

## THE CROCODILE FARM

Headlights cut across the open ground toward them. A dark night, no moon yet, but ambient light from the road in the distance and the housing estate away off to their left meant that they could see the outline of the car behind the beams. A low slung hatchback with pop-up lights. Almost unmistakably a mid nineteen-nineties Nissan. A significant collectors piece if it was in any decent shape.

Klein-Maatjie was squinting past the beam of the headlights, nervously scanning the darkness for any other vehicles following in the shadows. That would mean trouble and that they would need to fight or run, or both. He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary in the low, scrubby veld. In the far distance the lights of the city were washed against the slopes of the City Bowl and Signal Hill. The dark, bulked mass of the mountain demarcated against the night sky by the absence of stars.

Jansen, sitting next to Maatjie on the edge of their car's bonnet, lit the cigarette he'd held in his mouth for the last ten minutes with the bright flare of three matches together. It was by way of a signal as much as to ignite the cigarette. He exhaled a long, smooth stream of smoke which blew across Maatjie's face in a puff of warm air.

"Bergwind." Maatjie said flatly.

Jansen nodded. The approaching car had made a small correction after the flare of the matches and was now coming directly toward them across the veld. Its headlights cut out and they both quickly blinked their pupils wider to accommodate the dark. They heard the chassis scrape the ground and the car slowed further. It crunched carefully over another ridge and then was on the flat, clear ground that led up to them near the fence. It approached cautiously.

"Guy's taking care" said Jansen.

"Ya. Must be his baby." replied Maatjie. He smiled.

Jansen took his cigarette out of his mouth half-finished and pinched the ember onto the ground. He scuffed out the orange glow with his toe and put the extinguished stub in the breast pocket of his shirt. Maatjie liked to tease him about this habit, and about the shirts in which could always be found several of the half smoked stubs. The shirts were all identical; simple, short sleeved,

grey or khaki or dusty blue with two breast pockets in a complementary tone. As worn by farmers across the country and, in Jansen's case, always with the smell of old nicotine about them.

'What's a city boy like you wearing those shirts for man? People think you a potato and cabbage farmer from 'pumalanga!' Maatjie would say, and laugh.

Maatjie's voice still made Jansen smile. It wasn't that the tone or accent - straight up Cape Coloured - was funny in itself so much as Jansen had always equated the sound with humour. He'd grown up in Paarl, his father a wood and building supplies yard owner whose work force were exclusively coloured and could be relied on daily for a range of hilarious quips, wicked take-downs and vicious insults slung effortlessly between them as they worked. At lunch, when he was a teen, Jansen would sit near the group of them and listen to the exchange of ever more fantastic stories and their roaring, delighted laughter. Maatjie's voice reminded him of that time but somehow Maatjie's banter wasn't as satisfying as those of his memories. Too immediate perhaps. Too personal. When Maatjie was ribbing him about looking like a farmer he would smile and say, 'Maybe I am.' and leave it at that. Maatjie would often press on, hoping to get a rise out of him.

'You'll never get a meisie looking like that oem! They'll all think that you poor or stupid or both. These city girls want something with a bit of flair, a bit of life.'

Then Jansen would quietly say, 'Who says I want a city girl.' and close the conversation by reaching into one of his pockets and pulling out a stub to re-light.

As the car drew closer they could see it was finished in a bright, traditional racing red. The engine ran sweet and true. It circled slightly and pulled up parallel to theirs, facing the opposite direction and far enough away that if any shit started to happen there was distance between them and a clear route of exit. Maatjie looked at Jansen to see if he was feeling any of the nerves that were fluttering lightly in Maatjie's gut. Jansen's face was its inevitable, implacable blank. Only the eyes were active; watching and alert for danger.

Nothing happened for about a minute. They could see the dark shadows of three individuals inside the car, which they had been told to expect. They knew that the occupants would also be scanning for anything out of the ordinary and

they sat still on the edge of the bonnet, calmly returning the gaze they could feel through the cars' windows.

A door popped and light flashed across the interior of the car. The driver was a short, wired-haired man. A clear genetic descendent of the bushmen, his skin the colour of dark butter glowing in the interior light of the car. He nimbly exited the vehicle and stood looking at them across the roof with raven dark eyes above high cheekbones. The passenger door opened and a tall, black man unfolded himself carefully from the passenger seat. Possibly South African but more likely, from the depth of his skin tone, Congolese or other West African. He stood to his full height, keeping them in his gaze, and seemed to stretch his back slightly, decompressing the discomfort of being in the low-cabined vehicle. He turned back to the car, bending to lever his seat forward. Jansen and Maatjie heard him mumble something as he reached in a hand to assist the third man from his perch in the middle of the back bench-seat.

The passenger emerged head first, thin blonde hair catching the yellow light. He held the door frame with one hand, the other showing itself pale in the grip of the bigger black man. He stepped carefully out to reveal a white, double-breasted suit, a compliment to his fair skin and a hard contrast to the darkness of the night. And he was blindfolded. He stood upright and stamped his feet lightly to straighten the crease of his pants, then pulled fussily at the hem of his suit jacket. Against his jacket and shoes, also white and expensive-looking, the red flash of cloth that was the blindfold looked incongruous, theatrical. As if it was as much for effect as it was to prevent him from seeing. Seeing what? Maatjie wasn't sure.

The white man didn't seem perturbed by his lack of vision and calmly stood next to the tall black passenger, as if waiting for Jansen and Klein-Maatjie to make the next move. Maatjie looked again at Jansen, hoping for a cue to what they should do next. Jansen stayed still, his eyes watching. The quiet sounds of the open veld settled around them. Then the white man spoke.

"We're sorry we're a little later than agreed."

The voice was a plain Anglicised South African. A little thin. Definitely Cape Townian.

"We took some time to spot the marker on the road where to turn off." he continued.

Jansen stood away from the bonnet. "Not a problem. 's a fine night anyways."

"Yes. Isn't it," agreed the white man, as if making small talk at a cocktail party. "If you don't mind, I'm going to keep the blindfold on. My own insurance really. In the event of questions later."

"Not a problem." said Jansen.

"Now, I don't need to know names of course, but I want to be sure that you are mandated to have this discussion. Can you tell me who sent you?" The white suited man took a step forward, as if to formally open the meeting.

"My colleague and I are mandated by the Three Kings," said Jansen evenly.

"Yes. Good. And what password did they give you?"

"2957893."

"Very good."

The white man paused slightly and Maatjie had the strange sensation that he could see them perfectly well through the blindfold. Then he nodded to the black man.

"4693722," intoned a rich, accented English that confirmed the black man as of West African origin.

Jansen nodded his acknowledgement of the response.

"Excellent. Indeed." The man looked up, took a breath, sucking in the warm night air. And exhaled. He looked back down in their direction.

"How much did the Three Kings authorise you to sell?"

Jansen paused briefly, glancing at the small yellow-man on the far side of the car.

"Our resource is pretty limitless. How big's your wallet?"

The white man chuckled softly, and turned slightly to the black man

standing just behind him.

"Our resource is pretty limitless too. Why don't we start with an amount and we can always make an arrangement for more? Down the line."

Jansen nodded slightly. It was not what he had been told to expect. In the past there was a fixed amount of product and the price for it negotiated, fluctuating as the City's need for fresh water rose or fell. The City, Jansen guessed, would hide this expenditure in a dark corner of the budget and knew besides that, in these dry times, most of the ratepayers were not going to stir mud around the question of water supply. As long as the supply did not falter.

