

The Memory of Sorrow  
A novella

By  
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## Prologue

The sound of a train's approach had never seemed lonelier than it did to her now, as grey light revealed the watery ceiling stains in this strange room, and she lay awake amongst the city's half million sleeping and indifferent souls. The child's breath was unpleasantly sour and moist upon her arm, but she daren't move for fear of waking it. Its mouth gummed her skin, trying to suckle, and she manoeuvred the bottle into place. Even though the child was not hers, her nipples and womb constricted at its cry, an uncomfortable, involuntary reaction that she tried to anticipate by keeping a bottle ready, always made up. Not an easy preparation to make when travelling, and the milk sometimes went sour or curdled, but the greedy child hardly seemed to notice. Her eyes hadn't closed all night. When it grew too dark to watch the silent rise and fall of its chest, she pulled the child closer to feel its soft moth-breath upon her cheek. Twice its sleep had become so sound that the only way she could tell it was still alive, still breathing, was to place her hand upon its stomach, and feel the reassuring in and out of its diaphragm. Now, as morning stole upon them, she felt her eyes closing and a soft blue behind her eyelids usher in cool sleep.

A train, closer now, all steam and squealing brakes, woke her. The child was awake and staring intelligently around the room. "No," she whispered, "this is not ours". Its pale blue eyes, so like her own, watched complacently as she used the pisspot from under the bed, and then, after splashing in the water from the emmer, pulled on her shoes and gathered their things. When they entered the kitchen their hostess was already filling bowls with oatmeal porridge and a paw-paw lay in slices on the table.

"Just time for a quick breakfast," she said. "Jan is holding the train for you, so no hurry, hey?"

Alarmed, Anna glanced out the window and there, sure enough, was the train. She could just make out the bearded, sweaty figure of Jan talking to the driver.

"Thank you so much, I really couldn't..."

Making more apologies she managed to extricate herself, a sticky piece of fruit clutched in the child's hand the only price of escape. Prickling with embarrassment, she boarded the train, convinced that Jan's solicitousness in helping her from the platform singled her out as the cause of the delay. It was only as the train pulled away, its smoke veiling the station and scenery, and masking the last view she might have had of Durban, that she reflected with some sadness on the kindness of her unexpected hosts, and the friendliness of the city she was leaving behind.

When she had told them of her intentions, her parents' faces had been models of how to react in a crisis (mind you, they had had a fair amount of practice in confronting the unexpected lately). Her father, the picture of grief, tears gleaming in his eyes and his face almost puce, opened and closed his hands ineffectually. Her heart had filled with such immediate remorse that she almost abandoned the idea right then. It had been her mother's reaction that had lent her strength. Her face was blank, expressionless even. Only her eyes had glittered darkly with anger, outrage, and something very much like a challenge.

"It's not your responsibility," she had said, the hardness of her tone belying the guilt and the doubt, that it just might be.

"If you do this thing, you do it alone, do you understand? You will get no thanks for your sacrifice. Do you think that this child will be grateful? It will resent you, hate you. Or do you think that one day he will find you, say sorry, that he loves you?"

"No, mommy, it's not for him..."

"You are a fool."

The last was said softly, and her mother had turned her back - in sorrow or recrimination, she couldn't tell.

That had been their parting and the bitterness of it made her throat tighten. She had intended to get as far as Bloemfontein on that first day, or even remain on board the train to the end of the line, Cape Town. As they ascended the initial bend of Jacob's Ladder, out of Durban, however, she had felt faint. Leaning against the door of the

carriage for air, it had seemed natural to step out onto the platform at their first stop. Just for a moment, she'd said to herself, but then as she'd emerged clutching the child and her bag, the glass feeding bottle had slipped from her grasp and smashed upon the hot steel of the track. She'd stared absently at it, swaying slightly, the only thing moving in the stuffy air of the red and blue brick station. Concerned women seemed suddenly to materialise, and soon she was reclining upon a bench, her forehead wetted by a cloth. Divested of child and bags, she felt almost peaceful, ready to doze. It was only gradually she noticed that the gathering around her had dwindled. Only one red-faced, but smiling woman, stood before her, the child quiet in her arms sucking a piece of slimy mango.

"My name is Anna. You've missed the train." Smiling at the child, who now smiled sweetly back, "Stay with us tonight, we live just next door. My husband, Jan, works in the office here. He'll make sure you can catch the morning express."

"I...thank you, you're most kind."

It was as they were stooping to gather the bags that Anna asked, "What is your name?"

And she'd told the lie which she regretted as it slipped off her tongue, "My name is Anna too."

The woman had tried to conceal her disbelief, then her charitable nature prevailed. She had been a kindly hostess, not enquiring further.

## Durban 1935

It was only as I lay awake that night, the child asleep beside me, that I realised what it was that the women on the platform had found lacking in me - the one thing amongst all the baby paraphernalia more essential than bottles and milk, or nappies even. I had forgotten a ring. No wonder my hostess, Anna, had regarded me with such pity. I was amazed that she had extended me any kindness at all, thinking of me as an unmarried mother. No doubt my size had strengthened the impression of a recent pregnancy. I had always been a large girl - some had unkindly called me chubby - but now I simply regarded myself as fat. I had long since made peace with my size. Not only did my form tend towards heaviness, I was also almost six foot, uncouthly tall for a girl. I was pallid and plain, but consoled myself with a complexion as pale and unblemished as the newest rose. It seemed perversity that such a covering should clothe so ungainly a form. My size did not lend itself to athleticism, nor was I of the delicate temperament of needlepoint and embroidery. I had no interest whatsoever in cooking, baking, needlework, or raising children, and avoided all domestic chores whenever I could. My favourite pastime was reading, or listening at keyholes and doors when visitors came. I was not, however, an unpopular child. I had friends, and later, even suitors. My family's wealth, and my father's status, proved ample compensation for any failure of charm on my part. Unfortunately I had been as eager as everyone else to benefit from these. How little I knew of the world, or myself. How happy I thought myself, then.

I removed my engagement ring from the hem of my dress, where it was clumsily concealed. I slid it on, and swivelled it round so that the stone faced into my palm. It would prove a biting symbol of my dishonesty, and a reminder of where I might have been had I remained, like the rest, immersed in self-deceit. I closed my hand tighter around it, enjoying the little stab of pain it caused. Now, to the rest of the world, I was as good as married.

Durban, Wednesday, January 30<sup>th</sup> 1935

Blood set me going. It pounded in my temples and stung the rawness of my face like hot tears. I lowered my head and, tucking my shoulder in, survived another gut punch. I could feel my bowels shift like water in a sack. I would make it, just a few more seconds, just a few more breaths. The bell cut through the fug of noise and smoke and sweat, bringing sweet relief and water, but only for a moment. I turned around and pissed into my corner's bucket. The yellow heat cut through the ice. It wasn't a good idea, but my kidneys felt like pressed meat. Then the bell went for round six. I came out like a bull, never giving the other guy a chance. I danced circles round him, finally laying him out with a lightning left. Boxing had always been this way for me, either a slow death to the tenth, or a fast knockout reprieve. Although my style was easy to spot, it was difficult to gauge which kind of a night I was having. You would still be guessing right up to the point that the other guy was breathing tarp. Bookies hated me. Tonight I was on form.

Back in the locker room my second was giving me a vigorous rub down and massage when Harry the Horse plonked his hairy arse down on the bench opposite. His bald pate shining from the exertion of backing the wrong man, and losing all that dough, he pulled one yellow purri-patta after another out of a brown bag. His fingers glistened and the bench bowed beneath his weight and his orange cotton suit seemed ready to split. Harry was a bookie. Like no other bookie I ever met, he distrusted the track and never stood a bet on an animal in his life. I never asked why he got that name. Somebody was reading too much Runyon, I figured.

“Frankie, my boy, you disappoint me.”

He readjusted himself, then wiped the sweat off his face with a crumpled hanky.

“Let's us make a deal,” he smiled. His teeth were the colour of day-old tea.

They say boxing is the seediest sport in the world. The easiest game to rig cause you need only buy one plum player. No need to stand the judges or ref if you found a fellow willing to take a dive, and there were plenty of those. So an honest fighter

could unwittingly get caught up in somebody else's lie, somebody else's game. The payoff for the unicorn was the tidy win on his card.

They say there are no honest boxers, only those more or less complicit in losing. You have to keep your wits about you in this game. If you want to stay honest, that is.

"Harry, Harry," shaking my head, I smiled too. "You know my position. How would it look if a man of the law acted crookeder than the Law itself?"

Our smiles broadened like the half moon outside. We both knew a dozen such guys, guys who came and went like a rash. It was my honesty that kept Harry intrigued. I slung him the brown envelope I'd found in the pocket of my gown before the match. Without bothering to look inside I could feel it was a bulky weight. Harry did not disappoint me.

"But listen, there's a big match on tomorrow night. Are you coming, my boy?"

He knew that, like everybody else, I would be there. Jimmy Dixon was rapidly becoming one of the all time greats, the kind of boxer that comes along maybe twice in a lifetime. A man who couldn't be bought, Dixon was on the rise and didn't know how to lose. Tomorrow he weighed in against the reigning Champ, Mannie Hommel, a well-seasoned and powerful fighter.

"What's it to you, Harry?"

"I was hoping you could do something for me. There might be a little trouble with somebody trying to stop the bout."

Three years later Dixon, a coloured man, would literally be in a different league from white boxers, and become non-European Middle, Cruiser, and Heavyweight Champion (it was rumoured that he wiped the floor with his white counterpart during a little friendly sparring practice up in Joburg). But in 1935 there was nothing illegal about a black man squaring off against a white man in the ring. Still, that didn't mean that everybody liked it - there was always trouble.

“You know I can’t get involved in that, Harry.”

“...And so you see I got this letter...”

It read – ‘Gloves off coolie boy. You want to see a real beeting?’

The thing about thugs that really got on my tits was their bad spelling. I wondered if it was a clue to nabbing them young. Then again, my spelling wasn’t so hot neither. This piece of wit was written on railway stationery. Whoever sent it wanted Harry to know it came from somebody with authority, even if they didn’t have the clout to close the game down. Some little bureaucrat, just dying to bugger up a great Saturday night.

“Ja, Harry; I’ll see what I can do.”

I knew I wouldn’t get anywhere. Short of running up to the station and demanding which of my dopey colleagues was in need of the extra writing lessons, I didn’t have a hope. All I could do was pitch up early on the night and try and make the guy. If he was a railwayman I would know him. Aside from Sub-Inspector Richard ‘Crooked Dick’ Behendt, my partner and the only other soutpiel on the staff, no one else from the railway CID went to watch the mixed bouts.

I showered and wandered into the Durban fug. Sweat immediately clouded my shirt and vision. At this time of night it was as if the buildings themselves were lit by some residual store of light from the day past. The brickwork glowed soft pink and grey. The smell of masala and fresh dhania tempted me on through narrow alleyways, between clean washing and dirty puddles. Down one such alley I saw the figure of a nun on her way to the Cathedral. Her habit cast a sombre light against the rowdy pinks, and golds, and reds of newly washed saris in the alley. An upstairs window flew open and a warm greeting was called out. The nun turned and offered a toothless benediction. My stroll suddenly felt like the wasted time it was. I liked to wander amongst a crowd and press of people. To walk leisurely amongst a busy throng. Time

never felt more plentiful than at such a moment and humanity never more content, more purposeful. But the match had finished late tonight, and the crowd of the street gone home.

I turned back to find Harry the Horse.

The Blue Room, which was really only the painted basement of a more respectable tea-room, was his usual haunt. We traded drinks and small talk over the nightly revue. The dancers there were so slick they nearly had me well oiled. I said goodnight while things were still rum - before I lost anything, like my name, or caught anything, like the clap.

Crossing Prince Edward I stopped to chinwag with Detective B.B. Loots of the regular force, who'd been called in to close down a native dance hall. Things were going well. Loots was haggling with the owner, who wanted the boys to round everyone up only after the supper, which was served at 10.20pm. A damp, portly man, he wrung his hands and, as he became more and more agitated, sprinkled those around him with liberal amounts of snuff. He stood to lose a fortune if, instead of staying to eat the meat hash he'd prepared, all his patrons disappeared into the bellies of the Black Marias lined up along the street. After one particularly brown and minty sneeze, negotiations were completed. Loots and his men would be back at 11.15 sharp, with a photographer in tow. I saw in the paper the next day that the pictures were a washout. Somebody overturned the chalk dust during the stampede, everything was obscured, not a dancer to be recognised. There was no mention, of course, of the prior talks leading up to the police's arrival at 11.23pm, and their subsequent arrest of 255 native carousers, not all of whom were sober by this time, according to the reporter.

I got back to my flat in St. Andrews Street about two in the morning after stopping off at a low-key place for a quiet deliberation with Mssrs J. Walker and Co., during which it was decided that maybe the aching joints and pricking conscience were a sign that I was getting too old for this game. By this hour even the drunks were sleeping it off in doorways, park benches, cardboard boxes. And the heat was beginning to recede. Sometimes the nights in Durban seemed hotter than the days. They say it's the humidity. I lived upstairs from a couple with a baby. The wailing kept me awake all

hours. But if I even dropped a shoe on the floor they tap-danced all over the ceiling with a broom. I understood their dilemma. I had no desire to wake their child either. Hell, I was as exhausted as they were by their nightly battle for sleep. So, stealthily I entered my apartment and removed my shoes. I noticed with a grim smile that the cockroach powder I'd sprinkled was as effective as ever. They scuttled under the sink as I put the light on. Chalk. I must try the chalk next. I never understood what the insects were after. I was a bachelor and, although recognised by some as a first rate cook, I mostly ate out. The icebox held exactly a dozen Coo-ee minerals, some milk, and a bag of the best ground from Colombo's. The kitchen was all blue linoleum and chrome finish. Being an only grandchild, I'd come into some desirable furniture when my Grandmother passed on. It gave the place a kind of squeezed in, brimful look I had grown to like. The bed's elaborate rosewood headboard was almost seven foot high and came about all the way to the ceiling, taking up maybe half the room. Visitors thought it a little quirky. Personally, I was not one for encouraging visitors. Hell, the bed was my Granny's and I wasn't about to chuck it. For one thing, if I walked past it too quickly I could still see her there, scooped up amongst the overstuffed pillows. For another, I got used to its out-of-this-world luxuriance. A whole flock of geese must be stuffed in the pillows alone. Maybe that's why it still gave me the bumps. I threw on a clean vest, flicked the light switch, and crawled into bed. Ignoring the faint rustle of insect wings, I slept like a baby. Sometime before dawn it rained.

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The banging next day seemed to come from inside my head. Finally I worked out that the pounding was on my door, not just my temples. I opened up. Dickie was clean-shaven, and turned out as neat as a pin in striped serge and a natty blue and yellow tie with swirls and flowers that set my eyes reeling. He held a thermos in one hand and a pink carnation in the other. I took the thermos and added some rye. After the first swig I realised it was tea.

“Jesus, this really *is* Irish coffee.”

“Listen, you bum,” said Dickie, fixing the flower in his buttonhole. “We’ve got a call-out.”

A call-out this early in the day meant someone had found something disagreeable on the tracks. They never called us for a small carcass like a jackal, or a dog. I didn’t like the thought of dealing with a mangled cow, or person, first thing in the morning. Reluctantly I threw on the glad rags - service would be halted until we sorted it out.

The drive was all cool blue shadow and luminous green hillside. Market gardens peppered our route with colour. Red tomatoes, purple brinjals, yellow marigolds turned the landscape into semaphore. I wished I knew what it all meant. Or did it signal just another perfect day in paradise?

When we got down to the siding the area was already cordoned off. The ganger who’d called it in was there and so was Constable Phillip ‘Baby Batter’ M’batha, a slight man with fastidious ways - the exact opposite of the burly fighter whose moniker we’d given him. Batter darted here and there, gleaning information and keeping the locals off the scene. I could tell by the way he was sweating that we were in for something gruesome. I never saw him sweat from the heat.

The ganger was leading us slip sliding down the muddy embankment when Detective -Sergeant Jaco Coetzee joined us. He was a tall, blonde fellow, who liked to work out and had biceps the size of melons. A handsome man, he boasted a long-standing engagement to the Colonel’s daughter. Maybe it was this, or maybe being in the rugby first fifteen, had gone to his head. Whatever it was, he had the ego of a Tommy Burns, and the only thing greasier than his hair pomade was his handshake. I tried to steer clear of both.

“Hey, can I join you manne?”

He already had.

“Why, sure, Coetzee. Just taking a look now.” Dickie was polite to everyone. “Did the Head send you?” But he wasn’t stupid.

“No, no. I thought I’d see what you blokes had here. The station is so dead this morning.”

It was a poor choice of words. What was really dead this fine summer’s morning was the woman at the bottom of the incline. She lay face down and looked as if she was still trying to crawl away when somebody turned her permanent wave into a more permanent mess of gore and bone with a high calibre gun. She was awash in blood. Much more than made sense from the head wound we could see. My gut roiled with bile.

Coetzee scribbled furiously in a notebook.

She was wearing blue rayon with lots of ruffles and drop-waist fashionable maybe a decade ago. The pair of matching blue shoes were new and looked far more expensive than the rest of her outfit. One of them lay on the path, its heel broken and at an odd angle. I felt a compulsion to pick it up, click it back together, but my hands just dangled like a dead man’s at my side. I guess it didn’t matter much anymore.

Three women stood in the distance, gesturing towards something unseen beyond the bend in the track. Batter went to investigate. He came back balancing a blue slouch hat on a stick.

When the District Surgeon arrived, grave and balding, we rolled her onto a wooden stretcher. That’s when we saw the blue umbilical cord, but neither sight nor sound of a baby. Was it still here, or had somebody taken it? Dickie and I began a search of the dense thorny underbrush close to the path. We found something a little further up. A big blue handbag also smeared in blood. A black cloud of flies rose as I approached, and a little fist moved feebly as I picked it up. Dickie stepped out of the crime area and vomited up his tea.

At the nuns' hospital the child was taken by a nurse in clean starched uniform white. Her wide cap made her look like a Dutch painting. It hid her expression as she bathed the baby. I should have headed straight back, but something about the cool quiet of that ward and the nurse made me stay. Her name was Maude. She seemed to me an angel. I felt like stopping there forever. I never wanted to be near the dirty mud and horror of that crime scene again. She fed the baby a bottle and was pleased that it suckled. When I left she was still cradling it in her uniform-crisp embrace.

Dickie drove us back to the scene. It's a myth that one becomes accustomed to dealing with the dead, if that is one's trade. Those who work in casualty wards and on battlefronts, patching the almost dead together, have no time to reflect on death - and besides, their work is based on the hope that one out of the many will survive. In our line there is no such promise. We arrive when all hope is shot, bloody beyond repair, and - if there is any such thing still glimmering - before we leave we have stamped out innocence as well. Such is our job, separating the more from the less guilty. At this point though I was angry enough to say 'stuff the job', and forget about justice. I'd settle for an easy mark - a scapegoat would do me just fine. Red and orange spots danced before my eyes by the time we drove up to the siding again. I had to sit for a minute in the car, just breathing, like before a fight. I got out when my vision was normal. I couldn't do anything to stop the frenetic racing of my pulse as I started down that embankment like a racehorse about to fold at any second.

Only the District Surgeon, Dickie, and Baby Batter were there. The body had been taken to the mortuary. Coetzee had gone to the yards to check whether there was any evidence of a train having struck her. This seemed a waste of time as everyone had seen the bullet wound in her head. But I was glad he was somewhere else. The sniffer dogs were off further down the tracks. We'd passed the three women leaving by the road - the call of work, duty, family stronger than the fascination of our slow ploddings after a murderer at this sodden scene.

All the District Surgeon would say before the autopsy was that she most certainly died sometime in the early hours of the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> from two gunshot wounds. One in the chest and another, presumably fatal, to the head. Dickie and I studied the area. It was a steep, narrow pathway. Not much room for a struggle. Or escape. Not the

usual setting for a romantic tryst, and so why did she come down here? Was she following a lover, husband, father? Could a woman have done this? My mind ran to other killer women - Daisy de Melker types. But they usually committed murder stealthily - not blood and guts, unless for revenge. We tried to make sense of the spoor and the drag marks down the path. Dickie positioned one of the blue shoes above some indents. They matched precisely. It looked like her killer first attacked her at the top of the bank, and then some time later hauled her to the bottom and shot her. Twice. Somewhere in between these assaults she gave birth. Probably her last act of maternal courage was to shove her bag, with the baby in it, off the path and into the bush. Her killer must have left the scene at some point and missed this, or figured the child wouldn't survive the night, and was no threat anyway.

Just shows how wrong a person can be.

Our boss, Detective Head Constable Jordaan, pulled up in his old cream Studebaker, and surveyed the scene. Batter took plaster casts of some footprints; they were partially obscured, and only the heel gave a good impression. The sniffer dogs caught a scent that lead up another path to a pullover on the side of the road. Here the spoor was more evidently that of a man and a woman walking side by side. Batter got some good casts of tire marks and a whole right shoe. Then it started to drizzle. We were high up, some way above Durban, and it turned cold here when it rained. It was time to leave. We put the plaster casts on the back seat to dry out and left Baby Batter still gathering evidence. He used a cardboard box into which he put every scrap of rubbish that might or might not later turn out to be a clue. He worked meticulously in the steady rain.

We had no idea who the woman was. The child was a clue - vital, and as yet conveying nothing beyond the vague suspicion of a family murder. Like the rest of the world we discussed the Lindberg case. Was it possible that this murder was the work of a couple, like the Hauptmanns, motivated by greed? It was all wild conjecture. We were spitting in the wind, with nothing to go on, not even the victim's identity. We decided to stop off on the way down the hill at a popular local pub, The Loose Veranda. We ordered some sandwiches and pilsner. The barman really got his dander up when we started asking questions. The locals didn't know much except that a woman had been found murdered near the tracks. The barman thought we were

implying one of his patrons had a hand in it. Maybe we were. The beer was tepid, like warm piss.

Back at the office some photos were lying on my desk. Pictures the evidence boys had taken at the mortuary. They'd cleaned her up first. She had pretty big (blue, grey?) eyes and a generous mouth. They'd added a wig as close to her real style and colour (mousy blonde?) as they could get. She looked like a movie star. Of the silent screen. The phone on my desk rang and I picked it up. Joey Bananas, editor of the local rag, was on the other end.

"Frankie, my boy, you disappoint me."

It seemed my purpose in life.

"You and all the other shmoes. What you want, Joey?"

"A reliable source tells me that a broad did away with herself under a train last night. This true?"

"If it is, she must have been a contortionist, Joey. Nobody who saw her would tell you that. Who's your source, Joey? Somebody's yanking your chain."

The line crackled a bit. I could hear Joey's wheels spinning.

"Source is confidential, Frankie. Same as you. So you telling me this broad was murdered?"

"Maybe. And Joey..."

"Yes, my boy?"

"She wasn't a broad. She was a nice girl with a family. And Joey..."

“Hmm?”

“...I’m not your boy.”

I lowered the handset in its cradle with a soft click. Stupid thing to say. I’d put the guy’s back up for nothing. So far as I knew, she was a broad. Nothing told me she was a lady. Except her last gesture. And what did Joey mean when he said, “Same as you?” Was his source also railway CID? If so, why’d they gotten the story so wrong?

Looking through the pictures, I hoped she did have a family. I hoped they recognised her in the paper the next day and came forward so we could catch this creep. I doubted it. A woman like that - no wedding ring - who knew? Maybe she hadn’t a friend in the world. Except the one who killed her.

It was a fruitless, muggy afternoon. We waited in the office for the CID draughtsman to finish his mapping of the area and the mortuary to come up with some results. The District Surgeon’s office phoned to let us know that the autopsy was scheduled first thing on Monday morning. There were no more leads. At about four o’clock I took the trolley-bus up to the hospital. Maude was gone. Her replacement was distractedly trying to feed several babies. The child slept peacefully in its cot. I left a gaudy pink woollen teddy bear I’d picked up from the gift shop in the foyer. A lady with blue hair assured me through perfectly even false teeth that it was the only child’s toy she had left. I thought it better than flowers or chocolate. Still, I was relieved Maude hadn’t seen me with it.

I picked up some supplies at Deen’s, including cascara tablets for the boy living with his widowed mother in the flat two down from mine. He was a good kid, but at twelve a little puny for the work he did as a runner at the wool exchange for seven pence a shift plus tea - not a bad rate. I’d taught him a few moves, but these only got him into worse trouble. His mother gave me the evil eye now every time she saw me. I was getting a little annoyed at this, it was time to do something. The kid’s main trouble was over his lunch, which mammy wrapped in neat brown paper and string every

morning. She was a first-rate cook. Everybody wanted that lunch. Well, sometimes you need a strategy; fists just don't cut it.

Billy was sitting on the entrance steps when I arrived home. From the sound of braying laughter, I could tell that his mom was entertaining upstairs. I tossed him the cascara. At 6d a box it represented almost a day's wages for him. He started to unwrap it when I explained how he should crush it up and add a very small amount to his sandwiches tomorrow morning, increasing the dosage each day. I warned him not to use more than five at a go. We wanted the fare to be disagreeable, not deathly. A grin lit up his freckle face, splitting it from ear to outside ear.

I stashed my groceries and headed to the Criterion for supper. It was a busy little eatery on the Embankment, with a second floor bioscope. Tonight was *The Merry Widow*, but Jeanette MacDonald always seemed so pleasant, I could hardly get up the energy to watch her. Mae West was doing someone wrong on the other side of town, at the mustier Avenue Theatre. I planned to catch her at it, on the late showing. The Criterion had a perpetual holiday air about it. Maybe because most customers were from out of town. The food was lousy, but from a table at the window I could see the embankment and the yacht mole. The fight tonight was at the Seaman's club. I could eat and keep an eye on who was going in.

An hour before the gig the fighters arrived with their seconds to warm up. At around six-thirty the punters started pouring in. It was getting dark, so I paid up and crossed to the club. It was housed in a single story bungalow that smacked of dead fish. The paint was flaking, but the rent was right. And, after all, this was the seaside – sooner or later everything went a bit flaky. I stayed outside with the touts 'til the match was about to start. Harry the Horse had been inside taking bets for an hour. Now he came out for some air. I left him at the door. When I got to my front row seat the ref was already calling the game:

“Ladies and gentleman, take your seats –seconds out – time....”

I looked around. I could see no ladies. Probably no gentlemen either, I thought, as the crowd turned into a screaming mob with the first blows. A quiet, courteous man,

Dixon was astonishingly cool when he'd come out to shake hands. We all thought he'd be torn apart as he was a much slighter man than Hommel. Well, the only person who stopped the fight that night was the ref when he counted Hommel out after Dixon laid him down in the third with a left uppercut curled in the plexus, followed by an impeccable right to the chin that knocked Hommel into next week - and would have put him out of the championship too, if it hadn't been an exhibition fight.

