular steel.

At the back, in the passage, Amy had set up a stall. Her children had been sticking beads onto leather strips for weeks to make key holders. She had a group of bobbas from an old age home that knitted for her in UDF colours, a clump of bright woolen beanies piled on one side of the trestle. There was lots of literature and pamphlets laid out on the table, material advertising different events; mostly there were UDF knick knacks in a host of forms, earrings, key rings, pencils painted in the colours.

Amy didn’t take to all the talking and plans, preferring to get down to business, a comforting Jewish presence with a knowing smile and endless resources and connections, a plump figure in a sensible knee length skirt. She looked and behaved like what she was: the mama of the area committee. She had plump rosy cheeks and a big mole next to her nose with two great black hairs growing in a tuft from it. She grinned sweetly, humming to herself as she arranged her goodies, smiling at me as I walked past.

Mowbray Town Hall looked exactly like I had imagined. Bright yellow banners draped the hall inside and outside. Apart from Amy’s table of goodies, there was the information table staffed by keen looking comrades; a few of the executive members were lurking around nervously and puffing on cigarettes.

The only unexpected thing was the cops in the corner outside trying to close the whole show down.

“Listen,” I said to Beeton, who was standing in front of me scratching his head, his curly hair bouncing around. He rocked on his feet, his tweed jacket pulled back where he had thrust his hand in his jeans pocket. Beeton had worked day and night to get the meeting off the ground and was in charge of all of the detail. It meant he had booked the hall, had negotiated with the Council about putting posters on poles, fought with the comrades designing posters who were all into creative media. He had arranged with the printer in Athlone to do the job on tick. Beeton told me he had spoken like a true salesman. “I promise,” he had told the printer sincerely, “I promise we’ll be raising money from the floor.”

Now Beeton was being instructed. “Stuff blank slates…” I said.

“Just get as fast as you can to our lawyer’s offices in town. They’re on standby. I phoned Arthur from the callbox at the back of the hall and he’s convinced we’ll win. The boers couldn’t have applied their mind to anything, so he says.” I was sounding panicky and slowed down to make sure Beeton caught the detail.

“The judge in emergency chambers is a liberal. He’s an old colleague of Arthur’s actually. Just get there. As fast as you can, and take these papers with you,” I said. I signed a brief instruction at the bottom of the security order as the lawyers had told me and handed the papers to Beeton.

Beeton rushed off, papers in hand, scratching in his jacket pocket for his car keys. He gave a committed wave, almost a salute. There was a reckless splutter from the parking lot, his car emitting loud pops as he hurled the skoro-koro into the Main Road and took off in the direction of town.

There was less than an hour to get to chambers, get the papers to the judge, argue the case and hopefully win. Until then, there was nothing to do but whisper the problem to arriving guests and stand and wait.

Lizet was there. I hadn’t seen her arrive. She was chatting to a squatter leader, one of the speakers she had suggested, tall with a scraggly beard and crooked teeth, wearing a cheap suit with a bright red tie. His face was dark and pockmarked, on one side of his face a ritual scar with two deep set slashes. The man shook hands warmly.

“Ai! They want us to hear nothing,” he said. “Like we don’t exist.” Then he shook my hand again. “You boys are doing a good job,” he said.

I wandered around aimlessly and chatted to arrivals, fretting.

Suddenly Beeton was back, shouting as he slammed the car door. He came running towards me waving a piece of paper, his jacket and hair flapping. “Done it, we’ve done it!” he was screaming. Then he was grabbing me and shaking me by the shoulders. He pointed at the papers. “They didn’t apply their minds,” he laughed.

“It took about ten minutes to get the order revoked. Praise the law!” He was hysterical, whirling around, throwing his fist in the air.

As for me, I walked deliberately over to the cops at the corner of the building, walked slowly and kept them in my gaze. “It’s over,” I said. “We won a court order.”

The man who gave me the banning order for the meeting was visibly strained, moustache curled up in the corner. All the cops looked shocked. The Branch man grabbed the papers from me and held the declaratory order at arms’ length as if better focus would change the words. He shook his head. His whole body had stiffened. He was reading aloud, slowly, each word, with a rough accent. He looked at me, an angry, baleful stare.

“Vandag is jy gelukkig,” he said. “Next time I promise you’re in the kak.”

He stormed off, the flunkies just behind as they crossed the parking lot and went off towards the police station across the way. “Don’t forget to leave someone to record!” I shouted after them.

Things were starting to move fast. My evening was becoming a whirl; people outside were laughing and clapping hands.

Now everyone was streaming into the hall, a buzz of people chattering away. Amy’s stall in the passage seemed to be doing great business with people around the table trying on caps, joking at the colours on the pencils and key rings, scratching for coins and waiting for change. The mood was great and the hall filled quickly.

I was chairing the meeting. I called the speakers onto the stage. For a moment, I felt stoned, too many thoughts and things happening to keep in line inside my head, colours and sounds flashed together. Holding the mike, looking around at the crowd, the packed hall, I smiled and felt powerful and my breath calmed down.

Eighty percent of the audience was white, people who hadn’t been touched by apartheid themselves. In the back rows, a group of township mamas had come along to show their support, resplendent in their green women’s movement uniforms and white caps. The cops – including the man who gave me the order banning the meeting – had returned and sneaked into the back, trying to look unconcerned and invisible, arms folded.

I pointed with pride to the sides of the hall as I spoke. Along the walls, rows of posters had been pinned onto the wooden panels, huge banners decorated the stage against the curtains behind me; in front the speakers were sitting at a long table covered in a bright yellow tablecloth that Amy had sewn. There were neatly arranged vases of flowers in UDF colours.

Below me, the Bonteheuwel kids were moving, up and down in front of the rows of chairs, restlessly, from one side of the hall to the other. Chanting and singing. “Kaa-kaa!” Imaginary bullets bit the air. Then they would stop, conscious of the audience and wait for a signal from the stage. As I raised my crossed hands and they went silent, I spoke about their anger and unsettled behaviour. “These comrades would be in gangs if they weren’t fighting this,” I told the audience. There was a strong and appreciative applause.

Briefly an image flashed through my mind, of my younger brother when my parents announced their break-up. There was a frightened look of loss on my brother’s face, as if something had been spirited away, and I thought of his army call up.

Singing started up, a song I knew, but I sang softly as I couldn’t trust my voice through the microphone.

Mandela Mandela
Mandela prescribes for freedom
Mandela says freedom now
Now we say away with slavery
In our land of Afrika.

The tune was simple and they had softened the tone of the singing, deliberately to make it possible for everyone to join in. Why did an audience like this feel united in song, I wondered, as I covered the microphone high up on the stage?

Now we say away with slavery

Some in the audience held hands, a few had their fists in the air; younger students looked serious and certain. I felt as if the audience was hiding their fears and newness in a place far away and tentative.

Then from the back, the mamas picked up a new song.

Senzenina. What have we done? Our only sin, the colour of our skin. Senzenina…senzenina.

For a second, I forgot my role as chairperson.

“Amandla!”

I roared into the mike, my voice surprising myself as the crowd of whites roared back. Where had we learned it?

“Ngawethu! Power is ours!”

Much of the meeting felt like this, as if I were in a dream.

“Amandla!” My fist was in the air again. The township mamas responded, their powerful voices riding right through the rest of the audience. “Strength is ours!” The unity was palpable. I put out my palm as I had seen Mr Thabata do and brought my extended hand under the platform of the other hand. At the T-shape, the audience went quiet and the meeting settled down.

I felt like I was speaking very slowly, emphasizing the words. I was in space, high up above everything, in charge, conducting the ceremony, bringing everyone together.

Reverend Allan led a prayer. Mr Thabata welcomed the audience, explaining why whites were important to what he was trying to do, cajoling them, and telling them not to fear. An older man, Mr Thabata was rooted in the communities that were appealing to us for help and freedom. His grey hair and dress made him conservative and old school in front of people, his lack of rhetoric or flourish made him sound like a parent with a gentle rebuke.

Then it was Lizet’s turn. She took a completely different approach, all fists, and fingers poking the air. She paused for dramatic effect, was pointing at the Bonteheuwel lions. “How do we guarantee them a future?” she asked.

She dug into her own past. Her father was a simple builder’s assistant. She spoke of his pain at the removals and how it impacted terribly on her as a child; but the removals killed him, he drank from then on. Her eyes were on fire. There were clucks from the audience, people shook their heads, some responded to Lizet’s militant questions with shouts as she gradually built up into fighting mode.

I had the feeling that something was wound up inside her, waiting to uncoil.

She took everyone along with periods of soft cadences where she held the audience, and then she left them surprised, unsure at their own militant response. “We’re going to fight. We want

you with us. It'll be better, it will be easier if we work it out together, it is only right," she told the audience.

There was no appeal to guilt; rather she stoked a fire that reached them, pledged her whole being to do what had to be done, promised she would take up their yearnings, and fill the gaps in their lives. Everybody understood the simple messages that I too believed as I listened to her fascinated, watching her.

A message from overseas was read out. Beeton had worked hard to get this one, a typed message he proudly gave to me hours before the meeting. The anti-apartheid movement in Ireland sent greetings to the meeting, endorsed the work being done in the white areas. "South Africa belongs to all!" they quoted the Freedom Charter and launched attacks on Thatcher and Reagan. There was a call to engage but not to compromise, to link Ireland and the townships. The message was signed by Kader Asmal, I assumed an Irishman of South African descent, based at an Irish university.

Everything felt so new as the hall applauded. So many worlds whirled into the hall and seemed to make sense in this cocoon that sheltered us from the winds howling outside. Yet in reality we were on the edge, who could realise we were on a tightrope with a huge fall below, about to plunge to the ground?

In the back of the hall, I could see Beeton looking pleased; his arms were folded across his chest, his shoulders looking endlessly strong.

I myself felt like an eagle, up above everything, distanced by winds and air currents. Every little movement below spun up towards me. I could see everything, was soaring, swooping, felt like nothing would touch me now

The leader from the squatter area spoke last as Thabata translated the phrases and paragraphs in a lyrical and vivid set of images so that I hardly heard the detail. The speaker was low key, patient, quaintly old-fashioned. "I threw down my staff and it turned into a snake," he said. "Who will pick up the snake and lead us through the waters?"

Just fifteen kilometers down the road, in another world, shacks of tin and dusty streets were swamped and flooded by the winter rains. In the passages between houses, people were trying to survive. "Now the government is sending an army against us. Boys come in camouflage, carrying guns pointed at men like me. *Witdoeke* do their work," he explained, "They come over the rise protected by guns, they are armed with pangas, axes, and hatchets that plunder and stab. Children, women, are left to scream in the streams of their own blood…Help us to lead my people to safety," he appealed.

"Ask for the waters to part and to swallow our enemies; to wash them down to the sea."

The armoured buffels and soldiers are rolling up, are my own friends, my brother who is going to flee overseas, I thought. "This is a war, driven with our own conscripted brothers," I heard myself say and the feeling in my own voice surprised me.

The national anthem pulled us all together. As the mamas paused in the song, seemed to hold their breath as the rhythm changed and emphasized the words in Xhosa and Sotho, we felt unbreakable and strong.

Sechaba sa, he-e-su, sechaba sa, South Afrika.

The meeting broke up soon, nothing but a quiet parking lot as I got into my car, Amy on the other side packing the last of her unsold goods into her car boot. I said good night. The Branch had disappeared.

Images and words were ringing in my head the next morning as I read the headlines, drinking a strong cup of coffee. Light smoke filled my head and the leaves from the loquat tree were shiny and waxed; the garden at the back felt comforting and enclosed.

Chapter 6: October 1985

Sometimes the world just speeds up. I moved into realms I had never seen as things began to get more intense. The odds were getting higher as the ground was shifting.

Still, I was young and it looked like it was all new and would turn out well.

The rhythms of a whole lot of songs were being replayed in my head, mixed up and confused. Just a few hours ago over breakfast and a hot mug of tea, I was listening to a Bob Dylan cassette which I had culled over the years from a variety of Dylan albums. *Don't stand in the doorway, don't stand in the hall. The times they are a changin'.* I liked Dylan's harsh gravelly voice and the naively hopeful words, now even more relevant as the tunes played over and over in my head in irritatingly different combinations.

Masters of war.

I was bored, was daydreaming, standing on a gravelly strip of wide pavement.

On the far side was the upper end of Klipfontein Road; closer – on the side where we stood – was the high fence of the Manenberg police station, giant curls of barbed wire crudely welded on top of the fence and held in place by v-shaped metal bars looking like arms.

Over the bridge, on the far end of Klipfontein Road as it entered the African township, I could see a buzz of activities by the comrades I was supposed to meet. There seemed to be a flurry of coming and going and continuous movement; spirits seemed high for the day of a funeral.

We had been waiting for hours. I kicked a stone again. Beeton was leaning, arms folded, against my locked car parked there.

On the lower edge of the bridge, nearest to us, were rows of youths in camouflage uniform, holding guns and standing in two ordered lines facing in both directions from which people could possibly come at them. A few paces beyond was the heavy force of armoured vehicles, the line of armour – Buffels and Casspirs – beginning just near the middle of the bridge.

Just there, to the side on the pavement, an old, rusting sign proclaimed the need to get a permit to enter any African township.