"Is there a problem?" said the man in the white suit. Jansen felt the other man's eyes lock on him through the blindfold. He returned the veiled gaze steadily.

"No problem," said Jansen quietly. "Just figuring out some rough logistics in my head."

"I'm sure we could look into helping with that. Once we've settled on an amount."

The white man reached up and touched the blindfold. It was a nervous gesture, as if he wanted to remove it and then remembered not to. As if he was not expecting Jansen's response and his brain was working rapidly to find a solution.

"Yes," said Jansen. "Like we did last time."

"Exactly," said the white man and let his hand drop to rest in one of the pockets of his suit jacket.

Jansen nodded. He reached up to his ear and tugged on it slightly, apparently thinking again. He let out a small sigh. Then he scratched his upper arm briefly as if some insect had bitten him.

"600 million litres," he said finally.

Behind him he sensed Maatjie stand up, away from the car slightly. He saw the yellow-man clock the movement with his dark eyes and shift slightly to his right, so Jansen could see half of his body over the curve of the windscreen. He

also sensed a tightening of tension from the black man, though he did not move.

"600 million litres a day. For two weeks. At the end of February, one week. And the middle of March, one week. Thirteen cents a litre. Volume checks at both ends by representatives from both parties. Delivery to at least three different distribution points. Different again the second delivery. "

As he talked through the deal, Jansen started to use his hands to punctuate and enumerate each point. He was a big man over all but his arms, after a lifetime of heavy work, were his strongest feature. When he moved them around, as he was doing now, they were at best intimidating and at least a distraction. Maatjie used the distraction to casually reach his hand behind him until he felt the stock of his pistol slip snug into his grip, warm from its nest just above the crease of his buttocks. He glanced at the yellow-man but the Hottentot had not noticed his movement.

The man in the white suit was silent. Jansen could tell that he was doing the calculation.

"It's 109 bar. And change," said Jansen, doing the math for him. "Plus two and three quarter bar to me for the trouble. In real Rand, not the new Tx'gani shit."

He paused, watching to see if the last condition registered on the man's face at all, but there was no obvious reaction to the insult.

"It's the same as last time. And the transport, 'sincluded. Like before."

"Very good." said the white suit, "Very good. Yes, I think we can stretch to that. As we did last time. Of course."

Maatjie had the sense of the air around his partner going completely still. Jansen's hands rested by his side, his body seemed to settle a centimetre into the earth, taking purchase for a potential move. Maatjie tightened his hand on the pistol grip. Jansen's voice, when he spoke, was deep and calm but with a dark current of danger that Maatjie knew well and whose tone still scared him.

"Well. That's settled then."

The man in the white suit seemed unnerved by the rapid conclusion of the deal and unsure of what to do next. The big black man, also seemingly taken off-

guard turned to look back at his partner over the bonnet, and in doing so he missed his 'boss' stepping forward with his arm outstretched, looking to shake on the deal. Jansen took one step forward, his hand out as well. The black man, sensing movement, turned back but he didn't even finish saying the word 'no' before Jansen had grabbed the pale white hand, pulled the man tight into him and drawn his pistol from behind his back, all whilst moving just enough to his right to give Maatjie the clear air to put a single round in the black man's chest.

The Hottentot on the far side of the car was fast and had anticipated trouble, so he was already moving to give himself an open shot at Maatjie when the shot from Jansen's pistol caught him on the cheek and ricocheted into his brain. His body kept moving spontaneously and his arm raised to point his gun at Maatjie, but by then his reactions were gone, cut off by Jansen's shot, and Maatjie had put his second bullet through the yellow-man's neck, almost severing it at the spine. As he fell behind the car, his lifeless hand slapped against the bonnet and loosed off a single round harmlessly into the night.

Maatjie always liked the stillness and silence after the sharp reports of a gun fight. Even if there were wounded groaning, the clap of the weapons in his ears meant he heard nothing and his vision felt enhanced and keen. Jansen had told him that he always had a grin on his face after a shooting and he felt it now. A tight showing of teeth in a locked jaw. He looked at Jansen.

Jansen had the white man smothered in a tight head lock beneath his right armpit. The white man was almost hanging free against the bulk of Jansen's body, his neck twisted at an angle and standing on the tip of his shoes in order to keep breathing. He was making very small mewling noises. Maatjie noticed that his socks were a ridiculous orange colour, sticking out of his equally absurd white pants - as if he were some rare, tropical water-bird being hung for plucking at the end of a successful game shoot. Jansen nodded to Maatjie an acknowledgement of their success, then flicked his gun hand towards the car. Maatjie understood and went cautiously around the rear of the vehicle to confirm the yellow-man was dead.

Jansen looked at the dark bulk of the black bodyguard, now twisted face down in a mud of slow spreading blood. The hole in his back was significant. Jansen didn't like the brutality of the bullets that Maatjie used but he had to admit they were effective.

Maatjie paused briefly over the body of the Hottentot where it had fallen

near the front of the car. The man was dead. He bent down and efficiently scoured through the man's pockets. There were a handful of bullets in the one jacket pocket, but that was it. Nothing to identify him by. Maatjie pocketed the bullets and took the gun out of the dead man's hand, wiping it on the back of the jacket and putting it in a zip-loc bag that he pulled out of his own back pocket. He'd deal with it later. Either sell it on or, more likely, break it up and toss the parts in the sea. Who knew what crimes it may have been party to already? Maatjie wasn't going to be hooked on some other idiot's wrongdoings just for the keeping of an unknown gun.

He was about to stand and move on to the black man when he noticed a little slip of white paper sticking out of the coin pocket in the Hottentot's jeans. He pulled at it but, it tore away. He cursed and used his finger to open the pocket and fish out the rest of it properly. He unfolded the well-worn paper to reveal an old, black and white photograph of a young girl in a white dress. 'Real photograph. On photographic paper. Not common these days,' he thought. He held it to catch the glow of the headlights. It was of a little girl, hard to tell what skin colour, white dress in some kind of lace or crochet. She had a ribbon in her hair, possibly also white. He guessed she was pretty, but the details on the paper were faded with age. He turned it over. In clear black script the word 'Ma' was written, but nothing else. 'Well Ma,' thought Maatjie, 'your boy's not going to remember you any more now. Shame.' He pocketed the photo to show Jansen later and gave a nod to the lifeless head of the Hottentot as if to acknowledge the humanity of his carrying a picture of his mother with him while he worked as a gangster or hired gun, or whatever criminal job he'd chosen that had brought him to this end. He moved through the beams of the headlights and went to search the black man.

Jansen, still with the white man in his stranglehold, had rolled the African over onto his back with his booted foot. Blood had seeped completely across his torso and coagulations of it, and the dirt and grass onto which he'd fallen, obscured the bullet's entry hole. But it was there, a neat puncture in the expensive cotton, between the third and fourth button of his previously well pressed shirt, bang into the heart. 'Nice shot' thought Jansen. He appreciated his partner's skill, having worked with others who would, in this event, have plugged several bullets randomly into the body, firing without consideration or precision.