It was afterwards that things got a little ugly. Harry had made a fortune. The odds were close, but most punters fancied the old favourite, Hommel. A few had taken the slightly longer odds on Dixon. When they went to collect, Harry was nowhere. The dusters were just making an appearance when they found him lying in a puddle across the narrow-gauge rail used for shunting around the bay. Lucky for him the rail was shut down during the fight. Otherwise this would've been the second death on the tracks in a day. I was starting to get fed up with the way someone was piling on the work for me. Something would have to be done. I lit a Cavalla. Its smoke curled blue against the harbour lights. Maybe tomorrow.

Turned out Harry was only concussed. I sorted out the payouts and got him back to his place near Victoria Street. His wife was mad as a snake at me bringing him in looking like a sack of potatoes, blood seeping from the back of his head into his collar. When I left she was measuring some thread and boiling an upholstery needle, but the real scalding was coming from her tongue.

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Next morning I was up and at the office before anyone, even Dickie. Downstairs' baby had woken me with its cries in the early hours. After that, thoughts of another baby kept going around and around in my head until at last I'd given up on sleep and, leaving too early to catch a trolley-bus, I'd run my two miles then headed for work and a shower. It was one of those peaceful grey mornings when the bay and sky melded in soft luminosity. I decided, as I sat alone in the quiet at my desk, that this was the best time of day.

That's what I was thinking when, BAM! the office collapsed into a fiery hell of shrapnel and debris. I saw clearly a man in front turn, pallid arms outstretched towards me. I understood, as a hot fire of judgement rained down upon us and the earth buried me down, down into a muddy death, from which I clawed my way back, screaming, my lungs burning with air like acid. I stood, still clutching the man's hand, and looking down, saw that that was all I held. His eyes stared at me from beside a piece of wire, the rest of him meshed into it like a scarecrow gone to straw. I raised my gaze; jagged tree-stump-stilettos cleaved heavenward, whilst a hard rain began to fall upon us all, and the world resumed its slow spin.

And then I was lost into darkness.

I was still out for the count under the desk when Dickie found me. He knew better than to try and rouse me. The last time this happened I'd latched onto his throat and only let go after a desperate knee in the balls. This time, he sat in my chair and had a smoke, and waited for me to do my own waking up. When I surfaced we both acted like I always took a little nap under my desk first thing in the morning. I smelt the cordite and saw that some punk had thrown a firecracker through my second-storey window. It was this that sent me back into purgatory for a stroll down memory-lane. A walk in the woods. These little excursions were the reason I could never join the regular police force. Every time someone let off a cracker, or dropped something with a loud bang - there I was, down like a possum. Or a coward. But a lot of men knew a private terror after the war. We kept our traps shut because nobody would understand. And besides, did we really want them to?

I saw straight away the plaster cast of the shoeprint was gone from my desk where I'd left it yesterday. So this was no bloody kid's prank. Somebody knew enough about me to pull this one off, and must have been desperate. Who knew I had the evidence on my desk? And the balls! To come right into the building when he might be seen? Sheer lunacy. Unless...we contemplated this for a while.

Unless this person belonged here, wore a uniform, was one of us?

Dickie and I decided we didn't much like the way this investigation was going. We felt like dummies being yanked around while someone was making sure they got away with murder. Later that morning the Head called us in and laid it out that if we

didn't come up with something soon - and he meant like yesterday – then we were off the case. We all knew who was just chomping at the bit to take over. Coetzee with his bitty notebook and pencil - hanging around us like a proverbial fucking albatross - kept trying to cadge her picture; but we weren't relinquishing a scrap. Being engaged to the Colonel's daughter had nothing to do with our dislike of him. With his shmarmy ways and winning smile the guy was just a natural prick.

## Anna

After that first day's adventure I continued to call myself Anna. I thought it as good a name as any. The child and I continued our journey uneventfully. I'd decided on the train because I was unwilling to wait the two weeks for the next Durban sailing. By the time we reached the Cape Town docks, I was impatient to leave the Union, and tired of the deprivations of train travel. Even I, most sedentary of creatures, did not like to sit that much. I imagined shipboard life to be infinitely civilised. I liked routine and looked forward to the regularity of meals and hours. For two solid weeks, however, I was forced to remain below decks, prostrate and (so I felt) inches from death. The child was well cared for: a host of bored and kindly ladies saw to feeds, entertainments, and promenades on the deck. I think they viewed that hapless baby as a kind of mascot, a vision of rosy well-being on the Castle Line, perhaps. In the cabin I languished, not a morsel save chicken broth passing my lips, until my skin seemed to become a yellow and flaccid thing, and I imagined myself metamorphosed into a large chicken. I wondered if such an event would in any way surprise the broody gaggle who descended every day to show and reassure me of the child's continued good health.

We entered Southampton 27<sup>th</sup> September, amidst such relief that I forgot we now had no official papers. The documents I possessed were in my old name, and I'd already left that behind. When we'd embarked in Cape Town I'd told a story of a boarding house fire. They'd warned me I would not clear British Immigration and would be considered persona non-grata until I received a new passport. This suited me fine. I would begin life in England as a refugee. That is what I felt myself to be, having fled the limits of home.

Cousin Bedeliah was waiting for me at the gate, however, and he was most insistent that I leave with him immediately. I had written to him, but left Durban too soon for a reply, and hardly dared hope he would appear like a rescuing angel and free the child and me from the Authorities.

Bedeliah was a Cornishman. His grandfather, still living, was my mother's Uncle. As a family we were not close. I suspected, although it was never stated, through some

falling out between my mother and Bedeliah's. The fact that he was there, waiting for us, confirmed my suspicions. As little of the truth as my letter to England expressed, it must have been obvious that I came without my parents' approval.

I doubted whether my cousin was prepared for the child, of whom I made no mention in my letter. Upon first sight of us, Bedeliah betrayed no surprise, and continued to glower at the Customs man who wanted to inspect our bags. I understood nothing of the exchange, and may as well have landed in Morocco for all the sense I could make of the language. For a moment I felt the enormity of my decision to come here. England was not the familiar homeland I had believed. It was a foreign place, and the child and me strangers to its ways.

Eventually the Customs man went a shade paler and relented, worn down I thought, by Bedeliah's ferocity. Years later, much to my horror, I discovered what it was that he said to the poor man. He had told him, without being too specific, that I, his wife, suffered from a womanly complaint common after childbirth, and that if I didn't receive urgent medical attention I would either expire on the spot, or create one unholy mess, or both. The luminous yellow of my skin after the seasickness no doubt confirmed this wild lie. That Customs man must have been enormously relieved to get rid of the voluble Cornishman and his idiotically grinning, monstrously large, wife.

The weather that day was perfect, and I'd experienced nothing to match in beauty the blueness of sky and glorious green of the cliffs as we drove the coast road through Porlock for an undisturbed lunch in the field at the very top of the hill. I could understand almost nothing of Bedeliah's attempts at conversation, but was content in our rescue. It felt blissful to be stretched upon the green sward, which, though surrounded by sea and part of a landscape described by some as 'rolling', was in fact, unlike a ship, very still beneath me.

It was growing dark as we approached Zennor. Our route had not been the most direct, but it was an endearing introduction to Cornwall, and would remain an indelible part of my life there. At the time the only name which seemed at all familiar to me as we sped past it, was that little part of 'Mediterranean' Cornwall, St. Ives. We

turned off after passing Zennor and the roads became increasingly narrow and hedged in. I began to understand why the few cars I had seen in Cornwall all had dents or some paint missing. Although I never in all my time there heard of an outright collision, if one came away with only the slightest scrape from passing traffic, one invariably connected on the other side with dry-stone wall cunningly concealed beneath the luxuriance of the hedges. We reached the farm with the merest loss of paint, from which I judged that my driver was well familiar with the hidden dangers of the Cornish countryside. We entered its gates and the farmhouse loomed up large as any Brönte hall or mansion I'd read about in school. Next morning I would see that it was, like most houses round there, a rough, iron-coloured double-story made of granite, with no frills and certainly no room for hidden passages, or attics for the sequestering of the insane. In Cornwall, as in most places I discovered, one took one's chances with the neighbours, and other madmen, on the street.

Bedeliah lived and worked the farm alone with his Grandfather, Elim. Their names, strange on my tongue, were unusual even by Cornish standards, and had come about through the fascination of some long dead ancestor with the Old Testament, possibly evidence of a desire for singularity, for their surname was Smith. For all Bedeliah's volubility at Southampton they were a close pair, and I found them for a long time inscrutable. At first I appreciated their silence, their unquestioning acceptance of my arrival with the child, and the measured existence of rural life. Later I would grow to love it.

Durban, Friday, February 1<sup>st</sup> 1935

Baby Batter, scrupulous man, had made a second set of casts which he'd sent, at the Head's instruction, to Captain R.B. Lovemore, S.A.P Inspector of Vehicles. If he'd been a woman, I'd have kissed him. That print was now our most important clue. So far it was telling us nothing, aside from the killer's shoe size. Nine. Lovemore was working on it round the clock. When I rang him up he said he'd have something for me. Tomorrow. Maybe.

Meantime, Dickie and I fielded the calls. The afternoon was getting late and clouds were building up when Mrs Lotski from downstairs rang up. My head was throbbing as it always did before a storm broke. The thunder was loud above us, and it was all I could do to stay in my chair, but I made out that she thought she'd seen our woman. I told Dickie where he could reach me and climbed the two flights down to the platform.

Railway CID headquarters were housed in the second storey of the Main Station building on Commercial Road. Mrs Lotski was a ticket seller below. She worked the night shift and had only seen the paper when she got in at four-thirty. Her booth looked out into the waiting room and also had a window with a small half crescent opening facing onto the platform. When I showed her the picture she nodded yes, that was the one. She'd bought a ticket early on the evening of the 30<sup>th</sup>, for a late train. She couldn't recall the ticket's final stop. The girl seemed so tired, sitting all alone; Good Samaritan Mrs Lotski offered to share her supper with her. No, she'd said, her friend was taking her for supper at La Maison. As it got later and no one arrived, Mrs Lotski figured she'd said that just out of pride. La Maison was a swanky Froggie restaurant. A week of Mrs Lotski's wages wouldn't cover dinner for two.

She said the girl looked upset. Then, at around nine-thirty, a man in a brown suit and fawn raincoat arrived. He'd stood in the doorway and motioned the girl over. Mrs Lotski thought him a rude fellow when he didn't even go to help with the girl's tatty cardboard suitcase, just took it from her at the door. His hat, also brown, was tipped low on his face, and Mrs Lotski was sure she wouldn't recognise him. Oh, and he was

kind of a big fellow. And she thought there was something funny about his shoes, although she couldn't say what.

So much for an eyewitness. I looked round that dreary waiting room. To think someone spent their last hours waiting in this smelly, pale-apple-coloured dump, depressed me. That the girl thought she was going out for a supper treat, or a romantic dinner, and found instead only a miserable bloody end, made me even sadder. Angry too. A poster caught my eye on the way out - 'Voorspoed na die Toekoms!' it said, offering work on the railways for those of the right background and hue. It was uncanny sometimes, how the future found you.

Back upstairs Dickie was vibrating like a jackhammer. A fellow from upcountry had phoned. He'd been worried because his wife's nurse hadn't appeared back after a jaunt into town. She'd gone off for a few days before but always came back. He was just getting alarmed when he'd seen the morning paper. He recognised her immediately and, after turning it over in his mind all day, decided he better call the number in the article. He was a bit edgy. Had he done the right thing? he'd wanted to know. Dickie had had a hard time restraining himself. A whole flipping day wasted. He'd kept his temper enough to get an address from the guy, and the woman's name - Wilhelmina Susannah Maria van Rensburg, plain 'Annatjie' to her friends. With that many names, I hoped she had a loving family somewhere.

We drove upcountry, Dickie at the wheel as always. I had a licence but never used it; suppose a car backfired? We'd decided on the car as the address was some way from the local station. The road followed the train line through brilliant green hills for most of the way. When we turned off the main road I saw how far away the house was from the train stop. Must have been some slog walking home with that suitcase. Or did she get a lift? And where now was the tatty suitcase Mrs Lotski described? Maybe Annatjie's employers had some answers.

If he had them, Mr Nunner was none too forthcoming when we got there.

"Wat? Wat you want? Who is this? Who's there?" was his greeting at the door.

Dickie'd warned him we'd be coming. We showed him our credentials through the lead paned window. When he finally opened up I could see how someone could get restless working here. He had a stern bearing, but fussed like an old woman with the bolts and locks. He let us in, but didn't ask us to sit down. Taking a seat himself, he told us that he'd arrived in South Africa sometime after the war. Many here welcomed him with open arms, but not everything had been rosy. Not everyone was pleased to discover Fritz setting up in business when soldiers who had fought and lost so much battled to get a job because of some disability - a walleye, missing limb, missing sanity, missing health, or, worse for some families, plain missing. Me, I figured we'd won the war, and I'd seen enough to want the quiet life when I got home. I could tell by the impressive brick double-story and the gleaming Terraplane sedan in the driveway that lately Mr. Nunner hadn't been suffering too much. Turned out he ran a couple of butcheries in town and, we found out later, had a few ventures on the side.

Anyway, he was midway through his sad tale of the trials he'd faced as a poor immigrant and had gotten to about 1927, when Dickie reminded him of why we were there.

"Hmmpf," he exclaimed, with a look of disgust as if Dickie had let off a bad smell in church.

Which was unfair, because Dickie would never do such a thing - in fact, he was incapable of even contemplating it; Dickie was not the churchgoing sort.

He started the interview.

"Mr. Nunner, was Miss van Rensburg long in your employ?"

'Your employ' - I had to hand it to Dickie sometimes.

"Miss van Rensburg," said Nunner, the 'miss' sizzling on his tongue like it burnt him. Maybe it did.

"Miss van Rensburg, started with us last year. Her time here was almost up. We did not want to renew her contract. You saw her, you understand why, eh?"

He gave a nasty smile.

I'd made sure there was nothing in the papers about her being pregnant. The fewer details, the less the cranks had to manipulate, I'd felt. Mr Nunner's attempt at innuendo suggested we were on the right track - in fact, looking at him, how could I be sure this guy wasn't the Papa himself?

"No, Mr. Nunner. We understand nothing."

I let the 'Mr.' linger a little in the air. He got the message. His face grew even more solemn and went a shade of brinjal purple.

"Nein, nein. No. The bastard was certainly not mine."

He was so obviously offended I wondered if I'd blown it completely, if we'd get anything more out of him. But then he changed his mind. Maybe he remembered we were here on official business. Maybe he had other reasons. He asked us to sit down.

"This Annatjie, she is a sweet girl. Or so we think at first. My wife, she likes her so much she even gives her a few things. Dresses, shoes, that kind of thing."

He became unsure and faltered.

So that was where the shoes came from. Trying to look unimpatient, we waited and hoped he was going somewhere with this tale of happy domesticity.

"Annatjie goes to town a few times. On errands, you see. Small errands, nothing important."

Here he gave a tired yawn, and mopped his brow. They say some people yawn uncontrollably when lying. Below the table his legs were tapping out a different message.

“Annatjie, she was, how do you say it? She was a bietjie slow. She got distracted easily. She was easily, hmm, persuaded do you say?”

“I say nothing, Mr. Nunner. You’re the one telling the story.” I didn’t have to make it easy for him.

“Well, about May last year she meets a man. I think it is on one of these trips. On one of these trips into Durban that she met him, and he, well he takes advantage of her.”

“Let’s not be Victorian, Mr. Nunner. We all know the girl was pregnant. What we need to know is, did you ever meet the guy?”

Mr. Nunner looked unconvincingly shocked.

It’s all I can do to stop myself grabbing him round the collar and giving that pursed-arse face a few quick slaps. Reminding myself that this is not the Katzenjammers, I busy my hands instead, making sure my own tie is hanging just right and smooth.

“Nein, nein!” he yelled in a high-pitched, old womanish, kind of way.

I was getting tired of the outrage number he was trying to run on us.

“Give it a rest, Mr. Nunner. It’s a routine question. Did you know him, or not?”

“He called one night. I spoke to him on the phone. We do not say much. It is a party line you understand? The neighbours, hmmmph, they like the gossip, ja? He says he will come round here sometime and talk the matter over with me. My wife, she is very fond of Annatjie, you see. She could not stay here, but my wife would of been very happy to see her situation taken care of, yes?”

From the back of the house wafted the sound and smell of bluing. It was washday.

Gazing into that uncomfortable, indignant face, I wondered if he’d taken care of the situation himself. Cleaned up. His wife sounded like a nice lady. I speculated on

whether she was slow, or deliberately turned the blind eye? I said I'd like to meet her some day. His face puckered at this as if he was chewing on a lemon. He turned and lead us silently upstairs. The second floor was done out in the same subdued and heavy taste as downstairs, all black beam and whitewash. The guy certainly didn't make a splash with his dough. Or so we thought. And then we stepped over the threshold of Mrs Nunner's room, back in time to the years before the depression; the days of swing and flap. It was a dream in pink. Pink organza curtains played gently against wallpaper of intertwined pink lovers' knots. A fluffy pink footstool was home to a curly pink poodle with a pink bow in its hair. Against some deeper pink sheets on the bed, reclined a delicate rose. She was a dream in pink, as well. It was difficult to find anything wrong with Mrs. Nunner, at first. But when she threw off the blankets to greet us (she insisted her husband move her to one of the overstuffed pink chairs near the window) I saw that her legs beneath the pink ruffles of her gown were withered and red. She caught my stare.

"Yes, Mr...?"

"Inspector Long. Frankie Long," I said, removing my hat.

"Pleased to meet you, Inspector Long."

She gave me an arch smile, the inside of her mouth showing pink as a cat's.

"...and yes, I have polio. A belated honeymoon present, wasn't it, Cookie?"

Like a schoolboy I blushed. Pink.

"Mrs Nunner, we're here about Annatjie. I don't know how much your husband has told you...?"

Dickie readjusted his tie, as she turned her green-eyed stare on him.

"Aagh, shame. My poor Annatjie. I saw that horrible paper, you know."

Her bosom gleamed pale in the filtered light. For all her outrage I could tell that, under those gossamer ruffles, she wasn't wearing a corset.

"I had a feeling, you know, that she wasn't coming back. Esther, our maid, told me Annatjie'd taken her suitcase with her, you know?"

Mrs Nunner seemed to think we knew a lot more than we did.

"I had a bad feeling about it. Didn't I, Cooks?" She appealed to Mr. Nunner.

"Ja, my dear. I remember."

"You know, that Annatjie was such a sweet thing when she got here. I don't like to think that such things have happened to her while she was under our roof. And the neighbours, agh, you know. They like to talk, talk, talk."

She threw her hands up in elegant annoyance.

I could tell Mrs Nunner thought herself a lady; a real soft touch. But not so soft as to keep the girl on when she must have really needed the job. Not if the neighbours didn't approve.

"It makes me so confused, you know? I mean, where did she meet a bloke like this? A killer."

"You mean someone who'd get a girl in the family way, and then have to murder her when things got too awkward?"

Her guileless look held for just that instant too long, freezing into artifice. She turned a little paler within those pink folds.

Ignoring me, she continued:

"The only place Annatjie ever mentioned to me was the Coin tea-room. And once she went to the Theatre Royal, to see the Sons of England Women's Association

Production, and came home the next day. But Cookie, you said she was staying overnight with that friend of yours in Durban, that Mrs Titzinger?"

This last was addressed to Mr Nunner. Now, 'Titzinger' is a perfectly respectable German surname, but here he went a brighter shade of pink. His wife carried on, oblivious.

"She was back the very next day. So, you see, I'm sure she must have met this bloke before she came to us."

She said it smugly, as if she'd put an end to the case. Or, at least, rid herself of any vestige of responsibility in the affair.

Just for the look of it, I asked where Annatjie had worked before.

"In Craddock, for an elderly lady, she told us. We found her through the papers you know? She came with very good references."

She sounded sad. I could see that Annatjie, like myself, had turned out something of a disappointment. I was getting tired. The colour scheme wasn't helping my headache either. On the way out we got it from Mr. Nunner that his friend 'Mrs Titzinger' was, as we suspected, none other than Mrs Tits - Madame of the busiest whorehouse in Durban. He would say nothing more, and I could hear him mount the stairs with a heavy tread after he shut the door on us. And that, as they say, was that.

I looked round before we left. All the eye could see were darkening fields and the station lights in the distance. I wondered who the neighbours were.

As we drove back down to Durban the sun set through the remains of the storm, giving the clouds an eerie, and misplaced, silver lining. We left the car at headquarters and walked the tight maze of streets near the city cemetery. It was dark but the punters and poppies hadn't come out to play yet. It was a quiet stroll; not counting the black cat that crossed our path somewhere near Maud Avenue. The MatchBox! glowed down at us in spidery red neon from above a red door. A pair of black eyes squinted at us through a little metal slit. We must have looked all right. When the door

was pulled back we gazed upon a skinny dwarf of a woman whose form seemed too fragile to carry the load of blue eye shadow and gold jewellery she was labouring under. Her black hair gleamed with blue tints that matched the little scrap of black satin that almost covered her assets. When we asked for Mrs Tits she responded with a barrage (of Cantonese?) which she ended by shrilly calling,

“Tits! Tits!”

Judging from her annoyed expression, this applied as much to us as the Madame inside. She herded us like errant chicks down a stairway leading to the basement. The ‘office’ was red, supposedly like the inside of a match head, or something. What it smelt like was the inside of an ashtray. There were no windows. The walls seemed to press in on a bloke. Even dapper Dickie loosed his tie. As we entered, Mrs Tits was all over me. This was not an entirely pleasant experience. She didn’t get that sobriquet for nothing. Soon as I could come up for air, I hustled her into a red plush chair.

“Frankie, Frankie, my boy,” she said, ruffling my hair and trying to pull me onto her lap. “You disappoint me.”

Goddamit, was everybody in this together? Was there anybody left in the city I hadn’t disappointed? I was getting a little fed up with this line.

“Yeesh, lady, mind the locks why don’t you?”

Offended, she shoved me away. I needed the breather.

“Listen, babe, no offence. Just a guy in my position you understand...”

I held my hands up in a gesture of helplessness. Her expression settled into a look of boredom. She lit a cigarette in a fancy holder decorated with what appeared to be a genuine sparkler.

“Okay, Frankie. You don’t want a good time, what can I do for you?”

Even though it's the name she goes by, I hate to call a woman 'Tits' to her face.

"Listen, toots, I need some low down on a fellow, name of Nunner."

Without looking up she ground the cigarette out in a tin ashtray and then dumped the lot - fancy holder included - in a low bin in the corner.

Maybe she was giving up smoking.

I doubted it.

"This mean you going on a health kick, feeling rich, or maybe you got something you want to get off your chest?"

"Listen Frankie, I threw away the stinking holder because I'm chucking in my best friend. Maybe yours too."

I wasn't sure what she meant by this. Aside from Dickie, I didn't have any friends. Not that I knew of. Maybe she could see the confusion on my face.

"That holder was a gift from a certain somebody in return for keeping certain things to myself. But now you're here; I'm not so certain anymore."

"What would it take to make this uncertainty a sure thing?" I asked.

"This is about the girl, right? The one I saw in the paper this morning?"

And there it was. We had him.

"Yes, it's about Annatjie."

"Ja, that was her name. The paper didn't say, but I thought there might be some family, somebody left behind?"

"You mean the child?"

She squinted at me through the smoke. I couldn't read her thoughts.

“Yes.”

“There was a survivor.”

She considered this for some time. I got out a Cavalla and lit up, using a match from one of the complimentary books. It was thin and had ‘The MatchBox! - Matchless’ inscribed in red on the side. Fancy. And untrue. I put the book in my pocket.

“Listen, you and Dickie can't repeat this. This is a quiet joint, no interference. I want to keep it like that. Maybe retire in a few years. Open a beauty salon in Boksburg. Buy some little dogs. Live the quiet life. Get my own house, and some decent neighbours to ignore.”

“That's great toots, but a young girl is in a quiet place at the moment, and believe me, it's no life. So cut to the chase. This Mr Nunner, he the client who gave you the fancy holder?”

She looked at me in amazement. Was I on the money? Then she laughed and slapped her legs so hard her thighs wobbled under their red silk sheaths.

“Dickie, where did you find this guy? Is he a real detective, or you two just play-playing?”

By the way I cracked her up, I guess we were just clowning around. But somehow thinking of a dead girl and her motherless child, I didn't feel like a funny guy. Maybe Tits saw this on my face because she stopped cackling abruptly.

“Listen, boys. I understand you have to use the information, just don't let on where you got it, okay? That's all I ask.”

Dickie nodded. I studied my shoes. They were all muddy. I should give them a shine after this.

“Okay. Nunner, he’s my silent partner.”

I looked up. A bit on the side was one thing. Having a share in something like this put a whole new spin on Mr. Nunner and his lemony Puritanism. She saw she had our attention.

“Well, he owns this building and he knows some people. You know, to keep them off my back, and the girls on theirs...Ha, Ha, Ha, a little joke...You’re right, not funny, of course. Anyway, he’s worried a lady, one of his neighbours, sees him with me in town one day. It makes life tricky. So next thing, this girl, just a pretty little mouse, pitches up at the Coin. She says she works for him, and she will carry the parcel back to his house with her. You see, Nunner wants only cash, wrapped in brown paper. Like pork chops. So we do this once every couple of months. I like the kleine mouse. I am kind to her. I take her to the Beauty Salon one day. We spend ten shillings, and she comes out looking like ten pounds, at least.”

“And so she becomes Nunner’s mistress?”

Again she looks at me as if I’m a half-wit. I’m beginning to recognise and dislike this particular expression – it usually means I’m so far out of the ballpark that I may as well be playing tiddlywinks.

“Nunner’s mistress?”

“Is there an echo in this room?”

“No.”

A loud banging on the door starts up in the background. Somebody is really impatient to get laid tonight.

“So there *was* another guy? Mrs Nunner says the little mouse met someone in Durban. Someone you introduced her to.”

I was working blind now; I'd thought the 'other man' was just a convenient figment of Mrs Nunner's small mind.

"Oh, yes. That guy. But it couldn't be him."

Her whole body shook emphatically.

"Why not?"

"Well, because he's one of your sort."

And here the banging was joined by shouting, as we heard the door being smashed in upstairs. Just our luck. A police raid. Mr Nunner must have forgotten to pay his friends, or maybe Annatjie's death put a spanner in the works. Either way, our colleagues from the newly formed Municipal Police force came pouring in through the broken door and started laying into Johns and working women left, right, and centre. We tell Mrs Tits we'll get more from her later, someplace quieter like the cells, as she is hustled away by two red-faced sergeants who seem to think a girl doesn't have the right to earn a living.

We figured it was time we were on our way as well. When we reached the pavement we found a gawking crowd gathered round the doorway. The neighbourhood was enjoying the novelty. Although brothels round here were always being raided, this was the first time Mrs Tits had been hauled off. Her face was as red as the sign above the door by the time they manoeuvred her into the Black Maria.