About eight or nine of the mechanical monsters blocked the road, metallic iron patterns protruding from their brown or grey gun-battle blue painted sides, huge tyres with cleats, high up off the ground. A gunner peered from the top of most of them.

Bored as I was, I was talking to Beeton, explaining the relation between Dylan and what we were seeing.

"Masters of war, boet. I too would hardly believe it is really happening except this is what my own brother was called up to do."

I waved vaguely in the direction of Gugulethu.

At the police yard three cars suddenly roared in. Things immediately looked busy as cops ran from inside the police station and stood in line forming a reception committee. The gate of the station was flung closed again, the cars drew up in front of the doors and uniformed officers in brown and khaki jumped out, looking more like army than police.

A man in military uniform was definitely giving orders as armed people moved officiously around the building.

I stood there and was watching it all, yet it was as if we were invisible where we stood leaning against my car, or walked up and down, kicking at stones as we waited.

“No-one seems to even notice we’re here,” said Beeton, “yet we’ve been sitting here for three hours now. What on earth do they think we are? Haven’t they seen us?”

“We must just be off their radar screens or something,” he continued. He scratched his head. He looked puzzled at the long line of young white men preventing us from crossing the bridge.

“And Lizet. I wonder if she made it?” I interrupted. “Maybe she slept in Gugulethu last night. I hope so. She’s always out organising. I wonder…” Beeton lit a cigarette and leaned against the car door.

Now there was a dull thud-thud and a helicopter descended rapidly, hovered above the police yard while people below created a landing space. Dust pummelled upwards as sound and wind disoriented me. Then the chopper landed and four officers ducked low and ran under the blades, shouting. They clutched at briefcases and papers and the small coterie followed someone who emerged from the helicopter. This must have been big chief; he definitely looked army. Across the yard they pointed to a clump of soldiers.

“Time to leave?” asked Beeton.

I got in the front seat of the car; the door was ajar, my feet hanging out.

I shook my head, bit the corner of my mouth, pulled a face, and we waited.

About twenty minutes later, two kombis and a nondescript car arrived, driving up Klipfontein Road, and stopped about twenty meters from the row of soldiers. The car doors opened and about eight or ten people clambered out, including Rev Allan whom I recognised in the front kombi. He saw me and waved.

There were two imams, a tall man with a bright red fez and long flowing robes who had been in the papers a lot recently, a number of other priests looking dignified in dog-collars and smart black jackets. There was a tall and grey-haired woman who stood to one side.

The religious people linked arms and faced towards the bridge, looking very small and unimposing against the line of conscripts.

Rev Allan broke with the line, holding the hands of two people and ran towards the police station alongside where we were. He was with a soft-faced and bearded imam and a priest who I knew for never greeting us at UDF meetings. They ignored us completely as they hurried past, and were met in the yard by the army man who seemed in charge, waving to him as they approached.

A policeman with a briefcase stood near them as they met and talked while two men in camouflage held tightly onto machine guns. After a short discussion, with Rev Allan characteristically chopping the air with his hands as if he were reporting back in a meeting, the churchmen turned on their heels and returned to the middle of the road. They joined the others and stood there, arm in arm.

The line of priests began to move forward, in slow motion, the kombis and the car followed.

“Move. Let’s go!” I nudged Beeton hard in the ribs.

I slammed shut the car door and locked it. I turned to check Beeton behind me, struggling to keep up as I ran off along Klipfontein Road towards the bridge.

I also noticed a group of soldiers gesticulating and shouting from the other side of the fence inside the police yard, as if the soldiers had just seen the car sitting there and us running from it. All morning, the car’s inhabitants, us, had watched the spectacle unnoticed.

Beeton was jogging, out of breath and clutching the corner of his tweed jacket, moving in a way that made him look quite unbalanced as he ran.

Then we were behind the row of priests, both puffing heavily. We slowed to the brisk walk of the row in front. I was staring at the bright fez right ahead of me and wondered if the man would trip on the robes. I grabbed Beeton’s elbow, held his arm hard as we kept moving forward.

As if on command, young men in uniform stepped aside and our marching row filtered into a single file. When the line arrived, the boy soldiers stepped sideways, guns pointed down at the ground and fingers tightly gripped on the triggers as they allowed the marching line to proceed.

They had peachy faces with small lines of fuzz on their upper lips and chins, reminding me of my brother. I could have touched the young recruits as I passed and then I walked through between the armoured cars as if through a passageway.

Behind us the kombis stuttered in a line. A Casspir moved back to let the vehicles through. Dribbling out of the barricades, the marchers joined up with each other again and continued to walk in a determined way, straggled and less ordered than before. We crested the hill over the bridge and walked downwards along the road into the township.

A crowd had gathered on the township side of the bridge, starting to shout and cheer, hoarse rhythms of chanting of a toyi toyi came through. Five meters from the crowd, the line dissolved and we were being hugged and surrounded by shouting well-wishers.

It was Mr Thabata grabbing me, putting his arms around me in an excited bear hug, animated in a way I had never seen him. He danced around.

Rev Allan grabbed me and held me at arm's length, hands on my shoulders. "Where did you come from, lad? How on earth did you get here?" he exclaimed, squeezing my shoulders hard. "Climb in the kombi with us, man, let's go!" he said.

We were driving along the cracked streets, alongside the blue gums planted next to the graveyard, then deeper into the township down a street that I recognised from the Coke sign on the corner spaza shop.

Everywhere, the convoy hooted, cars coming towards us flashed their lights, there were fists in the air and shouts of welcome all along the streets. Inside the kombi, we were patting each other on the knees and backs, pointing, and chattering away. Only Beeton seemed quiet, as if caught deep in thought, as if he had just woken up with his mind fuzzy and full of disconnected ideas.

Then we were climbing out of the kombi and being pushed forward into the crowd. Alongside us, I could see more armoured cars, with soldiers sitting high up above us, the vehicles right amongst the people, so close you could almost kick the tyres. It was a presence squashed up against the crowd rather than an escort, yet no-one seemed to take any notice.

The cars were like ugly spiky arrangements scattered around the open marquee where a deep awning covered a space into the street in front of one of the township houses. The canvas and plastic tent was held by corner poles and ropes spiked into the ground. Around a small stage, a white painted coffin in an open space, three young men stood in khaki pants, black berets and bright yellow UDF T-shirts. The sunlight filtered through the canvas.

We were pushed forward towards a row of white plastic chairs in front. The family of the dead child sat alongside, faces covered in black, silent, tense as they acknowledged the arriving guests and shook hands with the priests and imams moving in front of them to greet.

The speakers had already begun and mostly spoke in Xhosa, including Mr Thabata who was his usual dignified self. One of the township priests shouted and hurled words skywards. The family interrupted and nodded, the victim's mother covered her head with her hands and was crying loudly.

The imam with the beard sang a prayer with high-pitched sing-song words in Arabic; a young township boy spoke; a big mama with a huge chest dressed in the Women's League green uniform and black beret had thick powerful upper arms that held me in fascination as she went on.

Then Lizet spoke, her words translated into Xhosa, fiery and direct, and ended with a powerful "Amandla!", her fist remaining in the air as the crowd roared back, and then broke into militant song. I was carried along by this singing, comfort for the family, anger, sadness, different rhythms and the softness and the hard determination.

Then I was being pushed forward and steered to the platform. The mike was lowered to just in front of my face. "Amandla!" I shouted, and was amazed as the crowd answered to this young white man they had never seen. I was silent for a few seconds and felt everything go still.

In the distance, just beyond the awnings, I could see a crowd of youngsters dancing round a Casspir, the dark tweed of Beeton's jacket amongst them, sound of chants coming through as I turned to face the family and spoke to them directly.

"Your child is so young," I said into the microphone. "Look how small the coffin is; it is not made for one of us." The mother looked towards the box and back at me as I explained: "My brother left because he won't fight. Why must we fight and not build?" I could see Lizet look up and nod, her thumb in the air.

Suddenly there was chaos. There was a sharp phuh-phuh from the corner where I saw the toyi toyi earlier and a popping sound like firecrackers going off. People were hurtling towards me, chairs scattering as they stumbled over them. At the coffin, the guards tried to hold the people back as the box went flying across the space, crunched as it hit into a tent pole.

In slow motion, I saw clouds of white smoke drifting into the tent, people running and screaming, only the family in black seemed to stay, sitting calmly, waiting as everything disintegrated around them. Then they too ran, scattered into the smoke.

Mrs Thabata had me by the hand, her gammy eye fierce as she grabbed me. "Come," she said, and headed over the platform where I had been speaking, opened the gate into the yard and ran beside the house into the back. She pushed a zinc sheet aside and shoved me into the opening before she followed me.

All her age seemed to have gone from her as she stooped low, passed me a wet handkerchief to hold in front of my face. She was crouching as she headed down a passage and looked down the street. Three young boys ran past in the other direction, yelping and laughing as they skipped past in the narrow space, one clutching a piece of concrete to his chest.

"Come,'" she said, and the next second she was heading across the street, dragging me by the hand. "Stay low!"

There was smoke and dust everywhere; the revving of motors, people running up and down, teargas was beginning to hurt my eyes.

As I got to the other side of the street, I heard a loud crack as if a whip had been skillfully jerked back. In front of me a teenage boy fell down, holding his side as his head hit the ground with a horrible crunching sound. From his mouth there was blood dribbling out, and he shuddered as if he was having a terrible fit, groaned out loud, a kind of muffled "huh, huuh!" that was like a small animal whimpering.

But Mrs Thabata kept moving, into a side street as she broke into a trot, letting go of my hand. I heard the sounds of sirens, and then there was a thud-thud of air being chopped as a helicopter moved overhead. Two more corners, and then she ducked through a wire gate into the front of a brick house with peeling and faded yellow paint on the front. Without knocking, she pushed open the door, shoving me ahead of her and closed the door decisively.

Inside the house were three teenage girls. One of them was boiling water on a paraffin stove, the other two sat on a small bed. They jumped up when they saw Mrs Thabata and greeted her enthusiastically as if she had just come to visit.

She made me a cup of tea, with lots of condensed milk for sugar and gave two biscuits on a saucer as she instructed me to sit on the edge of the bed. She was patting me on the hands all the while, making a clucking noise, reassuring me.

“Wait here,” she said, “you’ll be fine. They’ll look after you.”

Then she was off and I was left sitting quietly in the room while the three girls occasionally giggled or commented in Xhosa to each other, in short bits of conversation. Shouts strayed into the house from a great distance outside. It got darker and I could see streaks of orange in the clouds through the small barred window, as the day moved slowly to its end.

The older girl, who introduced herself as Nomdi, gave me a plate of stew and rice to eat. I was sipping on a mug of rooibos tea when Mrs Thabata returned, a scarf tied tightly over her head. The shape of her eyebrow above her damaged eye gave her a kindly look. She seemed older again, was concerned about whether I was alright, whether I had eaten, whether I had worried too much.

“What happened to Beeton?” I asked.

“We think he got arrested. He’ll be alright; Mr Thabata has phoned the lawyers. They shot dead two of the comrades,” she said. “It won’t be quiet for a long time.” She shrugged and glanced at me. “They threw a grenade…They hit the police chief.”

At ten, a car came for us; Mr Thabata’s familiar blue Valiant. Great, I thought, of all the ways to avoid recognition. No-one knows Mr Thabata or who he is or how he gets around.

“We’re going out round the back; we’re taking you through Nyanga and New Cross,” explained Mrs Thabata as she checked up and down the road before leading me towards the car. Mr Thabata was driving, his tie and jacket immaculate. On the back seat, a young woman had a tiny baby in her lap. Mrs Thabata slid in next to her and lifted a blanket for me to curl under on a platform of blankets on the floor beneath their feet.

At that point, Lizet lifted her head and lay flat again. I pushed myself alongside her, pulled the blankets over our heads, felt the two women above us move their feet. I shifted and put my arm around her body, over her, squeezed closer and maneuvered the blanket further to cover us completely.

At one point we came to a stop, the engine was turned off and there were voices, some shouting in Afrikaans. “We’re taking the baby to hospital,” I heard Mr Thabata say in his firm voice. The baby started yelling. There was the clink of keys, and crunching of boots along the road as the trunk of the car slammed. The car revved up again and we started, on the move again.

For another few minutes, I lay curled up alongside Lizet. Her skin felt warm, very smooth along her muscular arms. Her body was tight in her T-shirt as she eased herself back and her buttock nestled into me through her jeans. The movement of the car and the discomfort of the floor pushed us together. I squeezed as my arm was thrown over her, the side of my hand resting on her breast underneath the T-shirt, feeling detached and calm but scared.

It took about five minutes or maybe even less to get away from the township.

Out of the blankets, standing at the side of the road, we gave each other the high-five, Lizet kissed Mrs Thabata as Mr Thabata grinned and wiped his face with a large white handkerchief.

Back in the car, there was lots of laughing as we turned off the Lansdowne Road, re-entered the main roads and drove the long way around along Vanguard Drive. We were dropped at my car, exactly where I had left it at the Manenberg police station.

I saw in my mirror the lights of Mr Thabata's Valiant, as it dipped on top of the bridge before heading over back into the township of Gugulethu. It was a short hop as we took off to drop Lizet down the road at her block of flats in Athlone.