Jansen watched as Maatjie rifled through the pockets of the black man, but found nothing. Not even a weapon which was interesting. Maybe he worked with his hands? Or maybe he was not there to guard, but to report back on the deal? Maybe

whomever these fucking clowns were thought they were going to get away with the deal? Pull off the con, whatever it was? Or maybe they were simply chancing it without understanding who they were dealing with? 'Fucking idiots,' said Jansen softly, and he deftly shifted the white man from under his arm to standing right in front of him, choking him with his large hand tightly around the soft fleshy throat and holding him high enough that the man needed to be on his toes.

Jansen walked the man back against his fancy car and flicked off the ridiculous blindfold that was still clinging at an angle to the white man's head. Seeing his full face for the first time up close, Jansen could tell that the man was wealthy enough, and vain enough, to waste money on his appearance. There were no lines on his face - it was smooth, cared for, probably moisturised twice a day. The eyebrows were thin and neat. 'Plucked,' thought Jansen, 'like a woman.'

"What. The. Fuck?" he said, leaning in to lock eyes and with a tone that made it very clear that this was not an expletive but a genuine question that he expected to be answered.

The man gagged and with one hand slapped weakly at Jansen's arm. Jansen released the pressure minutely, enough that the man was able to scrape out a sentence.

"Not my fault. I'm messenger." Tears were being forced out of the man's eyes by the pressure of Jansen's hand which circled the man's neck from beneath one ear to beneath the other. And which tightened again with Jansen's distaste for the reply.

"No, you cunt. You are the dealer. Now once more: What. The. Fuck?"

The man's eyes were bulging now with the pressure, his face was turning puce. He looked vainly for some support from his dead companions.

"They dead." said Jansen and stared into the eyes to judge how close the dangling man was to unconsciousness. The man's eyes rolled upwards as his oxygen-starved brain started to surrender. Jansen suddenly released him and the man fell onto his hands and knees, gasping in the warm night air. Jansen let him take three heaving breaths, then kicked him in the ribs. All of the air the man had sucked desperately inwards was forced out of him with a sharp grunt and he dry heaved with the pain, falling forward onto his face as his arms lost their strength. Jansen bent down and pulled him to standing by the thinning hair on

the back of his head. The pain made the man wail sharply and Jansen saw that it had brought his glazing eyes back into focus. Jansen held him against the car with his hand firmly on the man's chest.

"Let me be clear. This is the last time I ask. What?"

The man whimpered slightly, his mouth smudged with dirt.

"I...I..." he paused briefly, so Jansen pushed hard and sharp on his chest to encourage him.

"I'm working for the City. I'm working in secret. No-one knows. The Mayor and the executive, some of them. They ... we are ... trying to make sure that the City has water throughout the summer. But we can't use the Desalinators. They can't get us enough. We can't afford it."

"Kak." said Jansen dismissively and pushed sharply on the man's chest again.

"No! No! It's true." Shock and a lack of oxygen was making the man panicky.

"They're going to up the cost of the water beyond our budget and then the water will run out. Then there'll be trouble and they will use that to take over, to call for the Mayor to be fired. Put someone, one of theirs, a water tycoon, into the city. To make money. To have control over the budget."

Jansen looked at Maatjie who was now standing beside him. What did he think?

"'S bullshit," said Maatjie. "What fucking plan is that? Where's the money coming from if they don't have the budget anyway?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I'm just the messenger. I was supposed to make the deal with you to get enough water to take us closer to the rainy season. To give the Mayor something to negotiate with the Desalinators. They ... the City ... been getting money from private donors. And they are going to use money from elsewhere in the budget. Cover it up until the problem is solved. Until they can pay it back. Please. They told me that this is just the first purchase. If it goes well then there'll be more. I've got the mandate to get more. If this goes well there'll be more."

"It's a pity that you're such a bad liar," said Jansen, "because then maybe we could keep talking, maybe I could believe you. But you not. You a shit liar. You said 'Like the last time.' Now you say this is the first?"

"I meant my first. My first deal. I'm just here because they asked me to help. I know one of them on the council. In the executive. I gave in some money. They said they'd done it before..."

Klein Maatjie jumped in. "You gave them money? What for?"

"I... I'm a business man. A developer. I put in a bid for a piece of land in the Bo-Kaap, but they said it was too low. They said if I helped, they could guarantee the sale to me. I've promised them a percentage. But I only said it was for water. For this. So they made me..."

"You fucking cunt." said Maatjie and spat in the man's face.

Jansen held up his free hand to calm Maatjie. He took a deep breath, letting his brain work through the situation and the man's story. Maatjie stood ready, glaring hard at the white man.

The white man looked at Jansen and seemed to relax slightly. Jansen stared back and said nothing.

"Look," said the man, less fearfully, sensing that he might still have a deal, "I'm sure that the Mayor will understand this situation. No-one is going to be punished if we get the water. I'll ask to speak directly to the Mayor. Explain. And when the water comes, the money will come. Just like last time..."

"Who are you here for?" Jansen's voice was cold and calm. Maatjie clocked the change in tone and shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet.

"The Mayor. Like I said. The Mayor and the executive..."

Faster than anyone would anticipate from a man of his size, Jansen slapped the white man on the side of his head with the full flat of his big hand. It made a sound not dissimilar to the clap of the gunshots earlier. The man's head snapped over sideways with the force of the hit and almost instantly his right eye clouded with blood. He did not even make a sound, so forceful was the shock. Maatjie saw blood starting to drip from his ear as he raised his head slowly to

look at them and then his head slumped forward and lolled loosely onto his chest. Jansen put his hand under the man's chin and lifted it, almost tenderly, so that they were staring eye-to-eye once more. Jansen waited patiently until he saw some focus return behind the glaze of the man's moist eyes.

"Now let me be very clear here Mister, you must stop with the lying. What you perhaps need to understand is that we have been dealing with people from the City for some time and we know exactly who is who in the zoo. What we know is that the Mayor does not know anything about this and that those that do are no friend of that office or the executive."

He paused to let his words sink in. He was aware that the man was likely only hearing through one ear and would no doubt be struggling with the pain of the hit and the residual ringing of its force. He watched as the man tried to make sense of what he had been saying. Watched as the man came to the realisation that whatever con he'd been part of had failed, had gone badly wrong.

"So," Jansen began again, "what I also know then is that you are not here for the City or at least not the people we have been dealing with. And that only leaves me with one question. One question, one last time; what the fuck are you doing here?"

The white-suited man whimpered. Jansen, leaning in close to the man's face, caught the soft, warm smell of urine and knew that the man had wet himself. Jansen gave a small nod of understanding. Whomever had sent this man was more scary to him than Jansen was. This guy was afraid of Jansen and Maatjie in this immediate situation, but whatever, or whomever was pulling his strings had them drawn tight and firm, with a serious scare attached. 'Fuck it' thought Jansen, and turned away. The man, released from the holding pressure of Jansen's hand against his chest, slumped slightly down the side of the car and let out a quiet sigh of relief. He must have thought he'd got away with it. Which made Jansen clock for himself again how inexperienced the fool must be. To not know when the end is come.

Jansen turned and stepped away. He heard Maatjie move forward, push the man's head back against the window with a slight clunk, heard the soft rush of air and bubbling of blood as Maatjie sliced through the man's windpipe and neck arteries and, lastly, the muffled, gurgling sound of the body in the white suit dropping onto the ground.