Suddenly it felt like home time. Leaving Dickie to do some more detecting, I hopped a trolley-bus to the hospital. Half way up the Berea it slid to a pneumatic halt as it lost electricity in its cables. Passengers grudgingly disgorged themselves after waiting a long while. No one was keen to walk up that incline. More infuriating was to have the trolley-bus, its power restored, catch up with you at the top. I reached the Hospital after a light jog, my shirt only slightly whiffy from the exertion. Pulling my jacket back on I went in search of the child, and Maude.

I didn't know if anyone had phoned through the baby's surname, or at least his mother's name. I discovered at the desk that he was still listed as 'parents unknown'. I updated the buck-tooth administrator as to the mother's details and was told that the Woman's Social League had been and was making plans to transfer the child to the Children's Home at Addington Beach. I found Maude as she was coming off shift. She stared at me dubiously. I gave her some spiel about official business, which left her looking even more sceptical, but she agreed to a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. Even though she was still in uniform, she'd added a beautiful green padded coat and white downy scarf which made her look like a darker, and more beautiful, Margot Grahame. In the sterile, carbolic smell of the hospital, she had a warm, green scent. She smelt like home. We chatted a long time. I don't recall what we said, or if we were solemn or gay, but the other staff were definitely eyeballing us by the time we left together. A trolley-bus was waiting patiently at the top of the hill. She lived near Congella, but we were still talking and decided to walk, me carrying her matching green padded bag.

## Anna

That autumn I wrote home, attempting to explain myself, letting my parents know the boy and I were all right, and in Cornwall. I received back a booklet edged in black. My father's funeral programme, complete with lavender ribbon, and inside my mother's handwriting, "Who can know a Father's love?" I didn't know if this was religious commentary, or if she'd felt the need to rub in the salt. The more I gazed at those few words, all that she had written, the more sinister a significance they began to assume. Was she suggesting that the boy's father would one day come in vengeful search of us? I bundled the booklet, along with the news clippings and all the documents - save one - into a stuffed cushion. It sat reproachfully on the chair in our bedroom, a reminder of awaiting decisions.

Cornwall was in the midst of one of its warmest autumns, and the hedges were loath to give up their summer blooms. Knowing nothing of farming, I followed Bedeliah on his rounds each morning. The boy, much to everyone's amusement, slung on my back South African style, came with me everywhere. Eventually I learned how to milk a cow, care for a pig, and cook. The latter I came by through studying Elim who prepared the meals on a black hob fed all day long with precious coal. By winter I could even make a decent pot of coffee, lightly salted and milkless. On Saturday nights the men bathed in an iron tub in front of the kitchen fire. First Elim, then Bedeliah. The water was then turfed onto the beautiful bed of hydrangeas Elim cultivated by the front door. On Sunday afternoons we all trooped to the three o'clock service at the church at the end of the lane. I was never sure what denomination it was; we seemed to have a different minister almost every week. It took me a while to work out the cycle of beliefs which rotated their way through that little edifice, according to some higher roster. I bathed with the boy on Sunday evening. The rest of the week I made do with the icy water of the porcelain basin in our room. Towards the end of November a gramophone arrived, shipped from Newcastle, I think. For several weeks we had no records to play on it. Then a catalogue arrived at the Zennor grocer's-cum-post-office. We knew from listening to the wireless exactly which records we wanted - they were American - from Parlophone. The day they arrived the house filled up with people, some I'd glimpsed only from a distance across a hedge or field, and others I'd never once seen. The sweet smell of scrumpy cloyed up

the rooms, and we danced like beans in jar, hardly moving at all we were packed so tightly together. At around one o'clock a few peeled off, heading home? To a quiet field? I couldn't tell. Unused to scrumpy, and having found it like sweet juice, I must have drunk at least four muddy red glasses, and simply slid into a chair and out of consciousness for a while. When I woke it was dark, and strangely warm and stale indoors. Bodies were lying everywhere; on every warm scrap of carpet, chair, and hearth that could be slept upon. The boy had fallen asleep early on in the evening, and continued to sleep all through that raucous party noise. After checking on him, I made my way outside for some cleaner air.

Bedeliah was smoking his pipe, sitting on the low dry-stone wall that led into the first field. I stood watching him for some time, letting his silence envelope me. He knocked his pipe off against the wall, and without a word, took my hand and guided me across the field. The grass was wet like sharp tongues across my naked legs. We headed into even longer grass and finally down a mud pressed path that disappeared below field level, into the earth itself. It was an icy cold cave of mud and stone. I later learned that there were few of these fugoughs left in Cornwall, stone-age relics the true use of which had long since been forgotten. Bedeliah lit a meagre fire with his tinderbox, and some small twigs that seemed made ready for the task. No new task, I thought. Unfortunately his preparations did not extend to a blanket, an oversight I wryly regretted. So, without undressing, we lay together in the dim light on the musty clod floor. My body shook involuntarily with shock when Bedeliah entered me, hard like a warm shank. He, feeling my jolt, and surprised at the filmy resistance, pulled back, too late and bloodied. I realised that, never having received any explanation to the contrary, he thought the boy was mine. We separated silently, tucking in our clothes. He packed and relit his pipe with a glowing twig. I could see his hands tremble, but only very slightly, like the flicker of flame light. When all had burnt down to ashes, and my body quite stiff with cold, and I, enjoying the clean ache, and darkness surrounding us, we spoke for the first time that evening. When it became too cold, I followed the path back to the house, leaving him lying in the now blue grey stillness of the fugough.

A few days later it was pronounced, at the evening meal, that we should be married three Saturdays hence, after the banns; and that Mrs Ball, who lived but two farms up,

would have a suitable dress. And so it was. We took our vows, with surprising ease and unexpected gladness, on an unseasonably warm December morning in the small grey-stone church at the end of the lane. I wore pink satin, which Mrs Ball had let out considerably. During a short ceremony afterwards, in departure from family tradition, we christened the boy simply Jerome.

Durban, Saturday, 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 1935

I was waiting downstairs when Dickie arrived to fetch me next morning. He cast a wondering eye over my neat blue suit and matching pink-sprigged tie, an outfit I hadn't worn since Granny's funeral. My face must have said it all. Without a word we drove downtown to the station. Captain R.B. Lovemore had come up with some details on the shoe and make of car from Batter's plaster casts. The shoe was some kind of fancy sportsman's running shoe, possibly imported from England, and definitely expensive. The car was a Dodge Senior Six. There were only a few hundred in town. They were sought-after cars; hell, even the Colonel had one. Batter had done some more questioning and turned up two separate witnesses who said they'd seen a dark blue Dodge parked alongside the road above the siding. One swore it was roughly nine in the evening, as he was walking home, that he spotted it standing empty; the other said he'd come across it, also unoccupied, about two the next morning, after the local *dans*. This tallied with our theory that the murderer had left the scene and returned later. Cool customer. I'd never encountered a murderer with the nerve to go back and make sure of the job.

Bliksem van Stryk pitched up, like the proverbial bad penny that he was, at around four that afternoon. A wiry, athletic man, he was too small for rugby, but had the temperament of a loose forward. He'd been promoted to the newly formed Municipal Police. Durban was in the process of being declared a city, and the MPF was an ambitious part of the Council's bid for cityhood. Although Durban liked to consider itself the last British outpost in this corner of Africa, van Stryk's meteoric rise from the railways to regular policeman hadn't been hampered by the fact that his Uncle, Oom Faan van Stryk, was the newest Member for the Provincial Legislature, Chairman of the Veeboere Assosiasie, and most recent appointee to the Durban Town Council. He was a bigwig. Given his new status as something of an 'untouchable', Bliksem liked to cause kak whenever he found himself back downtown at the station. I liked to think of him as untouchable in the Hindu sense; not worthy of notice. None of his old mates, not even Coetzee, missed him. He arrived now at the top of the polished wooden staircase with his face contorted in a smile.

"Hey, LongTom, how's it going? Still on that poppie murder case, hey?"

He let out the kind of staccato laugh that reverberates across a room, causing everything to shrink in its wake. A silence fell.

“I’ve got some sad news, hey. I’m afraid that whore of yours, LongTom, has done herself an injury.”

He waited for a reaction. Dickie spat sideways, neatly hitting the metal bin with a dull ping.

“I won’t go into the tragic details. Let’s just say that Mrs Tits won’t be wearing *those* stockings again, hey?”

Again the staccato bray.

The room went back to work. But everyone had heard. Dickie and I exchanged an unamused glance. Our best lead was gone. I could see the intention written clearly on Bliksem’s face. We were off this case. Looking into his scheming blue eyes, I somehow couldn’t bring myself to give a rat’s arse, and told him so. He didn’t find this half so amusing.

“So, is this all that brings you down here? The MPF got no budget for a phone call, Bliksem?”

He just smiled. Job done, mission accomplished; and with a tip of his cap, he left.

It took less than an hour for the Head to call us in. The order had come from the top, from the Colonel himself. With Mrs Tits dead, our case was going nowhere fast. With his partner out of business for good, we had nothing on Mr Nunner anymore. Nothing on anybody in fact. Just the vague outline of a Joe Bloe, who maybe worked for the railways, drove a senior six Dodge, and wore fancy running shoes. The closest fit, in fact, was Colonel Villiers himself, who by some perversity of coincidence matched all the criteria - being a Springbok cross-country man in his day. Which only served to underline that all we had was just so much dada.

The case went to Coetzee. We were to turn the file and evidence over to him on Monday morning. Meanwhile, Dickie and I were assigned to a cattle dispute for the rest of the day. Five red cows with long horns found near the Queensburgh line, and we had to turn up the owner. Volunteers were plentiful, but if the cows were handed over to the wrong claimant we'd have a nightmare of paperwork and litigation to follow. On the other hand, if the volunteer owner made a quick job of turning them into beef – well - let's just say everyone had one sort of stake or another, in that kind of happiness. Wanting to get home, I made the call that we give the cows up to a reliable fellow with whom we'd had dealings in the past. Dickie demurred. It seemed a genuine claimant was on the books – an old man with three daughters. Grabbing my coat, I headed for the embankment, leaving it up to Dickie to do the biblical.

Maude was late and the lights were already twinkling across the bay when we met up. She'd changed into something gossamer in green and orange, which peek-a booded temptingly from below her padded coat. We headed for the Athlone Saturday dance. I had tickets for the lower floor; they gave concessions to the men in khaki. When we arrived, I discovered that my companion's presence meant that tonight we were only welcome on the upper floor. Not wanting to embarrass Maude, I made no fuss. Things were less formal above. Dress was optional. But the music was hot. Harry Clarke and his Magnetic Orchestra were electric. We dusted our feet 'til pumpkin hour. At supertime we took a midnight taxi, only 9d, to a quiet place on Hermit's Lane. I knew they had no problem with mixed couples and I had no desire to ruin our evening by pushing the envelope of tolerance in our good town that night. We ate slowly, chewing over the details I told her of the case and my day. She thought I should keep at it; it was my job, and my duty. She seemed reluctant to speak of herself. I figured we'd have enough time to get to that. Maude was more than a single-date kind of woman, I thought to myself, as we spooned butter pudding and vanilla ice cream at the end of the meal.

We strolled down the embankment, stopping now and then to peer over at the darkened water. A train glided past, as if through a miracle, bay water on both sides of the track. Once when we stopped our hands touched on the railing. Just a brief contact, but I felt the warmth and blood of her so close and animate. I saw her onto

the trolley-bus home and walked, not lonely, but sanguine, to my apartment some blocks away. From the end of the street I heard downstairs' baby crying lustily to be made full again.

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Next day the neighbourhood woke to the tinny blare of the bullhorn an announcer was using to drum up support for the Opening Ceremony of the First Electric Train Service Across the Drakensberg. Scott's expedition never had so much publicity. It was an occasion for all the pomp and ceremony the new Railway Administration could muster. A special train was departing from Durban at nine, to cross the Berg from Ladysmith to Harrismith for the first time ever by electric rail that afternoon. It was a momentous occasion. All the big wheels from the Council and Railway would be there, as well as the artisans and engineers who'd worked on the conversion. Not one to stand on ceremony myself, I rifled for the catty under the washboard and let loose with some shot onto the roof of the green and yellow van, where the rambunctious announcer was perched. I must have scored a few hits because he glanced up in some confusion and then disappeared into the belly of the vehicle, which sped off to plague some other part of town. Miss Patlanski, the spinster from across the landing with whom I shared a bathroom, gave me a smile for the first time ever as we passed on the stairs that morning, confirming us as co-conspirators in our treasonous dislike of being woken by public announcers.

My shirt needed the wringer by the time I reached the bottom of the stairs. I didn't bother to pull on my jacket. I'd decided, after laying out all the facts to Maude the night before, that Dickie and I deserved another crack at the case. So Mrs Tits was no longer going to lay it all out for us. There was still Nunner, whose movements on the night were as yet unaccounted for. I was sure I could wrestle a confession from him if I only got the permission to haul him in for a heart to heart. And so I decided to head up to Queensburgh, where the Colonel had a little compound. If I could convince him, I knew I could solve this one. Leaving early I hoped to catch him before he embarked for the Berg. I dreaded the thought of missing him, and encountering instead his waspish, embittered wife. She was English, from Wales or Dorset, somewhere in the

West Country anyways. It was well known at the station that she hated Queensburgh with its large Afrikaner community. Hated all things Afrikaans in fact. We could never work out how the Colonel had snagged her - him the son of a small time Free State farmer, just one step away from the bywoner cousins who had moved with him to Durban in his prosperity, and which he now housed in nearby wood and tin houses. She too was of farming stock, but with visions of a new gentry in a new land, attaching herself to him and seeing in his swift rise in status a deeper affinity - a fierce determination to betterment. What she hadn't foreseen were the tight bonds of kinship which kept him incestuously lashed to his low class, classless family, who would drag themselves behind him all their lives and his. Why he had married her, remained a mystery to us all.

I knocked, and waited a long time at the front door, reached through orderly twin rows of staked and bound roses. The Colonel's pride and joy. Eventually a large blonde, tousled looking woman answered and stared at me with some impatience when I explained my quest. Leaving the door open she led me into a deserted parlour.

"I'm afraid you are too late, Inspector. Papa has gone with everyone else to the ceremony in Ladysmith."

Her accent was neither particularly British nor Boer, but somewhere in between; the vowels slightly flattened and stretched. She invited me to a seat.

"Would you like some tea? Or ginger beer?"

Ginger beer sounded good, as it was another hot slog back to the station, I said.

A strange sucking noise filtered from the back of the house, and now became nothing so much as a series of long strangled farts. We exchanged a startled glance, she going an unattractive red in the face. Without a word she dashed to the back, and I - having visions of elderly flatulent relatives - followed more cautiously. She wasn't in the kitchen, but the back door was open, and I went out and turned the corner into a new brick washhouse where I saw her wrestling with a strange copper and glass contraption. A thick grey cord hung from the ceiling and, reaching up, I pulled the

plug. She glared up at me for a second, almost releasing a sharp retort, then thought better of it.

“If you could just help me pull this up...”

I could see what she meant. The machine was some kind of new fangled electric washer. Four large suction cups pumped up and down in a glass cylinder causing the strange sucking noise I had heard earlier. Someone had obviously overloaded the thing and the arm of one of the cups had become entangled causing the embarrassing farting sound. The girl wanted me to pull the top of the cylinder to which the cups were attached, allowing her to reach in an arm and untangle the clothes. It seemed like a sensible idea, only we eventually swapped roles, her arms proving too large to reach into the small gap between the cups. I finally released the clothing and she hauled it out, dripping water and heavy, into a bucket.

“Men!”

I stood and lit a smoke. I was a little put out by this last statement, seeing as it had taken a good quarter hour of my time in the end to help fix the thing.

“Sorry, hey. Just that Jaco, I really don’t know what he’s thinking sometimes.”

We stared down at the soggy brown mess. She lifted a pants’ leg. It was clean but also ripped in two places.

“Jaco?”

“Yes, Jaco. My fiancé. He works with you down at the station.”

She looked at me in some bemusement.

“Oh, Coetzee. I’m sorry I didn’t realise he lived with your family.”

She smiled. Wiping her hands dry, she offered a belated introduction.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t introduce myself, the machine...I’m Emma. Emma Villiers.”

The name seemed to capture exactly the strange mixing of tribes she represented. We shook hands.

“So, is it broken?”

“No, no. He just overloaded it. I don’t know why he didn’t ask me to get Cookie to do it. It’s really not meant for suits, you see. He always has to have everything just so, my Jaco. He can be a devil sometimes.”

She smiled at me, inviting sympathy.

Something fluttered in the pit of my stomach just below consciousness.

“Miss Villiers.”

“Yes?”

“Jaco Coetzee, he boards with your family here, is that right?”

“Yes, I just told you that.”

She had a perplexed look on her face. My palms were sweating.

“And he’s here every evening, right?”

“Yes. Except when he’s training.”

“Training?”

Again, that look.

“Ja, for the rugby.”

A bead of sweat formed itself on my temple.

“But the rugby’s only in May?”

“Yes, but Jaco likes to keep in shape. Be prepared. ”

Training. In the off-season. Would give a guy plenty of time to slip off to The Matchbox. Time enough to keep an upcountry girl happy as well? I held up the soggy ensemble – it looked like the one Mrs Lotski had described – also like a million other brown suits.

“And so he’s been running all week has he?”

“No.”

Shite.

“No? But he did train on Wednesday evening didn’t he?”

“Oh no.”

Damn it to hell. I slumped against the wall and took a long drag. This case was beginning to mess up my thinking. Maybe the old war strain was at last proving too much. This was the guy who took notes at the site I reminded myself. The envy and measure of the station; sportsman soon to be son-in-law, blonde haired, blue-eyed future of the race. What was I thinking? Was I planning to arrest the Colonel’s daughter next? Or maybe the Colonel himself, just to really screw with the remnants of my career.

“We went to a small dinner party at a friend’s house on Wednesday night.”

“Oh, so he was with you then.”

“Why the interest?” Her level gaze barred deceit.

“He’s helping me with an investigation. I just need to get some things straight for the log.”

She didn’t look very convinced, but I could tell she was curious as to where this was going.

“Ja, well, he only stayed for drinks. He had to go back to the office to finish something up, he said. The fellows thought he was just being a stick in the mud. Always the dutiful detective, always working late, making sure of things, that’s Jaco. Anyway he was a bit late coming to fetch me. Pa was not amused. You know how fathers are, so protective all the time.”

Remembering Annetjie I thought to myself, no, not all the time. Looking at the woman before me, so bulky and yet curiously appealing, an Afrikaans expression came to mind, something about uprightness of character. Not righteous, or self-righteous, but honest and truthful to the core, her innocence left her vulnerable. She represented everything contrary to the grotesqueness of Annetjie’s murder. Emma returned to the work of rescuing the suit. The normality of the scene etched itself upon my brain as I watched her pallid, over-large legs bend to the task. Beyond her a kitchen garden sloped down towards neat, whitewashed servants’ quarters. Tidy rows of squash, tomatoes, and green herbs stared innocuously back at me. The simplicity of the picture defied corruption. What would a man stop at, in order to preserve such ordinariness?

“Emma, would you mind showing me his room? There might be something there...some notes he took...for my case...”

“Oh, ja? I don’t think you’ll have much luck. He usually carries his notebook with him.”

My blood was icy and ran like rheumatism through my veins, bulging and sore as an old man's whilst I told those pathetic lies. I was sure she would throw me out at any moment. I don't think she had the imagination to grasp that I was out and out lying on the spot.

"His room is behind the kitchen there."

As we entered I could tell that I would find no confirmation here of my ignoble suspicions. Everything was tidy right angles and painstaking orderliness. I tried to rummage in his wardrobe, the pristine folds and tucks not suited to such intrusion. The room seemed readied for any anonymous occupant. Like that of a boarding house or an hotel. No impression or trace of its occupant's character, desires, failures.

"No, it's not here."

"It's a little Spartan, but he just hates clutter. He keeps some of his things down at the station."

"Yes, I can see. That must be where it is. Sorry to waste your time."

I hastened to leave. She seemed suddenly forlorn, not wanting me to go. She trailed me to the door.

"Thanks for the help."

"Oh, ja sure, no trouble. And thank you for yours."

Oh, what a swine a man can be when need arises - here I was thanking her for helping me cast upon her fiancé's character the greatest aspersion one can. Coetzee was a colleague, and I was contemplating him in the role of cold-hearted murderer.

I doffed my cap and left, pulling the brim low to hide the grimness of my expression.

The office was deserted. Batter was on duty downstairs, logging the comings and goings of all, as he did every Sunday when the office was officially closed. He had a set of master keys and let me in, retiring back down to his post.

I tried Coetzee's desk first and found it locked, as I'd anticipated. The thing was, I knew he kept a spare key in his locker in the change room. This he kept padlocked shut. I contemplated just bashing the wood in. Then I considered how I would feel if some bastard suspected me of such a heinous crime and proceeded to smash my locker in. I would not be very amused. Particularly if I was innocent.

I booted it open, the metal lock coming away easily from the wood with a few well-aimed kicks.

Some neat toiletries and a change of clothes sat reproachfully innocent on the top shelf. On the bottom shelf sat something less recriminatory – a pair of fancy running shoes – size nine. They were also clean as new pence.

At that point Dickie arrived, no doubt summonsed by Batter, who'd given him a bell soon as he heard the thumping sounds above. He probably assumed I was in the grip of an episode, as everyone so considerately called my mad descents back into the woods of 1915. Dickie surveyed the damage silently and, seeing I was conscious and as much in my own mind as I would ever be, lit a cigarette. First one for me, and then one for himself. The blue smoke filtered out some of the sad display before us.

“He did it, Dick.”

“Ja, and what's that, pal?”

I explained my visit to the Colonel's house and my encounter with Emma Villiers, the brown suit episode, and my subsequent lies and disappointments, ending with the shoes size nine which I now held in my hands. He went along with some of it but pointed out that there was still nothing tying Jaco to the girl. Just because the guy decided to do his own laundry, may have been using a dark blue Dodge six on the night in question, and had a thing about neatness, didn't mean that he'd killed a woman. I had to agree. Dickie was keen to make an end of it too, but felt that Nunner

was our best bet – was, in spite of everything, still the man we were after. He told me that, incidentally, Nunner's wife had called late yesterday afternoon after I'd left, wanting to meet with me today at her house, and would I call her back?

Now - before I was fired for busting up the Colonel's favourite boy's things, and lying to his daughter, as he must soon discover - seemed as good a time as any to do this. I called her up and we arranged that I should meet her at Nunner's place pronto, as soon as a little engine could get me there. I agreed to catch the train onwards from there after our interview, and join Dickie in Ladysmith for the celebratory dinner the grateful town council was laying on. Together we trashed a few more lockers, including mine, to make it look like the random attack of a madman - maybe even someone other than me, if we could smooth things over with Baby Batter. After another smoke we went our respective ways. But before we parted Dickie handed me a gun. It was unmarked. "You never know," was all he said as he left, the locker-room door still swinging behind him.

## Anna

Old year's eve was an important affair in the neighbourhood. Gathered once again were all the faces I recognised from our impromptu dance. This time they congregated to see in the New Year with an immense bonfire in the village green at Zennor. The men and boys spent the day piling wood until it teetered above the houses, ready to set them all ablaze at any moment, or so I thought. At around midnight a bitter wind blew up, cutting through even the warmth of that massive fire. I had with me the cushion from our room, supposedly for Jerome's use, but in reality there because I'd decided to rid myself of the past in ceremonial fashion by flinging the cushion, and all its paper wadding, onto the fire at the right moment. As the night wore on my resolve was strengthened by all the fine humour and good will of the occasion, and the people who surrounded Jerome and myself as old friends already.

Durban, Sunday, February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1935

On the train ride up to Nunner's it occurred to me that, even if he was our man, there was still a big piece missing from this puzzle. I was sitting opposite a burly fellow with a porcine face and three jellyroll children in pigtails and short skirts. The eldest girl stretched up, ostensibly to get a jersey from her suitcase in the overhead basket, but in order really, I suspected, to show off her podgy, brown tanned legs to best effect. I turned my gaze to the passing landscape. We were approaching the siding of the murder. My eyes stung as I tried to focus on detail in the fast blurring scene. It was featureless, like a million other places on the line. Still, something about it plagued me. I put my head back and closed my eyes, trying to recall our arrival on the scene. A woman in a blue dress, stained dark brown with blood. The shoes, lying at an incongruous angle. Further down the track, three women, on their way to the station close by. Looking back and seeing us, they point towards a nearby bush. Batter, returning with the blue slouch hat on a stick. The CID draughtsman's careful map of the area, arrows denoting the sites where evidence was collected. The bushes concealed no other finds. Just the hat. The line deserted save for those three women. On their way to the station. I opened my eyes and stared at the luggage rack above. How had I known they were on their way to the station? I flipped through my pocketbook. After a few cursory questions, they'd confirmed that they were that morning only passing through the area, and knew nothing of the goings on of the night before. The notebook contained no reference as to their names, where they worked, where they were heading that morning. How was I so sure then, that they were on their way to catch a train? I pulled the emergency brake cord.

It took some explaining, over the high pitched wail of steam, to mollify the conductor who came running red-faced. My badge only went as far as to put me officially within my rights. A stream of 'fok' this and 'fokken rooinek' followed me from the footplate as I passed the driver's engine. I couldn't blame him; the sound of a blow-off is deafening in the cab. Black smoke pursued me down to the siding. Keeping to the track, I made my way to where the women had stopped on Thursday morning. A cursory search confirmed that nothing of importance was concealed in the bushes. I walked on. When driving back from the hospital we'd passed the same three women

walking on the side of the road. I closed my eyes and saw again the tatty cardboard case that banged awkwardly against the last woman's legs. A suitcase indistinguishable from the one Mrs Lotski described. A travel case - the one owned by Wilhelmina Susannah Maria van Rensburg, plain 'Annatjie' to her friends. Four hundred yards on from where her body had lain, I came to a well-worn thoroughfare leading into the veld, and a gap in the fence, onto the tarmac. I searched, beating with my hands at the long grass bordering the path. There was no sign of the suitcase or clothes. In times of recession people, even respectable women, do strange and desperate things. It was a time of "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without", and great need must have driven the women to take the suitcase so brazenly in the first place. I expected I would find no trace of them - or it - again. I was going on the slim hope that they might have taken the chance this sheltered stretch afforded to stop and rid the case of identifying papers or anything too distinctive. For once, I was on the money. Caught between the long grasses not far off the path was a crumpled piece of familiar stationery.

## Anna

The sparks from Zennor's enormous conflagration flew like so many ruptured promises straight into the dead night, taking all the weight of long-broken paper pledges with them. All save one. This last, slightly yellowing document, with its defiantly bold, black ink signature, smouldered back at the house, within the volatile safety of my Cape flower catalogue – which was, aside from a few old photos, the only remnant of South Africa I kept.

