
THE
SILVER THREAD
A HISTORY BEFORE TIME ORIGIN

Dedication

For my father — **Andries Jakobus Greyling**. I carry the whole of that name; this man carries the middle of it. You gave him *Jakobus*, and most of the rest of him besides.

You were a boy who set down your schoolbooks the morning your own father's heart gave out, and took over the dairy, and never once let on what it cost you. You went to the war a boy with a gun — a *kanonnier* — and came home to spend the rest of your life on the far side of that ledger: the breeding, the caesarians, your arm in to the shoulder on a cold floor at three in the morning, hauling life into the world by main strength. Self-taught, and a master of it. You fixed what other men had given up for dead.

You were a hard man. The world you were handed kept no shape for the way your mind was wired, so you made yourself hard enough to live in it anyway, and paid for that the quiet way such men pay.

But you opened your mouth to a person and the hardness fell into something near grace. Sesotho was your first tongue, and you carried nearly every language of this country in it — not the careful Sesotho of a white farmer making himself understood, but the real thing, beautiful and poetic, the kind that makes a people go still and lean in. I have watched cocksure policemen of the new regime lift the caps off their heads and hold them against their chests when you spoke — reflex, not choice — and call you *Morena*. You never asked for it. You spoke, and the respect came on its own.

Jakobus is the best of you and the worst of me.

This one is yours.

— Andries J. Greyling

Chapter 1 — The Same Book

They found the dead man at first light, and the thing Jakobus would carry out of the war and never put down was not the body but what was in the man's shirt.

He was nineteen. He had been nineteen for eleven days. Up here, in the long grey country north of the cutline where the maps stopped meaning much, a birthday was a thing that had happened to someone else in another life — a braai in the Free State, his mother's hands, a cake with too few candles because his father had counted wrong and not cared to recount. He had been a boy with a birthday. Now he was a thing the army had made, lying in the cold sand behind a fallen mopane with his rifle warm and the dawn coming up the colour of a bruise, and the contact was over, and someone down the line was screaming for a medic in a voice that kept climbing and then, abruptly, stopped.

The screaming stopping was worse than the screaming.

They swept the treeline when it was light enough. That was the job — you swept, you counted, you searched the dead for documents and maps and anything that could be turned into a report and a number, because the war ran on numbers, on a body count read out somewhere far to the south by men with clean hands who would never smell this. Jakobus searched the man behind the mopane. He did it the way he had been taught, fast and impersonal, hands going through pockets while his eyes stayed up, and his hand closed on something square and soft-cornered in the breast of the man's shirt, over the heart, where a man keeps the thing he cannot afford to lose.

It was a book. Small, black, the cover gone furry at the corners with handling, the spine cracked white. He knew the shape of it before he opened it because he had one exactly like it in his own kit, a thumb's-width from his own heart, pressed on him by his mother at the station with her mouth a hard line so she would not cry in front of the other mothers.

A Bible.

He opened it. The man's name was written inside the front board in pencil, in a careful hand, the careful hand of someone who had not had much schooling and valued what he had — Jakobus knew that hand; his father wrote in that hand; he wrote in that hand himself. He could not read the name. It was not in a language he had. But the *shape* of it, the care of it, the way the letters leaned, was the shape of his own name in his own Bible written by his own mother, and he understood, kneeling in the cold sand with the dawn coming up and a fly already at the corner of the dead man's open eye, that he had been told a thing all his life that was not true.

He had been told the men on the other side of the cutline were the enemy. He had been told a great many things. He set the Bible back in the dead man's shirt because he could not think what else to do with it, and he stood up, and he was sick, quietly, behind the tree, and nobody saw, or everybody saw and nobody said, which up here was the same thing.

"Swart." The corporal, low. "Los hom. Leave him. We move."

He moved.

You did not talk about it. That was the first rule and the last one, the rule under all the other rules. You did not talk about the Bible and you did not talk about the screaming that stopped and you did not talk about the thing you did with your hands at close range when the bush came alive and there was no time to be a person, only time to be a tool, and the training came up through you like water through a

pipe and did the work and set you down again afterward, shaking, alive, changed. You did not talk about it to the chaplain, who meant well and understood nothing. You did not talk about it to the men, because the men were carrying their own and there was no room. You wrote home that the food was bad and the weather was hot and that you missed her koeksisters, and your mother kept the letters in a biscuit tin and never knew she was reading the careful lies of a stranger wearing her son's name.

Jakobus had come up to the war already good at not talking. He had practice. There was a thing in his childhood, a thing with his father and a gun and a single afternoon, that he had decided at the age of eleven he would carry alone and never set down, and he had carried it so well, so silently, for so long, that the war found in him a man already built for it — a boy who could put a thing in a room inside himself and shut the door and walk out smiling. The army thought it had made him. It had only finished him.

He was good at the work. That was the part he could never say to anyone, after, because there was no way to say it that did not sound like a boast or a confession, and it was neither. He was good at it the way some men are good at cards or engines — a quickness, a stillness, an economy. He did not rage. The ragers got themselves killed or got other people killed. He went cold and quiet and the seconds got wide and he did exactly enough and not one ounce more, and he came back from it each time a little further from the boy with the birthday, and he told himself, lying in the sand looking up at stars so thick and close they did not look like his stars, that when this was over he would go home and the door inside him would hold and he would be a person again.

The door held. That was the tragedy of it. The door always held. It was everything behind the door that did not.

There was a man in their stick who could read the ground.

Jakobus noticed him the way you notice weather changing. The man was small and quiet and older than the rest of them and not, technically, one of them — he wore the same browns but he wore them differently, like clothes and not like a skin he was trapped in, and the white soldiers called him by a name that was not his name, a name they had given him because his own had clicks in it their mouths would not make, and they called his whole people by a word that Jakobus had used all his life without once thinking about it, the way you use a word for a thing you have decided is beneath your thinking.

Boesman.

He had said it himself, a hundred times, a thousand. It meant a kind of person you did not have to see. It was a word you could put a whole people inside and close, the way you close a Bible, the way you close a door, and never have to look at what was in there. He had grown up with that word lying around the house like a tool nobody thought about, and he had picked it up and used it and put it down again without ever once feeling its weight.

He was going to feel its weight. It was going to take years, and a great deal that could not be undone, but it started here, in the grey country, the morning he watched the small quiet man crouch over a patch of sand that to Jakobus was simply sand — empty, scuffed, nothing — and go very still, and read it.

"They came back," the man said, to the lieutenant, in careful Afrikaans, the way you speak a language that is your fourth. "In the night. Three. One is hurt — here, see, he drags. They changed their shoes." He almost smiled. He touched the sand with two fingers, gentle, the way you touch a sleeping child. "They think we read the shoe. We don't read the shoe."

"What do you read," Jakobus said, before he knew he was going to speak.

The man looked up at him. It was the first time he had looked at Jakobus as a person and not as one more armed boy, and his eyes

were old and amused and entirely without fear, and he considered the question as if it were a serious one, which no white soldier had ever asked him before.

"The man," he said. "I read the man."

Then he stood, and dusted his hands, and pointed with his chin into the bush at a thing none of them could see, and they followed him, because out here, in the end, they always followed him — the man whose name they would not learn and whose people they had reduced to a single word — because he was the only one among them who could see where they were going.

Chapter 2 — Kxao

His name was Kxao.

It took Jakobus a month to learn it, and he learned it the way you learn anything that matters — by accident, by being quiet long enough that the world forgot to hide it from you. They were sitting out a night in a dry shona, no fires, no talk, the kind of waiting that the war was mostly made of and the films never showed, and the small man was beside him, and Jakobus, to have something to do with his mouth that was not fear, said the army's name for him. The wrong name. The given name, the *Boesman* name.

The man did not answer for a while. Then he said, without heat, the way you correct a child who has stepped on your foot and does not know it, "That is not my name. That is the name the baas gave the dog."

Jakobus said nothing. His face was hot in the dark.

"My name is Kxao," the man said. And he made the sound at the front of it — a click, sharp and clean, like a drop of water falling into a tin cup — and Jakobus tried it, and got it wrong, and tried it again, and the man laughed, a small private laugh, not unkind, and corrected the placement of his tongue with a word, and Jakobus tried a third time and got close enough, and Kxao said, "Better. The young ones learn faster. You are too old. Your mouth is already a stone." And he was perhaps thirty-five, and Jakobus was nineteen, and it was the funniest thing anyone had said to Jakobus in a year, and he had to press his

lips shut to keep the laugh from carrying in the dark.

That was the beginning. Not a dramatic thing. A name, and a click, and a small joke at his expense in a dry riverbed in the dark. But Jakobus had spent his whole life being seen as a category — the drunk's son, the quiet one, the soldier — and Kxao had handed him a small joke the way you hand a man a thing across a fire, expecting it to be taken, and something in Jakobus that had been clenched since the magistrate's office and the gun in the shed and the careful lies in the biscuit tin had loosened, half a turn, the smallest amount, for the first time in years.

The white soldiers did not see Kxao. That was the part Jakobus came to understand slowly and then could not stop seeing.

They used him. They depended on him completely — when a stick had a San tracker it could find what it was looking for and when it did not it walked in circles and died — and they did not see him at all. They gave his people a single word and his person a dog's name and his pay a fraction of theirs, and they sat him apart at the fires, and they spoke of him in the third person while he was standing there, as if his fourth-language Afrikaans did not include the words for *we don't trust him* and *clever for one of them*. And Kxao stood in the middle of all of it, small and still and entirely intact, and Jakobus understood, with a slow horror that became, over the months, something nearer to awe, that the not-seeing did not touch him. The men thought they had reduced him. They had not reached him. He was somewhere they could not get to, somewhere out past the edge of their seeing, and from out there he watched them with an amusement so quiet and so complete that Jakobus, catching it once, full in the face, felt himself blush as if he had been caught reading another man's letters.

"Why do you do it," Jakobus asked him once. They were boiling water. The army had taught Jakobus that you did not ask the trackers anything except where and how many. "Track for them. For us. They give you—" he stopped. *A dog's name. Nothing.* "They give you

nothing."

Kxao watched the water. He had a way of watching small things — a fire, a tin, a man — that was the same way he watched the ground: completely, without hurry, taking it all in and judging none of it.

"They give me food for my family," he said. "Up there is no rain three years. The cattle people push us off the pan. The other ones"— he meant the men across the cutline, the men with Bibles —"they shoot at us too; to them we are also the dog. Everyone has a war and we are in the middle of all of them and nobody asks us did we want a war." He moved the tin off the flame with a bent stick. "So. A man feeds his children. You think this is for the baas? This is for my children. The baas is a thing the weather does." He looked up, and there it was again, the amusement, but gentler now, almost tender. "You also are a thing the weather does, Jakobus. You did not ask for this war either. I read it on you the first day. You search the dead and you are sick behind the tree and you think no one sees. I see. I read the man."

Jakobus did not say anything. There was nothing to say. He had been seen, all the way down, by the one person up here he had been raised to look past, and the strange thing, the thing he would spend years understanding, was that it did not feel like exposure. It felt like rain.

He started to watch the way Kxao watched.

Not the tracking — he was years from the tracking; the tracking was a country he did not yet know he was going to spend his life trying to enter — but the *watching*. The stillness. Kxao did not fidget. He did not fill silence. When there was nothing to do he did nothing, completely, restfully, the way a stone rests, and the other men found this unbearable and called it laziness, and Jakobus, who had spent nineteen years unable to be in a room with himself, found it the most foreign and the most enviable thing he had ever seen. A man at ease inside his own skin. A man for whom waiting was not suffering. Jakobus did not have

a word for what that was. Later he would learn that it was the thing he wanted more than anything on earth, and that it could not be taken, only given, and only by people who had almost nothing else to give.

He learned other things too, the small grammar of the man. That Kxao would not waste. That he gave things away — a strip of biltong, a length of wire, the better sleeping spot — easily, constantly, without the giving meaning anything heavy, as if holding tight to a thing were a kind of bad manners, an admission of fear. That he revered, of all things, a small green insect, and once moved one off the path with the back of his hand, slow and careful, and would not let the men near it, and would not say why, only "that one we leave," in a voice that ended the conversation. That he was, under the war, under the dog's name, under the careful Afrikaans, simply and unshakeably *content* — and that this content was not stupidity and not resignation but something Jakobus had no category for, something that looked from the outside like a man who knew a secret and from the inside, Jakobus would one day learn, was simply a man who had been raised among people who had decided, against all the evidence of their lives, to be happy, and to teach their children to be happy, and to laugh.