Jansen went straight to the back of their car, popped the trunk and took out two spades and a heavy duty-pick axe. His face was sour at the thought of digging. He hated manual labour. Most of his early life had been spent in toil either on his father's business lot or, later, in various building jobs. Even when he had spent that time in prison, his size had meant they had put him straight into the heavy work detail to dig, carry and shift on whatever shit project the warders had come up with to occupy the prisoner's otherwise vacant time. Since then he had made sure that he very rarely had to do that kind of work, made sure that everyone knew that his skills and qualifications were of a different nature and that those skills were what they were paying him for, not for menial work. But tonight he knew he would have to work again like a labourer and he felt the flush of anger wash across his face and the faint, stale oiliness of distant shame stir in his gut.

Maatjie was wiping the short steel blade of his knife on the shoulders of the white suit. The man had sunk to the ground as he bled out, his legs had splayed ungainly in front of him, his hands lying open on his lap, supporting the torso in a flopped forward position of supplication. His blood was oozing from his neck, covering the suit front, staining it a rich arterial red, and dripping in glistening strings into the ground in front of him. Jansen came to stand looking down at the body and let out a deep sigh.

"Fok," he said and dropped the digging implements with a clatter across the man's legs.

Maatjie held his tongue. He knew Jansen hated this shit. Hated it when things went wrong and had to be cleaned up. He examined his knife for any blood. It looked clean enough for now. He'd rinse it in bleach when they got back, clear it of any trace of its activity. It was one of his favourite possessions, probably his most prized, given that he had had it made up to his specifications; a single piece of 4116 ThyssenKrupp stainless steel machined into a twelve centimetre blade with the hilt shaped to his hand, including two holes for his index and ring fingers to secure his grip. It was spectacularly dangerous in close quarter fighting and, as he had just demonstrated once again, extremely efficient at cutting through human bodies. And it cleaned easily and well, not having any extraneous detail that could trap guilt-laden evidence.

Jansen lit a fresh cigarette, inhaled deeply, blew out the smoke in a long, even stream and looked steadily at Klein-Maatjie.

"Three hours to first light," said Maatjie. "An hour for each. Hard

ground." He sheathed his knife carefully back into the leather scabbard stitched to the inside of his jacket.

Jansen nodded. He looked at the scene around them.

"And the car." he said flatly. He stared at the dead men's car then turned to look back at their own car parked next to the fence. A thought, the glimmer of something that he'd noted when they first drove up, swam enticingly on the edge of his frustration.

"What if..." his voice trailed off as his brain began to haul the idea he was starting to have into sharper focus.

"Huh?" grunted Maatjie.

"This is the croc farm," said Jansen, almost to himself.

Maatjie turned to look at the fence as well. It was a tall, thick-wired diamond mesh with razor wire coils strung along its top. Designed effectively to prevent anyone getting in or over. When they'd scoped the spot the week previously Maatjie had pointed out the strip of open land, about a hundred metres wide, on the other side of the fence, which ran to a low wall that they assumed were the first of the ponds that held the reptiles. At this hour, the whole area behind the fence was dark with only the single glow of a security light in the distance that showed the roof and wall of a building, possibly a shed.

Jansen stood looking at the fence. He took a last deep drag of his cigarette, pinched it out, pocketed the stub and walked towards their car. Maatjie followed.

Jansen went straight to the drivers' side door and quietly opened it. The interior light came on and its slight glow spilled from the car, lighting a section of the fence next to it. Jansen walked around the front of the car and stood up against the fence, looking at it. He reached out and held it gently. His fingers curled through the mesh, and he gave it a small shake. It was tight and strong, and gave a soft metallic ring as it shook between the two nearest support posts. Jansen scuffed away some soil at the base of the fence with his boot toe. By the spill of the car light he saw that the fence had been dug into the ground as well. Very secure. He suddenly remembered that crocodiles were strong and capable diggers so the fence was probably dug in some way to prevent

any ambitious reptiles making a break for freedom. But maybe this could be an advantage for the plan that was now building in rapid stages in his head.

"What you thinking, Oom?" Maatjie's voice was quiet, he was a little anxious, suspecting that Jansen was about to suggest something out of the ordinary, something that wasn't part of the plan, even though that plan had not really counted on three dead bodies and a car to dispose of in the open veld.

Jansen turned to look at Maatjie who was standing on the other side of the car.

"We're going to feed them to the crocodiles."

Maatjie couldn't help but give a small laugh.

"What you say, Oom? The crocodiles? You joking."

"No. Serious. They going to get rid of the evidence for us."

Maatjie was briefly silent. Then he laughed again.

"Very fucking funny, Oom. Let's just dig the holes, get the bodies in, nice and far apart, take the car, get the fuck out of here before the sun comes up..."

"No." Jansen's voice was firm. Maatjie's heart sank a little and he felt the anxiety rising in his gut again. He knew this tone. It meant Jansen was fixed on something and he was not going to be distracted.

"We dig one hole. Under this fence. We drag the bodies to the water, we dump the bodies in, the crocs eat the bodies, evidence gone. One dig, three drags and an easy solution. Come, get the spades."

"Now you fucking gone crazy. What if there's a guard in there?"

"Why d'you need a guard for crocodiles? No one going to steal them." Jansen grunted with amusement, delighted by what he saw as a way to avoid the graft of digging three graves, and at the idea of the dangerous animals needing a guard.

"What if they don't do the job? What if they not hungry?"

"Crocodiles are always hungry my friend. I know this. I remember at school learning that a crocodile will always eat. They got too, they don't know when the next meal is coming. They'll eat anything. Even rotten food they eat."

Maatjie stared at his partner. Fuck. This was crazy, but he knew he wasn't going to convince Jansen.

"Come on now. Get the spades."

Reluctantly Maatjie returned to the implements lying across the legs of the white suited man. He gathered them up and then thought of one last gambit.

"What about the clothes?" he called back. "Man, not even a crocodile will eat this fucking ugly suit!"

"That's why you're going to strip them and we'll burn the clothes later." Maatjie jumped at the sound of Jansen's voice right behind him. Jansen was fired up now, he'd followed Maatjie to get the tools.

"Start with the big one. When I'm under the fence, I'll come and drag him over." He took hold of the spades and pick from Klein-Maatjie and headed back to the fence leaving Maatjie empty handed, staring at the corpse of the big black man.

Jansen chose a spot half-way between the two support posts, put down the two spades, hefted the pick with a firm grasp and swung the implement in a high arc to drive it's point deep into the ground next to the fence. The ground was firm, stony, but Jansen's strength and experience drove the point deep, almost to the hilt. He twisted the shaft a quarter-turn then levered it up to break the soil. He felt his muscles burn lightly at this unanticipated strain and, despite his annoyance, acknowledged the blunt pleasure of the effort. He swung again, striking the ground just left of his first hit, levered again, and loosened the soil once more.