My heart was beating fast. I felt as if I had been blown along into a storm, as if a great flooded river had carried me along and was about to burst its banks.

Chapter 7: 1986.

“I’m out of here,” said Peter Hendricks. “They’re going to kill me if they catch me.”

We all shifted uncomfortably, the meeting shocked, taken by surprise. Mr Thabata stared at the ground, Rev Allan’s eyes widened and he muttered under his breath, looking worried. Prega, who was standing against the wall in a corner, kicked at the beanbag on the floor in front of him.

“Just get used to it. It’s not going to get any better,” Hendricks said. “We wanted war: Now we’ve got it. We could be sure they were going to fight back.”

Then Lizet was explaining, taking it upon herself to attend to the details, talking about people having to move out of their homes. “Well, you can stay if you want,” she said, looking around. “Jeremy’s got a nice cottage. It’s just over the road. He keeps it clean. But you know what? Rather get someone else in, who can pay your rent and keep your things in order. Because you won’t end up in your nice clean house for long, I can tell you. You’ll be wishing you didn’t make it so easy for them to get you.”

I smiled wanly, as if she wasn’t really talking to me, just making an example of my situation. “And change your car,” she said, “They’ve long ago worked out where you drive. No contacts with family.”

She added: “Unless you want to get caught. Keep security levels the same, work with people who have the same security profile. Otherwise they’ll just be followed and lead the Boers straight to your hiding place. Let’s try minimise our casualties in the Cape, seeing as we’ve got time. All our comrades in jail up-country are kicking themselves. Let’s learn from them before the emergency hits here. And no phoning – even more than before.”

Hendricks interjected. “I’m not coming to any meetings,” he said. “None. I’ll find ways to keep in contact. You’ll see the results of my work, don’t worry. The rest of you, I suggest you meet maybe once every two weeks, max. Make all your arrangements in advance. You don’t wait. Ten minutes. If people aren’t there, everyone, you leave. Don’t take chances.” He gave me one of his intimidating stares as if it would only really be me who was likely to mess up.

“Get a disguise. And keep on the move.” It looked like Hendricks was laughing at me, I thought, or giving a patronising smirk.

That was that. The meeting was over, the next venue and time agreed. I went over the road to my cottage, shell-shocked, put the key in the door, unlocked it, walked down the passage. It already seemed unfamiliar.

I was floating. I crouched at my hi-fi, put a cassette in the player, pushed down the switch so that familiar rock music boomed out. I turned the volume lower and walked through to the bedroom, starting to pack clothes into a suitcase. I looked at my collection of books aligned in homemade shelves screwed to the walls, running almost up to the top lintels. The careful ordering of the books, the topics that ran into each other, fiction books along the lower shelves, it all seemed strange and unnecessary. I feel detached so quickly, I thought.

I dug behind some of the thicker books on the far right, and took out a small packet of weed. As I walked through the kitchen to the back, I scratched in a drawer for the Rizlas and matches. Absent-mindedly, I rolled a joint, sitting on the upturned barrel under the loquat tree. The soft haze of smoke looked almost blue as I stared through it, looking upwards at the sky.

It was a beautiful Cape spring day, the garden protected from the wind by the vibracrete walls, a view of the mountain through the houses at the back behind my garden. For a few moments, I felt entirely relaxed with nothing on my mind and no need to go anywhere. High in the air, seagulls cried out and whirled in the air currents that held them up. A rain front was on its way if they were this far inland.

Pulling the front door closed, I felt weird as I put the suitcase into the trunk of the car that was parked tightly against the pavement in the very narrow street. As I started the car, a short stab hit me in the stomach and I went “Ah!” to stop a momentary feeling of hysteria, a spinning sense in my intestines, like a panic attack on its way.

I smacked the steering wheel with both hands, then grabbed it and slowly I moved off, up my narrow street and turned left into First Avenue. At Lansdowne Road I went right, past the high walls of the Claremont police station where I used to report when I was banned. A familiar friend, I thought, driving too slowly until someone behind me hooted and shouted in an irritated way.

I moved over to let the car whizz past. “So this,” I said aloud, “is it! The Hardy Boys days are over.” I shook my head, hissed through my teeth and laughed at my own joke.

Halfway towards Rosebank, going along the back route, I realised there was no point in going to Beeton’s. I turned off the road, took the shortcut over Rondebosch Bridge, and headed along the main road to my mother’s place.

She was utterly calm. I noticed that her hair was beginning to grey at the edges, her eyes were a bluish grey, staring out from deep inside her. She seemed smaller than usual.

“I knew it was coming,” she said. “Look after yourself.”

She was in control, helpful and pragmatic. She volunteered the names of some relatives where I could stay if I got stuck. “Agh, I suppose they’re last choice, though,” she said. “You don’t want people who might be traced. Anyway, they talk too much. I don’t know if you could get them to keep your secret.”

This was the rationality I and my dad had hated so much, the common sense you could never challenge, even as right now I needed her strength and practicality more than anything. “Take your brother’s motorbike, it’s lying in the back. It’s not registered in his name. You can get rid of it when you’ve driven it enough. Send someone to get your suitcase; you can borrow a backpack for the moment.” A part of my stomach throbbed.

Amy helped me out through cousins she had who lived in upper Newlands, right under the shadow of the mountain. Their son had long since left home and there was a furnished flat in the garden so they would hardly know when I came or went, I could even cook for myself. If they had guests, there would never be any need to explain.

Amy held my cheeks in both her hands, stared into my eyes. “You be careful,” she said, looking tearful as she gave me a big, wet kiss. I noticed the hairs springing out of the mole near her nose, her plump cheeks under the rouge she was wearing.

I leaned my forehead briefly on her shoulder and felt like shouting as I left her. I looked up at the sky, big and blue above me, the mountain familiar in the distance. I pumped the motorbike into life and pulled the crash-helmet over my face, let go of the clutch and accelerated. The bike leaped off like a beast that had been released from its chains.

The cottage where I hid away was small but functional. There was a lacquered wooden door with small window panes. The door opened into the bedroom through a brick-covered portico under a frame dripping with bougainvillea in deep hues of purple and red. Inside, a small kitchen area serviced the bedroom. A tiny bathroom led off the back, with space for a blue tiled shower behind a swiveled glass door, and a small modern toilet with washbasin. There was enough space to move so that I felt comfortable but enclosed. I could lie on the bed and read or sit in a deep wicker chair with a linen-covered cushion. There was a small desk in the corner, where I threw down my wallet and the one small set of keys that opened the side gate.

I soon found the garden and the small room were not enough to keep me from boredom. Boredom defined my days. I tried to read. After a page or two I would have to start again as my mind kept wandering. I smoked a lot; the air was thick with the sweet smell, but no-one came down to the bottom of the garden where I felt as if I were on my own.

There was little to do but wait. Even the odd bit of work for the libraries that I took home, or occasionally popping into City Hall to do cataloguing, seemed unnecessary as they had no qualms about keeping me on their books and paying up.

Twice we had meetings. There was a deep tension while I planned to arrive, parking carefully some blocks away so my bike wouldn’t be noticed and locking the helmet to the bike. Then slinking along the walls, casing the block, checking who was around as my gut squeezed tightly.

The first time there was a quick contact with Rev Allan, the person who had arrived before the others. Together we slipped into the house to meet and were greeted by a young woman with a folded scarf over her head, who hurried us through to the back and offered us sweet cinnamon-flavoured tea. Everyone was agitated; as the others arrived, there were greetings but our minds seemed to wander off before we could ask how life was. There was nothing to say anyway. Decisions were made quickly and no-one felt like arguing. Still, there was the odd flare-up. At the last meeting, I shouted at Prega and called him a fool for a suggestion to call schools out on boycott.

We took on tasks, agreed what must be done, arranged the next meeting. The work involved one or two visits to people who were still operating openly, late night contacts with someone who wasn’t on the run, a request to pass on information or call a gathering. And then, nothing much seemed to happen. News came in of new detentions. Up-country the movement was being decimated.

I waited. My beard grew, suiting the thick plastic frames that enhanced my disguise, the thick glasses an old pair I dug up from my school years. All my ancestors reflected in my facial hair, a beard that grew in all manner of colours, red, brown, patches of black. I was convinced my

appearance made me look like the ultimate nerd, an imitation Rolf Harris figure trying to be cool, effective as a disguise but strangely undermining.

I met Beeton one day under the bridge in Rondebosch near to the leather factory that was pumping filthy water into the river. Beeton cackled uproariously. “You look like an idiot,” he said. “It should keep you out of jail.” I jabbed him in the ribs and laughed.

“By the way,” Beeton said, “You know they got Thabata? For the moment, his wife’s still out.”

I began to jog longer and longer distances as a way of getting out from the house and passing the time. I felt almost in a bubble that kept me safe in my disguise, cut off from others who passed me on the pavements as I whirled past other runners and pedestrians. They just looked the other way so that I didn’t have to smile or catch their glance. Running took up time. I was tired after I returned and ready to sleep for the rest of the morning or read a book if it were after lunch.

I went up towards the mountain, running, towards the forests at Newlands. Once inside the forests, I was in a separate world of shadows and light, of dust catching the streams of sunlight through the branches, the crunchy texture of dry pine needles underfoot. Huge tree ferns lent an air of green to my surroundings as the light caught the leaves and translucent veins and pods. As I ran, my senses seemed to absorb the detail, sounds, smells, memories of forests, of waves crashing on rocks below. It all merged in a hanging, dreamlike space which was neither reality nor escape. Paths crisscrossed the mountainside and I often felt I was going in a new direction on a path I couldn’t remember having been on before.

One day I went shopping to the centre in Claremont, a steel and modern-brick mall, with designer shops spread out inside, bright artificial lighting sealing customers from the world. I wandered from window to window, looking at books, clothes, jewelry, shoes; went down the steel ribbed escalators, towards a hardware store, past a number of banking halls.

Outside a shop a young child was crying. I could see his parents were inside the shop and they didn’t seem to notice they had lost their little boy. The child howled and looked at me, tears streaming down its face and one hand pointing towards me for help. For a moment, I stopped and was about to kneel down. Then I walked on. Stepping out of the mall into the bright sunshine, I felt horrible.

I changed houses and got a friend’s car. The same friend spoke to their family doctor, an old man who stayed by himself who was okay with me staying there, as long as there were no obligations. The doctor had a large stomach and dribbled but left me alone, except for insisting that we had dinner every night, served by a pleasant young woman in a crisp domestic uniform. There was always a soup to start. The main meal was bland and did not vary much, boiled fish and potatoes in a briny stew.

We hardly spoke. Every morning, I got up early and fetched the *Cape Times* from the front stoep. I sat by myself on the grass under a large fig tree in the garden, reading in the early morning sunlight and lit a joint as I read the papers, and smoked another by the time I got to the horoscopes and sports pages. I wondered vaguely if the smell of smoke carried down the garden through to the bathroom window where the doctor would get up to shave and prepare for his day.

One morning I went for a run down to the railway line.

Everything felt curiously familiar as I ran on the road alongside the track, on the other side of the rails from my old cottage in Harfield. Across from the station I could see the narrow road where I used to stay in another life, my past life, could still see the familiar cottages through the fencing and concrete structures of the station platform. I thought I must look odd as I swirled past in my dark glasses, slicked-back hair and deeply coloured beard.

As I passed further down the road, I came to the rail crossing at the Kenilworth station where I either needed to head across the tracks and go down to Rosmead Avenue and do a complete circle, or carry on straight along to Wynberg and then return on the same route.

There was probably less traffic on the Wynberg route at this time of morning. More pressingly, I felt the need to urinate. I ducked onto the station platform and went into the men's toilet, a brick structure with a concrete wall along the side at the entrance. Next to me at the urinal was a tall bald man, wearing dark glasses. He had a large stomach, and was wearing khaki pants and white canvas shoes. I gave him a quick look as he unzipped, memorising his face, a habit I had developed as a reflex of checking and counter-checking.

As I finished, shaking the last drops off, I realised the man alongside me was watching. He was looking deliberately, not so much out of the side of his eyes as staring down and sideways. He was playing with himself. There was a large, hard penis sticking out from his underpants, the cloth bunched at the opening of his trousers. He was moving his hand slowly up and down, stroking the tip of his cock with his thumb. He shook himself from side to side, as if waving slowly, showing off his size and hardness.

I felt caught in a vice and could hardly breathe. My own cock was beginning to get bigger. I could hardly help myself. It was anonymous, yet this desire threatened to lock me into something dangerous that I couldn't articulate. My throat caught as I slowly moved my palm on the shaft, the flesh alive in my hand. I glanced sideways and felt the man staring at me. A drop of clear cum emerged on my tip, and I rubbed it in. It felt slippery and warm.

I moved closer to the man alongside me, turning slightly so that my cock was more clearly displayed. I had no idea what I would do next, but I could see the man pulling at himself, moving faster and getting more excited. The man's breathing was becoming harder as he turned towards me, bouncing his penis with his left hand held underneath his balls.

Suddenly, there was a cough from behind the door in one of the booths behind us. Turning my head, I saw what looked like a large eye staring at me through a gouged hole in the wooden door, a Cyclops eye noting us both at the urinals, wide and not blinking. The hole was low down, as if the man was crouching, had been watching us all the time, the movement of our arms from behind as we masturbated, our sideways glances at each others' pricks.