Jakobus did not understand it. But he marked it, the way you mark water in dry country. He filed away the location of the man who was at peace, and he did not know yet that years later, broken in a way the war had only started, he would come looking for that water and find it almost gone — parked in a tent in the wrong desert, with the children not laughing — and that finding it nearly gone, and what he did then, would be the making of him.

For now there was the war. There was always, for a while longer, the war.

Chapter 3 — The Last Spoor

The war ended the way a war ends for the men in it, which is to say it did not end so much as stop being aimed at them, abruptly, by people they never met, in a building they never saw.

There were rumours for months — talks, a date, a flag coming down and another going up north of the cutline — and the rumours meant nothing in the bush, where a rumour does not stop a bullet, and then one day they were simply pulled back, and the patrols stopped, and the war that had been the whole sky for years was, somewhere over the horizon, being folded up and put away by men in suits. Independence. A new country being born up there, in the country Kxao's people had tracked across for longer than there had been a word like country. Everyone said it like it was a good thing. Jakobus supposed it was. He could not feel it. He had stopped, somewhere in the last year, being a man who felt things in the ordinary way; the door held; behind it the room filled.

He thought, in the confused weeks of the ending, that he and Kxao would say a thing to each other. A real thing. He had it half-built in his head — some clumsy sentence about the Bible, about *I see, I read the man,* about the rain it had felt like to be seen. He never said it. There was never the moment. That was the war's last cruelty and its truest: it did not even give you the goodbye. It just took the people out of the line one truck at a time and drove them off in different directions, and you looked up one morning and the man who had saved your life more times than you knew — because most of the times he saved it

you never knew, the ambush not walked into, the camp seen from far off, the death that simply did not happen because he had read the man — that man was gone, loaded onto a Bedford with the other trackers and their families, the small quiet people with their bundles, and driven south.

South. That was the thing nobody said out loud and everybody knew. The trackers could not stay. They had fought on the losing side of a war that the new country was about to call a crime, and the new country, being born, had a long memory and an old grievance, and the San who had served the SADF were now a people who could not go home, because home was about to belong to the men whose Bibles they had helped the army count. So South Africa, which had used them and given them a single word and a dog's name, did the one thing it had left to do, which was to load them onto trucks and aeroplanes and carry them across the border into a country that was not theirs, to a place in the Northern Cape that had water in a tap and no game and no veld they knew, a tent town on the banks of a river called Schmidtsdrift, and set them down there, three thousand of them, the best trackers on the earth, in a desert that was the wrong desert, and leave.

Jakobus did not know all of that then. He knew only that the Bedford pulled out in a brown roll of dust and that Kxao was on it, and that he had not said the thing, and that as the truck turned onto the main track the small man looked back — found him, somehow, in the crowd of standing soldiers, the way he found anything, by reading and not by looking — and lifted one hand. Not a wave. Just the hand, raised, palm out, held a moment. *I see you. I am here. I was here.* And then the dust took the truck and Kxao was gone, and Jakobus stood in the churned red sand with his unsaid sentence in his mouth like a stone, and that was the end of his war.

They sent him home with nothing.

That was not quite true; they sent him home with a discharge and a bus ticket and a kitbag and a body that still worked. But there was no

debrief worth the name — a form, a handshake, a chaplain's pamphlet about readjustment that Jakobus read once on the bus and left on the seat — and there was certainly no one who sat him down and said: *You are nineteen, you are twenty now, you have done and seen and survived things that will not fit through the door of an ordinary day, and we are going to set you down in your mother's kitchen as if you went away to a long camp, and we are not going to tell you that the silence you are about to live inside is normal, because we do not want to know, because if we knew we would have to have done it differently.*

No one said that. No one said anything. The country was busy being born too, down south, in its own way — there was a different new flag coming for them as well, a different long-deferred reckoning, the whole land turning over in its sleep — and a quiet ex-soldier with a kitbag was the least of what was happening, one of tens of thousands of young men walking back into ordinary houses carrying rooms they could not show anyone, and the houses took them back and fed them and did not ask, because not-asking was the national gift, the thing everyone had gotten very good at, on every side, for a long time.

His mother met him at the station. She had aged. She held him too long and he stood in the hold of it stiff as a fence post, not because he did not love her but because he had forgotten, somewhere up there, how to be held, how to let a thing in, and he felt her feel it, felt her notice the boy she had sent away was a locked door now, and felt her decide — the way she decided everything, with a hard small mouth and no fuss — not to say it. She fed him. She had made the koeksisters. He ate them at the kitchen table while she watched, and they were exactly as he had lied about missing, and he could not taste them at all.

His father was not at the station.

His father was in the shed, where he mostly was now, and when Jakobus carried his kitbag through the yard the old man came to the shed door and stood in it with a plane in his hand and sawdust on his arms and looked at his son across the swept concrete, and the two of them, the two locked doors, looked at each other and found nothing to

say, which was its own kind of recognition, the only kind they had ever managed. There was a thing in the shed between them, an old thing, a gun and an afternoon, that neither of them had ever spoken and never would. The father nodded. The son nodded. The father went back to his plane.

Jakobus stood in the yard of the house he had grown up in, in the flat Free State light, with the war folded up behind him and the door holding and the room behind the door full to the ceiling now, full and rising, and he understood with a calm that frightened him more than any contact ever had that he was not, in fact, going to be a person again. Not like this. Not here. The door would hold and the silence would win and one day, he could see it from where he stood, one day he would walk into the shed and pick up the thing his father had put down, because it ran in the blood, the men of this family and the shed and the thing you do alone, and no one would be surprised, and no one would have asked, right up to the end, what was in the room.

He did not go into the shed.

He stood in the yard a long time instead, and somewhere underneath the rising silence, very faint, almost gone, he found one true thing to hold — the memory of a small man raising a hand, palm out, from the back of a truck. *I read the man.* Someone, once, had seen all the way to the bottom of him and had not looked away. It was not much. It was nearly nothing. But Jakobus, who was very close that afternoon to the shed and the thing in it, took the nearly-nothing and held it, the way a drowning man holds a single floating thing, and he did not yet know it but he had just decided, without words, the only thing that would save him.

He was going to go and find the water again.

Chapter 4 — The Years of Noise

He did not go and find the water for a long time. First there were the years of noise.

That was what he came to call them, after, when he had the distance to call them anything — the noise years — though at the time they did not feel like noise. They felt like nothing, which is the loudest thing there is. He could not be still. That was the symptom, the one he could name; the rest he could not. A man who has been built into a tool for being still under fire comes home unable to be still under peace, because stillness is where the room behind the door does its work, and so Jakobus filled the years with motion the way other men filled them with drink, which he could not do, because of his father, because of the cupboard with the fist-shaped hole in it, because the one thing he had sworn standing in that yard was that he would not pour the war into a glass the way the farm had taught his father to pour the wine.

So instead he moved.

He worked. He was good at work the way he had been good at the war — a quickness, an economy, an alarming capacity to keep going past the point where other men stopped. He fixed engines, because his father had taught him that much before the silence took them both, and an engine was honest: it was broken or it was not, and you could

find the fault and put your hands in it and make it true again, and for the length of a stripped-down gearbox the room behind the door went quiet. He drifted up and down the country on the work, a town, a workshop, a boarding house, a town. He did not keep people. He was kind to them — he was always, even at his worst, strangely gentle; he could not bear to see a small thing suffer; he carried beetles out of rooms; he gave away more than he kept — but he did not keep them, because keeping a person meant letting them see the door, and the door did not open, and a woman would get to the door and feel it not open and leave, sad and baffled, and he would let her, because it was kinder, he told himself, than the truth, which was that there was no him on the other side of it for her to reach.

He was loud inside and silent out. He developed, in the noise years, the thing the war had started — a flat, easy, deflecting charm, a way of being in a room that gave nothing and offended no one, a smile that worked like camouflage. People liked him and did not know him. He preferred it. It was the only safety he had.

And underneath all of it, every day, was the shed. Not his father's shed now — he had left the farm — but the idea of the shed, the door at the back of the room, the thing the men of his blood did when the silence finally won. He thought about it the way you think about a debt. Not in despair, exactly. In arithmetic. He had watched the sum being done in his father and he could do it in himself, and the answer was always there, patient, at the bottom of the page, and the only thing he had against it — the only entry on the other side of the ledger — was a small man raising a hand from the back of a truck.

His father did the sum first.

Jakobus was twenty-six. He was in a boarding house in a town whose name he would later have to work to remember, and the call came to the workshop, and his mother's voice on the line was the hard small voice with the fuss finally, after everything, gone out of it, and she said it plainly because there was no soft way and she had never

had time for soft ways: *Your father is dead. He did it himself. In the shed.*

Jakobus stood with the receiver against his ear and the workshop noise behind him, the air gun, the radio, a man laughing at something, and he found that he was not surprised, and that the not being surprised was the worst thing he had ever felt, worse than the Bible, worse than the screaming that stopped, because it meant he had known, he had always known, he had watched his father walk toward the shed for years the way you watch weather come and had said nothing, because what was there to say, in a family of locked doors, in a country that did not ask.

He drove down for the funeral. The Boland in autumn, the vines going rust and gold, the mountains hard and blue and indifferent, the same light that had lain across his childhood. The dominee said the things. The men of the district stood at the grave with their hats in their hands and their faces shut, and Jakobus stood among them shut like them, a row of locked doors in dark suits, each one with a shed in him, and not one of them able to say to another the only sentence that mattered, which was: *I am also afraid of the shed. Are you also afraid of the shed.*

After, in the house, among the koeksisters and the tea and the low talk, Jakobus went out to the yard, and he stood in front of the actual shed, the real one, the door shut, the place where it had happened, and he made himself do the thing he had not done at nineteen. He opened the door. He went in. He stood in the smell of it — beeswax and old oil and pine shavings, the smell of his father's hands, the only language his father had ever been fluent in — and he looked at the bench, planed smooth by decades, and the tools hung on the wall each in its outline drawn in pencil so a man could see at a glance what was missing, and the half-finished thing in the vice, a small box, dovetailed, the corners cut true and not yet glued, a last careful thing made by a man who could not read and could not speak and could not pour the love in him out any way at all except through his hands into wood, and Jakobus stood there and finally, at twenty-six, in his father's shed, alone, he

wept.

He wept for a long time. Not prettily. It came up out of the room behind the door — not all of it, the door still held, the door would hold for years yet — but a wall of it gave way and what came through was not only his father; it was the Bible and the screaming and the man on the truck and the koeksisters he could not taste and the women he had let walk away from the unopening door and the whole grey country and the whole long silence of his whole built life, and he stood in the wood-smell and let it take him because there was no one to see, and being unseen was the only condition in which he had ever been able to feel anything at all.

When it was over he wiped his face with his hands and he picked up the small unglued box from the vice, his father's last made thing, and he did not glue it and he did not finish it. He took it as it was, four true sides and a base and no lid, and he wrapped it in a shirt and put it in his kitbag, and it would travel with him for years, the unfinished box, and it would become, in the end, the most valuable thing he owned, and he would give it away, but that was a long way off, in a desert he had not yet returned to.

He drove back north that night. And somewhere on the long black road, with the headlights eating the white line and the radio off and the box wrapped in a shirt on the seat beside him, the thing he had decided in the yard at nineteen and then buried under six years of noise came up again, clear and quiet and certain, the only forward thing in him:

Go and find Kxao.

He did not know where the man was. He knew only the name of a river he had heard once, in the confused weeks of the ending, the place they had taken the trackers. He said it aloud in the car, to the dark, the way his other self would one day say a different sentence to an empty flat in a different city.

"Schmidtsdrift."

The dark did not answer. But the white line ran on under the lights, steady, leading somewhere, and for the first time in the noise years Jakobus was following a spoor of his own.