Maatjie watched Jansen make the first strike and shook his head. Then he knelt down carefully next to the large black man, taking care not to dip his trouser knee into the blood-moistened soil. The man's eyes were open wide, the muscles of his face still caught in a rictus of surprise. Maatjie paid him the respect of gently pushing down the eyelids and then started to unbutton the man's shirt. He noted that it was of good quality. Who were these fuckers? They

weren't some two-bit gangsters trying to pull a fast one. These guys had money and they clearly thought that they had a solid plan. That indicated that they had some backing, someone in the background who'd come up with the idea of jumping on the lucrative bandwagon of supplying water to the City. Who? The City had always, in his experience of dealing with them, been extremely cautious about whom they dealt with around water. In fact, Maatjie had never heard of them dealing with anyone else but the Three Kings. And in turn, the Three Kings had only ever used himself and Jansen to make the deals. He and Jansen were trusted to push hard for a good deal, know the limits of what could be provided and keep their mouths very firmly shut about it all. Even if things fucked out and they were bust, Maatjie knew that the Three Kings would rely on them to not reveal the truth. So how had these dead men found out about the water trading? How had they known enough about it to arrange this meeting? To try to make a deal ostensibly on the City's behalf and yet not be clued in enough to know how the deals had worked in the past? The costs? The arrangements made? So that they had given themselves away as imposters almost immediately and were now lying dead? Maatjie suddenly felt a cold slither of fear pass through him. Dead men tell no tales, sure, but when these dead men didn't return to whomever had sent them, the tale was as clear as a bright new day. And if whomever had sent them was determined to break the Three Kings' hold on the secretive water supply, their death would be an invitation to retaliate or, worse still, to blow the City's dealings right out into the public's swiftly judgemental eye. Maatjie paused as he acknowledged the dangerous potential end points of this situation. He heard Jansen strike the ground again and exhale with the effort of loosening the soil. He heard a wooden thunk as Jansen discarded the pick, a brief silence, then the sound of a spade being dug into the soil. Jansen was working with determination; Maatjie needed to work with more focus.

He had the man's shirt undone and had pulled it from the pants, ready to strip off. He shuffled down to the black man's midriff and unbuckled the brown leather belt around the waist. He unbuttoned the fly, loosening the trousers as far as possible. He moved down to the feet to unlace and remove the man's shoes and socks. The shoes were definitely high quality; leather brogues that ended in a cut-off toe point, with a swirling pattern picked out on the lighter tan leather of the cap and quarter. And the socks were soft. Very soft. Maatjie felt the cloth between his fingers and thought briefly about keeping them for himself. The sound of the spade tinging against the wire fence snapped him out of savouring their luxury and he peeled them away and balled them into the shoes. He lifted the man's legs by the feet, also soft and cared for, he realised, grabbed hold of the hems and started to pull off the pants. The soil under the man's buttocks was muddied by the spill of blood and the pants came

away easily. The belt snagged slightly under the weight of the dead man's buttocks before slipping up the thigh, past the calves and over the feet so efficiently that Maatjie stumbled backwards slightly and the man's legs fell with a double thump to the ground. Maatjie heard Jansen stop suddenly at the noise, but then resume his digging. He bundled the pants and tossed them on top of the shoes and then bent over the man's waist, a foot on either side, to take hold of the hem of the man's underwear. He was cautious after the trousers slipping away so easily and tugged away the boxers in small shifts, first from beneath the man's buttocks and then revealing his pubic hair and genitals. Without pause he shuffled the pants along the thighs, raising the man's knees and calves as he did so, until he slipped them over the man's large feet and tossed them onto the pile of pants and shoes. Maatjie stood back again. In the darkness, the details of the black body were obscured, but Maatjie could tell that this was a well-proportioned, well-defined and well-nurtured human. It was the biggest body he had ever seen dead and he was admiring the torso outlined by the splaying shirt, when he felt Jansen approaching.

"I need your help. How you going?" said Jansen quietly.

"Nearly. Big fucker. Just his shirt off now. Gimme a hand," replied Maatjie, catching Jansen's hushed tone.

Jansen grunted and bent down to the black bulk of the dead man.

"Pull his hands. Get him sitting," said Jansen. He was experienced in dead bodies and had learned quickly from his early experiences with them that their weight and uncooperative limbs could be tricky to manoeuvre. His approach was to treat them firmly and with determination, as if lifting a heavy sack; get in low, use more strength than you thought you needed and don't be afraid to bend and break them as necessary. It was not as if they were going to complain.

Maaitjie took the man's hands. They were big and felt mushy as he grabbed them. He tried to get a good grip, like one would use helping someone to stand up from the floor. He stood over the man and pulled towards him. The hands seemed to melt in his own, slipping away even as he tried to tighten his hold, and the torso slid along the ground, twisting the legs at the knees and dragging the body under his spread legs.

"No. Take his wrists. Put one foot in his nuts and lean back on your other foot," Jansen's instructions were curt, frustrated by his partner's mistake.

Maatjie tried again. Doing as Jansen had said, he clenched the dead man's thick wrists in his hands, put his left foot firmly in the dead man's crotch, his heel wedging solidly in the soil, and leaned back on his right leg, pulling firmly against the weight of the torso as he did so. The big black man came upright with his head lolling backwards and then to the side. Jansen moved quickly to take the hem of the shirt on the side nearest him and pulled it up over the head before the torso had a chance to keel over.

"Now drop," he said.

Maatjie let the dead man go and the body slumped backwards, trapping the backward hanging head at an angle as it did. The shirt slipped inside out and came clean away so that it was in front of the torso, being held by the two arms.

"You forgot the cuffs man!"

Jansen had wanted to pull the shirt clear in one move, but it was held up by the cuffs at the dead man's wrists and, as the arms fell back, the shirt spread like a butchers apron across the man's lap.

"Fuck." Maatjie muttered, and felt a little foolish.

He bent down again and picked open the buttons on the cuffs, first pulling away one arm and then the other, letting them flop back again. The second arm fell back to land with the hand coyly covering the mound of the black man's genitals. It made Maatjie feel uncomfortable. It looked too human suddenly, too self-conscious, a reminder that only some brief time ago this had been a real being in the world with emotions and weaknesses, with desires. He flicked the dead hand away onto the ground where it fell with it's pale palm facing up. Maatjie felt a light clench in his guts as he saw the simple but plainly obvious mark in the middle of the palm. He looked to Jansen and indicated with his finger. Jansen bent down to look.

Unmistakably tattooed into the creamy flesh of the hand was a dark ring with an equally dark dot at its centre. Around the outside of the ring were seven smaller, lighter spots arranged equally, but with a gap at the apex where an eighth dot would have balanced the pattern. Jansen lifted the hand and twisted it slightly to catch the light coming from the interior of their car. There were no further markings on the palm. He turned the hand over. There was nothing he could see in the dark skin of the back of the hand and he turned it

again to the pattern on the palm.

"You recognising that, Oom?" said Maatjie.

Jansen shook his head.

"No. No idea."

He stroked the pattern firmly with his thumb to see if it was permanent, even though he could tell it was impregnated beneath the skin, then he let the hand drop.

"Huh. Tribal something maybe. Come, I need your help this side."

Jansen strode back to where he had been digging against the fence. Maatjie followed.

Jansen had worked fast. There was a significant pile of earth and rock off to one side of a wide hole that bottomed out at about half a metre below the level of the ground. Maatjie could see the lower edge of the fence in the dirt at the bottom of the hole.

"Here. Grab one side. We need to pull the fence up so I can clear the other side." said Jansen. Maatjie joined him, took a firm hold of the wire that threaded through the mesh at its base and leaned back on his haunches to take the strain.

"On three. One - two - three!" Jansen and Maatjie pulled together, lifting the bottom of the fence up and towards themselves. The fence shook slightly as it resisted their efforts, and it came slightly away from the ground so loosened soil and rock spilled into the hole from the far side. Jansen counted again.

"One - two - three!"

They both pulled hard and Maatjie felt his back muscles straining with the effort, his thighs solid beneath his torso and his shoes locking into the soil. The fence came further away from the grip of the soil.