I gave a cry. I put my penis back into my running shorts, stuffing it in and pulling the front of the shorts over to cover myself. Without looking again, I strode purposefully out towards the toilet door, my head held low down.

I held my right hand over the penis bulging out under the cloth as I emerged into the bright sunlight, blinking and almost bumping into a passenger on the platform. I lurched to my right

and ran towards the edge of the platform, exiting onto the road and charging off in the direction of Wynberg.

The flesh in the front of my pants felt huge, over-sized. I was sure everyone could see what I had been doing. It took a few minutes before my heart stopped beating so quickly and I calmed down, realizing that no-one recognized me or was paying any attention. Gradually, my penis shrank inside my running shorts.

I finished my run, sweating, charging almost manically towards the station at Wynberg, turned around and went back along the same route. The platform at Kenilworth was empty now. Perhaps the man was still inside the toilet. I felt myself speed up as I went past and charged off to my hiding place at the doctor's. In the garden I stretched against a tree, breathing out, consciously calming myself as the drops of sweat accumulated on my forehead and ran down my face to drip onto the ground.

Two or three times after that I ran past the same place near the Kenilworth station, but headed off determinedly and leftwards to take the Rosmead route, as if the route was a necessary part of a tight routine and a running plan. I didn't see the man again though there were some people on the platform as I passed.

Did I want to see him? Was I just looking for company, or was it his crazy actions that set me off? Thoughts buzzed in my head, lost in the running blur, hard to process.

I changed hiding places again later the next week and did not have to go past Kenilworth again.

One Friday I arranged with Lizet to go drinking. In theory, it was quite mad or irresponsible. Lizet said: "They don't know how either of us looks. We're so out of the ordinary no-one is going to stare. Besides, what Branch guy is really hanging out on a pub overlooking the sea next to a train station down in the South or somewhere like that?"

We caught the train down to Kalk Bay from Rondebosch. I had to catch a train to Rondebosch from Muizenberg where I was hiding, get out and meet Lizet next to the library entrance. Then we went back along the Southern Suburbs line, Lizet in a third-class carriage further down, the train a deep and dusty brown colour, gleaming almost red with the soot and grime that stuck to it as it bulleted and rocked along the lines.

Passing Muizenberg, I now stayed on the train, looking through dirty windows at the sight of the sea and white foam falling onto the sandstone rocks alongside the railway, the sea an intense combination of distance and closeness, a mix of colours. The salt and spray seemed to swallow me and draw me into a gentle and rocking dream.

Too soon, and we had passed St James station, tumbling onto the platform at Kalk Bay and walking excitedly down the stairs and through the subway as I grasped Lizet's hand and held it.

The Brass Bell was a wooden structure tacked onto an old disused pier. A large tidal pool was in front of it, onto which the sea alternately lapped gently or crashed in a wild and high tide that sent huge ripples across the pool. There were one or two brave or drunk students who took off their clothes and leapt into the waters. Upstairs there was a small pub with couples deep in conversation. The pub had a cosy, maritime theme, brightly polished oil lamps from a fishing trawler, tables made from heavy beams of dark wood that hung from the ceiling by long chains.

Alongside us, we could see the rocks a brief drop below and the sea smashing against the wall that held the railway line. I remembered it from my student days, the rain blown against the windows, cold damp winters grey against the bay, friends laughing and huddling up together, eating fish and chips with our hands, talking seriously about politics and love.

I huddled together with Lizet in a corner, our heads mostly held down and caps pulled low down. Twice, three times I got up to get beers. Lizet was getting almost tearful, talking about her father, wondering if he was alright or drinking too much as she feared. “I like you,” she said, “and I suppose I will find out why you want to do these things.” She was convinced we would pull out of trouble.

We looked down at the sea and held hands. Later that night we staggered along the main road towards Muizenberg.

“I want to walk,” I said. “I need air. I’ll leave you at the Muizenberg subway; you can get the last train at Muizenberg. I’m so beyond it.” I laughed as another car came towards us, its headlights bright in our eyes. The sea was high and crashed loudly alongside us as we weaved our way, fluorescent bits glistening in the rock pools.

Once a small group came towards us. There was an older teenage girl who must have been the big sister, a towel wrapped around her legs, carrying a large hold-all. The two youngsters with her were laughing, their hair still wet from their late night swim. They passed me and Lizet. The youngest child, a boy of about ten, gave me an odd stare and then they were lost in the darkness, only a small halo of mist around the dull streetlights and our heads swirling with hops and alcohol.

Two weeks later in the morning we came down to Kalk Bay again and headed up the road from the station towards the mountain, onto one of the paths behind the village. Down below we could see the Kalk Bay harbour. The piers ran like a thumb and extended forefinger into the sea. On the end of the long pier with a whitewashed wall, there was a small squat lighthouse, painted white with a red band at the top. There were a dozen or so small boats lined up to the pier, facing nose first, most of them bright in greens, yellows and blues, with white lines running parallel from front to back. They had single masts, and there was a small boathouse in the front.

Two boats were waiting in the open bay, just outside the narrow entrance to the harbour.

From where we were, high up on the mountain path, Lizet and me could see water pumping out the sides as the engine rooms worked , fishermen moving around the deck. The boat was kept in a fixed position while its turn to enter the harbour arrived. The breeze was moderate, but strong enough to create tiny patterns and ripples on the water’s surface across the bay.

“I used to go out on the boats,” I explained. “I wasn’t much of a fisherman. For a few rand, you’d join the fisherman on a night out. You got a tiny hokkie on the deck. You’d fish from there, chuck in your hand line. Mostly I’d be vomiting or lying on my back. I caught a few here and there…This big,” and I laughed as I held up my hands in an exaggerated display of size.

“Sometimes you can see whales,” I said. “I was down here last week and there was a huge one breaching. It did about six or eight leaps, imagine, every time it appeared about twenty meters further on. They sort of come three-quarters out of the water and then crash and slip back in the same movement. It looks heavy but they move forward at amazing speed.”

I screwed up my eyes and looked over the bay, at the mountains on the far side that were covered in a light mist, giving them a fuzzy and distant appearance. “It felt almost surreal. I remember the whales from when I was little. Then they disappeared for years. Now here I am; I’m looking down on the boats that I used to go out on. I’m up here, far away. It’s like I’m looking down on my life. I feel safe in my mountain boots on this path, in the fynbos. Out there they’re hunting for me.”

Lizet looked up curiously, resting, her hands on her knees. She was breathing heavily and a few drops of sweat were running down the side of her face alongside her ears. She was wearing light cotton shorts and a blue tank-top, which left her shoulders and muscular arms glowing in a thin sheen of sweat. She said nothing, and looked down at the harbour where I was pointing. The noise of cars on the main road and the whooshing of the sea merged into a low background sound.

The path was well-marked. It crossed a small stream, where vegetable-brown coloured water tinkled over rocks surrounded by a glade of trees. To the left and higher, the heavy jagged boulders of Pulpit Point hung above us. We stepped over the stream and went upwards where the path split, along a wide curved hill that gave us views way over the Simonstown mountains and beyond towards Cape Point.

There was a small indigenous forest, milk woods creating a curtain of overhanging silence and a dark, dank smell. The ground was spongy and crisscrossed with tiny roots. Further on, the path wound around a valley and went up towards a peak, lit from behind by a bright sun that was punching through the glare of thin white clouds. We walked up in silence. Lizet fished a water bottle from her backpack and took a few sips, swished a mouthful around and spat it out on the side of the path. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Come, let’s stop,” I said. “Just a bit further is a nicely sheltered clump of rocks. If you climb above it, you can see across to the other side and the Noordhoek beach.” Lizet took a gulp of air.

In less than ten minutes we were within a rocky amphitheatre. Lizet clambered up the one side, stood on a high rock at the edge and shouted with joy when she saw the view. As I had told her, it opened up a vista across the proteas and heathers to the beach at Noordhoek in the distance, a long slice of white sand, then a sea that had bands of different colours, shades of blue and almost deep purple.

Then we were down into the middle of the amphitheatre again, where I unpacked some picnic sandwiches in a serious and focused way as I took them from my bag and put them onto a waist high sandstone rock.

I gazed intensely, concentrating on what I was doing. Lizet put her left hand on my shoulder as I half-crouched. “Chill!” she said and gave me a squeeze. “It’s amazing.”

I started, stood up and turned to face her.

Her arm was around me and she was breathing heavily. Then my tongue was on her neck, licking down the side of her neck to her shoulder. I was giving short nips to her skin and tasting salt. She was whimpering. Her head and chest were thrown back. Through her t-shirt I could feel her breasts as I rubbed the front of her chest.

She turned around. I was pulling down on her shorts. They caught briefly at her knee as she stumbled and then stepped out from them with one leg. She turned around to face towards the rock, her arms stretched out against it to steady her. The sun was bright and hot against her flesh, a beautiful olive-coloured sheen as her buttocks pushed up.

I grabbed her hard as I pushed against her and entered; she gave a low moan as I felt myself slide inside her. She was wet and smooth, pushing off the rock with her hands and thrusting hard back. I grabbed her arms and was biting in the back of her neck, forcing her hard against the rock. I felt myself pushing with my boot into the sandwiches on the ground, the bread mangled under my boots and crushed into the sand.

It was all over. I was wiping myself with my underpants. We both pulled up our shorts. She turned around to look at me. Her elbow was scuffed and little beads of blood were collecting in the peels of skin. She held her elbow with her other hand, walked around in a small circle, kicked the ground. She moved off further away. From the other side of the amphitheatre, she turned around. “Whew!” she said.

I felt empty, ashamed. “I’m sorry,” I said loudly. Through my head went a repeating thought: She’s the Leadership, are you a bloody fool?

We walked down in silence, eating fruit I had taken from my pack. The path was mostly rocky but became more sandy and soft underfoot as we got near the bottom. It was a short walk down to the station at Kalk Bay, a dull painted building in post office style. We waited outside the ticket office, not saying anything. On the other side, I could see the Brass Bell pub adjoining the platform.

The train soon arrived and we got into our separate carriages. The train rocked as it screeched along the shore, the sound and deep colours of the sea strongly perceptible through the train windows. I got off at Muizenberg to go to the house where I was hiding.

As I left, I could see her in the train carriage through one of the windows. She waved, clutching onto her backpack. Lizet seemed to be smiling, pulling down her mouth at the edges, looking into the distance as if lost in thought.

“See you!” I said under my breath as I turned around and walked off.

Chapter 8: Winter/Spring, 1989

From time to time, my sister and I met in Rondebosch, furtive and quick meetings under the bridge, where Kathy would give a squeeze to my shoulder when we parted, and a longing, sad look as if every time we met would be our last.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s a life with so little pressure, you wouldn’t believe it. I never read books, because I can’t focus. But there’s gardening, the newspapers, I think a lot. The emergency has hit us so hard we seldom meet as a group these days. So even that stuff feels far away. We climb the mountains often,” and I smiled as I remembered the whole family clambering over rocks, diving into pools in the clear river waters of the Wit Els near Ceres, naked and tanned while the sun beat off the yellow rocks and cliffs, the sky blue and endless above.

Lizet and I never said anything about that furtive day above the ocean, but the emergency continued and so did our desperate need for company, for someone to really talk to. While the world continued to go crazy, while the guns and armour bore down on our people as they hunted us, Lizet and I started to spend more and more time with each other.

I met her under a bridge in Plumstead, both of us catching trains from our respective hideouts. Bridges seemed to give the shelter and closeness we needed, even if it was only concrete to look at and a huge wooden door behind which the chess club met on a Thursday night or a space where the Saturday market was based. We seemed, I suppose, like a white boss meeting a friend or arranging a domestic’s employment issues, me bearded with thick glasses. People scurried past to go to the station and catch a train, so no one hung around very long and we did not feel pressured or hunted.

She smiled so beautifully when I met her, the past and present submerged deeply and everything unsaid. We avoided politics, even the details of our last meeting or the follow-up we were supposed to do. It was chitchat about random things, autumn, the weather, what was happening in Kalk Bay and what our mothers were doing. We had gone up the mountain again, one time in the Newlands forests, but the intensity of our encounter remained unspoken. Mostly, I just wanted to talk to someone. She could go on for twenty minutes at a time. When I looked at her face, she broke out into a grin and her eyes lit up.

We met in secret, pre-arranged encounters at safe spaces, sometimes at the houses of friends we felt were safe. Eventually, we agreed to stay together. Our security profiles were the same, we said, so we would not needlessly drag anyone along to arrest us; we trusted the care that we took to make sure we were not being followed. We needed company.

In our new house, together, it had been raining gently one Sunday, a soft drizzle with the sun occasionally bursting though in a lazy sort of way. Despite the softness of the rain, we could hear the water flowing through the drainpipes from the gutters around the house, a regular dripping sound that only added to the still, suspended feeling of the grey Cape Town day.

I spent most of the morning lying in bed, covers pulled up, feeling snug and warm, disconnected. Lizet moved around, re-arranging food in the fridge, packing and re-packing pots, making a soup of green peas, carrots and stored chicken bones. The small kitchen, like the

bedroom, fed straight off the lounge, so the smells came through to me, getting stronger as the morning of cooking meandered on. I could feel myself getting hungrier.