Chapter 5 — Schmidtsdrift

He smelled the place before he saw it. Woodsmoke and dust and something under it, something stagnant and sweetish and wrong, the smell of too many people set down in a place with too little, of waste that had nowhere to go.

It was a tent town. He had pictured — he did not know what he had pictured. A village, maybe. Houses. Somewhere a people lived. What he found, off the gravel beyond the river, was a grid of canvas, hundreds of tents in dead-straight military rows on the bare red flat, bleached grey-white by years of sun, sagging, patched, with the dust blowing between them and nothing growing, no veld a man knew, no game, no shade but what canvas threw, three thousand of the finest trackers on the face of the earth and their wives and their children and their old people, set down on the bank of the wrong river in the wrong desert and left there to wait for a promise that kept not arriving. Land, they had been told. One day. Land of their own. Meanwhile: the tents. Meanwhile: the years.

Jakobus parked the bakkie and got out into the heat and stood, and the thing that struck him first, before the poverty, before the smell, was the *sound*. Or the lack of one. He had carried in him for years the memory of these people laughing — even up there, even in the war, in the dry shonas in the dark, there had been under everything a current of laughter, the small jokes, the teasing, the irrepressible delight of people who had decided to be happy. Here it was thin. Here the children were not laughing the way children laugh. Here men sat in

the canvas shade in the middle of the day with the particular stillness that is not Kxao's stillness, not the rested stillness of a man at ease, but its terrible opposite — the stillness of a man with nothing to track, nothing to read, nothing to do with the whole genius of his attention, a tracker in a place where there was nothing to find.

And there was drink. He saw it within the first hour, the bottles and the cans, the men around them already gone at noon, and he understood with a lurch that was almost physical that the same poison that had been poured into his father on the wine farm — the cup at the gate, twice a day, the wage that took the man — had found these people too, by a different road, the same way: take everyone's whole reason for being, their veld, their game, their work, their *seeing,* and set them down idle in the dust, and the bottle will come, the bottle always comes, the bottle is what rushes in where a purpose used to be.

He asked for Kxao. He had to ask many times — his Afrikaans, their Afrikaans, the children's better English, the long patient business of being a stranger looking for a man in a place that had learned to be wary of strangers in bakkies. He asked with the click at the front of the name, the click Kxao had taught him in a riverbed a lifetime ago, and he must have got it close enough, because an old woman's face changed, and she looked at him longer, and she said something to a boy, and the boy led him down the dead-straight rows to a tent like all the other tents, and there, in the canvas shade, sitting on an upturned crate with his hands loose between his knees, was Kxao.

He was old. That was the first blow. He was not old in years — he could not have been much past fifty — but he was old the way a thing is old that has been left out in the weather, and he was thin, and there was a stillness on him that Jakobus had never seen on him in the bush, the bad stillness, the stillness of a man with nothing to read. There was a bottle near his foot. Not in his hand. Near his foot. As if he had not yet decided, this day, or had decided and was waiting.

He looked up at the white man standing in the sun. For a moment there was nothing in his face — the flat wariness of the camp, the

look they all had now for a stranger — and Jakobus felt his heart go down into the dust, because the man did not know him, the man had tracked and saved and read a thousand armed boys and why would he remember one, and Jakobus opened his mouth to explain himself and found he had no explanation, no sentence, nothing but the same stone he had been carrying since the truck pulled out in the dust.

And then Kxao's eyes changed.

It was not memory, exactly. Jakobus saw it happen and never forgot it: the man did not *remember* him so much as *read* him — read the standing, read the stillness Jakobus had learned by watching him, read whatever it was that one broken man's body says to another across a patch of bare ground — and something in the old face woke, the old amusement, faint, a coal under ash, and Kxao said, in his careful fourth-language Afrikaans, slowly, as if testing whether the world still worked the way it used to:

"The one who was sick behind the tree."

"Ja," Jakobus said. His voice did not work properly. "Ja. That one."

"You learned to be still." Kxao looked at him a long moment, reading, reading, the way no one had read him since the last time this man had. "But not the good still. The bad still. The one we both have now." He looked down at the bottle near his foot, and then, deliberately, he moved his foot away from it, a few inches, a small clear refusal, and he looked back up, and the coal under the ash brightened by the smallest degree. "You came a long way to find a Boesman in a tent."

"You're not a Boesman in a tent," Jakobus said. The word came out of him hot, the loaded word, the word he had used all his life without weight and could not bear, now, to hear this man lay on himself. "You're the best man I ever served with and they put you in the wrong desert and forgot you. That's what happened. I read it." He had never said so many true words at once in his life. They cost him. He paid. "I read the man," he said, giving the words back, after all the years, in the wrong desert, too late and not too late.

Kxao looked at him.

And then the old man laughed — a small, cracked, astonished laugh, the first real laugh Jakobus had heard in that whole grey town, the laugh of the riverbed and the war and the man who could not be reached, coming up out of him rusty and disbelieving, like water finding an old channel — and he stood from the crate, slowly, his hand on his knee, and he stepped over the bottle without looking at it, and he put his small hard hand flat on Jakobus's chest, over the heart, where a man keeps the thing he cannot afford to lose.

"You are also a thing the weather did," he said. "Come. Not here. This place is not a place. Come, I will take you to where my people are still people. It is far. There is no road. You have a bakkie?" The amusement was all the way back now, and under it something Jakobus had not expected and did not know he had come for, something that undid the last of him standing there in the dust: *gladness.* The man was glad. After everything, the man was glad to be found.

"I have a bakkie," Jakobus said.

"Then we go to the bush," said Kxao. "You will be no use to anyone. You will be like a child. It will take years. Good. The young ones learn faster, and you" — the old joke, the riverbed joke, handed across the years like a thing across a fire — "you are still too old, and your mouth is still a stone. We will see what we can do."

Chapter 6 — The Road North

The road gave out long before they got there.

Jakobus had thought he knew dry country. He had soldiered in it. But the Border War's bush had been thick, green-grey, full — a country that hid things, which was the whole point of it. This was something else. North and west of the river the land opened and opened and kept opening, the thorn thinning, the red dunes coming up long and low like the swells of a sea that had stopped, the grass going pale and the sky taking up more and more of everything until it was almost all there was, a blue enormity with the land a thin red line at the bottom of it. The Kalahari. Not a desert the way the films had deserts — there was grass, there were trees in the dune streets, there was life everywhere if you knew how to see it — but a place so vast and so spare that Jakobus felt, driving into it, the particular vertigo of a man discovering how small his idea of *empty* had been.

Kxao changed on the road.

It happened by degrees and Jakobus watched it the way you watch dawn — you cannot catch the moment, only the having-happened. With every hour the bad stillness went out of the old man. The tent had been on him like a sickness; the land took it off. He sat forward. He started to read the country aloud, unable not to, the genius of his attention finding, after years of nothing, a whole world again to pour itself into — *there, gemsbok, four, gone two days; there, a steenbok lay up in the night; there, look, the bees, there will be water that side before the heat* — narrating the running land out the window like a man reading a letter

from someone he had given up for dead. By the second day he was laughing again, the riverbed laugh, at small things, at Jakobus's driving, at a bird, and Jakobus, who had come to save the man, understood that he had not saved him; the land had; he had only been the bakkie.

"You see nothing," Kxao said. Not unkindly. A diagnosis. They had stopped where the track finally died, at a place marked by nothing Jakobus could see, and Kxao was looking at him with the old amusement and a new seriousness under it. "You look, but you see nothing. It is not your fault. They taught you to look for the man with the gun. Now there is no man with the gun. Now there is only the world, and you are blind in it as a puppy." He swung his bundle onto his shoulder — he had almost nothing, a blanket, a few things, the easy unburdened lightness of a man who had learned that owning is a kind of weight — and he set off walking into the trackless red with the certainty of a man crossing his own front room.

"How far," Jakobus said, locking the bakkie, feeling instantly the absurdity of the gesture, the city reflex, locking a steel box in the middle of an ocean of grass.

"Not far." Kxao did not look back. "Two days. Maybe three if you walk like that. You walk like a soldier. Heel, heel, heel, *bang bang bang* on the ground, the whole world hears you coming, the dust hears you, the sand remembers your boots for a week. We will fix it. Walk like you are not sorry to be here." He said something else then, in his own language, the clicks running quick and liquid, and laughed, and would not translate, and Jakobus, sweating already under a pack the old man could have carried in his sleep, followed the small swift figure out into the immensity, leaving the locked bakkie behind to be slowly buried, over the seasons, in the patient red sand, the last thing he owned from the world he was walking out of.

The walk nearly killed him and taught him the first true thing.

He was fit — he had always been fit — and it did not matter, because

fitness was not the currency here. The currency was economy, and rhythm, and the deep ease that does not fight the country, and Jakobus had none of it. He drank too much water and then had none. He walked in the heat of the day because stopping felt like failure, and Kxao watched him do it and let him, once, all the way to the staggering edge of it, and then made him sit in the noon shade of a tree for three hours doing nothing, *nothing,* which was harder for Jakobus than the walking, because in the doing-nothing the door rattled and the room behind it pressed, and the old man saw that too, saw the panic come up in the stillness, and said only, "Ja. There it is. That is the thing you came to fix. You cannot walk away from it. You walked all the way here and look, it walked with you. So. We will not walk away from it. We will sit down next to it until it gets bored." And he closed his eyes, and rested, completely, in the heat, and Jakobus sat next to the thing in himself in the enormous silence and did not die of it, which was, although he did not know it yet, the entire curriculum, the whole of what he had come for, beginning.

On the third day, near evening, with the light going long and golden and the dune shadows pooling violet in the streets between, Kxao stopped on a rise and pointed with his chin, the old gesture, the war gesture, *there, a thing you cannot see.*

Jakobus looked. And this time, faintly, after three days of being taught to, he saw it: a thread of smoke, thin and blue, rising and bending off in the windless evening, and under it, small in the vastness, the curved shapes of grass shelters, and around them — he heard it before the shapes resolved, carried clean across the still air the way sound carries in big country — the thing he had come a thousand kilometres and seven years and one whole life to find again.

Children. Laughing.

Chapter 7 — A Place They Just Call Home

He had expected to be a curiosity. A white man, a soldier, a stranger walked out of the dunes. He had braced for it the way he braced for everything, behind the door, behind the easy charm.

He was not a curiosity. That was the first thing the band taught him, and they taught it without meaning to, simply by being themselves: he was not very interesting. They greeted Kxao with an explosion of delight — the band turned out, the embracing, the rapid overlapping talk, the old people's hands on the returned man's face — and they greeted Jakobus with friendly, mild, entirely unimpressed welcome, the welcome you give a thing your relative has brought home, a stray, a slightly useless object that will have to be fed, and then they got on with the evening. No one stared. No one performed for him and no one performed at him. A grandmother handed him a share of food without ceremony — handed it, he noticed, exactly as Kxao gave things, easily, as if the giving were nothing, as if holding tight were the strange behaviour — and an old man said something that made everyone laugh and was almost certainly about him and that he was, to his own surprise, completely comfortable not understanding, and the children, after one frank collective inspection, decided he was boring and went back to their game.

He sat at the edge of the firelight that first night, fed, ignored in the kindest possible way, and felt something he had no name for and

would spend years trying to describe. It was the opposite of the war and the opposite of the camp. It was the opposite, he slowly realised, of his whole life. No one here needed anything from him. No one here was afraid of him or impressed by him or wary of him. No one here was waiting at the door of him to be let in, because no one here was at the door at all; they had simply, gently, included him in the firelight the way they would include another log, and asked nothing, and the not-being-asked-anything, which the army had made the national gift, was here not a way of avoiding a man but a way of letting him be — and Jakobus, who had been performing for human beings since he was eleven years old, sat in the firelight and slowly, muscle by muscle, over the course of one long night under more stars than he had names for, stopped.

In the morning he made his great mistake, and they corrected it, and it became the joke that taught him everything.