"Wait," said Jansen and picked up one of the spades. "Loosen it around the edge there. Use the spade."

Maatjie picked up the other spade and dug into the soil against the fence on his side of the hole. The spade sang in his hands as it struck a rock, but the soil was fairly soft and he cleared a good shovel-load, making a small pile on his side before digging in again. He struck the fence with the spade, stopping his thrust and making the fence above shiver in response. He pulled out, and struck again. A second good load came away and he shovelled it onto his pile.

"Ok. Try again," said Jansen. Maatjie laid his spade down quietly and bent to the bottom of the fence again. Both he and Jansen had one foot in the hole, the other on the level ground so they were shoulder to shoulder. Maatjie could feel the warmth of Jansen's body where their arms touched and he could smell the sweat of Jansen's efforts mixed with the tang of old nicotine.

"Oom, it would have been as much work to dig the holes," he said, hoping that the effort Jansen had made already would help to change his mind.

"No boet. Bodies in a hole can be found. Bodies in a crocodile are history. Come. Pull now. It's nearly out."

They both leaned back to take the strain in their legs, then, with Jansen counting them in, they pulled hard and long on the fence mesh. Soil spilled in a small avalanche from the other side of the fence as a section of it came clear and lifted towards them. Jansen counted in again, and again they pulled. Maatjie's hands burned with the pressure of the wire in the flesh of his fingers. Jansen grunted in his effort and both of them had their heads back, their neck tendons taut with effort, as they leaned hard into the pull. The wire came free first with a little jump and then in one long rip that had them falling backwards slowly onto the edge of the hole, as the fence peeled itself clear of the hold of the soil on the other side. The main part of the fence seemed to lose tension as well, as if it had surrendered to their efforts, acknowledged their small victory.

"Good. Fuck."

Jansen shook the pain out of his hands and sucked a small dot of blood away where one of the fence ties had dug into his finger. Maatjie breathed in deeply, feeling the burning subside in his hands, owning the pain of it as he had learnt to do as a child.

"Ok. I'll hold up the fence again," said Jansen, "You dig out the other

side."

He stood astride the hole and took a squat to take hold of the bottom of the fence once more, lifting it up like a wire skirt so that Maatjie could get the spade in underneath to the soil on the other side. His biceps bulged and veined with the effort while Maatjie sat on the edge of the hole, bent over between Jansen's legs and shovelled his diggings onto the pile beside them. Jansen grunted gently with effort above and then, directly over Maatjie's head as he crouched to dig again, Jansen let out a short, sharp parp of flatulence.

"No fok man!" said Maatjie as he dug out a spill of soil.

"Sorry boet!" said Jansen, his voice strained with effort, "Too much pressure."

Maatjie heard Jansen snort out a short laugh and he too started to chuckle.

"No man," said Jansen, "Sorry. Don't laugh. Dig."

It was too much for him though and he dropped the fence and fell back laughing at his indiscretion.

"You definitely going to buy me a drink for that one," Maatjie said, now laughing lightly as well as he dug more soil onto the pile. "What if you'd have shit on my head? Jurr man!"

Jansen laughed even harder at this and Maatjie smiled warmly at the sound of his partner, whom he had seen smile so rarely, never mind laugh, enjoying this unusual brevity.

Slowly Jansen pulled himself out of his laughter. Small tear tracks glistened at the outside corners of his eyes and he wiped at his nose with the back of his hands.

"Oh fok," he said sniffing and blinking some control back into his body. "Ok fok. Sorry man. That was bloody funny. Ok. Stupid bugger. Ok."

Jansen sighed as he regained control over his laughter and slid over to the edge of the hole to inspect the work they had done. The sight of it brought him fully back into himself and he looked back in the direction of the bodies.

"Ok," he said clearly, "go and finish stripping those other two. I'll tie up this fence and clear more from the other side. Then we'll pull them across. How's our time?"

"Still ok," replied Maatjie, "still another two hours at least, probably a little bit more."

"Ok. Good."

Maatjie could tell from Jansen's tone that he was back in control and ready to go for it, so he stood up out of the hole with a nod, handed Jansen the spade and walked back to where the dead bodies were stiffening in the blood stained soil.

Jansen leaned on the spade to stand up. He looked down at the hole and the fence base which now stretched free across the widened hole. He turned and walked to the boot of their car. He lifted the cover of the spare wheel well, reached in to feel his way around the car jack, the spare and the tire spanner until his hands settled on the small bag that held the thick, flat tow strap. He stood at the boot to unzip the bag and unfurled the strap with its two sturdy metal clips. He felt their weight in his hand and nodded to himself 'Perfect'.

Back at the fence, he stretched up, standing on his toes to make the height, and passed one clipped end of the strap over the top of the fence, being careful to avoid the vicious barbs of the razor wire. He let the weight of the clip drop the strap down about a third of the way on the far side, caught it in his fingers and threaded it back through the mesh to his side. He stepped into the hole to clip that end to the exposed bottom of the fence, then he reached up again and took hold of the clip on the loose end of the strap. He laid the strap flat over his shoulder, then looped it under his arm and back across his chest to attach the clip onto the strap, harnessing himself into it. As he backed directly away from the fence, the strap tensioned and then, as Jansen lay his weight into the effort, it started to peel the bottom of the fence upward. He backed away further, feeling the strap tighten on his torso. The fence lifted further and he heaved a few more steps back until the fence had curled up above the level of the ground. Jansen grabbed the taught strap in front of him and, keeping the tension, walked himself hand over hand towards the fence. His arms trembled with the effort, but he managed to hold the lifted fence while swiftly unhooking the harness from around him and attaching that clip also to the bottom wire. He grunted with approval. The fence was now securely held up, so he could

away at the far side, creating a crawl hole deep enough to get the bodies and themselves under the fence without obstruction. He set to work digging the gap clear.

Maatjie worked with more efficiency on the other two bodies. He had dragged the Hottentot from around the far side of the vehicle where he had fallen so that he could strip it in the faint light from the car interiors. The head was a concern as his bullet had nearly severed it at the neck. Certainly the spine was blown away, and it flopped loosely from side to side as he manoeuvred it next to the body of the black man. A small section of skull had been blown out by Jansen's well-aimed round, dribbling fluid and white solids as he pulled the body across the dirt. The cheek had collapsed around the entry hole, the bullet having mashed the bone and forced the eyeball to bulge in the socket. They'd have to be careful not to decapitate the body as they dragged it across the ground to the crocodile pens. Maybe get it through the fence, then carry it from there.

The white man was tricky only in the amount of clothes that he was wearing. First Maatjie had dragged him flat, then pulled him away from the side of the car where he had slumped. He had taken off the soft, expensive white leather shoes and stripped off the ridiculous orange socks. Then he had roughly pulled away the jacket, rolling the body one way and then the other to release it as he did. Beneath the jacket was a double-breasted waistcoat that had also been white. It had done the majority of the work in soaking up the blood that had spilled out of the man's cut throat. The material and silk lining had acted like chromatography paper, separating out the plasma and red blood cells so the damp, dark red at the neck softened to a dirty pink half way down the garment. Maatjie's patience gave out and he made use once again of his blade, rolling the body onto its side and slicing neatly up the back seam, before pulling the flaps of material clear of the arms. He pulled out the mans' shirt at the back and made to slice again from hem to collar. He realised that the man was wearing a string vest. Maatjie shook his head, 'What kind of a poof still wears a vest?'. He gathered both layers together and sliced roughly upwards, working the blade to get through the stiff collar and thick neck-tie. The whole ensemble came free easily as the body rolled again onto its back. The neck wound, compressed together as he had pushed the head forward to get at the collar, made a grim little sucking sound as the head rolled back and Maatjie felt a small flicker of revulsion bubble in his gut.