I lay on the pillow, half-asleep, dozing off, and half-formed thoughts of my childhood drifted through my head. Voices came through to me every now and again, my sisters, my brother now overseas, and I jerked awake as my dream world dissipated and disappeared. Then I fell asleep again.

My sister had got hold of my old landlord from Harfield Village; this property came up and had been signed over. Mr Levy seemed to own half of Cape Town, or at least the cheap rent-controlled cottages and was unlikely to ever check who was actually staying there so long as the rent came through. Kathy was the only person who knew where we stayed and she refused to visit.

“I am not going to be the one who has to feel sorry that I trailed the cops over to get you,” she said.

After lunch, Lizet wandered into the garden, taking advantage of the break in the drizzle. She brought marigolds back into the house, putting them in jars of water along the windowsill. Then she went back outside to push mulch into the flowerbeds, earth and compost sticking to her hands, the small trowel digging and scratching along the edges of the lawn that always threatened to grow over everything.

The house was a small semi-detached cottage in a working class area at the top end of Lansdowne Road, not too far from where I used to live in Harfield. But for me it felt like a world away.

There was a whole row of these semi-detached houses in parallel, each semi really just a long house sideways to the road and divided in two, so that the edge stuck out almost onto the pavement and a grass verge, overgrown and unruly. The neighbours’ entrance door fronted onto a concreted parking area that ran through in front of our house as well, the back part of the semi with our entrance door set further from the road. The garden was hidden at the back behind a wire fence with a gate to our section.

A red-painted corrugated iron roof covered both semis and linked them in a long sideways line. At the back, a vibracrete wall sealed off the garden. There was the lounge that we entered straight from the front door, a bedroom and a kitchen that also ran off the lounge, and a cramped bathroom with its tiny basin, toilet and an old cast-iron bath. Our furniture was minimal. Anything of value that we really treasured, like my books or an antique cupboard that Lizet had lovingly restored years ago, had long been left behind or given away.

It was the kind of neighbourhood where no-one asked too many questions. A mixed couple living together would obviously prefer to lie low and wasn’t all that unusual in this area either. We made sure not to get to know the neighbours. Maybe they wondered who this couple was who always seemed to be driving different cars but they never asked. If at worst the cars were stolen, there didn’t seem to be any chop shop activity or scraping off of engine numbers to attract the cops, so why should they care for an actual explanation?

The neighbours seemed decent enough, they greeted and smiled. All over the neighbourhood, people were making it up in one way or another without much interference from anyone.

Up the road, about three houses further, a very pretty woman with long black hair usually set off from her house by herself in the afternoons. I saw her twice standing on the Green Point Main Road in a very short skirt as I drove past. I gave her a lift once when I passed her hitching down to the train station at Claremont, scheming that it was always better to set up an obligation while driving past could arouse anger for being rude. When she asked, I said that I was a writer. She told me to come over and drink a brandy. I never did, of course, although I sometimes felt a longing temptation and regret.

The immediate neighbours in the front were a quiet Muslim couple. He was off to work early every morning and we saw little of him, even over weekends. The wife was around most of the day. She seldom poked her head out of the house, though we did sometimes see the curtain fluttering when we arrived home. Twice she came over, her headscarf pulled over her head, brought us baked cookies brightly coloured in pink and green with tiny silver sweet baubles and multi-coloured hundreds and thousands. The dry biscuit crumbled in our mouths with a creamy, buttered taste. We oohed and aahed over the baking but never reciprocated, and made it clear we didn't want to get involved, big disappointment to her or not. She stopped trying, which was exactly what we wanted.

Some nights we heard the neighbours making love through the wall of the semi that separated the two houses and our bedrooms. She was a screamer. There would be loud moans and then, getting louder and louder, she would yell and she would burst into sobs.

One evening when I was alone in the house while Lizet was out organising, I put my ears to the wall. It was like I was almost next to the bed with its creaking springs. Her pleasure was palpable as her partner rhythmically did what he had to, silently spurring her on. They must have known the sound carried, but it never stopped them from having sex, three, four times a week.

Sometimes in our own bed we clutched each other harder, and occasionally would become aroused ourselves, making love intensely and furiously. Mostly we just lay silent, staring at each other with wide eyes, or simply smiled and quietly laughed.

It was like a shared secret with our neighbours, an unspoken pact.

I had long decided it was actually mad to live together; it added to the risk and meant we might both go down at the same time. I knew too many of our friends were caught when a girlfriend or wife was followed to where someone was in hiding, a partner not as careful as they should be or momentarily forgetting to pay attention and unable to imagine how meticulous the activist had been until then.

The point was to lie low and not interfere in the lives of anyone we came into contact with. Too many small mistakes – like a comrade finally slipping home because he had to see his mother or was missing his children, or chatting to someone who seemed like a friend – and that one mistake was the downfall that would put people in jail for eighteen months. The emergency was getting on for three years, who knew when it would end?

Yet our security profile was the same. "We both know how to be cautious; just watch who is following, circle venues or our house before approaching," lectured Lizet.

It was a chance we were willing to take. We only spoke about it once, and then living together became a habit, like all the rest of our tense watching and waiting. Skin on skin and the neighbours' thumping; our senses were even more awake having to make sure we never got caught.

Over the road the neighbours appeared less respectable than those next door. They were clearly a poor white working class couple, they had two kids, then a third arrived in the time we lived there. He would occasionally come home in the day with a couple of buddies, driving a truck that must have belonged to the plumbing firm he worked for, with no markings but pipes and tools scattered all over the back.

Over the weekends, he was off on a beautiful Harley Davidson he shined up, leisurely leaning back in the seat with his hands on the long high handle bars fronded by leather thongs. There was a deep churning of engines as three and four of his gang took off slowly in formation, then disappeared down towards Lansdowne Road with a roar slowly diminishing in the distance.

Occasionally he would have a beer or two with his buddies late on a Sunday afternoon after they had returned from their road trips, at a table set up alongside the carport overhung by a huge, spreading blue gum tree that looked like a welcoming bower. In the carport, an old Valiant was stored alongside the bike.

The woman always seemed to be alone with her two snotty children over the long Saturdays and Sundays, sometimes taking them with her to hang up washing on the line in the open field next to their house. She was pregnant when we first arrived in our house, getting larger and larger by the day. Once Lizet caught her sobbing in the street while she waited for a taxi alone. "I wanted to go over and give her a hug, as she howled with sadness from deep inside," Lizet said.

Two days later a transport vehicle delivered her to the house, a nurse opening the door for her to get out. She looked bewildered as she turned to see if there was anyone watching from up or down the street. She had a small shoulder bag and was wearing a faded nylon nightie. She was clutching a newly born infant to her chest wrapped in an old terylene towel with blue pictures on it. She waved to the nurse in the van as it drove off down the street, and waved and waved till the van had disappeared around the corner.

At about ten o'clock one night I woke from a sleep that began that afternoon; it was completely dark when I woke. I heard a crashing sound and glass breaking. I lay there breathing, trying to stop myself as my heartbeat started taking off. I was feeling almost dizzy as I strained to hear a loud mumbling too indistinct for me to make out any words. Again, a booming crash, a bang, then silence. Gently I reached over to shake Lizet awake, and put my other hand over her mouth as I looked at her face and saw her eyes opening in surprise, wide, unblinking.

The banging continued. It didn't sound close. It was not in the yard as far as I could tell. I eased out of bed, pulling on a pair of shorts lying on the floor where I had dumped them the afternoon before. Creeping quietly, I picked up the keys from the chair next to the bed and slunk through the lounge to the front door, where I put my ears to the wood and crouched low. Nothing. There I waited silently for three to four minutes. Still no more noise, then another sudden bang from what sounded like the street up front.

Gingerly, cautiously, I put the key in the lock and turned, fumbled with the Yale and opened the door a crack. Then I stepped outside, bare feet on the wet concrete slabs.

Lizet slipped alongside. She was also barefoot with a long cotton robe wrapped around her, arms folded tight. We stood on the grey concrete outside the front door. It had stopped raining. High above, the clouds scudded in front of a quarter moon, obscuring, then exposing, then obscuring the street again. Across the way in the carport, we could see the woman from over the road, the outlines of her body visible through her thin nightgown.

High into the air, she lifted her arms. There was an axe, or what could have been a large hammer, poised above her. Then she brought it down with a thump and sound of metal on metal. The end smashed into the bonnet of the Valiant, crushed the metal and seemed to get stuck as she wrestled to pull it up. She was sobbing uncontrollably and shouting.

“You hurt my body. I hurt your car!” she screamed as she brought the wooden shaft down again. Then she swung it and the back window splattered glass all over with a gigantic crash. “You hurt my body, I hurt your car!” over and over again.

Lizet and I watched for a while, unsure whether to move. Lizet put her arms through mine, clutching my forearm. The moon disappeared behind clouds after a few moments and we quietly went inside. The muffled, distant crashing and howling continued for some time.

Before I dropped off to sleep I heard Lizet whimpering to herself, tiny movements shaking her body every now and again.

Just before I woke late the next morning, I had a dream of myself in the Methodist Church in Athlone a few weeks before, dressed in my only suit, the glasses that disguised me taken off, my fists in the air as I shouted, “Defy! Defy! Defy!” In response, the congregants who were looking up to the pulpit where I was standing seemed surprisingly strong and showed no signs of the terror of the previous years of emergency.

“Defy! Defy!” they repeated like a mantra, their arms and fists rising and falling as if to signal all their impatience and transmit an end to the years of quiet assault upon them. I felt proud to have set it off and felt the new electricity surging through my body.

The disorganised resistance seemed to have taken us nowhere and we were all now ready for a new turn.

Chapter 9: Early Summer 1989.

There were seven of us standing in front of the crowd that was milling and shouting behind our backs a bit further down the road. Most of us were holding bunches of flowers, beautifully coloured blooms, whites and yellows and mauve, wrapped in waxed tissue paper or brown paper.

In front of us, blocking our way was a grim row of police in uniform. They had linked arms, uniformed elbow into uniformed elbow, peak caps pulled low down over their faces, looking determined that no one would pass. To the left, and in front of the demonstration, was the low white painted glass entrance to the hospital, and inside the glass doors the entrance hall where we needed to go in order to be able to disperse upstairs to the wards.

I remembered flashes of the inside from when I was younger and my mother took me with her on some locum she was doing for a nurse or matron at the hospital.

It was Mr Thabata's birthday. He was celebrating it where the cops had brought him for treatment for his chest, in a ward in Groote Schuur Hospital. We were determined he should not celebrate alone. Detention kept him out of reach. Now we would force our way into his life and open up the cracks in the Boers' strategies of isolation.

There was not much of a plan, but the respectably dressed amongst us had gradually made our way to the front. I had on khaki pants, rolled up twice to form a turn-up at the bottom, and was wearing a black and white checkered tweed jacket with a loud coloured tie. Mr Khan was dressed in a dowdy business suit made of artificial fibre, worn and past its prime.

Hajeera, too, was there, evoking for me the lasting vision of her sexy effrontery and self-confidence at the fruit market so many years ago. She was looking entirely glamorous. She was wearing a stunning, large set of gold earrings that jingled as she turned her head. She was made up just enough to look both passionate and nonchalant. At the same time it was clear she had paid detailed attention to every last bit of her appearance.

I waved at her, then greeted Mrs Abdullah warmly as she arrived at the front. Mrs Abdullah's black muslin scarf was wrapped tightly over her head, and she looked worried and stressed, darting looks around, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Beeton stood briefly with us, putting himself next to me for a short while, muttering under his breath. Then he peeled off quickly to go mingle with the noisier and more active crowd down below in the road behind us.

We stood in a smart and colourful row facing a dark blue row of police. In front of the row, two officers walked up and down, pacing themselves, one of them beating his inside palm rhythmically with the end of a black wooden baton he held in the other hand.

The cops in front were getting restless, looked this way and that. Some of them had taken their caps off. Their spiky hair made them look thickset and threatening. Their elbows were linked as they pulled and dragged on each other. From a disciplined line, there was suddenly rippling and tussling, like flows and eddies as a river came up against a sharp turn in its banks. The cops'

jaws stuck out. Behind them, another row of police was gathering, all armed with shotguns, masks draped around their necks, looking very calm, almost disdainful.

The cops stared across to the front row of activists, looking formal but with defiant intent to push our way through and sing happy birthday to the old man. The crowd behind was chorusing and dancing now, yelling loudly, surging forward and shouting insults at the cops. I realised there were two yellow paddy wagons, armour plated and with windows meshed, gathering lower down the road. A small group of police were climbing out the back doors of the vehicles and hanging close together. It looked like trouble.

As suddenly as the front row had formed, so suddenly did the police break ranks. There was a shout, then a series of whoops as the cops came running towards us. In slow motion, in little clusters, I and the others began to move forward. I could see Hajeera walking purposefully. We held the flowers in our hands, blooms clutched protectively to our chests, hesitant at first then taking our cue from everyone else, becoming more energetic as we strode forward. We were heading for the hospital entrance.

As the cops ran forwards, they went storming around the front row of dignitaries. With batons vibrating menacingly backward and forward in their hands, they passed me and the others without a sideways glance and flung themselves at the crowd at the back as they pursued people lower down in the road. I half turned and saw a young woman being beaten around the neck as a man and small children tried to drag the police away from her.