He woke at dawn — soldier's habit, the room behind the door pushing him up out of sleep — and he wanted, badly, to be of use, because being of use was the only way he knew to be allowed in a place, the only currency he trusted. So he looked around at the camp the way a soldier looks at a position, and he saw a hundred things that needed doing, by his lights — the shelters were flimsy, the camp was *temporary,* there was no system, no order, no plan, these people were *exposed* — and he set about, with enormous good will and total stupidity, trying to improve it. He started reinforcing a grass shelter. He fetched more wood than anyone could need and stacked it, squared, the way his father stacked, the way the army stacked, a neat soldierly woodpile, a monument to provision.

The band watched him do all of this with growing, delighted incomprehension.

It was Kxao, wiping his eyes, who finally explained it, because the others were laughing too hard. "Jakobus," he said. "Jakobus. What are you doing."

"I'm — making it stronger. For when the weather comes. So you don't have to—"

"We are leaving in eight days. Maybe ten." Kxao said this the way you tell a child the sun is hot. "When the tsamma is finished here we go to where it is not finished. You are making a strong house we will walk away from." He looked at the squared woodpile, the soldier's monument, and a fresh wave took him and he had to sit down. "And the wood. You have gathered the whole world's wood. For what? We take what burns tonight. Tomorrow there is more wood; the world is full of wood; you do not carry the desert on your back so that you can be sure of the desert. *We* are sure of the desert. The desert is our—" he searched the Afrikaans, did not find it, used the only word that fit — "our *huis*. Our house. You are storing up the inside of your own house against yourself. Like a man filling his own kitchen with bricks so that no one can steal his kitchen."

Jakobus stood by his ridiculous woodpile in the dawn with the whole band gently, lovingly laughing at him, and he understood, all at once and for the rest of his life, the thing he had got upside down.

He had thought he was in a wilderness. He had been thinking *survival,* thinking *exposure,* thinking *expedition* — the white man's eternal frame, the place as an adversary to be provisioned against, endured, conquered, the hostile blank a real life happens in spite of. And they were not surviving. They were not enduring. They were *home*. This was not the wilderness; this was the living room. The dunes were not an emptiness they were heroically crossing; they were the furniture, the neighbourhood, the well-known and entirely sufficient world, full of food and water and story and kin for anyone who could read it, and the only person in the whole vast comfortable house who was frightened of it, who kept trying to build walls inside it and hoard the firewood of it, was the soldier, the visitor, the man who had brought his war into paradise and gone looking for an enemy in the curtains.

"It's not a wilderness," he said slowly, out loud, in Afrikaans, to himself as much as to Kxao. "It's your home. I've been treating your home

like a war."

Kxao stopped laughing. He looked at Jakobus with the sudden full seriousness that always lay under the amusement, the look of a man recognising that a stone had, against all odds, taken a chip.

"Ja," he said quietly. "Now you are starting to see. Pull down the wood. Leave it for the birds. And come — there is no fighting to do here, so we will do the other thing, the harder thing for a man like you." He smiled, and it was the riverbed smile, the truck-window smile, the smile of a man who had decided, against the evidence of his entire life, to be glad. "We will go and find food, and we will laugh, and you will be very, very bad at both, and we will not mind."

Chapter 8 — Insulting the Meat

The first time the hunters brought in a big kill, Jakobus thought there had been a death in the family.

A young man named ǃApa had made the shot — a gemsbok, run down over a long day, the arrow's small poison doing its patient work — and Jakobus, who had carried the city in him still, expected what the city would do: triumph, the hero home, the back-slapping, the swagger of the man who fed everyone. Instead the camp received the news, and the meat, with what looked to him like open contempt. The old men sucked their teeth. A grandmother said something flat and dismissive. ǃOma, the oldest man in the band, a wisp of a person with a face like a walnut and an unholy light in his eye, examined the magnificent animal at length and pronounced — Jakobus got the translation later and never forgot it — that it was a pitiful scrap of bones, that he could not think why they had bothered to carry such a miserable rack of gristle home, that ǃApa had clearly become a useless hunter to bring back something so thin, and that they would all probably go to bed hungrier than before.

ǃApa, who had run a gemsbok to death across the burning sand, hung his head and agreed. *Ja,* he said, more or less. *It is a worthless animal. I am ashamed. I don't know why I troubled you all.*

Jakobus was appalled. He waited until he could get Kxao alone and

asked him, with real heat, why they did it — why they tore down a man who had done a hard, brave, generous thing, why they shamed the very best of them on the very day he had triumphed.

Kxao looked at him for a long moment, the way you look at someone who has asked the most important question in the world while believing it to be a complaint.

"Because," he said, "a man who kills a big animal can become a problem."

"A problem—"

"Think." Kxao crouched, drew in the sand, the teaching posture, the same crouch he used over a spoor. "ǂApa is young and strong and a good shot. Today he feeds everyone. If we say *ǂApa, you are great, ǂApa, you are the lion, ǂApa, you are the big man who feeds us* — what happens to ǂApa? Tomorrow ǂApa thinks he is the chief. He thinks the meat is *his* meat. He thinks because his arm is strong his word is strong. He starts to look at the others like they are below him. And then" — Kxao swept the sand flat, erasing the drawing — "then we are finished. Then we are like the cattle people, like the soldiers, like everyone with a big man on top and small men under, everyone afraid, everyone fighting to be the big man. That is the worst thing that can happen to a band. So when a man makes a big kill, we make his head small again. We insult the meat. We do it *because* it is good meat. The bigger the kill, the worse we insult it. ǂApa knows. He is not really ashamed. Look at him." Across the camp ǂApa was being relentlessly mocked and was grinning into the fire, warm, included, held, exactly the right size. "He knows we are saying: *we love you, and you are not better than us, and the meat belongs to everyone, and tomorrow it will be someone else's turn to be told he is useless.* It is how we stay equal. It is how we stay—" again the search for the Afrikaans, again the word that meant home — "*together.* The meat must be shared, so the hunter must be made small, so that no one is ever big enough to keep the meat."

Jakobus sat with that for a long time. He thought about the war,

which had been nothing *but* big men and the small men who died for them. He thought about the camp at Schmidtsdrift, where the big man was a thing called the government, far away, and the small men sat in the dust. He thought about his own life, the long performance, the easy charm that was really a way of managing the question of who in the room was big and who was small, the eternal exhausting human arithmetic of rank — and here were people who had simply *refused* it, who had built into the deepest grain of their culture a machine for taking the air out of any swelling head, gently, with laughter, every single time, so that no one ever rose high enough to cast a shadow on anyone else. He had been told his whole life that these were a simple people. He was beginning to understand that they were running, lightly, in the form of jokes, a more sophisticated political technology than anything his own civilisation had managed in ten thousand years of kings.

"You insulted me," he said slowly. "The first week. The woodpile. You all laughed at the woodpile."

"Ja," said Kxao, pleased. "You were getting a big head about being useful. Saving us. The big strong soldier who would provide. We made your head small." He grinned. "It is the kindest thing we do to a person. We only insult the ones we are keeping."

And Jakobus — who had been called clever and quiet and good with engines and brave under fire, who had been praised all his life in the cold currency of usefulness and had felt none of it reach the room behind the door — felt the absurd backwards mercy of it go all the way in. They had mocked his woodpile because they had decided to keep him. The insult was the welcome. To be made small here was to be made *one of us,* and Jakobus Swart, who had never in his life been one of anything, put his face down so the old man would not see it, and laughed, and was kept.

Chapter 9 — The Clowns

Oma became, in the dunes, the great gemsbok, and Jakobus laughed until he could not breathe, and that was the day he started to come back to life.

It was an evening like the others — the fire, the children, the easy talk — and the children were restless, that particular fizzing restlessness of children who want a story, and they began to pester the oldest man, the walnut-faced Oma, the one with the unholy light, who had spent the whole day, as far as Jakobus could tell, doing absolutely nothing with tremendous dignity. Oma resisted. He was, he indicated, far too old, far too tired, far too important a person to perform for a pack of ungrateful children. The children pressed. He refused. They pressed harder. He sighed the sigh of a put-upon king. And then, with no warning at all, the old man *became* a gemsbok.

It was not a description. It was not a man pretending. The transformation was total and instantaneous and, Jakobus realised, the product of a lifetime of watching the animal so closely that the watching had gone all the way into the body — the head came up and tilted, the long imaginary horns swept back, the weight shifted onto delicate hooves, the wary liquid eye rolled, the very *attitude* of the gemsbok, its skittish suspicious arrogance, poured into the old man's frame so completely that for a second Jakobus's brain simply reported *gemsbok* before correcting itself. The children shrieked. And then Oma the gemsbok caught the scent of something — turned the great wary head — and *saw the hunter,* and the whole comic tragedy began: the gemsbok

pretending not to have seen, edging away with elaborate casualness, the hunter (played by Oma too, somehow, the man flickering between predator and prey faster than the eye could hold) creeping, the stalk, the gemsbok's growing alarm, a sudden bolt, a pratfall, the great dignified animal tripping over its own imaginary hooves and landing on the great dignified old man's backside in the sand — and the children went to pieces, and the adults went to pieces, and Jakobus, sitting at the edge of the firelight, felt something tear loose in his chest, and laughed, really laughed, helplessly, painfully, the laugh coming up out of the room behind the door because the door, for once, had simply been left open by a man pretending to be an antelope.

He could not remember the last time he had laughed like that. He genuinely could not. Somewhere before the war. Somewhere before the shed. The laugh hurt coming out, the way a cramped muscle hurts when it finally lets go, and tears came with it, and in the dark at the edge of the fire no one could tell, or everyone could tell and no one minded, which here was a different thing than it had been in the army — here it meant *we see, and we will let you,* not *we will not ask*.

He understood, over the weeks of such evenings, that the clowning was not entertainment. Or it was entertainment in the way that everything important is also entertaining when it is done right. It was *school*.

The children learned the animals from the old people becoming the animals. Oma did the gemsbok and the children learned, in their bodies, laughing, how a gemsbok holds its head, how it startles, what it watches, where it looks when it is afraid — knowledge they would need, in ten years, on a real hunt, in deadly earnest, and that they were absorbing now through their helpless delighted laughter as completely as Jakobus had once absorbed drill through repetition. The old man did the lion, the warthog (the warthog brought the house down every time, the tail straight up, the absurd trot), the meerkat, the puff adder, the secretary bird stamping. He did the bad hunter who did every-

thing wrong, and the children learned the right way by screaming at the wrong way. He did, once, with devastating accuracy, a white man in a bakkie, lost, fierce, locking his steel box in the middle of the world, and the whole band wept with joy and Jakobus wept with them, at himself, because he had earned it and because being laughed at here was a form of being loved.

It was the oldest school in the world and the happiest, and it produced — Jakobus watched it produce, year on year — exactly the kind of person the band wanted: a person who knew the whole living library of the land by heart, who could not get a swelled head because the head-shrinking was built into every game, and who was, above all and before all, *happy*. That was the thing the school was really for. Not survival skills, though it taught those. It was a machine for manufacturing contentment, for passing on, from walnut-faced grandfather to shrieking grandchild, the hardest and most valuable thing a human being can be taught, which is how to be delighted by an ordinary evening.

Jakobus, who had been schooled by an army in how to end a life and by a silent family in how to hide one, sat in that other school night after night and let it begin, very late, to re-teach him from the beginning. He learned the animals. He learned which old man's puff adder was best (□Oma's; it was always □Oma's). He learned to laugh again, which he had genuinely believed was gone. And he learned, watching the children fall asleep where they dropped, mid-laugh, against any available adult, all of them belonging to all of them, that he had spent his whole life in countries — the farm, the army, the city, the white South Africa that made all three — that were extraordinarily good at teaching a child everything except how to be happy, and that he had walked, blind as a puppy, across an ocean of sand, into the one school that taught nothing else.

Chapter 10 — The Silver Thread

The tracking he came to last, because it could not be hurried, and because it was the deepest thing they had, and they did not waste the deep things on a man who was not ready to receive them.

For a long time Kxao would not teach him at all. He let Jakobus tag along, carry things, watch — and Jakobus, who had decided this was the skill he wanted above all others, the thing he had first seen in a riverbed in the war and never stopped wanting, was maddened by it, and learned, slowly, that the maddening was the first lesson. You could not want it the way he wanted things, with the clenched grasping want of a man hoarding firewood against the desert. You had to come at it sideways, easily, the way they came at everything. You had to stop trying to take it before they would give it.