The pants were easy enough. He unbuckled the belt, zipped open the fly, unbuttoned the waist and pulled them clean off by the hem. The pants coming away

had half pulled down the underwear until they snagged on the man's knee caps. Maatjie took them by their elasticated waist and stripped them away, noting with surprise as he did so that the white man had a large penis. 'Alabama white snake,' thought Maatjie, suddenly recalling the white boy in his class at school who had earned the moniker in the communal showers after one of their away games at a private school. He smiled at the thought. He'd liked the kid; even though he was white he was also poor - one of them. They had all revelled in the luxury of a hot shower immediately after a cold, wet game. 'That's what it is to be rich,' he remembered someone saying on the bus after, 'You rich you get to clean up whenever you want. With hot water.' Maatjie wondered briefly what had happened to 'white snake' as he tossed the underwear onto the pile of shoes and clothes that now lay in a mess of blood, leather and material next to the black man's corpse. 'Probably dead,' he thought, 'or a drug addict... or some other fuck up.'

Maatjie looked across towards where Jansen was digging, but couldn't see him behind the bulk of their car. He sighed. He wished they'd just dug these fuckers into the ground and left it, but Jansen was the boss and maybe he was right. Better to lose all evidence. If they could.

Jansen suddenly appeared, standing in the half light beyond the car, and Maatjie could see that he was now on the other side of the fence.

In a soft voice Jansen called across "Bring one."

Maatjie nodded and looked down at the three corpses laid out at his feet. He was sure he couldn't move the black man by himself, and was worried about dragging the Hottentot, so it would have to be the white man. He took the pallid corpse by the feet and dragged it towards the fence. The white man's arms splayed outwards and up, trailing through the dirt. As he came around the far side of the car, into the brighter light from the open passenger door, Maatjie noticed that the man had ginger pubic hair. So he must have dyed his head, which was blonde. 'Odd,' thought Maatjie. He looked at the man's armpits, now stretched and exposed in the light, to see if they matched the crotch, but they were bare. No hair at all. As if they had been shaved. The thought that this man was a moffie for sure had just popped in Maatjie's head when his heart missed a beat. There, in the left armpit, was a marking. The circle, the internal and external dots. The same as on the black man's hand. "Fok!" said Maatjie, louder than he had wanted to.

"What?" he heard Jansen say quickly and quietly.

"Look here. Same fucking mark. Under his arm. Same as the black bugger's hand."

There was a brief pause, then Jansen grunted an acknowledgement.

"What is it?" Maatjie asked.

"Dunno. Don't care. Get his legs under the fence to me."

Maatjie guessed that Jansen probably did care. In their line of business things like this were important. It meant, at the very least, that there was a stronger connection between the two corpses than they might have previously guessed. It meant that maybe they were organised in a bigger way than anticipated and that killing them now carried an extra weight of consequence. Maatjie felt the tremor of anxiety again flutter through him.

"Come on. Time's ticking. Legs."

Maatjie dragged the dead white man to the edge of the hole and flopped the legs down into it. He saw that Jansen had cleared a similar amount of soil on the far side and he could see the marks where Jansen himself had slithered under the jerry-rigged fence. Jansen bent over and took hold of the white man's dead feet. He leaned back and hauled the body towards him. For a man of Jansen's size, the body of the white man was easy to manoeuvre. The legs slid under the fence until the body was bent at the waist, half on either side. Jansen stood up and pulled again. The torso slid neatly under the gap and, with one more pull, Jansen had the corpse clear and stretched out on the ground beyond the lip of the hole on his side.

"Go and get the other one," he said softly.

"I'm worried about the head," said Maatjie.

Jansen looked at him from across the fence blankly, then nodded his head as he caught Maatjie's meaning.

"Just get it anyway," said Jansen firmly. "All going to the same place."

Maatjie turned away to fetch the dead Hottentot as Jansen bent to examine the white man's armpit and the tattoo inked there.

The Hottentot's corpse was even lighter than the white man's, but Maatjie dragged it carefully, watching the head closely to see that it didn't snag on any rock or clump of grass. The arms spread up as they had with the white man and helped to hold the head a little against the catch of the ground. The gore and gristle of the wounds had started to dry and harden as well, further helping to secure the head to the shattered neck. As he dragged the body near the hole, Maatjie noticed that the eyes of the yellow man were still open. He dropped the legs into the hole and as Jansen stepped in to take hold of the ankles, Maatjie knelt and pressed the lids closed on the staring eyes. The left eyeball, bulging outwards, resisted slightly and he had used his thumb to push it back into the socket. He sighed out a small breath of disgust at the sensation and immediately thought of the picture he had pulled from the man's pocket. An unexpected pang of sadness tightened in his chest, which he pushed away with a quiet, angry and dismissive 'Fuck you.'

He stood up and watched as Jansen pulled the body efficiently under the fence. His breath caught as the head crested the lip of the hole on the other side and stuck briefly, tugging at the fleshy remains of the neck. Maatjie had the gruesome vision of the head coming away and rolling back into the hole, it's eyelids popping open and the dead eyes staring up at him again. But the flesh held and Jansen laid the second body next to the corpse of the white man.

Jansen bent over the body and quickly checked the Hottentot's palms and under his arms for any tattoos, but he couldn't see anything like those on the other bodies. He thought about rolling the body over and giving it a thorough examination, but he realised that they needed to move quicker, and anyway what did it matter? They would all be crocodile food shortly.

"Come across," he said to Maatjie, standing up. "You start to drag the bodies towards the pens. I'll get the other fucker."

Maatjie crouched head first into the hole, arching his head and back under the fence and then pushing himself forward. Jansen came over to the fence and reached down to offer him a hand. Maatjie twisted his torso, took Jansen's proffered hand, and, pushing himself through with his heels, came up to sit on the side of the hole. He looked back through the fence at the scene on the other side. The separation from it through the mesh of the fence gave it a slightly unreal air. Like a picture of something that they were not involved in, a modern still-life of murder to be regarded with emotional disinterest. Their car, with the boot and passenger door open, it's soft light shadowing the ground, hid most

of the other car behind. Between them still was the body of the black man, naked in the dirt. The piles of soil next to the hole, with the spade standing stiffly up out of the larger one, looked so normal. So like the ordinary work of a labourer. And in the distance he noticed again the lights of Cape Town. He realised also that he was sweating from the effort of sorting out this fuck up of a situation. A sudden anger at the events of the last hour, of what they had had to do, shot through him and he stood up quickly.

"Kom Oom," he said firmly, his anger leading to resolve, "let's get this fucking thing done and get the fuck out of here. I'm done with this fuck up."

"Ja," was all Jansen said then dropped to his knees to crawl back into the hole and under the fence.

Maatjie didn't even wait to watch if his partner needed help. He took up the heels of the dead Hottentot and started to drag the corpse towards where he remembered seeing the low wall of what he hoped were the crocodile pens.