Durban, Sunday, February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1935

I was an hour late for my meeting with Mrs Nunner and by the time I arrived she'd worked herself up into an impressive state of hysteria. My absence was a torture to her, she said. I could tell she was in a great degree of distress as today she reclined upon her bed decked all in lilac, rather than her usual, serene pink bias. Having more urgent fish to fry, I was about to show myself out again, when she produced a letter. It arrived with Friday's post, she said. Mr Nunner normally collected the mail every week, but a kind neighbour had dropped it off while he was out. It was addressed to Annatjie, and Mrs Nunner, with the patience of Lot's wife, could not wait to hand it over to the police. She'd opened it. And - here was the disconcerting part - it was *from* Annatjie as well. What did I make of that, she wanted to know? Quite frankly, I didn't know what to make of it. It contradicted all the evidence I had already burning a hole in my pocket. I read Annatjie's letter; just a few lines, apparently letting herself know that she would be fine. She signed it plain 'Annatjie'.

Things were slipping into place.

Durban, Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1935

When we made the arrest he didn't seem surprised at all. The only complaint he made was at being handcuffed. He felt it unsuitable for a man of his standing in the community. Dickie presented him with a receipt for the clothing, shoes, bullets, and two revolvers we took from the house. Later, in the cells, he handed over another two bullets he'd happened to find in his jacket pocket.

## Part Two

## England 1958

It was a warm Autumn and we were spending it in St.Ives - Anna's idea of a getaway. We lived the rest of the year not twenty miles distant. I longed for somewhere more in the centre of things. Like London. One weekend I did catch the train in and spent the day browsing bookshops on Charing Cross and enjoying the warmth and stink of the underground. It was on this occasion that I stumbled across Ethel Corvo. She was the South African wife of an Italian engineer who had immigrated to Britain after the war. She'd written about South Africa in a series of historical romances. At first I was fascinated to catch a glimpse of another South African. Anna would say nothing about the country of my birth, and so, of course, anything to do with the subject was intriguing. Ethel was signing copies of *Gold Dust Jim*, a tale of adventure set in the days of the Johannesburg gold rush. The dust jacket was yellow with the silhouette of a man wielding a pickaxe. Ethel's name dripped down in red lettering from the tip. I wondered if she'd had any choice in that bloody insignia. It was pouring buckets and not many fans turned up. The proprietor rounded up browsers and stragglers in the aisles to give the appearance of a crowd. And so Ethel and I got chatting and I took her for some consolatory tea at the Ritz afterward. The pastry-trolley was bearing ponderously down on us when Ethel mentioned that she had grown up in Durban.

"Oh, yes, my dear. Natal was a wild place. A lot of gin, you know, for the malaria." She spooned a substantial slice of pavlova. "The Zululand Tap, we called it. You would get the shakes and become a little deranged. A kind of uncontrollable dance. Much worse than malaria itself, if you ask me. People were always running off, getting divorced."

"But you're not talking about Durban itself?"

"Well, there one didn't get the malaria. But the gin, well, there is always gin isn't there?"

Ethel possessed a very dry outlook on her fellow Natalians.

"And school?"

"I went to the Girls' High. As did everyone in those days. Only decent schooling around for girls, you know. Still taught us things like needlework and how to make dumplings. Who would have imagined...."

"Maybe you knew my mum, Anna Smith?"

She looked at me a bit goggle eyed, as if I was intruding on her story.

"No. Never heard of Anna Smith. Bettie Smith, now she was in my form. A tall stick-insect with..."

"Maybe another Anna? Blonde, blue eyes, very tall – striking you might say...almost certainly a few forms below you, now that I think of it."

I'd never known Anna's maiden name.

She sat very still for a moment, the meringue dissolving in her mouth. She was a compact but plump woman, with shrewd eyes and a busy demeanour. The cessation of bustle was disconcerting.

"Your mother, you said?"

"Yes. She left Durban the year I was born - 1935."

"Anna..." she said it dreamily, almost wistfully. "No. Definitely no Anna like the one you've described."

Not the answer I'd expected. She obviously had known my mother, and was just as blatantly refusing to acknowledge it. I was impatient, annoyed that schoolgirl politics could thwart me now, two decades later. But I knew better than to make myself a bore about it. We discussed other things and parted soon after. I later regretted not having made more of an effort to keep up the acquaintance. We exchanged addresses, but did no more. Once, after I moved to Islington as a student, I caught a glimpse of her

strolling through the Highbury Fields. She was arm in arm with a military looking man whom I took to be her husband. They were engrossed in conversation; I didn't feel I could disturb them with a greeting. They walked ahead of me, towards the tube, pausing only to examine the statue at the entrance of the fields. As they disappeared into the underground, I too paused for the first time to read the inscription. It was a bronze tableau, soldiers clinging to one another, all bent towards upholding what I imagined was the regimental flag. I'd always assumed them to be British, but now I saw it was dedicated to the 'Springboks', the South African soldiers who had fought in the first Great War. Sometimes you are closer to home, even one as yet unvisited, than you first realised.

There were quite a few South Africans living in Islington, for some reason, many of them writers. The local library had become an extraordinarily well-resourced reference centre. I discovered a great deal about South Africa, ranging from the impressions gained through the glossy prints of coffee table books, to the darker picture created by slim political pamphlets and treatises. These evinced a growing outrage at the ever-multiplying laws, restrictions, and powers the Nationalist government was enacting. The more I read the less real, the less comprehensible the place became. I often passed the bronze in the fields, and sometimes stopped, brushed my hands along those outstretched hands. They glowed, deeper than flesh and more solid beneath my palms. And cold, like dead things. One Guy Fawkes, after celebrating too long at the local, I crossed the fields for home. Amongst the thunderous bangs and falling stars of the fireworks the men in that statue seemed alive, straining toward a victory almost theirs, beyond my gaze, immortality. Their certitude frightened me. I took off, racing down Upper Street as if my heart would pound right from my chest, the blood hammering in my temples as I fled. After that I avoided the fields, no longer frequented the library. I buried myself in my studies, and excelled at achieving an indifferent record. Was anyone ever born to become a quantity surveyor? I returned to Zennor for the summer break.

Bedeliah died in the spring of 1955, almost three years before I left for college. Ever since, my mother's hair had whitened, her face gradually collapsed, and a disinterest crept into her tone. She'd always been an introvert, loving the small part of Cornwall

she'd made her own, the close family and few friends she'd cultivated. Now she could hardly move herself beyond the four walls of the parlour. They were a cheerful enough canary yellow she'd experimented with once and decided to keep. Beyond the yellow room the rest of the cottage began to return to a primeval grey. Unfamiliar heaps gathered dust and bits of furniture I didn't remember poked out here and there like warnings in the filtered afternoon light. We sat, drinking tea and eating soda bread as hard as granite. It was so gravelly I wondered if she'd pulled a hunk from the very walls of the house itself. We were silent, but the silence was companionable. It was always thus when I returned. Only slowly, and then being sure not to break the moment with crude or jarring information, we would begin to talk.

We always started on the weather. Contrary to popular belief, country folk do not have some mystic ability to divine the weather through signs - clouds, winds, pink skies, and the like. If those who live in the countryside know anything more than their town cousins about the weather it's because it is a subject much discussed, much pondered, and much scrutinised. This afternoon we chewed over the possibility of rain. It had been a dry spring, and every cloud that appeared became a portent of the long awaited storm. The sky was particularly golden and cloudless. Some sheep, crossing to new pasture, raised clouds of dust turned ochre by the sunset, bringing to mind a picture I had seen of oxen in South Africa. I wondered whether these images stirred my mother in the same way.

It was on just such a Sunday afternoon several weeks later that I found her sitting in the parlour, tea things at the ready, but her lips still and blue, and silent forever. I took my usual seat opposite and we sat together in this new silence, until the bell in the distance sounded time for the late service. Her friend arrived for their usual walk, down the winding lane to the Church. I answered the knock and brought her through. Together we stood for some time in silent contemplation, until the friend said, in a rather wistful tone, "We always went together, but now I see that she has gone ahead, and it is I must follow". And then she shuffled slowly past the threshold, back into the lane, and so on alone to her destination.

There was no memorial service, just the burial with the priest. She was put to rest in the plot next to Bedeliah's. We, the few mourners, returned to the house for rock buns

and whiskey. The rain had finally come and settled a mournful tattoo upon everything. The next morning the same friend, Daisy, arrived to help sort out the disposal of Anna's clothes, her shoes, and few items of use. She disappeared sometime after elevenses with several old suitcases. I imagined she would distribute her load to all the right people or causes. I saw a shepherd one day nearly a year later, wearing a suspiciously familiar orange cardigan. It was an incongruous sight, and made me smile.

The night before I was due to leave for London, I found a stack of records. They were old 78's and I was amazed when I put them on that the sound came out as clear as any of my new Pat Boone and Tommy Steele. Swing echoed around the yellow walls. I lifted the arm. It seemed too cheerful, too brassy and upbeat for here. I couldn't picture my mom dancing to it, let alone Bedeliah in his solemn ways. The notes hung invisible in the air. I shuffled through the stack and found one I didn't recognise at all. It had a soldier on the cover and I thought it was from the last war. The tinny sound immediately signalled that it was much older, belonging to the Great War. The voice sounded eerie, trapped inside the bright notes. The lyrics were sad for all the brashness of the accompaniment.

*A rose, sprayed with tears, living for years in my garden of memory*

Pretty, although the sound was scratchy, and for all the jangle and noise of the piece I could only catch a few phrases here and there. I tried another. The piano tinkled out forever, a tune I couldn't accompany, the lyrics a mystery. Every now and then the piano would pick up a bit for the chorus. I didn't wait for it to finish but put on one I did recognise – "Goodbye-ee". As Brother Bertie left with those pathetic words, and as he 'bon soir-ed', and 'cheerio-ed', I packed it all away, 'Toodleoo! Goodbye-ee!'

Later, sitting in bed in the dark, having a fag, I noticed through the gloom that there was a new picture hanging on the wall opposite. Since I'd left home, this room had become a kind of guest room, the repository for all sorts of objects, like blue porcelain elephants, that should have been turfed, but which Anna couldn't find the energy to get rid of. I thought at first the picture was of myself, taking part in a race at school.

Then something struck me as very odd about it. I couldn't place what at first, but as I was drifting off it came to me that I hadn't recognised a single other runner. I switched on the light and lit up again. Taking the picture down I scrutinised it more closely. It was not of me. The uniforms were old fashioned, large cummerbund affairs around the waist and hefty looking shoes. There was no date or place inscribed beneath, but removing it from the frame I discovered a photographer's purple mark, "Schmidt & Wren", and in a painfully tidy hand – 'reportare, consequi, sibi conciliare.' Some ash fell from the end of my fag. I wiped it off. Who was this?

And so began the Great Rummage. I unearthed the most unimaginable bits of crap, crammed into pokey hidey-holes. Receipts, for the stove range bought in 1898; the kettle bought 1952; the summer bulbs of 1939. Left over ration stamps, letters to the Plymouth Hydrangea Club (specialising in South African bulbs), and occasional letters to the local paper regarding the effect of tourism on the hedges, sheep, and nerves! I had always known myself to be adopted, knew we would get round to discussing the details someday. There were no papers of adoption or, for that matter, a birth certificate of any sort. What I did find were two letters from Ethel Corvo. They were not addressed to me.

The first was tentative. She'd met me in London, and remembered Emma well (I was right that she'd remembered my mother when we spoke in London, but Ethel had obviously gotten her 'Anna's and 'Emma's mixed up). Would she care to meet some time? Ethel was planning a holiday soon to Cornwall and it was easily arranged. I can only imagine the reply as the second letter from Corvo was much more forthright, bossy, more as I remembered her. She was battling to find official information on the case (?) and would my mother concede to an interview, or to answer some questions in writing? She was intending to fictionalise events heavily and so there was no chance of the boy ever finding out. She promised to drop all contact with the boy (me?) if Emma would just discuss a few details.

And that was all.

I dialled the operator. It wasn't yet past nine and I was hoping Ethel would be home. It rang for a long time before an annoyed sounding old codger answered and testily

summonsed her. She answered cautiously, sounding nothing like the woman I'd met. I explained who I was.

"Oh," she said as if she understood.

"I think you know something that might concern me. That is, I think you know something about my family...?"

"Oh, much better than that, dear boy. But George is ill at the moment. Why don't you come down here? Yes, it's the Bumps, you'll enjoy that. Come early on Saturday, around eleven."

And she rang off.

I hadn't a clue as to what she was talking about, or where it was I was supposed to be on Saturday and was about to ring back when I saw the address on the reverse side of the envelope in my hand. Cambridge.

\*\*\*

I arrived on the Saturday in pouring rain. I hoped the bumping took place indoors. Ethel's house was a neat cottage affair with modern metallic sculpture poking alarmingly out of innocuous looking flowerbeds. George was not to accompany us, as he, lucky man, had not recovered from his ailment. Ethel and I set out, armed only with an oversized broly, to stand on the side of the Cam, in the deluge, and bellow at passing teams of rowers who jostled past. Everyone was remarkably cheerful, and the degree of jollity and mirth which the abysmal weather and event seemed to bring about was incomprehensible to me, used to a more sensible and gentle Cornish humour. Everywhere people sat under dripping marquees eating sodden sandwiches and, I hoped, drinking something bracing – which may have accounted for the

convivial atmosphere. Ethel passed me a cup from her flask which I assumed held tea, but discovered contained a superb martini, complete with olives.

“I use the old recipe, you know. Just give the flask a swirl of vermouth, and pour it out. Enhances the juniper.”

I rolled an olive across my tongue, then chewed it and arched the pip into the river.

“So what have you got?”

I was in no mood for an old lady’s charm.

“Come back to my house after and dry out. You can take a look then. What did Emma tell you?”

“Nothing. And, just for the record, my mother’s name was Anna.”

“Ah, I see. Then I think it best you see for yourself. But you won’t like it. And remember, I wasn’t in Durban at the time. I knew ‘Anna’ before, when she was at school and still went by her given name - Emma Villiers.”

Not giving me chance to protest she went on:

“I read about the case in the English newspapers, and heard about it from friends who visited. But when it happened I had no idea that I would want to use it later in a book. Like everyone else all I registered at the time was the shock, the outrage.”

I think she could tell from my expression that I thought she was hamming it up - ‘playing to posterity’ - to me, that is.

“I’ll say no more now. Let’s wait ‘till we’re home.”

The sky cleared a few minutes before the Bumps ended. I never worked out who won. Instead, we trudged back to Ethel’s in the mud, beginning to steam unpleasantly in the late sun.

Over tea at the kitchen table Ethel opened a small, beige file. From within she produced what looked like a publisher's galley. Being just a slim volume bound in white board, it had no cover picture, presented no clue as to its contents.

"What is it?"

*The Kleurling*. The book I wrote about your mother, and about Emma."

"A book? About Anna?"

I used the name deliberately. She was my mother, but I felt her slipping rapidly away from me, becoming unfamiliar - a stranger in a book. My mind wrestled with the idea of Anna as a work of fiction; a character conjured for some purpose other than the quiet, mundane existence we'd shared in Cornwall.

"I know you wanted information about a 'case'...?"

Ethel watched me compassionately, but keenly, as I imagined she gazed at all her novelistic fodder.

"You'll have to read it, my dear. Call me when you're done."

I was dismissed, and rose reluctantly, not wishing to antagonise my one source, so to speak, of information.

"Don't lose it, dear boy. It's my only copy," she said as I reached the door.

"Not yet in print?"

"Oh, yes. Printed. And then burnt - every last copy - by the Nationalists."

She shut the door with a soft click.

I stood in the dark and listened for a long time to the bustle inside as George came down and supper was begun. I waited long enough that the fatty smell of steak and chips wafted out. My stomach lurched and I wandered on to the street. I closed the garden gate without a sound, but an inaudible wet metallic sensation that sent a tang through my teeth.

I caught the train back to London. It was half-seven and rush hour on the tube as people headed for the theatre or a night out at a music hall. I didn't feel like the crush so I got off at Russell Square and settled down to a warm pint in a booth near the back of the *Friend at Hand*. I began reading. Every now and then the conversation of two women sitting behind me filtered through.

*The characters in this book are fictitious.*

I studied this sentence with my hands, bold knuckled, closing round the pages, for a long time.

I read on.

It began with a diamond field. A preacher. Someone called Cookie Mandla.

I knew a modest amount about South African politics but I was confused by the narration. I re-read and worked out that the character Cookie was also the 'Kleurling' of the title. I made a note to look up the meaning of that word, for the moment I guessed it meant something akin to 'changeling' or 'foundling'. The narrator was Ethel herself, I thought at first, thinly disguised as a Mrs van Lastig. There was trouble with the natives, a protest of some sort. Mrs van Lastig sought refuge with her son, Johnnie, on Tant Frieda's plot, in a house being eaten by white ants. There were plans and counter-plans for escape if they were attacked. If the onslaught came at night they were to hide in the weeds.

"And if they come in the daytime?"

I blinked. The words echoed uncannily in my head. Their accent was all wrong, Spittalfields, not South Africa.

“Then my mum will have to let them in. I know it sounds rude, and they are my in-laws, but I have got a job now. I can’t wait around the whole day for them to arrive, never knowing what the plan is.”

“That’s right, love. Mind you, I thought your mum had a thing about...”

On the page the plan in Pêrelkop, South Africa, went differently...

*...Then you and your boy must hide under the bed and we will fight with our bare hands if we must...*

“...called him a stinking coolie boy...Mind you, that was before her stroke...”

*They’re coming. I hear them at the door ...O help us, Father...*

“...now that she’s living with us...I’ve told her time and again...he *is* a dentist, mum...”

*...lips like a scarlet thread...*

“...come and get your teeth done...not like he’d charge his own bleedin’ mum-in-law, is it?”

*... coming up from the wilderness...*

“She doesn’t want his black hands in her mouth, is what I think, dear...”

*I am sick with love... Everyone knew of my husband’s indiscretions...*

I skimmed on until a voice, that of a girl, van Lastig’s young mistress, caught hold of my consciousness.

*It wasn't, as they all thought, his money or who he was that first made me notice him. My first and only serious love, not one of many, as they suggested later. No, what caught my eye was his hands. He had beautiful hands. Like an artist's. Not that I knew any, but his hands were different from the hands of all other men. There were no calluses and the skin was smooth and soft. But not like a girl's - they were strong and corded with deep blue veins. He said it was my eyes that he loved most. And still later he said it was my red lips. Once*

I finished my pint and called Ethel. The phone rang and rang, unanswered. Skirting the museum, I walked to Tottenham Court Road to catch the no.19 home.

I finished reading the book. It revolved around the South African laws criminalising miscegenation, and their effect on a small town. The characters all seemed to me to be insane or simple. But the writing was compelling, and after sleeping on it, I decided that the heart of the madness lay in the South African government and its psychotic laws and Acts. Ethel, as authoress, merely reproduced the horror and grief that resulted from enacting private proclivity as public transgression. Very crudely - the book was about sex - and the downfall it brought for those attempting to exercise some kind of 'mastery' through it. And Ethel meant 'mastery' in the most literal sense; most of the sex happened between white 'baas' and black 'maid'. Women were fucked and then strangled. The affair between the white boy and the Kleurling is contrasted with an earlier tragedy in the narrator, Mrs Van Lastig's, life. Her husband, we discover, has also had a guilty affair in the past, and he too murders his mistress. Unlike his counterpart involved in miscegenation, he does not hang but goes to jail instead. Ethel captured events through the distorted lens of bigotry, and segregationist laws. But her story was a human one - gossip almost in places. And yet as a writer she was strangely removed. Her heroine, Mrs Van Lastig, is as damned and guilty as the rest of the cast. Only her son, Tinus, attempts to make any real connection with the Kleurling, but he too is a singular figure and an outcast himself. I sensed ideological divisions, but I couldn't work out if these represented a divide between young and old, or more or less, racist beliefs; the subtleties eluded me. What was evident was that Ethel humanised the muddle of politics, lust, and religion that before

seemed so intangible to me. Having caught a small glimpse of Ethel's contemporary South African landscape, one not populated by misty sunsets, cattle, and a dusky, bucolic peasantry, I was repelled by the idea that I had any connection at all with the characters, or incidents, described. I felt again that sense of something profoundly out of kilter. Insane.

Unlike Ethel's other novels, which sat neatly in the bookshelf next to my bed, it was not an historical romance. There were no heroes and no romantic victims in this book; all became betrayed and betrayer in turn. Everyone was guilty. It was a disturbing look at the struggle for humanity in *present* day South Africa. Aside from the confusion and revulsion I felt at the things I'd read about - things occurring now, even as I sat in the privacy and safety of my flat - I couldn't understand why Ethel had offered it to me as an explanation of Anna's past. It was Ethel's first, and so far as I knew, only contemporary novel. All her other books were set in the distant past. The implications of this rushed in on me - there was only one part of the novel set roughly two decades before - Van Lastig's story.

And then I found it. On page 42 -

*He murdered Hettie Bernadus six months before Tinus was born...*

*...If it had been possible to sell the farms I should have done so, I might have gone away, perhaps to another country, and changed our name; perhaps I should never have told my son that his father was a murderer.*

The farm's name was Banghoek. The family name was Van Lastig. They lived in a place called Pêrelkop.

I made for the library.

I looked up these unfamiliar names in an Afrikaans-English dictionary. 'Bang' had nothing to do with guns or explosions, as I'd thought. It meant 'scared' or 'afraid'. 'Hoek' meant 'corner' or 'angle', together they produced a name something like 'Scaredcorner'. I doubted whether this English version was ever used. "Pêrelkop" came out something like 'Pearlhead'. I wondered if there was any point in trying to convert these words into English. I needed something to hang onto, to orient myself;

the words themselves in Afrikaans held no reference for me, were so many empty marks on the page. Van Lastig stumped me. 'van' – surname; 'Lastig'? According to Juta's the word meant 'difficult, ticklish'. Was the creation of a new fictitious family name a troublesome issue for Ethel?

I called Ethel's number. I let it ring 'til the operator disconnected. Straightaway I tried again. No answer.

I spent hours poring over a Union atlas. All I could find was a place in the Cape called 'Paarl', Pearl. I wondered if this could also be a surname. Was there such a thing as a directory of surnames? Why would anyone compile surnames?

It was as I was about to try Ethel for the umpteenth time that it came to me – the phone book! A Union phone book for some time in the Thirties, oh, and I'm not sure which area. Yes, I could tell that request would get me far with the local Librarian.

In the end it was the place of our first encounter, the bookshop at Charing Cross, which set me on Ethel's trail. I was frustratedly browsing through her other books when a shop assistant, the same who'd shepherded me to her book launch, came to inquire whether I needed any help with the Commonwealth section. Was I interested in Australia? No. Maybe another South African writer, Lawrence Green, Denys Reitz, Van der Post? Did they write about murder? Not exactly. Then I was not interested in them. I was interested in South African murderers. The last statement elicited a drawn out "Aahh", as if at last my reading proclivities were understood, and disapproved of. He led me to the crime-writers' section, "Very popular, seems there's not enough bloodshed these days. After the war, I mean, sir". He pulled from somewhere near the bottom a slim blue volume by Benjamin Bennett.

### *Too Late for Tears*

"This is more to sir's taste?"

"Are these contemporary murders?"

He sighed and flipped open the book. First impression - September 1948. The copy he held was the "Fourteenth impression - 1956". Above this it read:

*Certain of the material in this book formed the basis of five chapters in "Famous South African Murders" (T. Werner Laurie, Ltd.) published in England over ten years ago. The book has been out of print for a number of years. The material has been re-written and added to in the light of further facts that have since become available.*

If this disclaimer appeared with the book's first edition, then some of Bennett's original material must have been written around the middle of the Thirties. Roughly two decades before the events recounted in *The Kleurling*. I was onto her. I could feel it in the way the rough cotton cover shifted portentously between my fingers. I paid and hurried to Leicester Square, where, sitting on a bench in the noonday warmth and lunchtime hubbub, I skimmed greedily through its pages. Twelve chapters, and an addendum - a woman's love letters.

The first chapter concerned murderers Barend Smartryk Johannes Jacobus Jansen van Rensburg and his 'sweetheart', Ellen Gordon-Lennox. My nose twitched at the 'van' in the man's name. This case was set in 1921, too early for me. I briefly wondered if South African names were generally so long-winded. I'd have to get a notebook if I were going to take this search seriously. Otherwise I would never remember the drawn out names of these people and places. Chapter two was, more hopefully for my purposes, entitled "The Man Who Was Never Found". Unfortunately not my missing father, nor identity, either, this one being set a few days after the first. Were the chapters chronological? I skipped a few and came to "Man in the Fawn Overcoat". My mouth went dry as I read that it was set in Paarl. Was this Ethel's "Pêrelkop"? I read on,

*The shootings at Paarl in 1926 were also due to money troubles...*

1926. Too early still? Maybe Ethel altered the timescale as well? No. I was born in 1935. That was the year we left the Union. The year Anna and Bedeliah were married. Whatever happened to my real parents, and to Anna (Emma?) took place the year we

arrived in Cornwall. This was the only certainty I had, although it was as much a felt as a reasoned truth. Had Anna, like the character in Ethel's book, been married to a murderer, and fled the country? Why then did she tell me I was adopted? Why say anything at all? I couldn't shake the suspicion that she'd left me with enough clues to have the slimmest chance of tracking down the past. She wanted me find out, to know about the 'case' we were all involved in; only she couldn't bring herself to out and out tell me. Maybe the past was more complicated than the telling of it. In my imagination theories abounded. Could she have been an unwed mother? In shame tried to disclaim me, but found herself unable to give me up for adoption, like so many other unwed girls did at the time? Was this the cause of the falling out with the family back in South Africa? The reason we'd had no contact with them, aside from a lawyer's letter informing us of Anna's mother's death and the inheritance that enabled me to study in London, take Ethel to the Ritz on that fateful day? I could spend a lifetime in conjecture. Truth was, I knew almost nothing of my origins, and understood even less about the woman whom I considered my mother, than before I'd begun this madding quest for an identity.

I skipped to chapter eight, "The Alibi that went Awry":

*The next case in my newspaper case book may well be described as the cause célèbre of the 1930's. It has been the theme of short stories and crime thrillers and quite recently provided the feature article in an American detective magazine with a circulation of several million.*

But was it the theme also of Ethel Corvo's novel? I broke into a sweat. Slamming the book shut, I raised my head to the square, and the passing crowd. Everyone seemed normal, calm, oblivious of my palpitating heart, the dry sourness invading my mouth, the enormity of the step I was about to take. Dropping the book into my satchel I made for the tube. It was time for a light lunch.