When the teaching began it was nothing like he had imagined. He had imagined a catalogue — this print is a steenbok, this is a duiker, this depth means this weight, this crumbling edge means this many hours. And there was that; there was an enormous amount of that, a vocabulary of the ground so vast and so precise that Jakobus, who had thought himself observant, understood that he had been walking through the world all his life functionally blind. Kxao could look at a single print and tell the animal, its sex, its age, its size, its health, its gait, whether it was hungry or full, frightened or easy, how long since it passed, and where, with a calm certainty, it was going — not because

the print *said* all that in any one feature, but because Kxao held in his head, effortlessly, a whole moving picture of the animal of which the print was one frame, and read the print as a sentence in a story he already mostly knew.

That was the first turn of the key. “You do not read the print,” Kxao said, crouched over a scuff in the sand that was, to Jakobus, nothing. “You read the *animal*. The print is only where the animal touched the ground. The animal is in your head. You make the gemsbok in your head — ǂOma showed you, the head, the fear, the way it walks — and then the ground tells you what *that gemsbok, today,* is doing. A man who only reads the print is lost the moment the print is gone. A man who reads the animal is never lost, because when the print is gone he knows where the animal would have gone, and he goes there, and there is the next print.” He looked up. “You did this in the war and you did not know you did it. You read men. You knew where the frightened one would run before he ran. It is the same. It was always the same. I only have to teach you to do with the gemsbok what you already did with the man with the gun.”

And that was when Jakobus understood what the silver thread was.

He had carried the image for years — the documentary memory that had never been his, the story of a tracker who said he saw, *actually visibly saw,* a shining line where the animal had gone. He had half-believed it was magic. He had half-wanted it to be. He asked Kxao about it, finally, one evening, carefully, braced for the answer to be either a mystery he could never have or a disappointment that would take the shine off everything.

Kxao did not laugh, which Jakobus had feared, and did not go solemn and mystical, which Jakobus had also feared. He thought about it, the way he thought about a hard spoor.

“Sometimes,” he said slowly, “when the tracking is very good — when I have been on the animal a long time and I am not thinking any more, when the animal is so much in my head that I am almost the animal — then yes. I see it. A line. Not with the eyes, here” —

he touched the outer corner of his eye — "with the eyes, here." He touched his temple, his chest, somewhere between. "The whole way the animal went, lying on the land, like a thread. It is not a ghost. It is not magic. It is—" the long search, and this time he found something close — "it is *knowing so much that the knowing becomes a picture*. You have so many small things — the print, the bent grass, the stone turned wet-side-up, the way the birds sit, the wind, the hour, the animal in your head — so many small things that your head cannot hold them as small things any more, so it makes them into one thing, a line, and lays it on the world, and then you do not have to think, you only have to *follow,* the way you follow a path you have walked a hundred times in the dark." He looked at Jakobus. "It feels like a gift from outside. It is not. It is the most ordinary thing. It is what your head does when you have finally paid enough attention. The silver thread is just attention, grown so big it shines."

Jakobus sat with that, in the firelight, and found that the grounded answer did not take the shine off. It put the shine where it belonged. It was not magic; it was *earned;* it was the reward at the far end of a discipline of attention so total and so patient that it looked, from outside, like sorcery — and that was *better,* because it meant it was real, and it meant it could be learned, and it meant that the small reduced people his whole civilisation had looked past as primitives were in fact the masters of a cognitive art so advanced that the white men who used them in the war had mistaken its results for witchcraft and its practitioners for animals.

He never became Kxao. He wanted to be honest with himself about that, then and always. A man does not begin at the far edge of forty and acquire what a child here drinks in from the cradle, the way a child drinks in a mother tongue. He got the grammar. He got good — better than any white man had a right to be, good enough that Kxao stopped insulting his tracking and started, which was worse and better, *correcting* it seriously, as a colleague. And once, only once, late on a long faultless follow, with the animal so deep in his head that he had forgotten he was a separate thing from it, Jakobus looked up from a

vanished print and saw — for three steps, for four, before his amazement broke it — a faint line lying on the world ahead of him, shining, showing him the way the kudu had gone.

He did not tell Kxao. He did not need to. Kxao, walking behind him, watching the man more than the ground, as always, read it off him the moment it happened, and said nothing, and smiled, and let the stone keep walking, following his own thread of attention out across the patient shining land.

Chapter 11 — The Elephant Vow

There were stories that were for laughing and stories that were for learning and a few stories that were neither, that were told rarely and in a different voice, and the night Be told the story of the elephant, Jakobus understood that he had been let in to something the war had never come near.

Be was the oldest woman of the band, older perhaps than ǂOma, with a stillness on her that was the deepest he had ever met — not the bad stillness of the tent town, not even Kxao's rested ease, but something further in, a stillness like the floor of a very deep water. The children quieted around her without being told. She did not perform her stories the way ǂOma performed his; she told them low and plain, and the plainness was the power of them.

She told the elephant story only once in all Jakobus's years there, and she told it because a young hunter had been boasting — gently, the band would never let it get far — about wanting one day to take very big game, the biggest, and the old people had grown quiet, and Be had decided it was time the young one heard.

There had been a time, she said, long ago — not myth-long-ago, Jakobus understood, but real-long-ago, the way an old person says *when I was young* and means a vanished world — when their people did hunt the elephant. It could be done. It was a great thing, a feeding

for a whole region, many bands, a wealth of meat. And they had done it. She herself, she said, had seen it done, once, as a small girl, and she had never spoken of it since, and she would tell it now and then not again.

The poison they used was slow. On a small animal it was a mercy; the steenbok lay down and slept and did not know. On an elephant it was not a mercy. The animal was too vast for the poison to be quick, and so the great beast had taken the arrows — many of them, in the soft places, the mouth, where the hide was thin enough — and had not died, not for a long time, and had known, the whole time, what was being done to it and by whom. And the elephant, Be said, in her low plain voice, with the fire very quiet, had *screamed.* Not the trumpeting they made in anger or in play. A sound she had no other word for than screaming, a sound that a creature that large should not be able to make, a sound of a thinking, feeling, knowing animal in agony and in terror and in something worse than either — in *betrayal,* she said, because the elephant knew them, the elephant remembered the waterholes they shared, the elephant had a long memory and grieved its own dead and had never thought the small people would do this — and the herd had gathered, and they had touched the dying one with their trunks, and they had screamed too, all of them, into the night, and the people had stood in the dark and listened to a family grieve a murder the people had done for meat.

"And when it was finished," Be said, "and we ate — and the meat was much, and good, and many lived through the dry time who would have died — the old people of that time made a vow. Not a law. A vow is heavier than a law. They said: we will not do this again. Not because the meat is bad. Because of the screaming. Because we heard it know us. Because a people who can hear that, and do it again, become a people who can hear anything and do anything, and then they are not people any more, they are the thing that does not stop. So. We do not hunt the elephant. We have not, in my life or my mother's life or her mother's. We let it be the biggest thing, and we stay small under it, and when we see it at the water we are glad, and we remember why we

are glad, and that is the vow."

No one spoke for a while. The fire ticked. The young hunter who had boasted sat very still.

Jakobus sat in the dark with the story going all the way down into the room behind the door, because he knew exactly what Be was talking about. He had heard a thing scream and stop. He had searched a man and found the same Bible. He had been made, by an army, into a thing that could hear it know him and do it again, do it many times, the door holding, the room filling — and he had come back from that not as a person but as a man arranging his whole life around a shed, because no one in his own world had ever told him the thing Be was telling the young hunter now, plainly, by the fire: that the screaming *matters,* that hearing it and continuing is the exact line past which you stop being a person, and that the only cure, the only way back, is the vow — to choose, deliberately, against your own appetite and advantage, to *not*. To leave the biggest thing alone. To stay small under it. To be glad.

He thought: my people made the opposite vow. We heard it scream and we built a country on doing it again. And these people, whom we called primitive, whom we reduced to a single word, had looked into the same darkness ten thousand years before us and turned away from it, and had been turning away from it, by firelight, in their children, ever since.

He did not say any of this. You did not, here, make a speech of a thing. But Kxao, beside him in the dark, felt the man go rigid and then, slowly, by degrees over the long quiet that followed Be's story, let go — and put one small hard hand on the back of Jakobus's neck, once, briefly, the way you would gentle an animal that has heard something it cannot yet carry, and took it away again, and said nothing, and that too was the vow, applied to a broken white man by a fire: *we have heard you scream. We are not going to do it again. Be glad. Stay.*

Chapter 12 — The Moon and the Mantis

The other stories were lighter, and he loved them the more for it, because he came to understand that the lightness was not the opposite of the depth but the form the depth took when it was at ease.

There was the moon. He had asked, one night — he had learned by then that you could ask, if you asked easily, sideways, the way they did everything — why the moon was not pure white, why it had its grey shadows, its bruises, its marks. And ǂOma, delighted to be asked, told him.

The moon, ǂOma said, had fought the gemsbok. Long ago, when the great things still argued with each other, the moon and the gemsbok had quarrelled — over what, the versions differed, and ǂOma gave three contradictory reasons in the same telling and was untroubled by it, because the why was not the point — and they had fought, up there, a great battle, and the gemsbok with its long straight spear-horns had wounded the moon, had gored it, and the moon had bled, and the gemsbok had bled, and they had wrestled in the dark sky covered in each other's blood. And that, ǂOma said, pointing up with his chin at the rising moon, low and huge and faintly stained on the horizon — that is why the moon is not clean white. It bathed in the blood of the gemsbok it fought. The marks you see are the blood. The moon never washed them off, to remember, or could not wash them off, as a punishment, or did not care to — again the three reasons, again the

shrug — and so it carries the battle on its face forever, where everyone can see, every night, for always.

Jakobus looked up at the stained moon and never afterward saw it any other way. That was the gift of the stories, he came to feel — not that he believed them as fact; ǂOma did not ask him to, ǂOma did not entirely believe them as fact either, that was not what they were for — but that they took the great cold indifferent things, the moon, the dark, the killing, the dying, and made them *kin,* made them characters in a family story, so that a person lying out under that enormous and frightening sky was not lying under a void but under a ceiling painted all over with the doings of relatives. His own civilisation had a sky full of dead gas and physics and a single distant judging God; theirs had a sky full of arguments and blood and gemsbok and the trickster, a sky you could *live* under, companionably, the way you live in a house with your loud relations. He knew which he would rather sleep beneath.

And there was the mantis, and the mantis was different, and the mantis stayed with him longest of all.

He had seen, from his first days, that they would not harm the small green insect. He had seen Kxao move one off a path in the war, a lifetime ago, with the back of his hand, and refuse to say why. Here he learned the why, in pieces, over years, because it was not a thing they explained all at once — it was too close, too important, the way you do not explain your own dead parents to a stranger in one sitting.

The mantis was ǂKaggen. Or ǂKaggen sometimes took the shape of the mantis, or the mantis was where you might find him, or the mantis was the one of his shapes a person was most likely to meet — the grammar of it shifted and the band did not seem to need it to hold still. ǂKaggen was the maker, after a fashion, the first one, the one who made the moon (from a shoe, in one telling, thrown up into the dark) and the eland and much else; and he was also a fool, a liar, a trickster, a creature of appetite and mischief and disaster, who got himself into ridiculous trouble and was forever being rescued by his clever family

— the meerkat wife, the children — from the consequences of his own foolishness. He was powerful and absurd at once. He was holy and he was a clown. And Jakobus, hearing this, understood for the first time why the clowning by the fire was not a small thing, why ǂOma becoming the foolish gemsbok was somehow continuous with the deepest reverence the band had: because their very god was a clown, because the holiest figure in their world was the one who fell on his backside, because they had built, into the foundation of everything, the radical and merciful idea that the sacred and the ridiculous are the same thing seen from two sides, and that a creation made by a fool who keeps getting rescued by love is a creation you can forgive for being the way it is.