Activists and latecomers for visiting hours were being swept up in the mayhem. I could hear curses, the pop of teargas, protesters and others running in many directions as they were chased by excited police with heavy truncheons.

Meanwhile at the front, as if in a dream, us well-dressed leaders were moving slowly towards the entrance and started gliding in through the glass doors that allowed us into the entrance foyer. It was not clear who had made it; I did not pause to see who was with me as I quickly joined the visitors moving towards the lifts at the back and pressed the fourth floor button to the ward I was looking for.

Then I was in the foyer at the fourth floor. Three different wards led off it. Somehow there was a whole crowd of people already assembled, and the numbers kept on growing as more and more people found their way out of the lifts or from the stairwell marked ‘Exit’. I recognized Mrs Thabata, wrapped in a blue shawl. Her kind smile, emphasized by the one good eye with its eyebrow raised benignly, caught my glance. She raised her fist with her thumb in the air. Some of the others who were coming in were more excited and animated. There were now probably about fifty people or more squeezed into the entrance space.

A ward door swung open. Through it, I could see other doors, private wards, and an entrance desk staffed by a few crisply uniformed nurses. The chief matron came out, trying to look confident and professional. She smoothed down her white uniform, unsure of how she would be received. Near the lift was a stool that didn’t even come up to the height of the lift buttons. She strode over to it and climbed onto the stool. She glared around, looking cross but also not sure how to start.

I went up to her. I held out my hand to her, took her hand. She stepped off the stool and peered gratefully at me. “Look,” I said as I climbed onto the stool where she had been standing. “Look, we won’t be long,” I said, louder. My hand went up to my tie.

“We don’t want trouble. We know it is a hospital; we don’t want to disturb the patients. But you can see we were determined to get here,” I said, looking directly at the chief matron and waving at the crowd gathered in the foyer.

“Just open the door. Let him hear us in his ward. We are just going to sing happy birthday – it is the old man’s birthday.” The crowd of people was tense, a few held their fists clenched, one or two with their arms in the air, but they listened quietly.

“So we want to sing happy birthday. And then we will go,” I said.

The chief matron said nothing. Looking relieved, she went back in through the double doors opening to the wards. She leaned over the desk and spoke a few words to the receptionist. A nurse went over, and the second door that I could see was slowly opened. Through its small mesh glass, as it was opened, I could only see a large oxygen cylinder up against the wall. I stepped off the stool and joined the crowd.

Then we were all singing. All together, no one sure who started it or who was leading. There was no way of knowing if Thabata could hear, or how he was feeling. Happy birthday. Everyone knew this would get through to him, might strengthen him and would bring him our spirit of defiance and support. As we ended, some of the women broke up giggling and clutched each other. I kissed Hajeera who was standing next to me.

Just as suddenly, one of the youngsters stepped forward and stood on the chair, fist in the air. She began to sing “Nkosi Sikelele” loudly, fondly, in a beautiful voice.

As quickly as we had come, we all dispersed again. There was just the mere whisper of “Amandla!” as the anthem of defiance ended, to avoid disturbing the patients whilst trying to be loud enough to give strength to the old man. People merged and swarmed out around the hospital corridors and returned in dribs and drabs to the entrance of the hospital on the ground floor, taking their turns at escaping through the glass doors. We were flung out into the night, the smallest whiff of acrid smoke the only memory of that afternoon’s arrests and the dispersal of the crowd by the riot police.

I felt smug as I ran off into the night, down the road, and then jumped into my car hidden in a side street in Observatory. It felt good to be taking initiative again after so many years of being pushed back.

Six weeks later when we went down to Belgravia Road, Athlone, it was a completely different story.

It was Friday night. The gathering in the mosque was long over but it looked like everyone still had their faces wrapped in fringed Palestinian scarves, wound or pulled over their heads or drawn up to cover their face from chins up to the eyes.

Lizet and I parked a few blocks down below Thornton Road, then cut through a few side streets to where the action was happening. I was dressed in jeans and a dark tracksuit top with

sneakers. I also pulled a balaclava low down over my eyes. My only concession to the possibility of getting caught was a spare pair of underwear stuffed in my pocket and the phone numbers of sympathetic lawyers folded neatly in the coin pocket in my jeans.

Lizet had me by the hand as we crouched low and moved with speed to the road above. Then she had simply vanished. I stood to one side, half squatting behind an old panel van, staring with a mixture of excitement and horror and wondering where she was.

The scene was utter chaos. There was much noise. Shouting, screaming, calls over the road and across blocks to each other. The recognizable chant of “Allah, uAkbaar!” Whistles went off all the time, some from fingers thrust between the teeth and others from plastic whistles people were carrying. The sounds were rising to a crescendo, and then there were brief moments of utter silence. Then off it would go again: the boom of the large engines of armoured vehicles trundling down the road, the odd pop-pop of teargas canisters being fired and a more decisive ‘ploof!’ as a soldier released a buckshot round.

Just a few dozen meters down the road from where I was standing, I could see a tree branch that had been dragged into the road. One end of it was burning. There were tyres stacked across the fronds and a deep black smoke was pouring out. A Casspir had been brought to a stop in front of it. Two young soldiers wearing round cloth-covered camouflage helmets climbed down from the giant van while three others leaned over the edge with guns pointing downwards to keep their comrades covered. The two youngsters began to pull at the log, moving it steadily sideward as they tried to clear the road.

I squatted down to keep out of view. Suddenly, next to me, against the parked car, a young boy was squatting. He couldn’t have been more than fifteen. He was breathing heavily and had pulled down his headscarf so that I could see the down on his silky, brown-skinned face. He looked up at me and grinned. His eyes were shining. He put down three bottles next to each other, with damp cloth fuses twisted into them. He made a thumbs-up sign to me, and then lit a fuse with a small lighter on another bottle he took from his pocket. He gave a whoop and hurtled forward, head and body low, the torch flaming in his right hand as he covered the distance towards the Casspir in the road. I stood up to look from my crouching position.

As if in slow motion, the bottle arced through the air, crashed against the side of the machine, and flame smudged and dripped its way down the metallic walls before falling towards the tar of the road. The soldiers watched transfixed, fingers on the triggers but not firing a shot. The boy turned and ran off along the road, just as the tree was finally pulled onto the pavement. With loud clunks as they scrambled back up into the vehicle, the soldiers were helped up and swallowed back inside as the roof closed its ramparts tight. The Casspir ground its gears as the engine revved up, smoke and diesel fumes pouring from the rear. Slowly, then at faster and faster speed, the armed truck moved forward down the road.

The whole night was like this. I didn’t move much, tending to crouch in the shadows or find shelter behind a car or barrow or bin. Things kept coming at me, like a movie put on fast forward and then slowed frame by frame, without explanation, a disjointed soundtrack in the background.

A young girl I recognized from the libraries in town stood in the brightness cast from a floodlight in the front of an armoured vehicle. She carried a soft see-through saffron-coloured scarf. She was dancing, twirling on her toes, beautiful in a long pair of tights, and moving her arms so that

the scarf trailed longingly, caressingly behind her. The police switched off the lights in their car and there were the regular pops of a rifle going off as she vanished into the darkness.

Two children came hobbling past me, holding onto each other and wailing horrendously. The face of the girl looked particularly anxious and twisted. She had her hands around her younger brother. She was perhaps nine and her black hair hung low down her back. The small boy was clutching a plastic bag of sliced white bread, pinched around the middle where he was gripping it too hard. From behind his hands and across his stomach blood was oozing into his T-shirt. The two children melted away just beyond the car where I was hiding, but I could hear their screams and crying for minutes afterwards.

A Casspir stopped again. An old man had just halted his battered car in front of them, parked it sideways along the road and was now blocking the police vehicle's progress. He got out of the car as if he was going to the café to buy some cigarettes. He pulled down on a felt hat with a feather in its band, buttoned up his dark crown tweed coat, put his hands in his pockets and simply walked off with his bandy legs and the bent back of an older man.

Another Casspir had come to a sudden halt. Five soldiers clambered out, unarmed. They were chasing after a young boy carrying a flag in UDF colours. He tore down a side street and disappeared into a house. The soldiers pulled back, not willing to leave the protection of their armoured car too far behind, and unwilling to get caught in completely foreign terrain. Their commander turned and saw that one of the houses along Belgravia Road had candles burning in the window. His boys ran shouting towards the house, kicking open the metal gate so that the wire fence jerked crazily. They pushed open the flimsy front door, which swung wide without any resistance.

Shortly afterwards I could see shadows behind the lace curtains, as the soldiers swiped at the candle flames until the front room was entirely in darkness. They emerged out of the front door in a tight unit like a giant beetle with their officer-in-charge shouting loud orders until they were back in the van and it was driving off.

I recognized Hajeera the moment she poised herself in front of a Casspir. She was looking utterly glamorous, her black hair was swept back. I could see this even though her head was partially covered in a gold patterned headscarf with tassels. She had on a bright marine blue silk dress, long and elegant, cut to blow as it hung. Her large, round gold earrings swung gently as she moved her head. She was standing so close from where I was I could see the carefully shaped and manicured nails on her hands as she held her arms spread out in front of her. She had on a deep red, seductive lipstick and her eyes were carefully shadowed. She stood in the middle of the road, right in front of the Casspir, defiantly, alternating her arms from in front of her to her hips, unmovable.

"Kom julle moffies!" she started screaming in a low-toned voice that carried right across the road. Everyone around was watching transfixed, I realised. I could see the whole scene even as I was caught up by the mad and coldly calm woman in front of me, I was fascinated and terrified at how she was about to be hurt. "Kom julle moffies. Skiet vir my, nie vir die kinders nie!"

And she threw her arms out melodramatically and spat hard on the ground, pushing out her chest, throwing back her head. A girl, it could have been her daughter, came out into the road. She put her arm around Hajeera and stood on her toes to whisper something in her ear.

Hajeera looked at her and patted her back. Together, their arms around each other, giggling hysterically, they turned around and went off.

An hour later, I was exhausted and hadn't moved very far from where I first came on the scene. I wondered how I was going to get back, and if this night was ever going to end. Another Casspir was moving along the road, this time in the direction of where I was. I ducked a little lower.

A group of girls ran out into the road and there was the pop of buckshot; they ran off to the other side of the road and then skipped down the road away from me. One of them was clutching her shoulder where blood was slowly dribbling down. She was laughing along with the other girls.

There was a loud hiss and a 'poof'. I saw a teargas canister rolling towards me along the road. It hit the side of the kerb and came to a stop, letting off billowing silver clouds of tear smoke.

Something snapped inside me. I couldn't see or hear anything. As if in a dream, I pulled off my balaclava and ran forward. I was wrapping the smoking canister in the woolen cap while running straight towards the Casspir. I moved into its lights, right in its path, then ran down the side of the huge iron creature. I leaped up as high as I could. As I reached the top, my arm let loose the metal canister. As if I had practised the move for years, the teargas container looped up and then came down into the top of the vehicle, still smoking and pouring out its chemicals. I hit the ground and made off as fast as I could.

Lizet suddenly had me by the hand and was chasing with me over the road and down a side alley. Soon we were in the car, heading back home, sweaty and shaking, laughing hysterically.

The next morning, the *Cape Times* carried a full colour picture across a quarter of its front page. An indistinct figure was seen leaping up, suspended in the air against the green metallic camouflage of a huge army vehicle; the smoke from the hand grenade he was releasing into the cabin was like a plume against a vivid and burning background.

The face of the figure was turned away but if one looked closely, he looked almost like a white war resister, out of place in the smoke and noise of Athlone's Belgravia Road.

Chapter 10: Late 1989

Prison had a gentle rhythm that suited me.

I found this surprising. There were always things I was fighting about, of course, but beyond that I felt myself getting more and more relaxed by the day. I could think about what I had done and what had happened.

I got myself caught when I went to a meeting where I ended up speaking from the floor. It was obvious how it would end if I carried on like that.

It was getting through spring towards summer. Mostly the days were crisp, a little cool. Gentle winds blew clouds high up in the sky, light blue with the last touches of winter. There were one or two days of drizzle, gentle and soaking. Usually there was sun over the courtyard. When they let me out, at about twenty to ten, I could already feel the strength of the rays that had crept over the Muizenberg and Steenberg Peaks behind Pollsmoor and were hitting the mountains at the Elephants' Eye cave.

I would run and run, around and around the courtyard, sometimes taking up my full hour just jogging. If I could squeeze some time in the afternoon and felt a bit slow, I would lie in the sun on the lawns surrounded by the cellblocks, soak up the heat and do a cursory round of push-ups that I repeated in earnest once I was locked up in the cell again.

My cell was a small space so I structured it carefully and did things in order: first read for an hour and a half, the Bible, then do exercise. Pumping up and down next to the painted metal frame of the bed, I filled time after dinner at half-past-three in the afternoon, building my body up and feeling my arms getting stronger by the day. My old life felt far away.

As I went round and round the yard, the guards were impressed at the running, the minute and ten seconds each time, impressed that the Jew boy kept fit, with his strong rugby player legs and the fact that he could keep going. The guards were relaxed and distracted, soaking up the sun on the court yard lawns.