Durban, Tuesday, May 7<sup>th</sup> 1935

On May 7<sup>th</sup> Coetzee appeared for trial before Mr Justice P. Herken and a jury of his peers. Coincidentally it was my birthday. Mr. B.D. Fleisher, K.C., Attorney-General led Mr F. Viljoen, for the Crown. Mr. Heinrich du Prees, K.C. (later Mr. Justice du Prees), and Mr. N. M. Willemse (later Mr. Justice Willemse) ably conducted the defence.

There was a media frenzy. Joey Bananas went crazy trying every sneak in the book to get information out of us. Although the defendant claimed he had an alibi, it was as substantial as one of Mrs. Nunner's gowns. With the letters, the dreadful details brought to light by the post-mortem, and the more than a hundred crown's witnesses we'd unearthed during the course of our subsequent investigation, we had enough evidence to bury twenty men. Nobody at the station was laying any bets on this one. There was no doubt about it – the law offered only one sentence in cases like this – the man would hang.

## Jerome

There was a trial going on in South Africa. It was said to be the largest in history. One hundred and fifty-six defendants were arraigned on charges of high treason; by the time I sailed for South Africa in August these had been whittled down to ninety-one. The media were calling it simply, the "Treason Trial". I remembered Ethel telling me that the government had burnt all the copies of *The Kleurling*. Expunged them from the record. Such fiery censorship brought other pyres to mind, and though I was only ten when the war ended, I remembered vividly the images of Nazis burning books; a sight which even then brought an unaccountable sense of shame and redness to my cheeks. It was the sensation I felt when reading Benjamin Bennett's account of my mother's murder. I knew this was my story when I discovered Anna on page eighty-six.

*Emma Villiers, the defendant, Jaco Coetzee's fiancée said that early on the evening of January 31 she visited the home of Mr George P. Walters, a clerk in the Natal Building Society, Durban. Coetzee drove her there in her father's dark blue Dodge sedan car and continued on to the railway station, saying he had to see someone on business.*

Durban, Tuesday, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1935

Small, black-leathered, precisely ruled lines. It was the notebook with which he tried to save himself, and the notebook that in the end proved his undoing.

*January 31. 9p.m. Found unknown native trying door of our offices. Gave chase as far as the Embankment. Native got away and unable to identify him. 10 p.m. went off duty.*

Another entry dated February 1<sup>st</sup> described his arrival at the scene of the murder and his encounter with Dickie and myself. He noted a "European female, full grown" had been found dead near the track. He made no mention of the child.

I did not consider myself a squeamish man, having been a soldier and taken part in enough bloody slaughter to suit anyone's pagan ideas of manliness. But Coetzee, now he, as they say, he had ice-water running through his veins.

These entries his defence introduced as alibis. For who would believe that a fellow could inhabit so aberrant a mindset as to take notes at the scene of a murder, no say rather a *slaughter*, of his own doing? Coetzee was no fool, but he underestimated the public's capacity for believing in evil.

## Jerome

Coetzee's was a short chapter. I finished reading it for the seventeenth time at two in the morning. It was a complicated story. I had difficulty working out where I fitted in. I realised that Bennett's account ended before Anna (in my head I still called her this) and I began our journey to Cornwall. I thought at first that the story was only about Anna, and her past, the horror of having loved a cold-blooded killer. I realised it was a chronicle of my mother's death when I re-read Bennett's description of the murder which on first impression was so unspeakable that I'd avoided taking it in too closely.

*Her clothes had been torn to shreds and her left ear was almost severed.*

I stopped. How did Bennett find it in himself to record this ghastly horror, let alone Coetzee bring himself to do it?

The phone rang. I ignored it. Fuck her. A terrible rage rose in me at Ethel's having set me on this path, having given me no warning, no counsel. No compassion. Fuck her and her wider social issues, her political morality tales, her sex obsessed booze addled bamboozled book. This was *my* story now. I would read on. I would know more. More than Corvo, more than Bennett, more than Anna, or Emma Villiers, whoever she once was. I would ferret out my story's mysteries. Own them. Possess them, as its secrecy, *their* secrets, once possessed me and held captive my past, curdled the present, denied me a future.

*One side of the face*

my mother's, I realised

*was discoloured and bruises covered the back of the hands*

of her hands

*and wrists, chest and legs. The lips*

my mother's

*were gashed and weals and lacerations disfigured other parts of the*

of her

*body. The injuries pointed to an attempt at throttling, but so fiercely had the girl* Wilhelmina Susannah 'Annatjie' Maria van Rensburg, my mother

*resisted that her assailant had seemingly struck her down with a blunt instrument.*

I paused here. The desire to reaffirm her identity, to embed it in this clinical prose was a compulsion. Again and again I confirmed the truth of the statement to myself: Wilhelmina Susannah 'Annatjie' Maria van Rensburg, the murder victim, must have been, beyond a doubt, my biological mother. The clever shifting of the reality of events that was Ethel's work of fiction, her novel, realigned itself around this new insight. Her story was my history. I appeared everywhere – I was the bastard child of Van Lastig's, found dead with the body of his mistress; I was Tinus, Mrs Van Lastig's stigmatised son; I was also the Kleurling's child, the one who survives as a sign of promise? the future? hope? at the end of the story, although both parents are dead. Above all these incarnations floated the notion of my mother, the one character absent except as an allegorical illustration of the lot of the bywoner, the poor white, in South Africa. Ethel's version was a kind of meditation on justice, on women's plight – particularly the lot of women living outside of the virtuous white South African family dream. She never quite put it that way, but all her characters were wrestling with the idea that they were blemished beings, tarnished by their own feminine nature, which, according to their communities, cannot overcome its biblical failings. The women in this story were fallen. They existed in a subterranean world of sex, poverty, blackness, and the birthing of bastard children.

I looked down at my own arms, turned my wrist and contemplated the colour of my naked flesh for the first time. Was I white? I'd never thought about this before – was there an olive tinge to my skin? My lips, were they generous in proportion? Too generous? Fleshy? I'd never before really contemplated being black – was the right skin colour a necessary condition? Could I be pink of hue but black inside, like the Kleurling's child? How would I know? How did the people in Ethel's book, in South Africa, know? How did the government know? I'd read about the signs – the ones the Nationalists were putting up on toilets and park benches: *Whites only/ Blankes alleenlik*. I was suddenly afraid. Afraid that if I went to South Africa something inside me would induce me to sit on the bench for non-Europeans, and would this be the wrong or the right thing to do?

The perversity of such a way of life struck me again. Bigotry was rife in Britain, but seldom presented in this official way. How did you cope in a society where every time you sat down, took a piss, kissed, entered a shop, got on a bus, you did so as black or white? Were you aware of it day in day out, of choosing this bench or that, this doorway, that toilet – or did it become like breathing, living only in your skin?

But this was Ethel's story, her account, a country's history that somehow now was my own as well. And somewhere outside of these considerations floated the notion of my mother. She hovered outside the details I absorbed, the truth I searched for, like a soul lost in limbo. Except there was nothing wraithlike about the glimpses I caught. Her presence was a shock, a manifest blow to the body. With every inch of every page I read she became an assault made flesh. I understood nothing about her save for the intimate placement of each blow, where the bruises flowered, how blood pooled in her torso. It was not a semblance of motherhood anyone could embrace. I felt anguish at the fate of the stranger, the character I read of, but could conjure nothing more to move me to love her. Her death was our necessary estrangement – even the repetition of her name coupled with the word 'mother' created an effect more alienating than familiar to me. I was no longer even sure I wanted to know more about her. Hadn't Anna already filled that place in my heart? I couldn't help the wave of distaste mingled with self-loathing I felt as I realised that my predominant reaction was one of aversion to the connection. Did I want to be the surviving son of this woman, this victim whose miserable death would then become a part of me, like a colostomy bag of shitty endings? Did I have any choice? I put the book face down on the table and headed for the fields to clear my head. I was in desperate need of some air, and to escape myself.

Durban, Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1935

The headlines all screamed it – WRIST BROKEN IN ATTEMPT TO SAVE HERSELF! The bruising truth of the attack battered at us as the District Surgeon gave testimony to Annatjie's injuries. Coetzee, dressed in a neatly pressed blue suit, sat stolidly in the dock. His face arranged in a look of distress. Or distaste?

*The right wrist was fractured by a bullet wound. There was a wound at the left ear and the ear was almost torn off. There were finger mark bruises on each side of the mouth consistent with someone holding her mouth.*

And there were the imprints of his motive, described for all to recognise. Silence was the only thing she'd left to give, and ironically, was the only thing she'd ever refused him. Was this the moment when a lover's touch became blasted with fury and far deadlier than poison? Like us, Annatjie could not comprehend so damned an embrace, and so had welcomed it at first. Did she look up, see the murder in his eye and reject it? Refuse the loss of future? Child? Life? Her wrist was shattered as she defensively held her hands up. She'd clung on to deliver her baby. Coetzee knew she was a fighter. And strong. That's why he returned at two the next morning to administer that last bullet. But Annatjie, despite all that Coetzee's guns and fingers could do, would not be silenced.

As the District Surgeon's testimony went on it became clear to me that Annatjie's mutilation did not end with her death. Everyone was guilty of it; we dissected and sliced up her story for later consumption over breakfast tables, friendly dinners, chance encounters on street corners.

*On February 9<sup>th</sup> the body was exhumed and the head removed. The skull was produced.*

As if the repetition, the accurate cataloguing of wounds, of moments, and emotions would in some way talismanically reproduce her tragedy before us, confirm us safely in the role of voyeur rather than victim. A line of reporters sat each day behind big-hatted matrons and bareheaded men, recording every detail in their black bound

notebooks - like Coetzee, believing that somewhere close to accuracy, salvation was to be found. They got it wrong in so many ways.

*The woman, who was enceinte, had gone into labour. She had been given a blow on the body that probably brought on labour.*

That was all the District Surgeon said about the child. Strange thing was, neither the prosecutor, nor the defence, questioned him any further.

## Jerome

*"There is no possibility of suicide in this case," declared the doctor.*

The radiator thermos was broken and only had two settings - off, or sauna. The stuffiness was claustrophobic. I decided to go for another walk.

It was now five a.m. and I found myself gravitating towards Chapel Street. The market was hours from opening, and all that suggested this shiny blue street was different from any other were the cabbage leaves in the gutter and a filmy bright pink shirt that gusted from lamppost to lamppost. A stall sign lay dirtied and half visible on the sidewalk, the letters "BREST" forming an arcane advertisement.

I rambled on past silent pubs and homes and, after descending some stairs near a low bridge, found myself at the edge of the canal. Iridescent industrial waste slid like faerie lights past me in the grey wakening dawn. A pungent and familiar smell came not unpleasantly from the direction of the gasworks across the water. The canal was organic and city sour. I loved the tenacious greenery of industrial land, the unexpected weeds and red-clawed fat-bellied rats that defiantly inhabited the walks and factories. Even now a plump grey shape was gliding before me through the rainbow wastewater. A light came on in the cabin of a long-boat moored a short distance away, and I heard clearly the splash of a pisspot being emptied over the side.

I walked home. Everything was still shut up tightly against the day. It was only seven-fifteen. I left the heating off, and still bundled in my greatcoat, read on.

*Although it was not established until the post-mortem examination, a .32 bullet had passed through the left side of the head; first penetrating a hand which was probably raised as a shield against the assault. The girl had gone into labour shortly before her death; the child was born alive but died soon after its mother.*

Died soon after its mother?

Bennett made no sense. If I was not that child then who was I? I was fed up. I'd been trying to wrestle the answer from the recalcitrant pages of these books for days now. And where was Ethel? I left, pausing only to gather up the books and a satchel. I caught the first train, departing eight-twenty, for Cambridge.

Durban, Monday, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1935

#### MISS OPPERMAN'S LETTER TO HERSELF

Nobody knew what to make of it. Oh, we had our theories, but at the end of the day had to admit that only Annatjie would ever know the truth. Nunner, under attack from defence counsel, said that his wife never accused him of being intimate or familiar with Miss van Rensburg. Which is not the same thing as a denial. Nunner was a sly character, yet took his oath on the Bible very seriously. He would do anything at this point to avoid damnation.

It was evident he was telling what he believed to be the truth on the stand. Who would invent such outlandish detail? There was the matter of the declaration we discovered in his house. He, with characteristic largesse and consideration, had sent Annatjie packing without the usual reference for future employers. No, what Mr Nunner obtained instead was a testimonial for himself, *from* Annatjie. This stated that he was a man of good character and had never spoken or been intimate with her. The existence of this document raised in everyone's mind the spectre of an opposite reality. We suspected him all the more for having so obviously tried to absolve himself. Nunner and Coetzee had a lot in common in their attempts at paper refuge.

*"A servant girl reference," commented defence counsel.*

*The Judge-President: Did you not take this reference as an insult?*

*-No; she said I could show it to people.*

*If they talked about her condition.*

Out of our total number of over a hundred crown witnesses, twenty-four were neighbours, of either Coetzee or the Nunnens. Maybe he had something with that letter. Hadn't worked, though. And then we'd all laughed as he described how he'd come to discover Coetzee was 'seeing' Miss van Rensburg.

On the night of the local dance, Coetzee afterwards accompanied Miss van Rensburg, and Mr. and Mrs. Nunner, back to their home. Here they had entertained their guest, until at around midnight Nunner took his wife up to bed.

*...he went back for a bit and then went to bed. He told Miss van Rensburg to give up her room to Coetzee and come and sleep with them.*

A strange enough suggestion in itself. Had Miss van Rensburg shared their bed before?

*Coetzee said he was in a hurry and would not stay. Witness went to bed about two o'clock.*

*In the night he got up. He went to the tank for a drink of water*

Why not use the kitchen tap?

*and saw the motorcycle still standing on the footpath. He walked round to the window of Miss van Rensburg's room.*

*He saw no light but heard whispers in the room. He called Miss van Rensburg. He asked where Coetzee was. She gave no reply. He banged the gauze screen and broke it. He took off the swivel of the window climbed in and struck a match. He saw Coetzee and Miss van Rensburg in a compromising position.*

We wondered what possessed Nunner, or rather, what sense of possession it was that drove Nunner to such ludicrous lengths? The defence, during cross-examination, played him for the fool he was.

*Coetzee, said Nunner, was not angry or in a fighting mood that night. Witness did not go out the door but back through the window.*

Like a fox, I thought to myself. At defence's amused prompting he confirmed that:

*Climbing through windows was not a habit with him. When he returned to Miss van Rensburg's room he did not order her to open her door but again climbed through the*

*window. He returned Coetzee his clothes, and Coetzee unlocked the door and walked out...*

...the window being too busy a thoroughfare for escape, it seemed. There was the faintest hint of enjoyment in this little drama. It was stagey, Laurel & Hardy, Mutt & Jeff type action. Was it contrived? It flitted briefly through my mind that maybe Annatjie and Nunner had colluded in 'catching' Coetzee in that compromising position. With his rank and aspirations he would be the perfect patsy for a girl in a jam, a girl in need of a quick hitching.

## Jerome

On the train to Cambridge certain passages flickered across my consciousness as I gazed blindly at the swift passing landscape. Although I knew it was only a work of fiction, that the prose was quite florid and the details made up – Ethel’s characters tugged at me, teasing me with minutiae that seemed the substance of truth.

*The first time it was in my small room in the back garden. A glorified servant's cottage, which is what I was to them – a kind of glorified white maid. They'd prettied it up a bit, but the windows were still vreeslik small. Still, they were big enough for a man to squeeze through, truth be told. I wasn't sure about him, that first night. I couldn't quite look him in the face, so I kept my eyes on his hands. I remembered how I'd gazed at them before – who could tell then that they would bring my body such pleasures, and my soul so many sorrows? And then I focused on the picture on my wall - Jeanette MacDonald looking primly down – and it was done. Sometimes after that on my days off we would throw a blanket down in the veld – the blue sky less judgemental - and I remembered Solomon's Song in the bible, the passages we were forbidden to read, but knew by heart anyway, and my own heart sang the words of that song of songs,*

*'O that you would kiss me with the  
kisses of your mouth!*

*For your love is better than wine,  
your anointing oils are fragrant,  
your name is oil poured out;  
therefore the maidens love you.'*

*I once spoke them aloud to him. Told him that I, no longer a maiden, loved him also. He laughed, but in an embarrassed way, and I knew then that I was only one among many for him – and I briefly wondered about those others. Did they love him? And yet I was happy enough to be the one with him now. Secretly, I cherished his name - in public, I called him mister.*

I found Ethel walking through one of the colleges with a Fellow. They were crossing the grassy quadrangle opposite. When I attempted to join them a porter chased me off the lawn. By the time I'd walked round they'd disappeared towards the river. I finally caught up with them as they were setting off on a punt.

"Do join us, Jerome," she called graciously as her friend steered them effortlessly through the other craft into the sluggish water.

I was not at all comforted by her friend's urbane smile. Punting looked bloody tricky to me. Scowling I walked back to her house and waited at the gate. She returned at dusk, by which time her pavement resembled a work of art of the most recent sort, decorated as it was with the soggy yellow butts of several boxes of cigarettes and two lots of fishy newspapers. There was a great chippie at the end of the road, and impatience had fuelled my appetite.

"Ethel..."

She opened the door to me in an elaborate gesture of cordiality.

"Do come in."

"Ethel, I can't make any sense of..."

"Wait."

She pulled off her hat and scarf and set the kettle going. Although it was nine at night and the sun only beginning to set, she still, in homely ritual, switched on all the lights. As before we sat in the kitchen.

"So, you've read *The Kleurling*?"

"Yes, but..."

"What did you think?"

I felt as if I were handing in a school book-review on "War and Peace" - which they'd only set the day before.

"I don't know what to make of the bloody thing."

"What?"

Not the review she'd expected.

"But it's all there, dear boy. The whole story. You just need a little coaching on Union history, that's all. Lots of people felt it to be a very important work. They would never have put so much effort into destroying it otherwise, you know."

"Ethel, I understand it's an important political statement, particularly coming from a writer as popular as yourself..."

She waved this last away with a little flutter of her hand, but I could tell she was mollified.

"I just don't understand where I fit into this novelistic landscape of yours? Am I Tinus? Am I the Kleurling? Is Mrs Van Lastig really Anna, or yourself, or neither? Is she my mother? Where is Pêrelkop really? Is it the town of Paarl in the Cape? Banghoek - 'scaredcorner'...is that a meaningful name? You see what confusion I'm in. I found this. Thought it might interest you. I found Emma Villiers, but apparently, not myself."

I threw the Bennett on the table between us. She opened it and stopped immediately at the right chapter when she saw Coetzee's name.

I watched her read. It didn't take long.

"Bennett doesn't always get it right. There was a lot that remained mysterious about that case. One thing I do know is that you are Annatjie van Rensburg's child. How I

know this has been something I have kept quiet about at your mother, at Emma's request."

She rose and left the room. She returned with a dilapidated school album for the year 1931.

"Emma Villiers and I were friends and class mates, you see. Not a large school, everyone knew everyone else's business. Emma's situation was often called 'the Boer war III'. It was a bit of a joke that her parents re-enacted the war between English and Afrikaner every day at the dinner table. Apparently her mother was quite a shrew - we secretly hoped the father would succeed in re-writing history. He adored Emma; there was nothing he wouldn't do for her. She never walked to school like the rest of us; he was always there to fetch her in his latest model car. Anyway, I married and left for England soon after graduating. I never met Coetzee. But I did know your mother. I would never have realised it if I hadn't encountered you in Charing Cross the day of that abysmal book launch."

She showed me a group photo of the class. Emma was easily identifiable as she stood head and shoulders above everyone else. She was plump and wore a broad but guarded smile, more gums than good humour.

"So my real mother was not Annatjie van Rensburg, but a schoolmate of Emma and yourself?"

"No. You have the wrong end of the stick again. Your mother was definitely Annatjie van Rensburg, and she was also most decidedly not a school compatriot. Let me show you."

She flipped through the book again, in her haste scattering a few markers and pressed flowers. She showed me a photograph of two women in striped uniform with strangely starched white headdress. Nurses?

"She's the one on the left."

I looked closer. The picture was well defined, not in the least grainy or distorted. My mother could easily have passed as my sister, only her colouring was much lighter. I saw for the first time where my rounded jaw and beakish nose came from. She wasn't smiling. Her solemn gaze held me transfixed. Her ears were tucked delicately within the folds of her headdress.

"She was the school nurse?"

"No. She spent a brief while as a trainee under the matron. There were always three or four young trainee girls who passed through the school during the course of the year. As I said, I would never have remembered her if I hadn't been looking up Emma's photo."

"What happened to her?"

"She left. Took up a private position somewhere in the Eastern Cape, I think. One hardly keeps track of such things, you know. Just so-and-so might mention a detail, a bit of gossip long forgotten, and then you recall these strange connections, which were hardly interesting then, but seem more than coincidence now. In hindsight the divisions were there at the beginning. Maybe if we'd fraternised with the help, not been so conscious of our proper place, we might have become friends with Annatjie. She could only have been a year or two older than us. If we'd been friends, if Emma and Annatjie had maintained contact, then maybe Coetzee would not have been able to pull off that affair."

I looked at Ethel sitting so modish before me and wondered at my mother, who trained as a nurse, and was considered a servant by decent society.

"That's why I made her character a bywoner's daughter in my book. I wanted to show how women were kept apart, but suffered alike. In reality she was not the lower class character I created. You must understand, when one writes..."

She got up to make the tea. With her back to me she went on.

“It’s an idea...a wordy solution for something intangible, really. I don’t know why things turned out as they did for your mother and Emma. I don’t know who Coetzee was, or is.”

“Is?”

“What stuck in my head was that trial and the injustice. It threw the whole country, the international press, into apoplexy. Why did the judge do it?”

Durban, Tuesday, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1935

The native Joseph stayed with us all for a long time. He was a timely reminder; we regarded our own 'native' Josephs anew. What damning secrets of ours did they possess? What power might be theirs, given the right conditions, the right chance? The native Joseph was a runner for Sergeant Coetzee. He worked seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, at the beck and call of Coetzee's every whim. Unnoticed, disregarded, like a Cinderella, he rose from the ashes and gave testimony, fitted the evidence, like that glass slipper, to the right foot. Coetzee's dainty size nine.

The native Joseph, so the reports told us, was the one who returned to spanking clean the condition of that special shoe, the shoe that, yes, was very muddy on the morning after the event (Joseph, employed after all by a police force of sorts, liked to try on the technical argot of his superiors) in question. He, Joseph, spent some hours brushing the expensive suede outers with a wire brush and then rubbing the surface lightly with no. 00 steel wool which Coetzee had him purchase especially for this task.

The native Joseph, the testimony continued, did this amongst the many other duties he usually undertook. It had been a busy week. Why, the very day before he spent travelling up and down the track relaying notes. Notes? The prosecution here asked for clarity. Yes, notes.

*Notes written from baas Coetzee to Miss van Rensburg, and notes sent in reply from Miss van Rensburg to baas Coetzee, Baas.*

*No need to call me baas, Joseph.*

*Yes, Baas.*

The native Joseph did not smile cheekily, nor even ironically, as one might have expected, at this point. He did not smile at all during the relation of his testimony. He did not look at Coetzee. Not even as he left the stand. Nothing broke the serious façade of the native Joseph, except the content of his tale. I imagined a smile stealing

across his face in the darkness of the dead of night as he lay abed, ready for sleep, amongst the smoky cinders of the thousands of braziers that warmed the heart of the township.

On another continent another Cinderella man was preparing himself for the biggest fight of his career. Jimmy Braddock, boxing middleweight, was beefing up for his shot at the Heavyweight Championship of the World. He'd finished off Art Lasky in a New York bout in March that Damon Runyon wrote up - in his inimitable style whetting our appetites for the title fight. It was only Braddock's second outing this year, and the public waited impatiently to see if his knuckles would hold out. Some fighters have what you call a 'glass' jaw, a weakness soon discovered and made common knowledge. A well-aimed blow in the right spot and the fight was in the bag. Well, Jimmy, he had glass hands - a debilitating thing for a boxer, it meant he'd only a limited number of fights in him. With every victory he brought himself closer to the end of the line, a kind of fighter's entropy. And so Jimmy was taking it easy in Long Island, piling on the steak and steering clear of the practice sessions. Bookies were pulling their hair out trying to make the odds. Me, I put two pounds on the Cinderella man just because I found his opponent, Max Baer, too mechanical. Besides, I'd favoured Primo when Baer took the title off of him the year before, and I was still looking to make up the loss.

I myself stopped boxing for a while during the build-up to the case. We really clocked in the hours making sure of the verdict. Nothing else provided that consuming sense of achievement, except the steady way in which my relationship with Maude was progressing.

## Jerome

We docked in Durban at midday and, having already cleared customs at Cape Town, were in time for a light lunch at a pleasant eatery just off the esplanade in Albert Park. I found Long's block of flats quite easily – an Indian waiter pointed the building out to me as it peeked above the trees at the far end of the green lawn. Although constructed in an old-fashioned heavy style, it had been newly painted in pastels and looked quite seaside festive. Long's name was no longer on a letter box downstairs, and the doorman who'd only worked there a few years had no recollection of a Frank Long, nor any idea of how I might find him. He was kindly searching for a phone book when a man, heading out for a day on the beach with his big-eared, sun-befreckled boy, caught the gist of my enquiry and stopped.

"Frankie Long, you say?"

"Yes, I'm looking for him on a rather urgent, personal matter."

I didn't tell him that I'd travelled half way across the world on the slim lead that Long was mentioned in a Benjamin Bennett story as one of the main investigators in the notorious Coetzee case.

The man scrutinised me for a moment, taking in my jeans and short-sleeved cotton shirt. I'd bought it on the ship, in concession to the warm winter weather. My usual black roll-tops were stifling in this atmosphere. I was glad now for my change in dress because everyone I'd encountered so far wore either grey or brown suiting, or an outfit that appeared to me quite foppish: short pants with long socks and invariably a comb tucked into one sock. This last I discovered was essential for combing the remains of a thinning, greased hairline into place after the wind had caught and flapped it. I had had to stifle the impulse to return the greeting as I walked along the esplanade, as so many men passed me, their hair offering unconscious salutations in the stiff breeze. The man before me, although hardly a decade older than myself, was similarly dressed. I doubted whether he was old enough to have known Long, and I was turning back to the phone book when he stopped me.

“Well, if it’s a personal thing, I suppose... You won’t find him in there. He’s not listed, never has been. Doesn’t believe in phones. Doesn’t have anyone to call, or who would call him, really.”

“Do you know how I could reach him? I’m only in Durban for a few more days and it really is important.”

“Ja, let me give you his address, but don’t bother trying him tonight, he’ll be leaving for his shift soon. Rather catch him in the morning, he gets in at around nine.”

He wrote out an address that seemed to be for a beachfront hotel.

“Thank you, Mr? I didn’t catch your name. I’m Jerome Smith.”

We shook hands.

“William Fenton, but just tell him the Kid sent you, he’ll understand.”