So they did not kill the mantis. Not from fear — they were not afraid of it. From a kind of courtesy. You did not know, when you met the small green creature with its folded praying arms turning its strange wise head to look at you, whether you were meeting an insect or meeting the foolish holy maker of everything come to see how his rescued, ridiculous, beloved world was getting on. And so you let it be. You moved it gently off the path. You did not make a speech of it.

Jakobus learned the Afrikaans name too, later, with a small cold shock of recognition. *Hotnotsgot.* The settlers had watched the Khoe and the San regard the little insect with reverence and had concluded, in their certainty, that here were savages who *worshipped a bug,* and had named it the *Hottentots' god,* a sneer set into the language for centuries, one more people reduced — there it was again, the reduction, the whole pattern of his country — to a single contemptuous word by men who had not troubled to understand the first thing about what they were looking at. They had not worshipped the insect. They had honoured the *possibility* in it; they had practised, toward the smallest life, the courtesy of *you might be more than you appear, and so I will not crush you to find out* — which was, Jakobus thought, very nearly the opposite of worshipping a bug, and very nearly the most civilised idea he had ever encountered, and his own ancestors had looked straight at it and seen savagery and coined a slur.

He never killed a mantis again. Not before and not after; the not-killing began in the bush and it never left him, all the way into the life that came after, into the man he would become — a man who, decades later, in another country, in the middle of something urgent and dangerous, would stop, and crouch, and move a small green insect off a path with the back of his hand, slow and careful, and not explain, and not make a speech of it, and only a very few people who knew him very well would ever understand that they had just watched a man honour the foolish holy maker of everything, and a dead god of a murdered way of seeing, and a small man in a riverbed in a war, all at once, with one gentle motion of his hand.

Chapter 13 — The Gift

He had always given things away. He had not known, until the bush, that it was a wound; he learned there that it could also be a way of being held.

It went back further than the war — back to the farm, to a child who had learned early that you could buy a moment's safety from a hard, frightened, drinking father by giving, by anticipating, by handing over the thing before it could be demanded. Giving, for the boy Jakobus, had been a kind of flinch. He gave to manage people, to keep them at the door, to pay in advance for a peace that never came. He gave the way he charmed — as camouflage, as a way of being liked without being known. He had never once in his life given a thing simply because giving was good.

The band gave constantly, and it took him years to understand that their giving was the exact opposite of his.

There was a system to it, though *system* was too hard a word for a thing so light. Kxao explained it to him the way he explained everything, crouched, drawing in the sand. A man here did not keep his good things. If you had a fine knife, a good blanket, a string of beads, a clever thing — you did not hold it. You gave it. You gave it to a particular person, a partner, someone in another band perhaps, far off, and that was not the end of it but the beginning: that person now held it, and used it, and in time would give it on, or give you something back, not as payment — never as payment, payment was an insult, payment was what the cattle people and the soldiers did — but as the next

breath of a long slow exchange that ran, person to person, gift to gift, across the whole enormous land, band to band, year to year, a web of obligation that was really a web of *relationship,* so that the desert that looked to Jakobus like emptiness was in fact strung all over, invisibly, with threads of giving, every family tied to families three hundred kilometres away by a slow traffic of beads and blankets and knives that was not about the beads at all but about the *thread* — about making sure that no one was ever alone, that everyone was always owed to and owing, that the whole scattered people were bound together, in the lean times especially, by the simple unbreakable fact that you had my grandmother's knife and one day I would come and you would feed me.

"You give the thing," Kxao said, "so that the thing makes a road between you and the other one. If you keep the thing, you have a thing. If you give the thing, you have a *person.*" He smoothed the sand. "A man with many things and no people is the poorest man in the world. We do not let anyone be that poor. So we do not let anyone keep too much. The giving is how we make sure no one is alone." He looked sideways at Jakobus, the reading look. "You give things to keep people away. I have watched you. You give a thing and then you step back, you watch, you see did it work, are they happy now, will they leave you be. That is not giving. That is paying a guard. Here you will learn the other one. You will give a thing and step *toward.* And it will frighten you very much, more than the war, because to give the way we give you have to let the road stay open after, you have to let the person walk back down it to you. That is the hard part. Not the giving. The road staying open."

Jakobus learned it slowly, and against the whole grain of himself. He learned to give a thing and not step back. He learned to receive, too, which he found even harder — to take a thing held out to him easily and let it mean *we have made a road to you,* and not flinch, not feel the old debt-panic, not immediately calculate how to pay it off and close the road again. He learned to let the road stay open. It was, Kxao had been right, more frightening than any contact. A man can

be brave under fire and still be a coward at an open door, and Jakobus had been the second kind of brave his whole life, and the band, gift by gift, taught him the first kind — the harder kind — the courage to be owed to, to be tied, to be reachable, to be kept.

By the end of his years there he gave the way they gave. It became, and stayed, the deepest thing in him — the thing the people who met him later would notice first and understand last: that he gave things away constantly, easily, the good things, the things he valued, pressed into your hands at a parting with a quiet finality, and that the gift was never a transaction and never a flinch but always, underneath, the same thing it had been for the small reduced masters who taught it to him in the sand: *I am making a road between us. I am refusing to let you be alone. Here. Take it. The road stays open. Come back down it whenever you need to. You are owed to now. You are tied. You are kept.*

He did not have the word *hxaro.* He carried the thing without the word, the way he carried so much of it — the gladness, the stillness, the courtesy to the mantis, the vow against the screaming — out of a world that had no chance to label itself for him before his country finished destroying it. But he carried it true. And every gift he gave for the rest of his life was a thread laid quietly back across the years to a fire in the Kalahari, and a small man drawing roads in the sand, teaching a frightened soldier the bravest thing he knew: how to let people in.

Chapter 14 — The Night the Door Opened

It came apart in him on an ordinary night, which is how it always comes, and they did not try to fix it, which is how it healed.

He had been there long enough by then that he no longer counted. Seasons had turned over him — the dry, the first rains, the green flush, the tsamma swelling, the moves from pan to pan, the slow knitting of him into the body of the band until he woke one morning and found he had stopped being a visitor without noticing the day it happened. He could track. He could be still. He laughed easily now, the laugh no longer hurting on the way out. The room behind the door had not emptied — he understood by then that it would never empty, that this was not the kind of thing that empties — but the door no longer had to be held shut every hour of every day, and a man who is not spending all his strength holding a door has, for the first time, strength left over for other things.

And then there was the dance.

They danced to heal — that was the plain of it, under everything Jakobus could not follow. When someone was sick, or when a sickness was in the band that had no single body to live in, a grief, a fear, a wrongness, the people danced it out. The women sat close around the fire and clapped and sang, the songs going round and round, layered, hypnotic, the rhythm a thing you stopped hearing and started living

inside; and the men danced, round and round the seated women, hour upon hour, the rattles on their legs, the feet on the sand, until something in the dancers — the healers, the ones who carried it — turned over, and they went somewhere, into the heat of the thing they carried, and they laid their hands on the sick and the sad and *pulled,* drew the sickness out and into themselves and cried out with it and flung it away into the dark, and fell, and were caught, and were tended, and rose, and danced on.

Jakobus had watched it before, from the edge, the way he watched everything, with the soldier's part of him noting and the rest of him held off. This night he could not stay at the edge. He did not decide to come in. He was simply, at some point in the small hours, inside it — not dancing, he never danced, that was theirs and he knew the difference between being kept and taking — but inside the ring of it, sitting in the sand among them, with the singing going round and round and the fire low and the whole band breathing together as one animal, and the thing happened that he had spent twenty years and a thousand kilometres preventing.

The door opened.

Not broke. Opened. There was a difference and he felt it. The door he had held shut since he was eleven, the door behind which lay the shed and the gun and his father, the Bible and the screaming and the man on the truck, the koeksisters he could not taste and the women he had let walk away, the whole sealed room of his unlived grief — it opened, in the heat and the singing and the safety of the ring, and it all came out, not in a flood that drowned him but in a long slow tide that the band simply, wordlessly, let rise. He wept. He shook. At some point he was making a sound he had never made, a low sound from the bottom of the deep water, the sound of a man grieving everything at once after twenty years of grieving nothing, and the women's singing did not stop and did not falter and did not even, particularly, turn toward him — it took him *in,* the way the firelight had taken him in that first night, the way you take in another log, the song simply widened to hold one more sorrow without breaking its rhythm,

and ǂOma, dancing, old as he was, came round in the slow circle and laid one trembling hand on the top of Jakobus's bowed head, just for a moment, in passing, the way you would touch any of them, and pulled, or seemed to, and cried out, and flung something into the dark, and danced on.

Jakobus did not know, then or ever, what to make of the pulling. He was too honest a man to claim a magic he had not understood and too changed a man to sneer at one he had felt. What he knew for certain — the grounded, witnessable, undeniable thing — was this: that a community of people who owned almost nothing, who had been hunted and used and reduced to a word, had encircled a broken stranger in the dark and, without being asked, without a single word of counsel, without trying to *solve* him or *fix* him or send him to a chaplain with a pamphlet, had simply held him inside the warm body of themselves and let him come apart, all night, until the coming-apart was finished, and had been there, still singing, in the grey of the dawn, when what was left of him surfaced — emptied, wrung out, lighter than he had been since before he could remember — into the first light.

No one mentioned it after. That was the last mercy and the deepest. In his own world a night like that would have been a Thing — there would have been concerned faces, careful questions, a watching, a managing, the awful weight of other people's worry, which is its own kind of door-closing. Here, in the morning, Be handed him food exactly as she always did, and ǂOma made an obscene joke about the warthog, and the children ignored him, and Kxao looked at him once, read him head to foot in the way he had, saw that the door was open and would not now fully close again, nodded the smallest amount — and they all simply went on, and let him go on with them, a man who had wept out twenty years in their fire and was now, this ordinary morning, just one more of them, helping strike the camp, no different, no special, kept.

That was the day the peace started. Not the calm — the calm came later, the calm was the fruit. The peace started here, the night the door opened in a ring of singing and nobody on earth tried to fix him, because the people who had every reason to be broken had long ago

learned the thing his own clever shattered civilisation never had: that you do not heal a person by mending them. You heal a person by refusing, gently, all night, for as long as it takes, to let them be alone.

Chapter 15 — The Calmest Man in the World

The peace became calm, and the calm became a kind of work, the day the three bakkies came over the dune line.

He heard them long before he saw them — everyone did; you heard an engine for a long way in that country, an ugly tearing sound that did not belong, that the land flinched from — and he watched the band do the thing they did when the outside came, which was to go quiet and small and unreadable, a lifetime's instinct, the survival of a people who had learned across centuries that being noticed by men in vehicles was how you died. The women drew the children in. The men's faces went smooth and stupid, the mask Kxao had worn at Schmidtsdrift, the mask Jakobus now understood was not stupidity but armour, the only armour they had.

Three bakkies. Hard men. He read them before they stopped — the war part of him, the tracking part, the same part, reading the men the way he read animals: armed, but the guns slung and casual, so not hunting, not yet; angry in the bored aggressive way of men who have driven a long way to do an unpleasant errand and want it to be someone's fault; a leader in the front vehicle, older, a farmer's hardness or an official's, used to being obeyed, already getting out before the dust settled with the heavy walk of a man who has decided the conversation before having it. They had come to move the band. Jakobus did not need the words yet; he could see it. Some new line on some new

map, some grazing claim, some permit, some reason. *You can't be here. This is now somebody's. Move.* The oldest story in the country, arriving by bakkie, with rifles.

In the old days — even a few years before — this would have undone Jakobus completely. The engines, the armed men, the threat in the air: it would have thrown the door wide and the war would have come up through him like water through a pipe and he would have gone cold and still and *capable* in the terrible way, and there would have been, very fast, the possibility of something nobody could take back. He felt the old thing stir, far down. He noticed it stir. And he found — this was the gift, this was what the years had grown in him — that he could *let it stir and not be it.* He had spent twenty years as a door holding back a room. He was something else now. He was a man who could feel the room and stay in the doorway, easy, present, unafraid, the worst of him acknowledged and set down, his hands loose and empty at his sides.

He stepped out from the shelters and walked toward the men, slowly, with nothing in his hands.