When they took me down to the shower and bathing quarters they seemed in no hurry to rush me back, so I could lie and soak in a deep bath. The plug was a shred of old towel. The water was hot and steaming.

Nelson Mandela must be just down the corridors, I told myself late one night, wondering where medium B was, where they kept the black prisoners, which of my comrades might be there. They had moved the old man there from Robben Island just a few weeks before, for reasons that were not explained.

It was quiet, the night hanging, there was an almost magical stillness. Then the iron roof cracked, producing a sharp contracting contrast to the silence; and yet no one seemed to hear as the prison went on sleeping as before. Staring out of the long oblong frames of my cell windows, my head pressed on the cool metal of the sides, I looked up across towards Constantia, where the darkened wine lands nonetheless showed up divided into different

coloured patches and fields in the brightness of the quarter moon. Further to the left, a red light went on and off, on and off, warning aeroplanes of the tall mast on top of the rounded peak, the elephant's head, dark against the sky.

Occasional clouds scudded past and momentarily blocked from view the tower or the top of the peak. Below that, I could make out the rough shadow of the Elephant's Eye, the eye of the elephant bruised and blotched in the nighttime darkness.

It was calm except for the occasional roar of a motorbike in the distance, perhaps on Boyes Drive far away or roaring up the Ou Kaapse Weg to disappear at the crest into the valleys and turns before Noordhoek, some late night reveller coming home maybe. Then the cries of a night jar. The sky felt dark and glowing at the same time, clear but with no stars. Silence. I went back to bed, nostalgic at the soft, gentle, hanging feeling, as if time were suspended. There was nothing that I had to do. I slept well and in the morning it took me a while to remember where I was and how I had got there.

The small sealed-off block that housed the politicals, us, had eight cells, four arranged on either side of a corridor. A metal door, solid and imposing, had been welded into a solid metal structure to completely isolate us from the rest of the prison and the corridors where the ordinary prisoners were kept. Behind both corridor and cell doors was this solid metal door, plated when locked.

There was a metal grille door to the corridor and to the cell, made of bars that enabled the warders to look in except when the door was locked, which was most of the day. For about three hours we could sometimes mingle, usually when we were taken out to get exercise, or taken to or from the bath, or to collect our dinner at half past three in the afternoon.

A long window at about head height in the cell gave some access to the corridor, with a central hinge that could swing open to about thirty degrees. A metal frame enclosed the long plated glass; by pressing my nose against the gap when the window was fully open, I could just catch a glimpse of the guard sitting up in the corridor at the metal door that blocked off our section.

Every morning, my porridge was delivered in the same way. By 5h30 the iron door would already have been opened, and it was the metal grille door only that kept me from the corridor. A flunkey slid the porridge under the door. But breakfast in the next section with ordinary prisoners was served from 4h30, and it clearly took a long time with everyone lining up to get served. They had to finish serving all the bandiete, then dish my plate full of oats or semolina, then find a warder and take the plates the long way down to the end, to feed me and a few other political prisoners.

They had to be let in the metal door and the grille door: a regular tjank tjank and rattle of keys against the metal, then the scraping of a chair, and the young guard would open the door, momentarily freeing himself from boredom and the isolation he shared with his wards.

Then the porridge would arrive. A flunkey bowed down in front of the curious-looking warder who would always accompany him, and the silver plate of oats would be slid through the space under the grille door to my cell. The porridge would be ice cold, and the brown sugar would have melted to form a brown scum over the hard covering on the cereal. I objected.

When the kolonel came round on Tuesday and Thursday to ask about “complaints, enige klagtes?” with the intonation rising on the last syllable, I complained loudly. The kolonel was head of the prison and took his job very seriously with the three or four uniformed men around him. All had large stomachs, and tight belts holding them in. They seemed friendly and buried their heads in clipboards on which they scribbled furiously. One of them kept nodding and grinning, the thin wisp of his moustache a distraction that fascinated me even as I complained.

“Any complaints, enige klagtes?”

I started with a short rant: “I am being held against my will. This makes me a special case, not awaiting trial or being one of the convicted. I demand to be released or at least to be treated like a political.”

The kolonel looked uneasy and shuffled his feet around.

“I am sick of cold porridge,” I said. I looked straight at the man with the clipboard. “You’ve got to get organised, not me. I can’t do anything. I expect a proper hot breakfast. I don’t tell you to separate us out so we must wait for the bandiete to finish.”

I played the kolonel as much as I could against the Security, whom I was sure disrupted his routine even without the difficult customers and all the extra work.

“We’ll get it to you first,” he said as he turned to leave and the solid gate was locked up again.

After that the porridge was delivered warm, dished out first before the ordinary bandiete started lining up I assumed. But the change in system was too much to cope with and brought another problem. The instruction was only to get the porridge out, first, quickly and warm.

The warders with the keys now couldn’t get to the ‘political’ section in time to open the metal doors to the cells, and thus to open up the corridor to us. The locked grille gates were effectively sealed and the cells barred behind them.

So now the porridge arrived through the narrow window, which was about the width of the grille bars. Now there was a tap on the windows, turned on their central hinges, there was a rapid acrobatic flip of the wrist, and a hand appeared through the bars with the silver plate of porridge.

It was warm: the art was in not letting the porridge slop out of the bowl. A face in the corridor would bow, wide eyes looking emotionless at me, bushy eyebrows and the arm in a blue pajama holding firmly onto the plate of porridge until I took it, always saying “Dankie!” in a loud voice.

A growing and slowly lengthening bead of melted brown sugar slid down the wall, with loose granules scattered over the floor. Every morning I obsessively picked them up and turned my attention to eating my porridge. Lines of ants began to find the sticky sugar.

It took six days of the same complaining before they could coordinate both operations, opening the cell as well as getting the breakfast delivered warm. Rev Allan down the corridor joined the campaign and loudly added his words to the request for “Klagtes, complaints”.

Beeton at the far end of the corridor had also joined us. I was itching for a chance to get to talk to him and find out what had happened.

By the time Beeton arrived, actually, the porridge issue was almost solved. Six long days had passed, slow, eventful, but stretched out and packed with spaces and time to be occupied and filled.

I got used to the sounds as well as the silences. There was the echoing of feet way down the passage on the other side of the metal door that sealed our political section off from the ordinary prisoners. There was the double clang followed by a short tune of brass on iron, the sound of keys and the creak as this door swung on its hinges from time to time. The crack of the corrugated iron roof late at night surprised the night air; water pipes gurgled behind the toilet; Rev Allan whistled soulfully about two cells down. During their exercise period, bandiete mingled out in the courtyard adjoining my cell, some walking up and down in the hubbub but never acknowledging any of the inhabitants of the political section at our end.

Just as there were long nights, there were long days that had to be filled. I developed routines, like running systematically at exercise time when they let out me into the grass courtyards. After morning breakfast, still locked in my cell, I shuffled around remembering what I could of freedom songs, perking myself up in a toyi toyi that would end with a frenetic knees up, hands high in front of me. Meditation and breathing. After my runs, there was the steam and warmth of the hot bath that I had established as my private space, even with the guards present.

Lunch was at about 11h30, soon after I had come in all steamed and hot from bathing. Six slices of brown bread, some peanut butter, the regulation katkop sometimes mixed with honey or jam from supplies my mom had brought for me. Lunch coincided with the sun coming in through my cell window, bright outside as if the courtyard were lighting up as the sun also hit a spot right on my bed, where I sat with feet curled up. There are no problems, I thought, life is good.

After lunch, I would sleep for a maximum of an hour and a half, to avoid being wide awake at night. Then I read a few pages from the Bible, not too much so I would not get through the book too soon. Leviticus, Exodus, stories of blood and theft unfolded as I read about bags of foreskins the Jews collected from the tribes they attacked; how many bags could they fill and women kidnap before God stopped approving?

In the small space between the bed and the wall opposite, I could do my exercises, sit-ups and presses, working on keeping my body and back in shape. My mind wandered dreamily, no meetings, nothing to hold responsibility for. I was amazed at how much time I could spend sleeping, and at how I had to fight to stop myself from always lying down for a snooze.

Supper was at about half past three, so there was a long stretch to when the sun went down and it became dark. This was the worst time, when I paced up and down or got agitated or bored.

I decided to get in contact with Rev Allan. By leaning out of my cell, I could toss the end of a dental floss container along the inner wall of the courtyard. I swung it round and round, my head jammed up against the window which was tilted open, trying to look sideways as I tossed the string. The third time I tried it I managed to get some momentum. There the container lay, just

outside Rev Allan's cell window. All Rev Allan had to do was lean out of his window, similarly toss a piece of floss attached to something heavy, and reel it in.

I had convinced the bored, young guard to carry over some of my jams and fruit to console Rev Allan: "His children are sick, shame, man, he is feeling really bad," I said. Inside the packet was the note that explained. I knew he would hoard the packet and eventually find the note. In fact, he found it quite quickly and the plan was underway.

There was a rush of excitement as I felt Rev Allan reeling in his own string, catching the cord that was strung across towards his cell, reeling the container in like a fish. The string hung tight and suspended alongside the outside wall between the two cells. Now all we had to do was attach the inside cardboard bit of a toilet roll, bobbing on the string, and we could send notes flying backwards and forwards like a Morse Code. How's your wife? How did they get you? Why aren't you getting fruit, how often do they bring you clothes?

Then the warder struck.

I certainly didn't hear any sliding of the chair or big yawn which usually signaled that the warder was getting up to stretch his legs for an inspection to have a chat to end his boredom and silent captivity. There was just this sudden, loud booming voice down the corridor, obviously from outside Rev Allan's cell. "Wat die fok doen jy?" I felt the string tug, and then loosen.

Panicky, I threw my end of the string into the courtyard, and our brilliant scheme was over. There was the scratching rasp of the walkie talkie, silence, and boots marching down the corridors, the tjank of the gate and then the sound of four or five officers having an intense discussion outside the Rev's cell.

Then I could hear the cell doors being opened, the metal door, then the grille. Lots of murmuring and the odd insulting shout. My face pressed against the corridor window, cheeks and eyes distorted by the pressure, I could just make out the figure of Rev Allan, clutching plastic bags of clothing and belongings to his body, as they shunted him to a cell on the opposite side of the corridor. It was the dark and much colder side of the corridor, where the outside windows were much smaller and high up on the walls with no light. It took two days of "klagtes, complaints" before Rev Allan was moved back and I felt relieved. It was the end of schemes for communicating.

Yet some things seemed to get easier. They started taking me out into the courtyard for exercise at the same time as Beeton. Technically, we weren't supposed to talk, but how could we be stopped?

Beeton walked up and down the side of the courtyard rather than jogging. It meant that we passed each other at least twice during every round I made, and a slow disrupted conversation opened up. Beeton had got caught putting up posters one night, red-handed with buckets of glue in his car and a wild cops 'n robbers type chase that ended with him crashing into a tree after having taken a corner too sharply. The cops feigned outrage while Beeton submissively wiped his hands down with a rag to get the glue off and they took him off to emergency detention. Now here he was.

On his rambles up and down, he had worked out that on the other side of the courtyard was Chris from our area committee, who had been picked up some eleven months earlier, and was

now on trial, a big one, with Tony Yengeni as the accused number one for ANC activities and bombings all over Cape Town.

For us, what it meant was that Chris went out to court every day, except on weekends. A judicious sideways flick from the courtyard could get a note into his cell, a message to outside, not saying too much in case it got found. It created a triumphant sense of beating the system and gave a connection to the world.

At night, Chris would return from court. Like a dormouse, his face pressed up to the window and occasionally actually sitting on the ledge in his cell with his feet hanging out, at 3h30, when everything was quiet, he would shout news headlines across the courtyard to us on the other side: Myself, Beeton and Rev Allan, all desperate for news, desperate for contact, nothing profound to do and interminably dozy but trying to stay wide awake.

They came for me a few days later.

I could tell from the step it was different. From down the closest bit of corridor even on the other side of the door, I heard it. A firmer trap-trap, the beat of boots sounding determined. I could tell there were more people than just the usual warders long before they arrived in my section. The clack of the keys on the metal door that sealed us off was more insistent than usual, aggressive, a harsh metallic banging that signaled its urgency and made the guard jump up from his chair and open quickly. There was the squeak of their boots on the freshly polished floors as they marched down to my cell.

It was God-man, Van Rensburg. I almost laughed. I recognized him instantly though he had changed his style completely. He was with a coloured Security man with curly hair and a moustache that swished across his upper lip and down to his chin. Van Rensburg was wearing a suit and had dispensed with the cool, poetry-reading garb in which I last saw him years ago. His black hair was slicked back with some kind of pomade and he jerked his head officiously towards me, sitting still on the side of my bed and waiting for them to arrive.

“Staan op!” Van Rensburg said to me. “Kom!” He turned and marched out of the cell as I stood up and followed. The two warders who had accompanied the Securities dropped in behind me as if to make sure I didn’t play any tricks.

I breathed slowly and tried to make sure I looked calm. I swung into the corridor from where I had heard the heavy footsteps just three minutes earlier, past the guard as the door was opened, green lino tiles along the floor were peeling, and along one wall a set of buckets had been placed. Near them, on the floor, a set of squeezed-out towels were lying, indications of incessant leaking. Presumably a water pipe, I thought, it hasn’t been raining lately. The ceiling of the corridors was low, lit at frequent intervals with banks of incandescent tubes in old metal shades.