When I met Frank he weighed about ninety pounds and was the quietest man I’d ever known. He lived alone in a tidy studio flat one road down from the wealthy beachfront hotels and apartment blocks. He told me he worked nights as a watchman. Not well paid, but enough to keep him ticking over. The last was said with a humourless smile that curled round his teeth. He told me he’d been a boxer. On his wall was a board with a surprising collection of photographs. He pointed himself out - a middleweight. He looked like a movie star, boxing into the camera, his hair neatly styled, reminiscent of a stocky Sinatra. I watched his now etiolated form as he unwrapped a pack of cigarettes with brittle fingers and wrists that looked as if they might snap at the touch. There were several photos of glamorous women. One in particular, a black woman in a crème coloured scarf, seemed to arrest the gaze.

“There she is,” he was pointing to another on the side.

A sepia print of a girl sleeping, until I realised she was dead. I recoiled as I recognised that this was Annatjie van Rensburg.

“That’s the one we used to catch him.”

Fascinated despite myself, I stared. Below it was a picture of two men in flat caps, tartan knit vests, and what looked to me like jodhpurs and stockings. I didn’t know much about men’s fashion. They leaned against a dark coloured Dodge, their arms locked shoulder to shoulder. Their faces held triumphant grins, their eyes were hidden in noonday shadow.

“Dickie and myself. We’d just impounded that car. It was the Colonel’s, you know? A great day for the little man.”

“Was that...?”

“Oh, yes. We found enough evidence to convict twenty men. I would have been happy with enough to hang just one.”

He spat out the side of his mouth.

“Well, kid, love to stay and chat, but I’m late for an appointment...”

“May I wait?”

I’d already explained to him why I’d tracked him down. That it’d taken me three weeks and thousands of miles to get here, never mind the money (the last of my inheritance) spent on finding him. There were only a few days left of this leg of the around-the-world cruise. Next stop was Australia, far from the answers to the many questions that plagued me. Frustration surged through me and I could feel my face flush bright red. This was all the time Frank could spare? He had an appointment?

“I think you’re the only one who might be able to help me. You’re the last one left. I need you.”

He looked at me a long while.

“What are you planning to do if I help you figure this one out? What if I’m not the only one left. Say we find Coetzee; are you going to confront him? Kosh him over the head? He’s my age now; an old bastard like myself. He’s done his time.”

We stared at each other in silence. Me, trying to stare him down, force him to my will; he gauging my worth, genuinely surprised at what he saw - someone so young, and so stupid.

“Okay, you can tag along. But try not ask so many bloody questions for a while.”

He was running late. We entered the doctor’s reception and an assistant ushered Frank straight in. I wondered what it was he was here for. With his kind of thinness I thought of cancer. He hadn’t been sweating or coughing since I’d been with him. It only took a few minutes and he left with a prescription. I followed him to a beachfront pharmacy on Brickhill road. They also did developing. He came out clutching an insubstantial brown box. We went back to his flat. It was nearly lunchtime and he put a pot of water on to boil. I thought he was cooking up some pasta, but then he threw together some sandwiches, avocado on white bread. Into the boiled water he put a syringe and other unrecognisable implements. I’d never seen anyone self-medicate before; I hoped he needed no assistance on my part. He didn’t explain, or speak at all. For all the notice he took of me, I may as well have been a figure ensnared in one of the photos on the wall. He sat in a green padded armchair and concentrated on administering the right dose from a small glass capsule. A few seconds later he leaned back, a glow of well-being suffusing his body. He looked comfortable, at home with himself for the first time. He opened his eyes.

“Heroisch”

“What?”

“That’s what Mr. Nunner would have called it. Heroisch: a little thing that causes an immense effect. Like a letter of only two lines.”

He reached into the drawer of the coffee table next to his chair and passed me a well-worn note on lilac paper. Eau de toilet, Verdigris? traced its way to my nostrils:

*I love you,  
Sorry to leave you.*

“Is this...?”

“No. My wife wrote that. That’s my letter, my end. But there were many letters in that case. Letters we found from Mr. Nunner to his wife, a letter from Annatjie to Mrs Nunner, and the one that had the tongues wagging; the letter from Annatjie to herself,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “Ja, the counsel for the defence grilled Nunner on that one. They really had him there. Too bloody clever for his own good, he was. He even got her to write him, the boss, a letter of reference. I remember the judge’s face at that one. ‘A reference from a servant?’ he said in this indignant way he had, ‘aren’t you embarrassed, you fox?’ Or something like it. Well, let me tell you it took some wriggling for Nunner to squirm out of that one. I bet the neighbours kept their windows battened down with him on the prowl, after that. Ja, there were lots of letters, twisting and pulling public opinion this way and the other. But the letter which finally brought home his guilt was the brief, two-line note I found that day down by the tracks. It was Coetzee’s letter to your mother. The only one he ever wrote, or that we found. The one that blew it all wide open.”

*Wait for me at 6pm on Wednesday, in the cloakroom at the station,  
Alles sal regkom, your Jaco*

It was dated 29<sup>th</sup> January. Three days after he signed for the letter she sent him by registered mail; the one informing him she was pregnant.

Everything would not be all right.

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There were things Ethel had asked me to find out for her while I was in Durban, but my time was limited – I'd chosen the round the world cruise option as it was only marginally more expensive than sailing direct, and it appealed to my sense of adventure (or boredom?). There was something exceptionally sad and also distasteful to me in travelling to Durban only to rummage in the sordid history of my mother's murder. But Ethel had been ecstatic at the thought and launched into an extensive list of the sites I *simply had to visit, my dear*, and numerous detailed descriptions of how to find them. Only Durban had changed a lot in the interim since she last lived there as a schoolgirl. The newspaper offices had moved, and the Central Police Station she directed me to had (alarmingly) been entirely demolished the year before. In its stead was now a park with little old men playing chess on an oversized board set into the ground in white and black marble. Many of Ethel's instructions proved a waste of time – they were far too detailed, and far too out of date. I abandoned her list, but Frankie confirmed some of the things Ethel had unerringly guessed and written of in her book. Like the letters:

*I knew as I slipped the padded brown envelope into the red box outside the station that he was right – writing would be my salvation, was my only hope really. I noticed Mrs Jager from the neighbouring plot eyeing my jersey. I could see her little eyes narrow and almost smell the thought – only one reason a girl would be wearing a jersey like that in summer. I stared back and she looked away.*

*“Good day, Mrs Jager,” I said as I stepped onto the road. Walking fast I soon left her behind. The dust kicked up by my blue shoes took a long time to settle, and hung behind me like a grey veil in the still air.*

Well, I don't know about the dust or the neighbour - but Frankie claimed that if he hadn't found that letter that day, he was ready to chuck it all in. Coetzee would have gotten away with murder. So in a way Ethel was right – Annatjie's letters did bring her a kind of justice in the end.

### Durban, 1935

We never traced any of Annatjie's family. No one came forward to claim and bury her, or look after the child. She was finally interred in Stellawood – an anonymous 'benefactor' (I suspected the Colonel) donated the plot. Quite a crowd turned up. In a strange way she belonged to a community now in death, even as in life she'd possessed so few friends. It was a pathetic occasion and I left as soon as decently possible.

The sky was turning purple with rain as I made my way to the hospital. I found myself gravitating there more frequently as the nasty details of the case surfaced – Maude's goodness emerging as the antidote to that sense of despair, no anguish, which this murder evoked in us all. For me alone remained the added torment of those dreams of war that worsened the greater our success on the job. To this hellish torture was added the torso of the young woman as we first saw her, and instead of the outstretched arms of my young soldier friend, I saw now her pleading form as night after night she rose in my sleep and proffered me a bundle. Each time I unwrapped it out fell, not a child, but a single broken shoe. Again and again I attempted to wrestle that broken heel back on but each time it began wriggling in my grasp, until grotesquely it segued into a baby whose limb I was trying to re-attach like that of a broken kewpie doll.

I did everything to avoid sleep – the only time it was safe to close my eyes was on those occasions Maude visited me. I don't know if I appealed to some deeply ingrained compassion of hers, or if she truly was an angel, but our relationship grew from such unlikely circumstances.

And on Saturday nights we still went dancing until the sweat stained our glad rags and my sides threatened to give in. Most Sundays I spent alone – soaking my feet in salts and diligently applying the juice of a small succulent she gave to me, which miraculously cleared up blisters.

## Jerome

Next to the site of the now vanished Central Police Station were the City Baths. I recognised the familiar set-up from the Victorian Bath-house I'd sometimes visited in London. Frankie and I were steaming in the Turkish bath. Through the hot mist I could make out other glistening forms and smell the not unpleasant scent of the herbs they mixed with the water. Some were obviously here to shed a few pounds – Frankie was hardly in need of further weight loss and came, I think out of habit, as much as anything else.

“They’re planning to modernise this place too.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Ja. Rip off the roof and take out the baths. Open the place up. For hygiene, the newspapers said.”

I looked at the wooden frets above, and the cool black and white encaustic tiles beneath my feet - worn thin in places by the tread of numerous feet upon them. It could probably do with a revamp I thought, and wondered if the bold stares I'd received from a couple of patrons had anything to do with the city's decision to turn the place into an ordinary swimming pool.

“Pity. Even in the worst times, the worst of the depression – a fellow, even one on the bum, could still come here and for a few pennies leave spanking clean and feeling like a king. There was no shame in being poor then, everybody was. Did I tell you that after Maude I nearly ended up on the streets myself? If it hadn't been for him...,” his voice trailed away.

I knew Frankie well enough to realise he'd fallen into one of his reveries. At first I'd thought he would continue after his pauses – but now I knew that they only deepened into silence. His mind wandered after its own elusive ghosts, and when prompted he could never remember what he'd been in the middle of saying. I wondered what pieces of my own history were being lost even as I questioned him.

“So Coetzee is my father? That’s what Annatjie - what my mother - believed?”

“Is it?” he focused on me. “I don’t know. Even Nunner was forced to concede that he’d only set eyes on Coetzee in July, which left a two-month gap. Remember your mother was almost full term when she was murdered. Maybe they met earlier in secret? We assumed that he was not the father. Which didn’t make him innocent of murder. She could ruin him just as easily whether or not the child was his. No, that note confirmed that he had known her, and planned to rendezvous with her that night. Every lie and excuse he produced from his notebook just hammered home his guilt in the eyes of that court. Funny thing was, for such an astute and ambitious fellow he just didn’t realise it at all. That his paper evidence was damning him further with that jury. He had persuaded himself, you see. Like us, he was convinced that a man of his rank and sporting prowess would never be found guilty. Men like him did not tell lies; at least not small ones. They may have distorted reality, magnified their own place in the world, their status and importance as heresiarchs; founders of new beliefs of Nation and Volk and God’s love of whiteness.”

I looked at the wrinkled and flabby white flesh laid out on the benches surrounding us and wondered if he was being ironic. I was going to crack a joke, something about ‘fleshpots of the city’, when he continued.

“But they did not lie about the petty things; things like whether they washed their hands or not after arriving late for a dinner party; what shoes they wore on a particular evening; and why they failed to recognise the face of a dead lover after making detailed notes about the position of her corpse at the scene of the crime. No, Coetzee dug his own trench with those lies.”

Durban, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1935

Coetzee took the stand dressed in a grey pressed suit. He was a powerfully built man, with a commanding presence and piercing blue eyes. Not the image one wants to project when accused of a violent physical assault and murder, I thought. But Coetzee knew what he was doing. He admitted frankly his involvement with Miss van Rensburg; and then the lies flew from his tongue like blowflies off a carcass. He last saw Annatjie the previous September. They corresponded. She sent him the letter, but he had consorted with her only in July, and denied paternity. The child was not his, but he was prepared to help her find a place for her confinement.

What a gentleman.

*On the night in question, the 31<sup>st</sup> January, he dropped his fiancée off at their host's house, and then drove on to the station. He didn't recognise anyone who looked like Annatjie in the waiting room.*

Not the blue-eyed, mousy-blonde, pregnant woman who'd been waiting for three hours, since six o'clock, on a hard wooden bench?

*He hadn't bothered to question the attendant (Mrs Lotski). He strolled instead to his office. On the way he stopped to chat with a colleague, Tom Vosloo, about the boxing.*

I bet I know just what he had to say about that sport. The writing on the note Harry the Horse gave me bore remarkable similarity to the letter I found near the tracks.

*He was waiting in his office*

What were you waiting for, Coetzee?

*when a native rattled the doorknob.*

*If he was outside, how did you know it was a native, Detective-Sergeant Coetzee?*

## Jerome

We were walking past City Hall. My skin felt slick under my collar. Although we'd only just left the baths behind I was already drenched in sweat. My one shoe had developed an unpleasant squelch and I could feel a blister forming against the heel. So much for the dry winter weather. A particularly fetid smell rose up as we crossed one section of the pavement and Frankie, noticing my expression, laughed wryly and explained that Durban was really a swamp and we'd just traversed one of the oldest drainage canals. There was something disconcerting in the idea that all this concrete was shifting upon a layer of silt and sand, as if it might drain away during the night, and I would wake to find our ship wallowing amongst floating buildings. As if the whole place might gradually drift out to sea – nothing dramatic, but a slow erosion.

“So, do I have to begin the hunt myself? Who do I contact, the Prisons’ Department? Or should I comb the cemeteries?”

“No, no. You won’t find him in either of those places.”

“How do you know?”

“Do you think I’ve hung around as night watchman all these years for the joy of it? The only reason I’m still here is to do my job right, keep an eye on things, to keep watch now that everyone else has forgotten.”

Durban, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1935

The trial was over. All the evidence was in and the jury was still out. They remained sequestered for five days. The longer they took the more nervous we got. And then, on the second day of their confinement, the government gazetted a General Law Amendment Act. The law was quite clear – the mandatory punishment for committing murder, no matter how compelling the circumstances, was death. This new Amendment changed everything.

It meant that even if they found him guilty, Coetzee might not hang.

The jury could find extenuating circumstances.

As days three and four slipped by I wondered what those circumstances might be, since something was proving cause for deliberation.

And then on June 11<sup>th</sup> they emerged with a guilty verdict.

And a mercy rider.

Everything rested now on the judge.

Jerome

“So where is he? Where is Coetzee now?”

“Come, I’ll show you.”

Durban, June 13<sup>th</sup> 1935

Judge Herken took a few days to ponder Coetzee's fate. It was an enormous step, after all - Coetzee would be the first white person not to receive sentence of death for murder – if the judge decided to show clemency.

On Long Island the Cinderella man spent a desultory fifteen rounds tapping at Max Baer. The fight was broadcast live on the wireless. We kept hoping the action would pick up, but those glass hands just refused to deliver a knockout. After fifteen sludgy rounds Bradshaw won on points. He was the new Heavyweight Champion of the World, but after that lacklustre victory I hardly had the heart to collect my winnings. I should have seen it as a sign.

The next day, June 14<sup>th</sup>, court was resumed. The judge delivered a lengthy verdict. In it he described the murder as the action of a wild beast, ferocious - unmerciful. We were heartened. His summation was accurate – a true account of every damning detail. And then he went on to say that he believed that as a man of standing, and moreover as a *rugby* man, Coetzee had suffered grievously already through the publicity of the case. The crowd crammed into the courtroom got a bit restive at this. I felt Dickie's weight as he shifted on his feet next to me. Through the press I caught a glimpse of Coetzee's fiancée. Her face was impassive -and whiter than her knuckles, as she clutched her gloves in both hands on her lap.

And then, setting aside the black cap, Herken delivered his sentence.

'Life' was to be Coetzee's punishment.

The court erupted.

## Jerome

With the image of a floating city still before me, I saw that we had come to a halt right in front of a building that appeared to have washed ashore here from the pages of a fairy tale. One about mermaids and princes.

“She went up in nineteen thirty-five. Grand isn’t she? Maude and I came here for the early show to celebrate the Jury’s guilty verdict. There were no restrictions on where you could sit if you were black, in those days. But,” he laughed softly to himself, “you were only allowed in at certain times.”

There was something wistful in his amusement.

“Getting to know Maude was like falling down that rabbit hole. We lived in a parallel city, one I vaguely knew of, but never even visited before I met her. Being black then was a bit like being a mermaid in one of those fables. You had the form and shape of a land dweller, but everything else in the story had to be negotiated, guessed at, diplomatically settled. Parlay from morning to night – only your tongue was useless, cut off, mute like in the fairytale.”

The building’s façade hung before us – hundreds of bevelled glass windows set in romantic turrets and Tudor style plaster and beams beckoning us inside.

“I guess I imagined myself as her knight. I was going to smooth the way, make things better – reason with them so people would understand. I think that must have amused her. But she was never unkind in her laughter, and finally I learnt that it was her graciousness which sustained us and which really carried us through those awkward encounters with the black and white of things.”

We’d entered the lobby and for a moment I was blinded by the change from concrete glare into cool darkness. And then as my vision adjusted I followed Frankie’s gaze and looking up saw the night sky winking above us – as if we had been transported into fairyland.

“But you should know by now, kid, things are never as they seem. Sometimes those happy endings aren’t playing for us.” Lighting up a fag he gestured towards the ticket counter. “Want to go see a movie?”

Within the glass booth sat a pasty-faced, balding old man in a pale yellow cardigan. He was carefully handing a fellow pensioner some change. The matinee show was about to begin. And then I realised and the hair on the back of my neck rose as a woman with two small girls stepped up to buy tickets. It was all I could do to fight the urge to publicly expose him, knock the change from his outstretched hand and tell the woman to take her children and run. For here was the devil himself.

He looked up. His watery blue eyes held mine for an insignificant moment and he returned to his task. Then something must have registered dimly as he raised his eyes again and paled visibly as he stared at me.

Whose features did he recognise? My mother’s - or those of that elusive character winning a race in an old photograph - my father?

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“I started sweating when I heard that verdict and I didn’t stop for seven years, until they released me from gaol.”

“Seven years? Is that what life imprisonment means in this country - only seven years?”

We were sitting in a place I’d never envisioned as part of my quest - Johannes Coetzee’s hotel room. It was dingy and depressing – features that the bright orange and black curtains accentuated. Only the brown geometric pattern carpet was new, and as with some new carpets, smelt strangely of urine.

“Twelve years, that was a life sentence in those days,” said Frankie through a cloud of blue smoke.

“You should be grateful, kid. It was what I got in exchange for you.”

And Coetzee went on to explain how Emma Villiers came into my story, and bargained with the devil for me. Although he never could comprehend why she did such a thing – but to me, growing up as her only child, that part was always clear. Corvo too understood why Emma felt as she did about me, and about my mother. Why it was more than a debt. How she realised that they shared so much, more than just the same man, and that one small slip and Annatjie’s story might have been her own. How the things you thought were dependable, familiar – solid – could fall away in a quicksand of circumstance. In a way, I was Emma’s child – in as much as I belonged to anyone. In her book the two women sort of meet – but Ethel Corvo was aware of a different reality.

*I saw her once. Or rather, I set out to see her early one morning, before anyone else was up. I passed Esther on the way to the station. The fare was less than I’d expected, but then I got off at the wrong stop and decided to walk back, rather than wait for the train. I must have been red in the face when I reached the house. I stood at the gate for a while, overcome with such a weariness I could hardly hold my head up. And then someone came out with a glass of water. And when I looked up I saw her. She was taller than me, and blonde, and then I remembered her, from the school. She was always clumsy and awkward about things – she stood looking silently at me now. Did she realise who I was, why I’d come? She’d have thrown that water at my face if she’d known what I was there for. I felt sorry for her, she had big, kind hands – that had done nothing to earn what must follow. And so, thanking her, I turned to go.*

*Can I help you?*

*I paused. The desire to pour my heart out was strong. I was sure she would understand, would remember me. And then I heard his voice from inside – he was asking who it was, about to come out -*

*No. No thank you. You are very kind, but I must have the wrong house.*

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Through the smudged window I could see the beachfront below. The Indian Ocean rolled out calmly to either side. I pressed my fingertips to the pane, and quickly withdrew them. The glass was tacky with salt.

“I don’t want to sound like I’m blaming her.”

Of course he did.

“But I would have, no, I did do everything for Emma. People were unkind to her – especially afterward. I was so angry. With myself for allowing them to mock her, you see.” He shifted his paunch. He’d unbuttoned his shirt and the vest beneath showed signs of a none-too-recent meal. “They said I was only interested in her because of the Colonel. You see, she wasn’t pretty like other dolls. She was something else. Solid, but there was a mystery there too. I could tell from the first time I met her that here was a girl who would always stick with me, support me. And I suppose she did when the time came.” He rubbed some fallen ash into the carpet with the tip of his shoe. “But all these years she’s been your mother, hey? Then you know why I did it. There was always something special about Emma. You say she changed her name?”

I tried to keep my expression neutral, I wanted to hear him out, but he must have seen the distaste on my face.

“Ja, anyway, I’m not making excuses. Maybe if I hadn’t been so driven to perfection, *volmaak*, and such a ‘pretty boy’ as they called me...” more ash fell onto his slacks. He ignored it and continued. “She didn’t understand that it was for her. At first she wanted nothing to do with me, wouldn’t speak to me, although she sat in court every day perfectly made up. Emma was the very picture of a supportive fiancée. I think it was her mother made her do that – she, the old shrew, was mortified by the whole thing, tried the stiff upper lip approach, but I heard she didn’t leave the house for

weeks. Then towards the end of the trial something changed. Somewhere along the line Emma got it into her head that it was her duty to take care of the child. Of you.”

I didn't ask why. I needed no further proof of the notion that there is more to being a mother than biology. Coetzee continued,

“Her mother belonged to that Women's Social League or whatever it was called. The busybodies who kept moral order in the town. Looking after orphans, and the sick, but really just an excuse to find out the juicy bits of gossip. One of them even brought me a basket with jam and flowers while I was locked up. Jam and flowers I ask you! As if I were there to have my tonsils out instead of waiting for the gavel to fall. Anyway, you know the type. Emma must have heard something about the child through one of the ladies because it was never mentioned in the trial. People assumed it, thought that you, I mean, had died. I don't know.”

This explained why Bennett got it wrong in his account. My survival had not been made public after all.

“ Anyway, Emma came to me,” he continued. “I was her last resort. She visited me in the cells the day that she gave testimony. She was wearing her purple dress. It had little sprigs of flowers, violets or something. Anyway she knew it was my favourite. She was the only woman I ever met that could stand in her stockinged feet and still look me in the eye, know that?”

I looked at the paunchy figure and couldn't imagine him ever having been tall or upright enough to have looked Anna in the eye.

“She said I was her last chance and that was why she had come. She had no options left. Her mother was vehemently against it, you see. She wouldn't give consent for Emma to adopt you. She never told me, but I can imagine the rows – her mother had the tongue of an asp. I think she was jealous of Emma, of the way she took all her father's affection. Anyway, at that time, as a minor, and an unmarried woman, there was only one way that Emma could get access to you, and that was if I accepted

paternity. You see, as custodian I could sign you over into her care. And then she could take you and pretend you were her own. That was her plan.

“I said no. If I accepted paternity then my defence was bugged, you see. The prosecution would make a meal of me if they got hold of it. So she went away. And I never saw her again.”

He got up and wiping the glass that stood atop the basin, poured a generous shot from a bottle still wrapped in its brown paper. He offered it to me. Ignoring the glass I took a swig from the bottle and passed it on to Frank.

“Jesus.”

He laughed at my reaction.

“It’s brandewyn. Anyhow, it does the job.”

The stuff tasted like sweetened vinegar syrup, only sharper.

“So then did she steal me?”

“Wait, I’m telling it,” he said impatiently and resumed his seat on the bed. “After the Amendment was passed, and the jury - God I was amazed at that - came back with their recommendation of clemency, her father came to see me. Can you imagine, the Colonel down there in the holding cells? Everyone thought I was so cold, so calm about it all - ‘like ice,’ they said. But man, when I saw him I just broke down. Blubbed like a sissy. You should have seen his face - I think he would have forgiven me anything but that. We were sportsmen, you see, men like us didn’t cry. Well I think he gave me his handkerchief and said something like, “Kom maak jou reg nou.” And then I knew it really was the end. It was worse than the death sentence for me, that. To lose his respect - so that he remembered me only as the weak one. A coward. The shame of it.” He shook his head here and downed the last fingers of brandewyn.

“Her father doted on her, you know. I think Emma was the only thing of happiness in that whole marriage. From when she was little he’d give her anything she wanted. But she wasn’t a spoilt child. Hell, I remember the time...

I didn’t like his anecdotes of Anna. She belonged to me, not him. I cut him short –

“So what did they do?”

He blinked and focused on me properly for the first time since he’d begun his tale.

“I think you were his last gift to her. Oh ja, the Colonel was a powerful man. He made many friends over the years. And it was all ‘you scratch my back I’ll scratch yours’ in those days. Just not so obvious, like now hey? So the Colonel, who never refused Emma anything in her life, made a deal with someone – I never asked who. Tell the truth, I didn’t care. Anyway, he said that if I signed those documents acknowledging you as my son and giving you over to Emma’s sole guardianship, then the judgement would go my way. For a second I thought it was a put on, a trap of some sort. But looking at him sitting so *regop*, so upright and dignified, not further from me than you sit now, and I knew *hy praat die waarheid* – that he was telling the truth. And then again, I had nothing to lose. That little bastard Joseph had delivered me up good and proper. If I could have had a few minutes alone with him...Anyway I signed. What else could I do? ”

He stole a glance at Frankie who was staring out the window in seeming oblivion.

Durban, June 14th 1935

I took to the streets on the day the Judge handed down that sentence. I ended up at teatime somewhere near the harbour-master's house. From here it was a short stroll to the edge of the sea. The waves were surging in on the beginnings of a front. Clouds hung still over the bluff rising up beside me. As I stood below it and felt the blue electric air of the storm about to break I felt a strange gladness come upon me. The case hadn't gone the way we'd planned it – and yet the odds had been so stacked against our ever catching Coetzee in the first place. I stretched my arms out against the wind sweeping low across the sea. It caught my shirt, slapping the fabric against me. Above the wires of a flagpole snapped crisp attention. As I made my way back the first raindrops fell on the warm sand. The pungence of raw salted hide assailed my senses as I passed a hide & skin trader's yard. I saw Billy standing next to a burly merchant smoking on a cigar. He was gazing at the man in fierce concentration – the grading of the wet hides occupying all of his attention. There were no bullies in sight now. Carrying on past Shaw Bros. and Boersaamwerk I soon found myself near the new cinema – the confectionary building where Maude and I celebrated a few days before. I walked on past the Marine Hotel, whose restaurant Annatjie had thought she was going to eat at on the night she was murdered. It was dusk now and its lights winked out a cheerful reassurance. I crossed the street and watched them filling in the water on the embankment side of the train tracks. No more would our faery engine float across the bay. The illusion was lost to each bucket load of sand and yet I couldn't suppress the strange feeling of joy which welled in me with every step. I was on my way home. I could see before me already the wry smile with which Maude would greet me, how she would dry me off and fuss over me (and the wet floor) and then we would share a meal and I would tell her about my day and she would understand, even the things left unsaid. The rain was falling hard now as I looked down the muddy street, past the Yacht Club, past the Criterion, the Riviera Hotel glowing white, the deserted Courts of Law, to where Grey Street running out into the bay, marked my turn. A man on a ladder was busy changing the street sign. The south end, the white end, of the street was being renamed 'Broad'. I didn't care, just off it, down a smaller road, in a neat little block, a flat with a blue door was still home and there Maude still waited for me.