That was the first thing that wrong-footed them: a white man, here, among the *Boesmans,* walking out unarmed and unhurried, with the deep unbothered ease of a man at home. The leader checked, mid-stride. His men shifted. The thing they had braced for — frightened San, or a fight — was not what was happening, and men who have braced for a thing and meet something else have to stop and re-read the situation, and in that gap, that small re-reading gap, Jakobus was already speaking, low and friendly and entirely calm, in their own language, in the Free State Afrikaans of their own fathers.

"Middag, meneer. Warm vir so 'n ry." *Afternoon. Hot for such a drive.*

He did not raise his voice once in the whole of it. He never did, after, in his whole life — that was the thing people remembered, that he could lower the temperature of a room without ever lifting the volume of it. He stood in the sun among the threat and was simply the calmest creature present, and calm, he had learned in the bush, is

the most contagious thing there is, more than fear, if you can hold it long enough — because a body reads other bodies, the way a tracker reads an animal, below all the words, and a nervous system that meets a truly steady one will, given a little time, begin to steady itself, helplessly, the way the band's singing had once widened to take him in. He read the leader. He read the man's anger for what was under it — the discomfort, the not-quite-wanting-to-do-this, the relief, even, at finding someone he could talk to instead of someone he had to bully. He gave the man a way to be less than he had arrived as. He asked about the drive, the dust, the road; he was a fellow countryman, reasonable, unsurprised; he did not contest the map or the claim or the rifles; he simply, by being unafraid and unhostile and immovably calm, made it very difficult to start the violence the men had half-brought with them, because violence needs a charge to jump across and Jakobus would not hold up the other terminal.

It took an hour. It ended with the band moving — they were going to move soon anyway; the tsamma was thin; a band does not die on a principle when it can live by walking — but moving in their own time, on their own feet, with their dignity, instead of being scattered off the land at gunpoint, which is what would have happened to any of the other bands Jakobus later heard about, the ones with no calm white man to stand in the sun and lower everyone's pulse. The leader left almost friendly. He had come to do a hard ugly thing and Jakobus had let him do a smaller, less ugly version of it and feel, driving away, like not quite so bad a man, and that — Jakobus understood, watching the dust go — that was the whole art. You did not defeat such men. You did not need to overpower them. You disarmed them, the way you would gentle a frightened dangerous animal, by being the steadiest thing in the field, and you sent them away having done less harm than they came to do, and you counted that, in a country like his, as a victory, because in a country like his it was one of the only kinds there were.

Kxao came and stood beside him as the engines faded.

"You did not get a gun," the old man said. It was not quite a question. There had been, somewhere in the camp's few things, an old rifle;

Jakobus had never touched it; everyone knew he never touched it.

"No."

"You could have. You know guns. Better than those ones." Kxao nodded at the settling dust. "You were a soldier. You could have stood there with a gun and they would also have gone."

"Ja." Jakobus watched the last of the dust go down. "They would have gone, and they would have come back, with more, and angry, and someone would have died, probably one of us, probably a child, the way it always goes." He was quiet a moment. "A gun makes the other man certain. It tells him what kind of thing this is. The moment there's a gun, everyone knows the story, and the story always ends the same way." He turned the old empty habit over, the thing the bush had made of him, and said the truest version he had. "I spent a long time being the most dangerous man in the room. It never once made the room safer. It only made me the thing the danger was about." He almost smiled. "Now I just try to be the calmest man in the room. It works better. And I don't have to carry the gun, which is heavy, and which I have started to hate."

Kxao looked up at him for a long moment, reading him, all the way down, the way he had the first day behind the tree, the way he had across the crowd from the back of a truck, the way he had in the wrong desert in the canvas shade — and whatever he read there, in the calm unarmed man standing easy in the field where the war had wanted to come and had not been let, it satisfied him, finally, completely, after all the years.

"Ja," he said softly. "Now you are not a puppy any more." It was the highest thing he had ever said to him, and they both knew it, and neither made a speech of it. "Come. We are moving. Help the old people. And do not" — the riverbed grin, the truck-window grin, handed across the years one more time — "do not gather all the firewood."

Chapter 16 — What He Left

Kxao died in the bush, old, at home, in the green time, and Jakobus grieved him the whole way through and out the other side, and that grief — clean, complete, survivable — was how he knew, finally, that he was healed.

The old man went the way the band thought a person should go, which was the thing they had not been allowed at Schmidtsdrift and the deepest reason Jakobus had carried him out of it: at home, on the land he could read, among his people, in his own time. He had been failing for a season — slower, thinner, sleeping in the day — and he had known, the way he knew everything, and had not made a fuss of it, because making a fuss of it would have been a kind of bad manners, a hoarding of attention, the same sin as the swelled head and the squared woodpile. He sat in the sun. He told the children, in his last weeks, more stories than he had in years, the foolish holy ones, ǂKaggen falling on his backside, the moon and the blood — pouring the library out of himself into the small ones while there was time, the way his father had poured love into wood. And one morning in the green time he simply did not wake, and the band keened, and Jakobus keened with them, openly, a white man weeping for a *Boesman* in a way that would have been unthinkable to the boy who searched the dead behind a mopane a lifetime before, and there was no shame in it and no managing of it, only the band's old genius for not letting a sorrow be carried alone.

And Jakobus understood, in his grief, the measure of the thing that

had been done to him. Because he could grieve. That was it; that was everything. The boy who could not weep for his own father in the shed could now weep, fully, for this one, and feel it move through him and not destroy him, and come out the far side of it still standing, lighter, the dead man set gently in his proper place inside instead of locked in a room with the door held shut for twenty years. They had not just given him peace. They had given him back the machinery of being a person — the ability to let a thing in, hurt, and heal — which his own people, with all their churches and all their doctors and all their hard silent love, had somehow never managed to leave switched on in him at all.

He stayed one more turning of the season. And then he knew it was time, and Kxao, even gone, had arranged it so, because the old man had said the thing to him near the end, plainly, the way Be told the elephant: *You cannot stay a guest forever. A guest who never leaves becomes a weight, and we have carried enough weight. And the world out there — the world that broke you — that world is full of broken ones, and now you are not broken, and a man who is not broken is the most useful thing there is to the ones who are. We gave you the peace. Now go and spend it. That is what it is for. A peace you keep is like a thing you keep. It makes you poor. Give it away.*

So Jakobus prepared to leave. And on the last night, by the fire, he did the thing the years had taught him, the bravest thing, the thing that was the whole of what they had made him: he gave away what he loved most.

He had carried it for years, wrapped in the same shirt, the one possession he had brought across the sand and never given and never finished — his father's last made thing, the small dovetailed box, four true sides and a base and no lid, the corners cut clean and never glued, the only fluent sentence his silent father had ever managed, made by hands that could not read or speak or pour their love any other way. It was the most valuable thing Jakobus owned. It was the only thing he owned, really, of the man who had made him and the world that had unmade him. In his old life he would have kept it forever, held it tight,

a thing and not a person, and been the poorer.

He gave it to Tashe.

The boy — not a small boy now; the years had grown him too — who had learned the thread alongside Jakobus, who had been his small mirror and his first real friend among the young ones, who would carry the band's seeing into whatever was coming, into the fences and the resettlements and the ending of the old free life that everyone by the fire knew was coming and no one spoke of. Jakobus put the unfinished box into the young man's hands the way Kxao had taught him — gave it and stepped *toward,* not back; gave it and let the road stay open — and he said, in the language he had learned in a riverbed and grown old enough in to be funny in:

"My father made this. He could not talk. Not to me, not to anyone. This was his talking." He turned it in Tashe's hands so the corners caught the firelight. "He never finished it. He never finished anything he had to say to me. So it has no lid; it is open; you can put what you want in it, or nothing, it does not matter — what matters is it was made with love by a man who could not say love, and now it is yours, and so there is a road from my dead father, who never met you, to you, who never met him, across the whole world, and you and I are tied, and you are owed to, and when you are an old man you will give it to someone and tell them a white man gave it to you who learned to be a person here, from us, when he could not be one anywhere else." His voice did not break. The door opened and closed now like a door. "Hold it open. The way you all held me."

Tashe took it. He did not make a speech of it either; they had taught them both better. He held the open box a moment, and then he put into it the only thing he had to hand — a single ostrich-shell bead from the string at his own neck, one bead, dropped into the lidless box of a stranger's father — and closed his hands around it, and the road was made, and stayed open, and would stay open, Jakobus knew, long after he himself was dust, a thread of giving laid down across the sand and the years between a silent man in a Free State shed and a boy under

the Kalahari stars, neither of whom would ever know the other, both of them tied now forever by the broken healed man who walked between their worlds.

In the morning he left. They did not make a ceremony of it — that was not their way and it was no longer his. Be handed him food for the walk exactly as she had every morning for years. The children ignored him, which he had learned was the truest love they had. Tashe walked him to the edge of the camp, the open box already on a thong at his side, and stopped where the camp stopped, and raised one hand, palm out, the way a small man had once raised a hand from the back of a truck — *I see you; I am here; I was here* — and Jakobus raised his, and held it, and turned, and walked out into the enormous patient land alone, following his own thread of attention back toward the world, carrying nothing he could hold and everything they had given him, which was the only kind of wealth, he understood now, that a man cannot be made poor by spending.

Chapter 17 — Sawubona

The bakkie was where he had left it, mostly buried, the red sand drifted up its doors to the windows, a steel box the desert had been quietly reclaiming for years, and Jakobus dug it out with his hands and a flat stone over a long morning and got it going on the third try, the engine catching with that ugly tearing sound the land flinched from, and he sat behind the wheel a moment before he drove, the way his other self would one day sit in a parking lot before starting an engine, and he understood that he was about to drive out of one life and into another, and that he was, for the first time he could remember, not afraid of the one he was driving into.

He drove south. The dunes flattened and the thorn thickened and the first fences came, then the first farms, then a town, then the world — the noise of it, the rush of it, the cars and the shops and the radios and the hard fast human arithmetic of who is big and who is small, all of it pressing back in around him the way it had pressed before, and he waited to feel it close over his head and drown him the way it had in the noise years.

It did not.

That was the thing he carried out and never lost: the world could not get back in the way it had got in before, because there was now a still place at the centre of him that the noise broke around like water around a stone. He was not the door any more, holding back a room. He was the stone in the river. The room was open and aired and lived-in; the dead were in their proper places; the grief came and went like weather

through a house with the windows working. He moved through the loud world calm, easy, unhurried, present — a man at home wherever he was, because he had learned to be at home in the one place a person actually lives, which is inside himself, and a man who is at home there is at home anywhere, and a stranger, gently, in every land.

People felt it on him immediately, everywhere, for the rest of his life, and could never say what it was. He was the calmest man in any room. He lowered the temperature of a place without lifting his voice. He read people the way he had learned to read animals and ground — the frightened one, the dangerous one, the one about to run, the thing under the words — because it was, as Kxao had told him the first day, the same skill, the same attention grown so large it shone, a silver thread laid now not across the sand but across the faces of human beings, showing him where they had been and, quietly, where they were about to go. He gave things away constantly, the good things, pressed into your hands at a parting with that quiet finality, making roads, refusing to let anyone be alone. He would not carry a gun. He moved small green insects off paths with the back of his hand and never explained. He was, people said, an unusually peaceful man, and they did not know they were describing the single most expensive thing in the world, paid for by a war and a shed and twenty years of silence and given to him, free, for nothing, by people who owned almost nothing, in a desert his country had driven them out of and then forgotten.

He found the words for it, years later, and far from the Kalahari, and they were not San words at all.

He was in the east of the country, in the green hills, the Zulu country, and someone greeted him in the old way — *Sawubona* — and he learned, asking, easily, sideways, the way the bush had taught him to learn, what it carried. *Sawubona:* I see you. And the answer, *Sikhona:* I am here — because until you are seen, the old idea ran, you are not yet wholly here; a person is brought into being by being beheld. And under both of them the deepest one, the one that stopped him in the road

the way Be's elephant had stopped him by the fire: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* — a person is a person through other people.