Tramp-tramp. They took me up through a crooked passage that made an L-shape. The floor sloped upwards, so that it felt as if I were climbing continuously. There were two more security doors to go through, the familiar clack-clack of metal on the grate, the wait as prison guards stirred themselves to open another section.

Waiting at one of the gates, I heard a hiss or whisper from the cell nearby. The window was a few metres opposite us. “Dis Boesak se mense!” I couldn’t tell if it was anger or venom or

support. I followed my interrogators up to the front. Through the windows in the corridors, bandiete had hung their blankets to air or just to claim more space. Many sat dispiritedly around as I glanced in and passed, legs swinging over the edges of their bunks in overcrowded and musty cells.

Then I was taken through the last metal doors, towards the main desk where guests or visitors would register themselves. Through an open glass door, I could see a few cars in a roundabout, a carefully tended bed of flowering indigenous plants, splashing bright colours at me. The Security guys came quietly alongside me, God-man taking my elbow, as they steered me quickly into a room that led off the far end of the foyer. They locked the wooden door of the consultation room. They signaled me to sit down.

I am not going to talk, I thought.

We sat around a small table, all of us on green plastic chairs, hands folded in front. They looked awkward. I moved my head around, stretched, peered at the walls, but there was nothing to see. It was just bubbly regulation prison paint, light egg shell yellow and gloss, peeling in one corner where it had been cemented over.

“So?” said God-man, leaning forward. He adjusted his thin grey green tie.

I snorted and laughed. As I did, the two Securities looked at each other, exchanging a quick sideways glance that was enough to give me confidence, hearing my own voice. I could feel them retreating. So quickly? They sat back in their chairs, tried to look in control and unfazed. Something is going on, I thought.

My voice sounded firm.

“Look!” I said. “How long have you had me here? How much shit is going on out there? You know better than me, it’s getting worse. The kids won’t go back to school. Our call was for back to school before you arrested me.” I paused.

“Now we’re out of the scene. There are roadblocks and burning tyres. We’re sitting inside.”

I looked at them, hands with palms down on the surface of the table.

“It’s obviously not us. You’ve got us here and yet things are getting worse.”

There was a long silence. No one said anything. God-man looked down, looking bored. The coloured guy tapped occasionally on the table but said nothing. The silence lasted about twenty minutes. My mind was wandering but I was determined not to talk.

Eventually the coloured guy spoke. “So!” he said, and jerked his head back. He pulled the side of his mouth down, sucked on stray hairs from his moustache. “Will we get rewarded if we change our sides?”

He folded his hands behind his head, leaned back in his chair, the two front legs off the floor. He looked at no one in particular as if he had not just spoken.

“Talk to your friend God-man here,” I said. “I don’t do jobs; God-man can tell you what Jesus thinks.” Again there was a long period of quiet.

Van Rensburg stood up “Come,” he said, opened the door to the consultation room, waited for me to catch up with him, strode outside. He whispered to the officer at the reception desk, who spoke into a phone.

A warder in khaki uniform arrived and took me through the first metal gate. I caught a glimpse of the two Securities going out through the door in the foyer, heading into the bright sunlight outside. Then the metal grille closed. I was handed to another warder, who told me to wait. There was about four minutes of watching a side corridor, where prisoners were brought to sit on bare stools in a glass fronted cubicle, through which their visiting relatives could speak and share their lives.

I was marched downstairs, back through the long corridors, the metal gates, the sound of metal banging on metal, as I was taken back to my cell.

In my bath with steam rising around me, after I was first taken out to exercise together with Beeton or taken off to the bath section to lie back in two metal baths alongside each other, I could converse as much as I wanted.

Rev Allan was treated differently, perhaps as punishment for the string episode, perhaps out of respect for the dog-collar that he liked to put on. So it was just Beeton and I alongside. I wiggled my toes through the steam, hiked one leg over the side, put out an arm and stretched so I could just touch Beeton on the shoulder.

“I missed you, man,” I said. Beeton half sat up, glaring sideways at me. “I mean…you were going to end up here, so what took you so long?” We laughed, leaned back and sighed.

“You know I joined the ANC?” said Beeton. I shook my head. “We weren’t going to get anywhere with all this above ground stuff. Not the way they are hitting us for it.”

“No, seriously,” Beeton said. “I’ve signed up.”

“I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know anything. You shouldn’t have told me. It’s none of my business,” I said eventually. “What if we get out of here?” There was a long period of silence. Beeton shook his head.

“I know,” I said and I reached out and touched Beeton’s arm: “I also began to wonder how we would ever win.”

We got out of our baths and toweled off in silence; when we got back to our cells we separated without a word to go for lunch. I couldn’t read that afternoon and felt uneasy and unsettled. I ran in silence the next day and it took a while to open up with Beeton again.

It was a few days later. I heard the tramping of feet coming down the corridors; it was not usual hours and there was something going on beyond the normal banging on the metal gate and the scraping open of the metal grille, as the prison guards stood on either side of me in their khaki uniforms with no suited Security guys to intimidate them.

They escorted me back up to the top, past the peeling lino, left at the L-shape, the roof paint still peeling badly where the leaks persisted. Hanging drops of water were poised and ready to let go, to fall downwards and onto the floor where towels and buckets waited in a disorderly way. We walked past and continued uphill towards the front.

Just before the last gate, they stopped. “You’re there,” the smaller one said, pointing to the sides where the visiting booths were. “The second one is yours.” He seemed pleased for me. “You’ve got a visitor.”

My heart flew. By the time I got to the booth, my mother was already settled down in a stool on the other side. A glass window, framed by strong wood, separated us, there was a small metal circle with holes punched in the glass, like holes in the lid of a tin can. The walls of a small booth held me in. I sank onto a small stool and I smiled deeply at my mom.

“It’s so great to see you,” I said. “Thanks for coming.”

She laughed, her shoulders heaving, not focusing on me, she was looking away, looking around. Suddenly Lizet came swirling into the booth. She had on a shawl and she was wearing a smart suit. She took off her scarf, threw her arms around my mother.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked, emphasising each word. “I mean, you’re crazy.”

I quietened down. Lizet put her palm against the glass, in a gesture I had only seen before in cowboy movies. She held her hand on the glass, facing me. She looked very directly at me. “They’ll never look here,” she said. “I am your mom’s legal assistant, and had to come with her. This is the last place they would check.”

We were quiet for a short while. “I had to come,” she said. “I wanted to see you.”

How are the sisters? What are you eating? Are you getting out for a run? We spoke about inane stuff.

“You know,” I said suddenly and I stood up.

My voice was louder. “I want to marry you’” I said. “If I get out of here.”

Chapter 11: October 2010.

Sometimes, when I look back on the long journey I have travelled, I wonder if we really achieved what we set out to achieve. As I jog along Boyes Drive, high above the ocean, the sea mists leaking onto the shores at the far distant mountains across the bay, I think about the many things I did and how much I learned. A deep sadness comes over me at the same time as I breathe deeply and feel my lungs fill with air, the soft breezes on my skin.

I wonder whether we had realised the dreams we thought we had.

I did get married and lived for a while in bliss, as they say. We were both heroes of a kind, Lizet and me, people who were looked up to, people who had taken the struggle through to its end and won. Yet it did not last long, and Lizet was called to do things to make the new system work, got drawn into a level of politics where her time was always at the disposal of other people. Inside me, something else tugged and held me back.

Eventually, after a few years of fighting and then drawing back, we got divorced. She could no longer take my moaning, the cynicisms that she accused me of, the way I always held myself back and refused to throw myself into the new challenges she felt we faced. Of course we loved each other. But it was not enough, and the hard men and the new politics sucked her in and made demands I felt I could not accept any more. She left me one day and told me she had a future to make; I must decide where it was I wanted to rest.

They killed Peter Hendricks. They found him in a meeting, took him outside and shot him in the back of the head, allegedly for “trying to escape”. Prega was exposed as a spy; he admitted as much to the TRC. Today he is a big businessman.

I continued to work in the library, surrounded by my books but they never had quite the same attraction that I felt when I was younger. Poetry too seemed to bore me, there was too much forced into too many intense and disjointed words.

During the winter months when I stayed above the bay for a while in a friend’s house, I often saw whales playing in the ocean on their lengthy journey along the coast. They were awesome creatures that fascinated people all along the shore, who stopped walking or driving to point and watch. Sometimes at night I would hear their soft deep trumpeting. Everything would seem suspended. Time would hang.

I had made a long journey. From far across the ocean, my relatives brought themselves to this place, this country. My time in the eighties felt partly about these borders we had crossed, the movement into a place and a new world that was strange and yet deeply familiar. The people I met held me, taught me things about themselves and how they lived, invited me to share. So I made the decisions that brought me over to them, that opened me up to hear what they were saying. I was rewarded through taking a lead and being allowed to see things I would never have otherwise.

All these things that came at me, all these things I remember: what held them together? Where was I in the middle of these times?

There was a nauseous distress, a sense I had left something behind. When I talk to my dad, who now suffers from Alzheimer's, who is forgetting even the names of his own children, who fantasises and forgets his own divorce, who cannot ever relate to the pain he caused to my mom, I often wish memories were simply erased like that.

During the divorce, the children just couldn't take the fighting any more. The youngest, my brother, was ten at the time and took it worst. I cried that day when I saw how vulnerable and young he looked.

My dad was the one who made it. He was a famous roads engineer, always out and about, being called on to work in tiny rural Karoo towns, brilliant, so I'm told. He ended up teaching at the university and lots of his students remember his lectures. He lived in a romantic world with himself at its centre, always thinking his own ideas were everything to everybody. He could never really adapt to having too many other people around competing for attention, even just the five of us children, myself, my three sisters and my brother.

The side of the family my great-grandfather betrayed, the cousins who were left in the lurch after they had sacrificed to set my dad's grandfather up in the new country they called their home, the family story we were never really told, had become blurred like the winter fogs over the sea. Perhaps the important part was that they had journeyed across the seas, had traveled from the ghettoes of Minsk; and one of them had made it and had passed on his success and achievements.

One of my relatives was apparently a Molotov, the famous man after whom the cocktail was named. He was carried off as a young man by the Cossacks and eventually he re-surfaced as a hero of the revolution and protégé of Stalin. Who knows if he was related to us actually? He never acknowledged it, but a brother left behind in the ghetto had recognized him and the sequence of events in his life that seemed to confirm that the link was true. I wonder if we got his rebellious genes; the family legends couldn't answer.

Borders in those days seemed to mean far less than they do today and people just did what it was they had to.

My mother, a nurse who was always caring for others was the strong one, the one who held us together and toughed it out, yet she too simply disintegrated after the divorce and before she died.

Bobba, my mom's mother, used to spend hours with her friends from the old country, speaking Yiddish on the benches on the beachfront. I have soft memories of playing on the beachfront down on the fine white sands as the first sun began to glow across the beach. We used to walk miles out at low tide.

On the beach, only the people from the municipality removing seaweed and a few perching gulls were around.

When I stayed at my bobba's house in Muizenberg, that I inherited after my mom's death, the clack-clack of trains late at night passing through False Bay station nearby was a soothing and rhythmic sound that to this day still reminds me of moments left hanging, leaves a sea smell of nostalgia and a longing for something far behind. Late at night in prison I sometimes had this same hanging, suspended, timeless feeling.

Anyway, it was happy coincidences that had brought me back to these parts of the Cape, which enabled me to spend time next to the sea first in the loft of a cold stone cottage that I rented from a friend, a view over the whole bay and its magnificent sweep, and then to move into my bobba's house after my mother died.

High above the cars and the road below when I went for my regular run, I nevertheless heard the slow, continuous rush of the sea filtering upwards to my ears. It was always present, sometimes in the background or louder sometimes as storms crashed on the rocks. The sea went on and on into the distance, the hissing, crashing, rushing sounds seemed to speak as I went about my daily business. On nights when the red tide was in the bay, the waves would sparkle and glow with phosphorus.

Bereft of the context of the struggle, I fell back more on more on my family and its history, on our personal story to help me know from where I had come, what I had done and perhaps still had to do.

Where I now live, streaks of white blow across the mountains. Sometimes wet mists creep across the bay as if they had been emitted from the bellies of the mountains over the bay.

Lying in bed I can see across to the mountain points of Hangklip on the one side of the bay, with its distant flash of light calling from the lighthouse. Cape Point, dignified and certain, flashes at the other end. At the side and at the back of the house is a steep, layered garden of succulents and grasses: the harsh familiar beauty of the Cape fynbos that I love. It spills up the mountainside behind the house and disappears over the peaks.

I think a lot about my past. And about some of the stresses that had driven me to where I was. I had felt depressed and burn-out for years. There were triumphs. There were things I thought we had achieved. Strongest was a sad acid taste that made me feel that something hadn't worked for me.

Once we went down to the beachfront to watch the amazing hulk of a fishing trawler that had crashed onto the rocks. We saw the people sliding on wires to the land. Some were plucked up to helicopters in swaying seats as the wind tossed up the ocean.

I praise the magnificence of that era. There were grand things we had done. It was as if *we* had succeeded but somewhere I had failed. I sometimes wonder if I belong.

(bloch.final draft3 main.jan2011.doc)