## Jerome

The sky was darkening almost imperceptibly outside. Grey blue changed to grey pink and then flattened into teal. I found myself getting anxious to go. I knew there were still many things Coetzee could tell me. But I had had enough of unravelling this history, I wanted only to confirm my guess about my father, and then leave. But Frank was after something else.

“So that was how it was done. All these years I thought that it was us, that we’d left something out, left a chink of doubt...And then I thought it was you, your rugby mates, your status as blue-eyed son of the people that got you off. The thought has haunted me ever since.”

“No. That was media hype. I know the judge said something about me being a top rugby player, but tell the truth my ears were buzzing so loudly I never properly heard his summation. But I did catch the word ‘Life’ and then I saw a lady faint in the second row. And when the sound came roaring back in everyone seemed to be shouting and counsel was shaking my hand. His career was made. First lawyer to successfully pursue a verdict of clemency in a murder trial. He became a judge, did you know?”

“Yes, your counsel all ascended the bench. I followed their careers too.”

Coetzee ignored the aside.

“No one knew what happened you see, why that verdict. And the papers were desperate to come up with an angle. They all said the same thing - it didn’t make sense that the judge, who called the crime the most depraved he’d ever been confronted with, would return with the sentence he did. It just didn’t make sense. Even the international press were trying to get interviews with me. Ja, then I was really a wanted man.”

He looked almost proud at this. And then his face fell a bit,

“Part of our deal was that I would *hou my bek* - keep my trap shut - of course. Oh, at the time I was more than happy to play along. I was so relieved and tired - hell, I’ve never felt so tired - I just wanted to disappear. That judge wasn’t that far off the mark when he said I, yes I, murderous beast, suffered too. Like a leper I was cast out from decent society. And if I am alive today it is only in the meanest of ways, as you see me now. So you see my sentence *was* life. I lost the life I should have had too, you know. I thought a lot about that, at one point I wanted to get in touch with Emma, to ask her...” His words trailed off. Then his face changed. “So she was your mom, hey?”

In the emptiness which followed I looked at the wretched figure sitting on the edge of the bed with its mustard counterpane and felt... nothing. His words neither consoled nor angered me. Strangely I believed his story - that he’d acknowledged my paternity, without being my father. A small degree of relief seeped through me at this realisation.

Fortunately Frankie took over the interrogation. Now confronted with the possibility of learning the truth at last, I lacked the will to speak.

“So you signed the document saying you were the kid’s father. But you’re not?”

“No, I’m not his father. Would I try to murder my own child?”

Frankie let it ride.

“Coetzee, everything you say is as clear as mud. Do you know who his father is?”

“I always assumed the boy was Nunner’s. I never met his mother until that Winter Dans, so there was never any chance that he was mine.”

I had heard enough. There would be no great revelation, no more confirmation than this. I thought of what Frankie said about happy endings. Sometimes they don’t get any better, or the story any clearer. The only person who knew the truth was Annetjie, and she was as lost to me as when I first encountered her between the pages of that

Bennett collection. I rose, and, as in a dream, took my leave. The air was so stuffy that I seemed to move as if wading through molasses, by increments. Turning finally at the door, I half raised my hand in a salute of farewell to Frankie. He and Coetzee were deep in discussion, two decades of mystery to chew over. He nodded at me, hardly a glance, but an acknowledgement made all the more meaningful later, when I read about what happened. He'd already produced his kit, a small portable version of the instruments I'd seen him use at his flat. Our expedition had lasted longer than planned, and it was already time for his medication.

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It was my last night in Durban, and I was directed by a helpful tourist guide to the 'German Club' – a sort of charitable social group for German immigrants. I learnt there were a number of these 'clubs' - the Italian and the Portuguese Clubs were also popular. It was a disconcerting experience to sit in that tropical surround eating steaming hot bratwurst and sauerkraut. A fitting end to an unsettling day.

Through a helpful Club secretary I learned that Nunner was dead. A few elderly ladies clustered about me when they heard who it was I was enquiring after. One or two must have traced a resemblance, as they were very forthcoming with the details. Although no one blamed him directly, I gathered that life had not been too cosy since the unfortunate Coetzee affair. Nunner and his wife left for Germany in 1938, just in time for the outbreak of another world war. He never returned from this one - he died in a freak accident in his bathroom some days before war was actually declared. He'd slipped and cracked his head open on a basin. A lot of general clucking accompanied this part. The bathroom had only recently been retiled. Mrs Nunner was bereft, they said, but re-married a mere three months later. After that the war made communication difficult. Spies, you know. They'd lost touch.

Somewhere in the Club store box there might be a few pictures of the Nunnars taken at a local flower show. His wife, although largely bedridden, was an enthusiast. A couple of the women reappeared twittering and clutching a picture album. We

skimmed through endless flower festivals, from 1924 until I thought my head would burst open like the poinsettias and clerodendrums adorning the pages. And then, there they were in a group portrait of 1933. They were neatly labelled but I had no difficulty in identifying him - a sterner and more glowering version of myself. He looked stockier, but maybe so would I become.

The next afternoon I left Durban. It was with no small sense of relief, and regret, that I headed for the welcome anonymity of Australia. Settling into the soothing rhythm of shipboard life I became merely another lazy passenger, enjoying rising late and muddling along through the various games and entertainments laid on by the crew. It was a few days into our voyage that I discovered the *Natal Mercury* amongst the other newspapers we'd taken on that last morning in Durban. And there, large as life, including several dramatic photographs, was the end of the story.

It made the headlines -

#### BENCORRUM HOTEL DESTROYED BY FIRE

The article began as a piece about the dramatic rescue of several residents, and then switched into an harangue about the evils of heroin use.

Investigators believed that the fire started in a room on the second floor. The room's occupants were the only fatalities. At least one, a Mr Frank Long, had succumbed not to smoke inhalation as at first thought but, it appeared, to an overdose of heroin. Mr Long's doctor confirmed that Mr. Long was a prescription user, and presumed that his tolerance of high doses of the drug, combined with his administration of said dose in an unfamiliar environment, may have contributed to his death. This was a well known, but little understood phenomenon amongst long time heroin users. According to Dr. Phips, Mr Long first began his use of the drug in 1947, after the passing of his wife.

More doctors were interviewed and the rest of the article was taken up in a general hue and cry for the banning of heroin. It was time to make this drug illegal said the Mayor, and if Britain bans it - so should South Africa! Nothing was mentioned of the

identity of the room's other occupant, other than that he was a Mr J.H. Coetzee, long-time, and generally peaceable, resident of the hotel.

I saw again that last nod Frankie gave as I left. Was this the way he'd planned it? Those loose ends tied up at last – a kind of justice delivered? I was glad that no one connected quiet, flabby Mr J. H. Coetzee with the notorious thirties' murder case. I wanted no media fuss over his death.

On the back page was a small obituary for Frankie. Although short it was nicely put and mentioned his boxing career. I saw it was written by a former colleague of his from the Railway CID. He said Frankie would 'Long' be remembered.

I never did discover how Emma got hold of that photograph - the one of Nunner on the sports field. It remained, like so many other details, a mystery - showing me only that she'd known, or guessed at, the truth all along. I did, however, find the document Coetzee spoke of, the one in which he'd 'signed' me over to her. It was neatly folded amongst the fragile pages of a Cape Flower catalogue.

*Dun, wheat, black. The strands blinked before me, too close for focus. And then the light brightened for a moment and lit everything in warm gold filaments too soon muted into brown. I felt something drop cool upon my face, felt its very outline as it ran soft down my cheek. And then the light was gone. I closed my eyes and the colours shifted before me once again. Gold, wheat, brown, and then to black.*

## Epilogue

I failed Maude more thoroughly than I failed anyone in my life. She, whom I loved most. That year, 1947, was the year of Coetzee's release. Restless and angry, I made it my crusade to follow him. I haunted him like the last ghost. And night and day the same dream appeared to me. It was always twilight. I was walking on a beach and would hear a woman's cry. I would turn and see a hand reaching from the waves. Heart pounding I would race into the surf and grab hold. Her skin only grew slicker in my grasp. I always lost her. At the time I thought it was a recurrence of my old war wounds, somehow connected to Annatjie. A sense of reproach would linger, and the shortness of Coetzee's sentence would stir up the old anger. Later I came to understand that the woman in the dream was Maude. Absent so often, I hadn't noticed the signs. One day I arrived home late in the afternoon and she was still in bed. She hadn't risen all day and the sheets were soaked. The doctors were kind executioners, talking us gently into despair. She was, after all, one of their best staff nurses. This was just the first brutal symptom, they said. It would vanish in a few weeks or months and she would be as good as new. Or almost. The paralysis would return. They didn't know when or how severe. One day I caught a glimpse of a photograph in one of her nursing manuals she'd accidentally left open. It was of a woman disappearing into a hospital bed. On the side was the caption: bed-ridden, paralysed, incontinent.

And so began my betrayal. She regained her health that spring, as they said she would. And I kept up my chase. I told myself I was following Coetzee to make sure he didn't do it again, see that the shortcomings of justice were kept at bay, keeping us all safe. I was a liar. I couldn't bear to face her. See her disappear like sand before a wave. Answer the question in her eyes. And then there she was, one gorgeous blue day when I got in early from work to surprise her with some early hyacinths. The flowers she left me were red, and formed a pattern like lace on the carpet.

After everyone had gone and only I and Mrs Peters from downstairs were left sitting on the blue counter-pained bed I realised that Maude had used my spare revolver, the one Dickie had given me during the Coetzee case. As if anything even remotely tainted with such monstrousness could never be made safe. But that was not why Maude was gone forever. I got up, and taking only her scarf - the white one she was

wearing when we first met - I left that apartment, mahogany furniture, rosewood bed, bloodflowered carpet, and happiest of days gone forever. That was how I learnt that sometimes, sorrow and longing rising in your gut like bile, there is no going home.

I took a night job working security at one of the beachfront hotels. It was a desk job really, the only dead I saw were those who died in their sleep, in coitus, slipped in the shower, were far from home. The mortician handled them all. A natural death was hardly any trouble at all - unlike suicide and murder - had no life of its own past the cleaning up of the room for the next contented customer. I used the days to follow Coetzee as he played out his own living death as once rugby hero once murderer once man now bum on the make in a bar. And I? I - once husband once lover once detective once man, now shade - kept watch.

### *Acknowledgements and Afterword*

Whilst this is primarily a work of fiction, it has its roots in certain events which did take place near Pretoria in 1935. The Coetzee case *was* a cause célèbre of the time, and *has* been fictionalised many times before this, according to Benjamin Bennett. I was able to track down only one such work – that of authoress Daphne Rooke. It was a chance conversation with her about her book *The Greyling*, which first set me on Coetzee's trail. *The Greyling* is one of those truly great 'lost' works, banned during the censorship era of Apartheid. If my book achieves no effect other than to provoke interest in Rooke's writing, I will consider it a success. I have transposed the action of the story from Pretoria to Durban so as to introduce an element of Rooke's own childhood background, and hopefully produce a work of truly local fiction.

In recreating the Durban of the 1930s I am heavily indebted to Benny Singh's brilliant autobiographical work, *My Champions were Dark*, in which he describes in amusing detail his childhood in Durban and his illustrious association with boxing. I have used authorial license and moved the fight between Hommel and Dixon from its actual venue in Ocean City, to one of my own invention. The description of the fight, however, is based on Singh's account. Articles taken from *The Advertiser* have also formed much of the basis of my tale, being particularly useful in providing coverage of the trial and daily Durban living. I have again altered these to suit my own fictional purposes – but yes, trolley-buses were introduced in 1935, and the Bencorrum Hotel *did* burn down – in 1959.

I am greatly saddened that I could find no way of introducing the very extraordinary denial by the British government that newly introduced televisions would be used to spy into the living rooms of its populace! The 1935 article in question was in deadly earnest, and in no way intended as an amusement. Nor was I able to include the intriguing article which discussed Durban residents' growing tendency to build garages rather than bathrooms – a fact born out by the circa 1930's house I live in today.

Given the constraints of producing a not unwieldy work I had to leave these, and other pungent details, regretfully behind. Plot and pace were to finally dictate what should and shouldn't remain. The result is as you read it.

If you wish to explore the actual case further you will find a most succinct version in Benjamin Bennett's *Too Late for Tears*. Look for the 'Coetzee' case, as his is the only<sup>1</sup> name I have *not* altered.

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<sup>1</sup> I couldn't resist holding on to R.B. Lovemore who *was* S.A.P Inspector of Vehicles, and did give evidence in the case. Who could improve on such a name?

Carole Green

Addendum to *The Memory of Sorrow*.

Recalling the origins of a piece of writing is as tricky a task as piecing together the historical fact behind a work of fiction like Daphne Rooke's *The Greyling*, or indeed tracing the genesis of any work claiming to be *reportage*. It was during a break in filming Rooke's visit to Durban in 1997 that a chance remark about the scarcity of original copies of her novel, *The Greyling*, led to the author giving a most fascinating account of the book's banning. Rooke claimed that on a trip back to South Africa in the 1950's, when she was toying with the idea of writing the book, she had encountered enormous difficulties in accessing any information about the Coetzee case. Her failure to unearth anything in the newspaper or Durban town archives suggested to her something more sinister than a failure to keep proper records.

The primary things Rooke recalled about the case (which happened in 1935, whilst she was still a schoolgirl) were Coetzee's position as an Afrikaner policeman, and his status as a rugby hero. She remembered that there was outrage in the English speaking community at his avoiding the death penalty, and that a general feeling prevailed that his escape was due to 'family' connections. She recounted vividly a detail of the case to do with shoe casts (cutting-edge forensics at the time) and how an underling had 'cracked' the case by recognising Coetzee's footprints and making an exciting dash from Durban to Pretoria with the evidence, thus outwitting Coetzee (his direct superior). Fortunately she recalled his name - J. Coetzee - which reminded her of the author whom some academic had mentioned earlier during her visit to the English Department of the University of Natal. I use the term 'fortunately' because, as may be becoming evident from the above, Rooke, whilst a charming raconteur, had got most of the details wrong.

After having pursued the case myself, during the research of this book, and using largely local resources and archives, I believe it is accurate to say that there never was any attempt to 'cover up' or 'keep' records from the general public. The banning of *The Greyling* can only be ascribed to the reasons given in the original order. Having read the novel<sup>1</sup>, the bulk of which has to do with miscegenation, it is easy to imagine how it would have appeared to the South African Censors in 1962. There is no mystery in their having it banned. No juicy unchartered literary diversions lurk here – although Rooke's

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<sup>1</sup> A rare copy provided by the author herself – it is probably one of the most thoroughly banned books, not even to be found in specialist bookstores.

work, as always, provides a palpable sense of the time, and a human context to the too often generalised machinery of Apartheid.

Why then did Rooke fail to unearth any material on the case during her search in the 1950's? Quite simply, she had most of the details hopelessly wrong. Her recollection, whilst evoking all the relevant pieces of the case, had with true writerly flair, re-arranged them into something much more pungent for anecdotal use. My own early attempts at researching the case seemed initially to confirm her suspicions. It appeared someone had wanted this trial forgotten. I could unearth nothing about a J.Coetzee who had murdered his pregnant mistress in Durban in the 1930's. And so, for many years, the idea of this story lurking behind Rooke's novel and haunting her memories of being a schoolgirl in Durban, remained just that - an idea.

Then in roughly July of 2002, whilst perusing a flea market bookstall, I came across Benjamin Bennett's *Too Late For Tears*. And there, in Bennett's precise, reporterly tone, was the Coetzee case. *My case*, as I felt it to be by this time, amazed at the luck of finding so full an account of it after so many years. As I read it became glaringly obvious *why* Rooke and I had failed to unearth anything. Here was the real detail - it happened in Pretoria and *not* Durban as Rooke had thought - here were dates, the murder - January 1935, his release from prison - 1947, and so on. Here were names - the victim's, the murderer's, the Judge's. I went back to the Don Africana Library. The librarian warned me that the microfiche from the *Advertiser* of that period was not arranged according to subject. He clearly was trying to prevent me from wasting many fruitless hours as those before me had, in searching through decades of material for a particular name or event. But now, armed with Bennett's dates, it took me less than ten minutes to find the article chronicling the first day of trial. It was headline news. Working backwards I managed to find the small three-line piece reporting the discovery of a woman's body on the train lines just outside of Pretoria on January 31<sup>st</sup> 1935.

The trick of Rooke's memory which had transposed everything from Pretoria to Durban was difficult to slough off, even with the antidote of Bennett's more 'truthful' version. When I began to think of rendering it into my own fictional account I found that the story seemed somehow to 'belong' in Durban, or at least had very firmly ensconced itself in my consciousness as a piece of local nostalgia. My first draft began with a train

ride - that of the detective on a desperate mission to Pretoria with Coetzee's shoeprints (and shoes?) as per Rooke's original description. It was a solid enough beginning, and included an encounter with a large and (I hoped) mysterious woman. But what was I writing up - Rooke's muddled recollections, or another version of the Coetzee case (already widely fictionalised according to Bennett)? Did the world need another murder story like this? The solution, I came to realise, lay somewhere in the interstices of the modes of reportage and fiction - where my own concerns with history and the text were founded. In engaging with these modes through an effort of production rather than literary analysis, I envisioned mine as a piece teetering (and hopefully coming to rest) somewhere in-between the grander notions of history and truth, in short being a work of 'faction'. I wanted to use the modes more conventionally associated and available in the writing of non-fiction (orality, textual corroboration, and so on) in order to bind together a fictional work. This decision allowed me a greater degree of 'play' in representing the past than if I had decided upon a mode like 'biography' or 'historical romance', some elements of which are nonetheless included in the finished work.

When writing about an actual event, however, the pull towards writing 'truthfully', 'accurately', and of rendering people and places 'faithfully' is very strong. One almost seems under obligation to the past, particularly such a violent and emotional history as the one with which I now sought to work - as if misrepresentation would constitute a form of desecration. The disturbance of another's memory, if not their bones, was a really felt issue for me - in this instance raising all sorts of literary spectres to do with voice and the usurping of place which must dog any student of the post-colonial. It is a problem common to almost every writer, I decided, and one I would simply have to negotiate as I wrote. The alternate was a bit like (as Michael Green refers to it in *Novel Histories*), Terry Eagleton's 'emptying of hands' - trying to say as little to compromise oneself as possible, and in so doing, saying nothing much of anything at all. A race towards silence. Self-censorship is a very real dilemma when writing, more so when one has a background in literary studies. If one cannot be Faulkner why write at all? This kind of reasoning soon degenerates into self-indulgent ramblings. More difficult and more pertinent was finding an answer to the question - why write *this* story?

I wanted to create something that would be an 'authentic' counterpoint to the existing accounts of the case, whilst still maintaining the status of a fictional work. My intention was to bring into 'play' not only the conventional problems such as the rendering of characters, plot, and history in an interesting fashion, but also to take into account the weight of the fictions, memories, reportage which informed this story. In other words I did not want an insular manuscript, but one that would 'speak' to other texts, and perhaps the expectations of the reader.

Having decided on producing a work of 'greater' fiction in the sense of having relocated the action to Durban, and introduced as central to the narrative a character of complete fabrication, I felt it all the more necessary to use 'real' and 'accurate' historical detail in order to bolster the verisimilitude of my tale. Being most meticulous in reconstructing the Durban of 1935, however, posed several real narrative challenges. Readers' assumptions about the period were strong and several accurate details (like the existence of trolley-buses and chrome fittings in a kitchen) had the opposite effect. They appeared anachronistic to some of my early readers<sup>2</sup>, making the narrative seem less 'authentic'. I was faced several times with this dilemma: leave the accurate detail in and risk weakening the readerly bond, or replace or omit it and in doing so pander to readerly expectation. I decided in most instances to stick with historical 'accuracy' and hopefully pull the reader along with me, into the unfamiliar.

In other instances I felt no compunction in creating buildings or fabricating characters. These 'large' fictions did not bother me as they did not undermine the 'reality' of the piece in the way in which invented 'everyday detail' would. Ordinary details which are purely 'invented' by an author, within the context of an historical piece of writing, can too easily appear as laziness or sheer inaccuracy.

My supervisor suggested I include an explanation of to what degree the piece has been fictionalised, to which I can only respond that it is, to me, *all* fiction in the sense that I have fabricated a work, encompassing moments of 'real' events past. In the reading I hope it is impossible to separate invention from fact. Some of the most surprising details are those most faithfully reproduced from the original source (yes, the Nunner figure *did*

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<sup>2</sup> Aside from my supervisor, mainly family and friends, principally my mother who, being retired, had time and inclination to read the unfinished work. Her irritation at the incompleteness of the writing I showed her was often heartening – here was someone who did want to read further, even if only family!

in his testimony in court describe, in a rather more garbled fashion, his propensity for climbing in and out of windows!). Other, more mundane anchors (like Frankie's train ride, the excerpts from *The Kleurling*) form the fabric of the broader tale and are to be found nowhere else except in *The Memory of Sorrow*. Thus what may have originated on a metafictional basis (the interplay of Corvo's novel, the newspaper accounts) have, through an organic process of writing, become fiction in the sense that they are invented texts speaking to each other within the pages of the work – their antecedents (*The Advertiser*, *The Greyling*) do still point in a metafictional direction.

#### MIN(D)ING THE GAP

I scrapped the version which began with the detective on a train. As a beginning it did not set the right tone. There was no mystery in it. Written in the third person, it seemed as if all the chronology of the story lay before me, just waiting to be plodded out onto the page. In order to sustain my (and I hoped a reader's) interest I needed to introduce a deeper, structural element of uncertainty to the work, not simply the idea of a future (or past?) waiting to unfold. The notion of writing in the first person occurred to me, and shortly thereafter the woman's voice, which provides the opening. This voice soon took substance as the character of Emma, and an idea of how a narrative might 'hang together' around this opening became clearer. Although I had not worked through all the details of the plot, the narrative seemed to find its own way into events from here.

Frankie's voice then became the counterpoint to the initial woman narrator. He provided a sense of the immediate, the 'known' unfolding of events, as opposed to the more elliptical parallel narration. Emma's account was intended to be both incomplete, and yet at the heart of things.

This was the beauty of first person narration – it introduced a ‘real’ element of historicity in that it allowed this writer<sup>3</sup> to provide a narrative of events which was incomplete, fallible, full of the gaps and ellipses which make life and history so interesting and anarchic, but which in third person unlimited narration signal an author, like Agatha Christie, whose contrivance often shows or (like others unnamed) simply not in control of the material (she’s lost the plot, you know). I had no desire to either ‘lose’ the plot or to produce a work of careful, but tedious, intricacy.

First person narration also allowed me to avoid the thumping lessons that so easily consume a work dealing with South African history. I treated my readers as if they were in possession of at least the broader historical concepts of racism and the rise of apartheid politics. Or at least I allowed myself the luxury that if they were ignorant of these, then hopefully not more so than of the historical period of the 1930s. I was not going to set out to reproduce in painstaking description either of these features. My intention was to evoke a sense of the time and politics through the use of strategic detail – those things that struck the consciousness of my narrators, which, however imperfect, provide a tone that conveys more than a shopping list of historical or prosaic detail.

The constraint on length which submitting the work as a short dissertation must necessarily entail, helped me avoid (or edit) those descents into poetic prose that sometimes prove irresistible to one as a writer, and fiercely annoying to one as a reader. Frank does sometimes digress in his description of places and people, but he, of all the characters in the book, is the ‘romantic’. The philosopher-detective, the guy with the hard exterior and the soft interior. Failure wouldn’t matter so much to him otherwise, nor would injustice. It is Frank’s story which is really pathetic in the sense of providing (in the first part) hope and the promise of the fulfilment of justice and romance. It is in his personal tragedy and failure that the brutal reality of the future (our past) is revealed. Some readers have felt that these elements could have been further explored. I would have enjoyed pursuing this part of the narrative further, but the book would have become a different project then, much longer and requiring less from the reader, I feel. If I ‘filled’

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<sup>3</sup> An aside: To my ear it sounds a bit pompous to refer to myself as ‘a writer’ amongst other writers, it seems necessary that one at least be published in order to throw around such a title. That said, all writers must at some point have written a first book of some sort, and therefore it is bearing this in mind, and for the purposes of coherency within this journal, that I call myself a writer.

in some of the gaps, then I would lose the narrative speed and style that the piece has almost serendipitously acquired. I would be obliged to flesh out the whole, and would have to rely on a very different kind of prose to sustain interest. I would, I feel, be slipping towards an authorial voice, towards narration in the third person.

I have striven to produce an effect so that, whilst a reader may not always get a clear or complete picture of events or what the characters are thinking, yet, almost as in a dream, all the elements are there – awaiting the reader's interpretation. For instance, we suspect, but do not *know* that Nunner had an affair with Annatjie. The strongest evidence for such an affair is alluded to in his testimony given at the trial in part two. His own description of climbing in and out of windows is reproduced almost verbatim from the actual newspaper accounts. I have only made the description slightly less jumbled than the original reportage. It was whilst reading this testimony that the idea of his stronger connection to the victim first presented itself to me, as the original (unnamed) reporter no doubt intended to suggest. I hoped to reproduce this effect within my own text, even given that Nunner has already emerged as a suspicious character by this time in the narrative. Frankie's thoughts as he listens to Nunner are that he is like a fox – it is up to the reader to supply the obvious imagistic leap to the henhouse. Much is left literally unsaid (unwritten?) but I hope is nonetheless present to the reader. It has been a terrifying line to travel (particularly as very tangible marks, not only readerly approval, are attached to the text's reception). How much of a 'gap' to leave? Too big and the reader sails across, perhaps not even noticing the absence, except as a lack of narrative 'richness'. Too small and it becomes an irritating omission, a word hovering just beyond consciousness. One part of the narrative I would have liked to develop more given world enough and time is that of Jerome's life in London. Perhaps his and Frankie's 'missing years' are another project waiting to happen...