He stood in the green hills and felt the whole of his life arrange itself around the three Zulu words like iron filings around a magnet, because they were the exact words — the only words he ever found in any tongue — for the wordless thing the San had done to him in the sand. He had been a man who was not wholly there. The army had not seen him; his country had not seen him; his own father, who loved him, had not been able to see him; he had performed for human beings for thirty years precisely so that no one would see him, and the not-being-seen had nearly killed him, twice, in two sheds, his father's and the one he had carried inside. And then a small man behind a tree had said *I read the man* — had seen him, all the way down, the first human being ever to — and a band of the most reduced and unseen people on earth had taken the unseen soldier into their firelight and *beheld* him, night after night, year after year, until, beheld, he had at last become wholly here. *Sawubona*. *Sikhona*. They had not fixed him. They had seen him. It was the same thing. It was the only thing. A person is a person through other people, and he had been made a person, late, at great cost, by the very people his whole world had decided were not quite persons at all.

He never preached it. That was the last thing the bush had taught him and the one he held most faithfully: you do not make a speech of the thing that matters. You embody it. So he carried *Sawubona* the way he carried the box's open lid and the courtesy to the mantis and the vow against the screaming and the stillness that filled a room — wordlessly, in the body, in the way he greeted a frightened stranger, in the way he gave things away, in the way he could sit with another human being's pain and not try to fix it, only refuse, gently, to let them be alone in it. The people who met him in the years that came — the ones who would walk beside him into things stranger and larger than this quiet beginning, the ones who would call him by all his different names — knew only that there was something about Jakobus Swart, some deep unhurried peace, some way he had of seeing all the way

to the bottom of you and not looking away, that made you feel, in his presence, more real than you usually managed to be.

They did not know where it came from. He did not often tell them. But sometimes, very rarely, when one of them was breaking the way he had once broken, holding a door shut against a room, he would do the only useful thing, the thing that had been done for him in a ring of singing in the dark — he would simply stay, close, easy, unafraid, the calmest thing in the field, for as long as it took — and he would say, if he said anything at all, the two words that were the whole of what the bush had made him, the words a small man had given him without ever knowing them, behind a tree, in a war, a lifetime and a thousand kilometres ago:

I see you.

And he meant it all the way down, the way it had once, against every odd, been meant toward him; and the person, seen, would come back from wherever they had gone; and that — not the tracking, not the calm, not the gifts, not any of the famous quiet competences that made him who he was — that was the real thing the San had taught Jakobus Swart in the years he spent learning, from people who had almost nothing, how to be a person at all.

Sawubona.

Sikhona.

A person is a person through other people.

He walked back into the world with empty hands and that knowledge, and it was enough, and it was everything, and it never ran out, no matter how much of it he gave away.

What Is Real in This Book

A note from the author, and a debt paid plainly.

Everything in this novel is made up. And almost none of it is.

Jakobus is invented. Kxao is invented, and so are ǂOma and Be and Tashe and ǂApa and the band itself — and I want to say that first and loudest, because these are not real people and must never be mistaken for a record of any real person, family, or community. They are made of respect and of reading and of one old soldier's memory handed to me sideways, and the names are placeholders standing in until people who actually carry these languages tell me what the names should be. But almost everything *around* them — the history, the skill, the wound, the way of seeing — is as real as the ground you are standing on, and you deserve to know exactly where the line runs.

The San tracker units of the Border War. Real. South Africa genuinely did recruit San men — !Xun and Khwe and others — into the army as trackers; 31 Battalion and later 201 Battalion ("the Bushman Battalion") are real units, based for years at a place called Omega in the Caprivi. Their skill was real and it was decisive. *What is heartbreakingly real:* after Namibian independence in 1990, thousands of these soldiers and their families, unable to stay, were moved south into South Africa — to a tent town at **Schmidtsdrift**, and years later to **Platfontein** near Kimberley, where their descendants live today. The finest field trackers on earth, set down in a place with nothing to track, and largely forgotten. The tents, the waiting, the promised land that kept not arriving, the bottle that rushes in where a purpose used to be

— all real. I invented Kxao. I did not invent what was done to the men he is made of.

Bushman tracking — that trained Western eyes can see nothing where a San tracker reads a paragraph. Absolutely true and real, and not even slightly exaggerated. This is not folklore or romance; it is documented, tested, and, frankly, humbling. A San tracker can look at ground that a trained soldier or scientist sees as blank sand and read the species, the sex, the age, the size, the health, the gait, the hour, and the intention of an animal that passed — and be right, over and over, in conditions that defeat everyone else. Insurgents genuinely did walk backwards, change shoes, retrace their steps and cross rock to try to beat them, and it genuinely mostly did not work. If you take one fact out of this novel, take this one: some of the most sophisticated perceptual and reasoning skill our species has ever produced was held by the very people my country decided to call by a single word and look past.

Anna Breytenbach, and the tracker who finds an animal with no equipment. Real. Anna Breytenbach is a real South African who works with animals, and the documentary in which she appears — the film many people remember for the scene of locating and reading an animal with nothing but attention, alongside the deep tracking knowledge of San people — is real, and it is where this whole book started, in a thing my father had me watch, and a thing I never got over. *Where I am careful to be honest:* the parts of that world that step past tested tracking into telepathy and direct animal communication are not accepted by mainstream science, and you should know that going in. But this novel deliberately does not lean on the supernatural at all. It does something quieter and, to me, more astonishing — it takes the famous **"silver thread,"** the shining line a tracker has described seeing where the animal went, and grounds it not in magic but in *expertise*: attention paid so completely, for so long, that the mind fuses a thousand tiny signs into a single picture and lays it on the world. That is real. That is what mastery feels like from the inside. The wonder needed no invention from me; it only needed to be told straight.

Louis Liebenberg and the origin of science. Real, and worth your time. Liebenberg is a South African who learned to track with Kalahari San and went on to argue, seriously and influentially, that the scientific method itself — hypothesis, evidence, inference, revision — was *invented* by hunter-gatherer trackers tens of thousands of years before laboratories, and survives most purely in them. When this book says the San were running an advanced cognitive art that white men mistook for witchcraft, that is not me being kind. That is, increasingly, the considered scientific view.

The stories, the customs, the way of being. Real traditions, carried gently here and owed to the people who keep them. The reverence for the **mantis** as a form of **Kaggen**, the trickster-maker who is holy and a clown at once; the **moon** marked by its battle with the **gemsbok**; the deep grief and the vow that some San carry around the hunting of great animals; the gift-exchange network the Ju'hoansi call **hxaro**, where you give away your best things to make roads between people so that no one is ever alone; the fierce, funny custom of **"insulting the meat"** to keep any successful hunter from growing a big head (anthropologists have written about this for decades; if you want the famous account, look up Richard Lee's *"Eating Christmas in the Kalahari"*); the elders who teach the children by *becoming* the animals; and the all-night healing dance. *Where I ask your grace:* I have rendered these with care and from the outside, and I have surely gotten things wrong; this draft waits on the sign-off of people who carry these languages and these ways, and nothing here should be taken as authoritative until they have had their say. The Afrikaans name for the mantis, **Hotnotsgot**, is real, and it is exactly the kind of reduction this book is about: settlers decided the people were "worshipping a bug" and coined a slur, when what they were actually watching was a courtesy toward the smallest life so civilised it shames us still.

The word. This book is, underneath everything, about being **reduced to a single word**. *Boesman / Bushman* is a loaded word, the way *Coloured* is loaded — a word that can hold a whole people and close, so you never have to see what's inside. I have used it in these

pages only where a character would, and always to make you feel its weight, never to lay it down lightly. *San* is now the more common term, but it too has difficult roots, and some communities — the ǂKhomani among them — have chosen to reclaim *Boesman* for themselves. The honest answer is that the only fully respectful name is the specific one a people choose for themselves, and where this book stays general it does so as a placeholder, in the same spirit as the invented names, awaiting the people who get to decide.

The lineage I'm standing on. The image at the root of this book — an Afrikaans man who goes deep into San life, learns the language, and spends the rest of his days trying to carry what he was shown — is woven from real authors who did some version of that, **P.J. Schoeman** and **Laurens van der Post** chief among them, men whose books my father owned and I read as a boy. They were of their time and got things wrong, sometimes badly, and this novel quietly knows that. Jakobus is not any of them. He is made of the *longing* in them — the longing of my own people to be taught how to be at home in this land, and in themselves, by the people we wronged most.

So here is the bedrock, the thing that is true under all the made-up things: a man can be handed back his own humanity by people who, by every measure his society uses, have nothing — and the having-nothing is not the obstacle to it but, somehow, the source. The peace in this book is real. I have watched something like it. I have spent a long time trying to deserve to write it down.

Most San languages have no single fixed word for *thank you*, because among many of these peoples gratitude was never something you *said*. It was something you *did*. So I will not say it. I will only point you, the way Kxao points with his chin: go and learn whose land you are standing on, and read it, and give something away.

Sawubona.

— A.J.G.

Illustrations

A gallery of the real places, peoples, and made wonders behind this book — the wider subject, not only the scenes in the prose. All images are freely licensed (public domain / CC0 / CC BY / CC BY-SA); credits follow.

Places of Awe

The Kalahari — the place they just call home.

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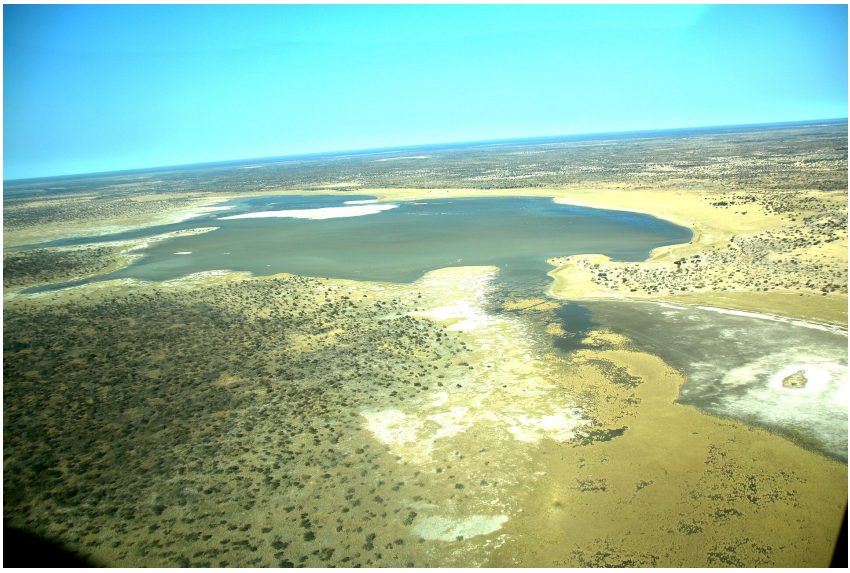

The Nyae Nyae pans — water, grass and distance.

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Things of Wonder

San rock art — the oldest continuous storytelling on Earth.

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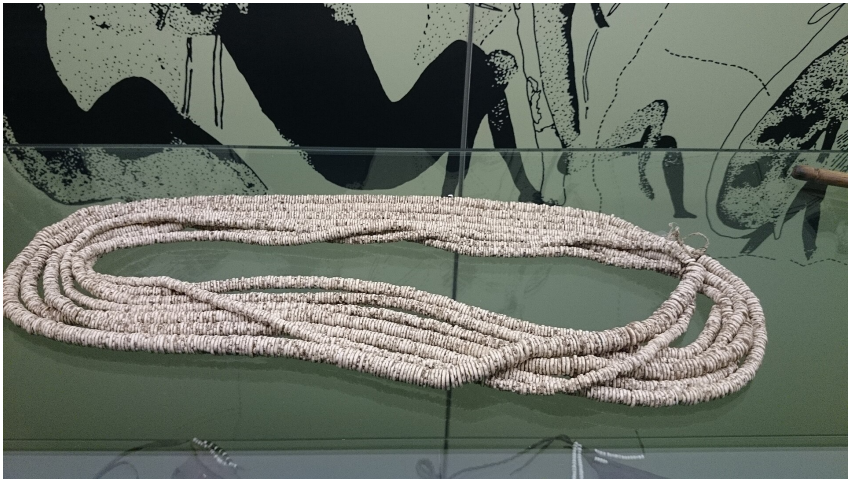

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The Peoples

The San — people who own almost nothing and are calm in any room.

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