The greatest and most glaring gap is Annatjie, or rather her exclusion as narrator. Although seemingly everywhere in the book, her voice is entirely absent from the text. She was the one character I felt it impossible to fictionalise and to ascribe motives, emotions, to. She was both too close and impossibly far from me as a writer. The text which must be hers came to me always in the extreme. In fact it was only through the fictional Corvo's piece of fiction (*The Kleurling*) within the narrative that I dared

approach Annatjie. This allowed me to write through the additional medium of Corvo's fictional novel. Again my intention here is both to speak to, and introduce an element of mystery into, events. On page 89, is Corvo's character describing an encounter with a Nunner type, or with Corvo's 'Coetzee' character? The reader must ultimately decide. The only moment when I have offered a glimpse of perhaps the real 'Annatjie's' consciousness is in the last lines before the epilogue. I felt that the necessity of including 'her' at this point was sufficiently strong to overcome the inadequacy of doing so. The end of the story seems brimming with other narrative lines and endings – I wanted to bring it back to Annatjie. It is not prissiness or being overly fastidious, or overly sensitive which led me to *not* try and reproduce Annatjie in the first person. I have not avoided her. The story is so *much* hers that it seemed a redundancy to try and reproduce her further on the page. If she is absent it is because the whole project, the whole text precisely revolves around the fact of her absence. It is hopefully that which also brings her to mind as one reads. Like Jerome we must feel it impossible to know her beyond a certain point; hers is the gap, the missing piece at the heart of the narrative. All accounts of her, like Corvo's fiction, are attempts to fill this void, to intrude on her silence, and her mystery which lures the narrative inexorably onward and which conversely provides the substance and the 'life' of the tale. Her silence is strategic, intended to 'nag' at but (hopefully as always) not irritate<sup>4</sup> the reader.

Daphne Rooke did not disappear completely from the tale. The character of Ethel Corvo may share a common background with Rooke, but is a completely fictional entity. I needed a character that would form an interstice between reality and the narrative. A great deal of the plot is provided by and generated through both Corvo's past as a girl in Durban, and her career as novelist. *The Kleurling* represents a work not dissimilar from *The Greyling*, as the title obviously demonstrates. The content of the former is entirely my own, produced so as to tie in with the demands of my own narrative. I did spend a very wet day watching 'the bumps' with Rooke and her family, but it was an entirely different (and more convivial) encounter to that which my characters experience in the book. Corvo's is a not entirely pleasant character; I needed her to obfuscate as much as

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<sup>4</sup> I use this word advisedly as reading can become a tedious and annoying business if, as a reader, you feel that you are being 'toyed' with and that there is no greater rationale to a writer's choices other than a desire to demonstrate her own erudition and cleverness.

reveal the passage of events. The easiest way to do this was to give her a persona in many ways the opposite of Daphne Rooke's generous and outgoing personality. I have to trust that my Corvo is sufficiently distant in substance to Rooke that there will be no mistaking her as anything other than a work of pure invention.

## DEATH AND THE MADAM

I discovered that part of the process of populating one's story with characters, is the undoing of these in some satisfying fashion at the appropriate time. Not all characters need be done away with, of course – some just slip from readerly consciousness with the turn of the page. Others (particularly in a work of detective fiction) have to be 'got rid of'. This is to do with *what they know*. If I had wanted someone in this story to know it all I would have introduced a third person narrator. It is a trickier thing than I first thought to allow a character to reveal only so much and no more information, given the logic of the tale.

Madam Tits is a case in point. She could have blurted Coetzee's name out at any moment – and so she *had* to go. How to provide an exit for her, and yet not waylay the main story? Perhaps I was overly ruthless in her disposal; my only consolation is that her murderer is punished in the end. This must satisfy the reader as well, as I just didn't want to expend too much time and page space chasing down this sub-plot. Perhaps in a longer, published version, I might develop this part of the tale more.

There were more characters that needed 'offing' than I at first thought. I was alarmed. I did not want the book to become a bloodbath – no serial killers here, thank you. Still, obeying the demands of a good mystery story, it came to my attention only towards the end of the work that a great many characters who were alive at the beginning of the story were dead by the end of it. How did this happen? I wondered, and re-traced my steps. A process of natural attrition I decided – they all knew too much, the ultimate sin in a mystery novel. I had to get them out of the way before the reader started asking questions. Like watching a bad soap opera (is there ever a good one?) – 'Why doesn't he

just ask so and so?’ Luckily for writers there are usually some characters in the story who also think that a few people know too much.

Again, the line between graphic and off-stage violence had to be negotiated. I wanted to elicit repulsion, but avoid that sense of exploitation, which is my own response to the overly manipulative use of gore on the page or in film. Gratuitous violence à la Tarantino is preferable to the banal over-the-top horrors of the professional (popular?) murder/detective fiction writer. Writing is a manipulative process; one is deliberately trying to draw the reader towards something, lead them on - however aware one is of the cogs and gristle of doing so (“If on a winter’s night...”). Graphic violence is too often the electric cattle prod of narrative technique – ‘this’ll get ’em going if nothing else will...’. I can’t imagine that most readers enjoy being treated like so much literate kine. Book sales must, I guess, be the ultimate test – I suspect they will demonstrate the converse. I’m sure there are many studies about violence and the reading public. In this piece of writing I have tried to neither avoid nor overdo it. The story seemed to me bloody enough without too much embellishment. That which went unstated often created a more vivid impression than any description I could supply. I do not go into much detail in the scene on page 11 when the child is found. I think Dickie’s reaction and the mention of a few key elements, like the handbag and the fist, give the reader more than enough to respond to.

## DARKNESS AT THE EDGE OF TOWN

Benny Singh’s autobiography *My Champions were Dark*, provided my initial ‘way in’ to the Durban of the 1930’s. He gave me a perspective which suggested the existence of a different kind of Durban from the extremely British settlement it is most often portrayed as. Contrary to popular belief, Durban has not always been of ‘The Last Outpost’ mentality. In the 1930’s Durban, like many other parts of the world, was feeling the cultural sway of the Movies, and of American writers like Damon Runyon and Robert Benchley. Today Durban is listed on the Internet as one of the world’s leading exemplars

of American Art Deco architecture. Many of these buildings (Quadrant House on the Esplanade is a good example) were under construction or recently completed at the time of this narrative. Cars too, were most often imported from America (consignments to Durban were often sold long before the ship even docked). The Hudson Terraplane which Nunner drives is a car often associated with the American Blues, and the Mississippi delta in particular (thanks largely to Robert Johnson's *Terraplane Blues*). Whilst it is highly unlikely that the blues would have been heard in Durban at this time (it was still a very local phenomenon, even in America) there was a strong leaning towards things American – fashion, cars, architecture, and banter.

Frankie's wise-cracking tone took some real working on. That kind of 30s humour has, through endless reproduction (in the detective fiction mode particularly), become a tired and overly clichéd language. I did not want to end up with a one dimensional, cardboard cut-out, of a man. I think that, whilst Frankie's voice might sound a little obvious at first, that this is part of the necessary setting of the tone, the context of the piece, and as one reads on into his character Frankie emerges as an entity unto himself.

The other absolutely vital source of information was the newspaper accounts in the local rag, *The Advertiser*. I used the reportage on the trial extensively as I was unable to lay hands on (although I did track down) the trial transcript itself<sup>5</sup>. The reporters were unfortunately given no byline, and I therefore cannot acknowledge them individually – but these articles gave a real sense of how sensational the trial was, and how closely followed by the public. The sheer density of words and the standard of journalism give some indication of the kind of readership an ordinary local paper enjoyed in 1935. My supervisor suggested that Frank sometimes appeared too erudite for a policeman – but the average Joe public had much more to do with words than he does nowadays. I believe Frank is a pretty accurate representation of a person of his class and time – allowing for the quirks which I trust make him appear a singular individual and not only the creature of my narrative.

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<sup>5</sup> It is lodged in the Pretoria Witwatersrand Archives, but according to the archivist I contacted, is too bulky a file to easily reproduce. I look eagerly forward to perusing it should I get a chance to visit these archives myself.

Another key text was *Durban's Heritage Explored* by Peter Johnston and Hyacinthia Naidoo. They offered me an invaluable vision of the topography of Durban in 1935 and 1958 respectively. Their pungent yet concise descriptions informed many of my choices as to setting for the various incidents of the book. The architecture provided a link between past and present, adding to my sense of the town, not only as a backdrop, but as an entity in itself. Frank takes Maude to the newly opened Playhouse to celebrate the jury's verdict, and it is here too that we encounter Coetzee so many decades later. Jerome walks along that same Esplanade that was Frank's way home on so many occasions. His mood is very different from that of Frank and Maud as they strolled along one night, their hands touching ever so slightly as they came to rest them on a railing at the harbour side.

I'm not going to attempt a comprehensive acknowledgement of all the works which informed this book – for that there is the bibliography. *Durban: A Pictorial History* by Ian Morrison provided many of the everyday details of transport and dress which gave me a greater assurance when writing up my characters and their movements across town.

I would like to mention some of the important online resources I used. The National Archive online was extraordinary in the depth and minutiae of information it provided, only to say that it was often too much – probably my own fault for not narrowing search parameters (I hate to exclude things – some most valuable information has emerged almost serendipitously). Google was much the same, except that I discovered that the pictorial search engine often provided more accurate and quicker access to the kinds of sites I was hunting – particularly to do with the domestic detail of 1935. What did a kitchen look like, were there fridges (no, iceboxes only), and what would my characters have worn? You may notice that some are garbed in fashion almost a decade old in 1935, not everyone would dress in the latest kit – some I imagined could not afford it, and some (like Mrs Nunner) enjoyed the fashions of the 1920's. One fashion blooper that a reader fortunately spotted was my description of one of my characters wearing a safari suit in 1958 – they only arrived in the 70's. Of course there is a wealth of (I think) fascinating detail that I finally did not use – it was an impossible choice between preserving the trajectory of the plot and the desire to plumpen and flesh out the narrative

elements. Given that I also had the, albeit secondary, consideration of academic length, I decided to pursue the action in almost every instance. “Does the story or character still make sense without this detail?” I asked myself. It was only in setting up those deeper narrative threads that I allowed myself the indulgence of seemingly superfluous detail. I would have liked to have explored Frank’s boxing and Coetzee’s rugby more – but these have become clichéd and over used symbols/preoccupations (?) of masculinity. I decided to deliberately underplay their usage. This was no ‘coming of age’ novel. Whilst boxing marks some significant moments in Frank’s life, I hope that in the text it appears in perspective with other, more important, events.

Which brings us to Maude. Although we never hear her voice directly - she is always recounted through Frank (except that note) - Maude is one of my favourite characters. Beautiful, well dressed, compassionate, and (of course) black. Why do I delight in her colour? (In this new South Africa are we not past such tricks?) Well, no. Being a South African writer race, and issues of race, are not something easily sidelined or forgotten. Nor would I wish to. I was wary, however, of slipping into the mode which positions Race as the dominant narrative paradigm. Whilst some may argue that it is an overall, or overarching, concern – I did not want to make it the exclusive or overbearing feature of the work. Maybe the distinction between overall or larger narrative paradigm and *dominant* paradigm is not immediately apparent, but anyone exposed to South African writing produced in say the last three hundred years will, I feel, understand the distinction. Certainly those works contemporary to the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century tend to labour under the weight of History, in the manner that another Coetzee, this one a Nobel Laureate, described in his Jerusalem speech. I wanted to break some of our (my?) assumptions about race and the hegemonic effect that it exerts not only upon the present, but also the past. Apartheid has been such a pervasive feature of South African life that it is difficult to escape its tentacles. I am not here going to debate whether race is, or is not, the (or one of) the grand narratives which inform our world. What I wished to do in this book was to indicate a period when notions of race (and of class?) were perhaps more fluid than in later years (more fluid perhaps than they ever appear when pinned down in black and white on the page). I think I’ve achieved this to some extent. Some readers found the fact that Maude lived with Frank difficult to believe, and yet interracial

marriages occurred (often enough to be the subject of later legislation). It would be a while before the Group Areas Act regimented where one could live. Whilst governments, particularly local councils, did meddle extensively in population settlement and the control of living space, they were more preoccupied in trying to secure a labour force than with the prevention of miscegenation. To put it one way, racism was more in the way of a voluntary set of beliefs to which many subscribed, than the totalitarian apartheid bureaucracy it would become. Whilst she may be framed to some extent by race, I hope that Maude (like Frank, hell, like all the characters) transcends these paradigms – that they are as real characters upon the page, and not caricatures.

If I fail to mention race overtly in the text it is not because I am erasing it as a concern of that (or our own) time. It is precisely in several strategic choices where I omit to mention the race of the character that such considerations and preoccupations become foregrounded (sometimes unwillingly or uncomfortably for the reader). Take for instance the three women walking on the tracks. They are important, much more so than they at first seem. A strange side-effect of their role in the action of the narrative (the theft of the suitcase) raises in the reader a sort of correlative (albeit maybe reluctant) desire to know their race. The ‘politically correct’ part of the reader knows their colour probably shouldn’t or isn’t important. Another part is probably just plain curious. What I enjoy is that the women (a little bit like that cat) can be either black *or* white. By this point in the narrative the reader<sup>6</sup> is no longer assuming that race correlates with class, or education. It is a kind of writerly phenomenon one is able to pull off only on the page – the second such an incident were filmed it would lose all ambiguity.

The women are white, by the way - though whether English or Afrikaans speaking - I leave to your imagination.

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<sup>6</sup> I base all my comments about the work’s reception upon feedback from those, as I mentioned before, who have read it. More correctly I should speak of ‘intention’ rather than ‘effect’, but these are phenomena that have come more consciously to my attention through discussion of the piece and I shall therefore leave this paragraph as it stands.

## NO SHORT CUTS

The technical business of editing has been a difficult one. At one point having read too much Cormack McCarthy I madly decided that what the text needed in order to convey a convincing sense of the masculine was less punctuation. It sounds dumb when put so starkly, but in reality it was one of my stupider manoeuvres. Although I had diligently kept a version which did have all the punctuation present and correct, I persisted in my ill-conceived idea for several weeks. Since not everything new is written at the end of the previous page of writing – sometimes things are added in on, let's say, page 3, and a word altered on page 12, a sentence embellished on page 33, and so on - reverting to a previous version becomes nonsensical as the text is altered through rewriting and new writing. Needless to say the process of reintroducing punctuation was a lengthy and tedious one – compounded by the knowledge that the mess was truly all of my own creation. Aside from this one very annoying stylistic decision on my part, the styling was pretty straightforward. Oh, I briefly toyed with Runyon's special present tense (a term coined to describe precisely his mode of writing) as in this example Don Iddon uses in his preface to *Short Takes*:

Thank goodness, Joe Louis makes it quick and merciful knocking out Tami Mauriello in two minutes and nine seconds of the first round of his twenty-third defence of his title of heavy-weight champion of the world. (1946)

Something more immediate than the past, and yet possessing all the humour of a good anecdote, Runyon's grammar is almost synonymous with the culture of the 1930's. I decided that Frank and Dickie would make very conscious reference to this type of humour, as does Benny Singh in his autobiography. The characters of Harry the Horse and Mrs Tits come almost directly from Runyon, via Singh's memoir – that is to say I used their monikers, their substance is entirely of my own fabrication.

Editing one's own work is, as I have indicated before, a tricky business. One's brain is crammed with worlds of detail of less and more pertinence to the overall schema, the plot, the character, the sentence, and so on. When reading the brain tends to neatly thus supply the correction to the mistake on the page, sometimes before one has

consciously read it. Thus after several hundred read throughs, when nearly all grammatical corrections had been made – I discovered that in one instance I had used the name Harry instead of Frank, in the first chapter! This was clearly a remnant from an earlier draft, when I hadn't yet settled on a name for my lead.

What follows is part of an earlier version. It is quite a lengthy piece, but it demonstrates some of the elements which found their way into the final draft. Most of the characters and the details didn't make it, but what I enjoy about this piece is its pace, and the kind of Runyonesque tone I manage to capture. Had I persisted with this draft the book would have been substantially different. In the end I abandoned this mode precisely because of its style – too trying over the length of the project I had in mind. I also couldn't imagine juxtaposing this bantering style with the voice of the woman who opens the book. In the end I felt that her presence as counterpoint to Frank was too important – it was that opening which came to set the overall tenor of the writing. So, here is another beginning (raw and completely unedited), maybe one I will use should Frank's missing years ever be written.

It was an evening hotter and more stewy than the mutton curry at the Oriental Hotel. Foregoing the latter's culinary delights, Hugh and I had settled instead for the more civilised and insipid pleasures of the Criterion. And, let's face it, the hoof was better looking. The restaurant was only a few blocks from Hugh's business on Stanger, he was a buyer of hides & skins, &c., as the tatty yellow lettering of the sign above his premises loudly proclaimed. It was the "& c." bit that had led to our first meeting, and it was his gentle humour and stand-up personality that had led to the continuance of our friendship. I had known him for almost 17 years, although after joining Her Majesty's finest I ignored that part of his business not connected to the buying and selling of animal parts. It was this unspoken business that I was concerned with tonight. The beautiful tempered blue of Hugh's suit was matted with grey dust and sweat by the time we arrived, my own, cheaper suit remained its usual crumpled grey self. The advantage of cheap fabric being that it never looked much better, or worse, for wear. As we sat, I noticed one of the waitresses, a tall brunette, disappear into the kitchen. After surveying the menu we ordered mutton curry anyway. We were just getting down to business, when I saw the brunette again, crossing the esplanade. It was hardly time for a change of shift. Throwing some bucks on the table I made my way through the supper press and gained the street just in time to see her boarding a rickshaw. Narrowly missing

the fender of a Bentley, I crossed and boarded one myself. "Follow that girl," I said, lighting up to cover my mild embarrassment.

If he was amused the rickshaw puller hid it well under his ferocious costume. The horns on his head dipped impressively as he made the most of his running display. I took no enjoyment from the ride, it was said the pullers regularly dropped dead in the traces. I had ridden several times in them, but always felt a sense of shame at being pulled along so obviously by the exertions of another man. I guess we all rode along on someone's back in those days, the rickshaw seemed just a crude example of what had become a way of life for us in the colonies. And those in the Motherland no doubt lived off the sweat of us colonial donkeys. Just one big stew, sometimes you got the fat, and sometimes (like me) you just gnawed away at those bits of grey gristle, hoping something tasty would eventually turn up.

When we pulled up outside the Oceanic Hotel, the brunette was nowhere in sight. The salt tang was strong and the breakers on Ocean beach made a ceaseless din. I could have gone in, but the foreshore, wreathed in briny fog as it was, seemed to me a more appealing prospect. It was as I skirted the rocky paddling pools that I saw her. A dim figure, fast disappearing along the sand, I could just make out the red and blue stripe of her coat. At that moment a ship's horn resounded, a trick of the fog making it sound as if it were about to bear down right upon the beach. The night cleared for a second and I could make out its lights in the distance safely rounding the point. If not for that passing ship who knows how things might have turned out later? As it was, I knew soon as I turned back that I had lost her.

I found her the next day, too late to uncover her secrets, or discover if we could have known each other better. I was coming out of Hugh's, after a frustrating morning of aimless chat when a runner came for me. For weeks we had been searching for leads on the identity of a woman found murdered on the railway line below Mariannahill. Not content with half strangling her, her assailant had returned sometime in the early hours of the morning to finish the job. She had managed to crawl almost up the embankment when she was shot three times, fatally in the heart and face. I had been following up the possibility that she had been a waitress, an outsider in town for the Summer work, when the brunette at the Criterion had disappeared on me. I figured the two must be connected. It wasn't long before I discovered that they had a lot more in common than I liked. The brunette's bag and shoes were found first, and then at 2pm that sweltering January afternoon, her body floated peacefully in to shore at the Point, following the route of the ship I had stared at the night before.

Mandy Huss was her name. Her mother and father came down to identify her, and arrived at my office on St Andrews street looking dazed and brown in their Sunday best. They were German immigrants and had a smallholding outside of Kloof. They had received the news from a neighbour who had come from the local post office. Mandy boarded with another girl in town who anxiously reported her missing early that morning after she failed to return home the night before. Although she sometimes did go on a date without telling her roommate, Frieda, this was the first time she had stayed out the whole night. After reporting her missing, Frieda had gone in for her morning shift at the Criterion, but feeling uneasy had returned to the police station that afternoon. She had been still waiting in the front room when the news had come of a woman's body found washed up near the Point. Something had gone cold inside her, and she had known without being told that the woman was a green-eyed brunette, was her friend, Mandy. Frieda was still in my office when Mandy's parents arrived and so I cut our interview short, asking her to return the next morning. There was little love lost between them as she brushed past the parents on her way out. Mandy's father turned and spat out the side of his mouth as she left, and I thought I saw her flinch, her cheeks turning crimson.

"We don't allow that in here, Mr Huss" I said, establishing my territory. I was the law, and if there was any retribution to be meted, I would be the one dealing it out. He turned a pebbly gaze on me, "My daughter is dead. What are you going to do?" His voice was heavily accented and thick with anger. He had a point. Mandy had been my only clue, and now she too was dead, maybe because I had sought her out.

The details of the first murder, the German family, the laconic Frank, all features of the final work – but here leading to a different kind of story. The pace of the final draft is somewhat slower – allowing the reader a better view of the action I think. In re-reading this version I'm appalled at how many 'hads' there are – getting rid of these seems to be a real feature in the editing of prose written in the past tense (mine, anyway). These 'hads' clog up the works – making it all sound very plodding. The best way to fix this particular problem I felt, was in most cases to simply omit them. As in:

Something had gone cold inside her, and she had known without being told that the woman was a green-eyed brunette, was her friend, Mandy.

Becomes:

Something went cold inside her, and she knew without being told that the woman was a green-eyed brunette, was her friend, Mandy.

Changes like these are hopefully not visible in the final draft, except in creating a more fluent read.

The contrasting time frames of Frank and Emma, and Frank and Jerome, are intended to speed up the pace. At first I 'dated' every new page/day in which they continued their respective chronicles, but it was felt that after having introduced an initial time frame, the text itself carried enough references for readers to establish their own chronology. At one point it was suggested that simply beginning each person's account on a new page would suffice, and that there was no need for headers at all, but I felt that this would prove tedious for a reader – I was not trying to engage in a guessing game with the reader the whole way through as to which character was speaking. This would unnecessarily disrupt the flow of the writing. I decided instead to use the characters' names as headers. This did not spoil the little bit of mystery surrounding the initial woman character, I felt, as we know that 'Anna' is an assumed name, and her identity is thus not immediately revealed. I kept the date headers for Frank's sections as I felt that they added to the sense of pace and plot development.

I was amazed at how crucial structural decisions such as headers, the use of a prologue and an epilogue (which I'd decided upon almost unconsciously) were, in making sense of the piece. It was suggested that I might consider dropping the prologue - it is followed by Anna's voice after all. The prologue (for me) works as it provides a kind of window for the reader outside of the action, almost outside of time. The voice is not Anna's – it is deliberately in the third person, although not obviously so. This was how the text first began when I started writing this particular version and it just suited. I think it works because it allows the reader a neutral way in, it sets up the mystery, before we are confronted with the 'reality' of Anna's voice. It also suggests in an almost subliminal way the larger events, the 'bigger picture' of which Anna's story is but a part. The prologue had to stay.

The epilogue is Frank's. This was a bit of detail which, although outside the strict boundaries of the story, was nonetheless important. We needed to know why Frank ended

up where he did, to know what happened to Maude. No matter how much I shuffled it around, though, I just couldn't place this passage anywhere within the page order of the first or second part. Nowhere did it enjoy a smooth transition. And so an epilogue it became.

## BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

At some point in the writing one is no longer setting up the elements of a tale, one is starting to round them down, make use of those women mentioned on page 11, the shoe print on page 13, etc. I brought the Cinderella man in during the trial, partly because without him the boxing image is all set up at the beginning with nowhere to go (metaphorically speaking). That grand slugging match I'd intended between Coetzee and Frank never materialised, somehow the story (I am pleased) never got there. Yes, I did have a rough outline of the main features of the plot, but did not follow it rigidly. The impetus of the writing led often to the unexpected. I feel the work is stronger for it, hopefully has something of a life of its own – that is to say, a durable logic.

Jerome's visit to South Africa became crucial to this rounding off process. I'd always intended for him to track Frank down. But why the round-the-world cruise? Why not speed him to Durban post haste after his last encounter with Ethel Corvo? Well, I wanted again to create that sense of this story being a part of a larger entity, to give Jerome's life a perspective outside of the events of the book – the introduction of a larger time frame makes one aware of a different time scale – the time scale of an everyday life of months and years which are beyond the few days captured in this account. Although we do not know what Jerome does during the interim, we do know that great chunks of time have passed, occupied (our logical subconscious tells us) with all those mundanities which fill everyone's ordinary days.

The other question was why Jerome didn't travel to Durban exclusively to hunt down his past, and spend a longer time in Durban doing so. Well, the answer to that one, if not evident in the text, is that Jerome, although fascinated and in one way compelled to confront this grisly past, is also repelled by it. He does want to know what happened, and who his father is – at the same time he is deeply ambivalent about what he might find. Whilst he discovers a great deal, there are many things he does not pursue – he does not attempt to track down his mother's family (at least not on this trip), for example. I think he needed to get the big questions out of the way first, and also come to terms with some unpleasant answers, before being ready to tackle his mother's history. Maybe he'll revisit

South Africa when he's older, and with a less oppressive sense of the past. Maybe then he'll uncover a gentler, more ordinary, family history.

From a writerly point of view, the reason Jerome doesn't unearth more about his real mother, is to do with the same reasons I gave for not including Annatjie as a first person narrator in the first place. It would pull the narrative in the wrong direction, giving it a new perspective which would require a different kind of writing – a different kind of space. I would lose that gap, that ellipsis, which the narrative came to centre around. A large part of what I wanted to convey had to do with the idea that, for numerous reasons, there are things which simply cannot be known, as much within the pages of a narrative, as in real life. I also really wanted my readers to have an active involvement with the text. As with a good anecdotal history (gossip?) I wanted to leave enough room for ambiguity and choice. The newspaper stories and Daphne Rooke's writing both reproduce this effect. It is a strangely intimate way of writing; at certain junctures we as readers simply have to leap along with the writer as for a host of reasons (fear of libel I suspect in the case of the journalists) things are left unsaid, or unwritten. I found it a reassuringly 'grown-up' approach. If the oppressive patriarchy of High Apartheid is not the overweening subject of the book, so equally I hope to have avoided the overdone 'authority' of the writer who regards a book's characters as marionettes in service of the greater cause...whatever that cause may be. This last sounds hypocritical – my characters are of course as fabricated as any other, but I hope that the broader schema within which they operate signals a greater reliance on the imaginative freedom of the reader.

Risky as I felt it to be, I wanted to write the kind of book that *is* more demanding of a reader. You may have noticed that there is no glossary. This was not an oversight. In some places (Coetzee's chat to Jerome at the end) translation is given by the speaker. The reader (like Jerome) has to trust (or disbelieve) the interpretation being offered (is Coetzee trustworthy?) – or go and look it up for themselves. Some of the lingo of the 30's and of boxing I have left deliberately unexplained (the unicorn) – the reader must either guess according to context or look it up. I hope I have done this without becoming annoying. I think that in most instances the context of the word or phrase is sufficient, on those few occasions it may not be, I hope that it adds pungency and that sense of delving into the unfamiliar which is part of the exploration of any previously unknown world.