Jansen stopped briefly at the front of their car to take in the scene they had created. Lying a little towards the other car was the bulk of the naked black man, his outline blurred by the darkness of the night and the blood in the dirt around him. To the right was the pile of clothes and shoes that Klein-Maatjie had stripped from the bodies. The other car stood eerily empty, the interior light and the open doors underscoring what had happened to its passengers. He could see the drag marks passing at his feet where Maatjie had pulled the first two bodies around to the fence.

'Fuck sakes,' he thought to himself. 'This is not how I wanted to spend the night.'

When the representative from the Three Kings had called him up to give him this task he had thought that it would be as simple as the three other times he had met in the shadows with representatives from the City. The first time had been a little edgy, sure, but the agreements made had been attended to in good faith and the subsequent meetings had been efficient and cordial. At least as cordial as they could be given the nature of their intent. The City representatives had been different each time, but they had clearly been briefed from the same hymn sheet; buy water, get it shipped in, dump it in the system, keep it quiet from the Desalinators and sell it on to the happy customers. Jansen had settled on a fee of two and a half percent of the total which had made him a very nice sum of money for nothing more than the edgy discomfort of

the meetings and overseeing the delivery arrangements. Money for nothing. Until now. Now he was facing the reality of three dead bodies and, more disturbingly, the thought that someone in the arrangement had spilled enough information that another party had tried to either get in on the act, or find out what was going on in order to shut them down. Jansen made a mental note to make special mention to the Three Kings about the strange marking on the dead men. A symbol of something. A clue. He would let them figure it out and hope that it pointed in the direction of where the break in secrecy had occurred. Then he would offer to fix it. Small recompense for this fuck up. He bent down and took the black man by the heels, strained into the weight of the corpse and dragged it towards the hole under the fence.

Klein Maatjie crossed the ground between the fence and the wall of the crocodile pen as efficiently as he could. He had stopped worrying about the dead Hottentot's head coming away. It was all going to the same place anyway, just as Jansen had said. It survived the drag and he dropped the heels of the corpse as he looked over the waist-high white wall. The pen was dug about six feet into the ground, the wall dropping smooth away from its lip to the base where it connected with what looked like a concrete bank. This, he could just see, led to the darker shimmer of the water. It looked like about five feet or so of clear concrete. He couldn't see any of the reptiles, but he thought he heard a faint splash of water off in the darkness of the pool. He shivered at the thought of the crocodiles. How the fuck were they going to get the bodies into the water? They couldn't toss them far enough to clear the concrete bank. Maybe the water came up closer to the wall somewhere else. He started walking the perimeter of the pen, looking over the wall to see if the water came nearer. Luckily, about ten metres from where he had abandoned the body, the edge of the concrete bank curved toward the encircling wall and he could see dark water lapping directly against the base. 'Jesus this is insane,' he thought, and walked back towards the dead yellow-man.

As he bent to pick up the man's legs again, he could hear Jansen dragging the dead black man under the fence. It sounded like it was proving a struggle. He heard a soft curse and the sound of the fence rattling. It was quiet again briefly, then he heard Jansen grunt with effort and then, a moment later, the thump of dead flesh on the ground as Jansen let the man's legs go. Klein Maatjie picked up the heels of his corpse and dragged it to where he had seen the water lapping the wall of the pen.

Jansen stood back panting with the effort of having dragged the black man around the car and wrestling the corpse under the fence. There was a nasty gash

in the side of the corpse's stomach where the flesh had snagged on the fence and Jansen had used his brute strength to pull the body clear. No matter. He'd done it. Now he waited for Maatjie and caught his breath.

"It's not as far as it looks," said Maatjie, coming quietly back to the fence.

Jansen straightened up and said, "Good. 'Cause this is one heavy bastard."

'He's enjoying this more than he's ever going to admit,' Maatjie thought as he looked at his partner curiously. He must tease him about it later.

"What you find?"

"Crocodile pen. Found a place where the water comes to the wall. Otherwise there's a bank or something. Around the water."

"Good."

"I can't see how deep," Maatjie paused, "You sure this is still a good idea? What if it's not deep enough?"

"Deep enough for a croc. Deep enough for a body."

Jansen picked up one heel of the black man and motioned Maatjie to the other.

"Come. Help me. Let's get this fucker in there first. I'm tired of him now."

Maatjie took up the other leg and they started to pull.

The corpse was heavy. Maatjie was amazed that Jansen had managed to get it under the fence without assistance. Even with two of them pulling, it felt like they were hauling a tree trunk through mud. The corpse left a thick drag mark across the ground, the arms and head scoring unique indentations in the broad scrape left by the body. The two men kept a steady rhythm in their steps, working together against the weight, and occasionally pausing to tighten their grip. They got to the wall where Maatjie had stopped initially and he indicated the direction towards where he had left the Hottentot. Jansen grunted and peered over the wall to the pen below before starting the pull again.

Maatjie had left the yellow-man's corpse slightly away from the wall and in a moment of panic thought that they'd missed him before he saw the shadow stretched out in the tufts of grass. They unceremoniously dropped the large dead man next to the wall.

"Go and bring that other one," said Jansen, breathing hard with the effort of the carry.

Maatjie nodded, his own breath was short and he was starting to relish the end of this grim effort. As he walked back towards the glow of the car light, he noticed that the darkness of the night around them had softened. He glanced up to see that a half-disk of moon had now risen and was hanging above the ridge line of the mountains in the east. They needed to get this done and be the fuck away from here before the sun followed suit.

Jansen reached down and took a firm hold on the black man's feet, hoisting them over the wall so that they dangled, bent slightly at the knee, over the water below. He was starting to regret his insistence on this creative solution for the dead bodies. He wasn't even so certain now that the reptiles would eat the corpses. But he had committed to it and to go back was not an option. The odds would have to be bought.

He went around to the shoulders, squatting down to give his full strength to the lift, and hoisted the body up in his arms. He let out a grunt of effort and steadied himself against the weight and then, with a final push and stagger, forced the body towards the wall. The corpse folded at the waist and the top of the torso flopped heavily over the lip of the wall, the head and one arm dangling over the water, the other arm draped backwards over the wall. Jansen cursed quietly and, holding the body by the neck with one hand, so it would not fall back again, reached his other under the dead body's naked backside. Folded over as he was, with his buttocks stretched over his hips, the black man's body offered no easy purchase for Jansen's hand. He struggled and failed to get a hold under the buttocks. Similarly the slack thighs gave no help and he nearly dropped the body as it pushed back onto him. He grabbed wildly under the cleft of the buttock and felt the dead man's genitals brush his arm.

"Fuck. Fuck sakes," he said vehemently. This was really not turning out as easily as he had hoped. He should have listened to Maatjie and buried these fuckers. Instead here he was groping around a dead man's arse and ball-sack to try and find some purchase to toss him into a crocodile pen. Jesus.

"Fuck it," he said out loud, and took a firm hold at the root the dead man's package. He closed his eyes against the sensation of the pubic hairs curling around his fingers and hoisted the corpse upwards, feeling the strain on the flesh of the man's privates as he did so. But it worked. The body lifted up and forward and quickly reached a tipping point as the torso leaned forward over the wall. In a rush of momentum the body pulled its own weight up and over the wall. It happened so quickly that Jansen was pulled forward, still clutching the man's genitals, and nearly pitched over himself before he let go. There was a brief pause and then an alarming splash in the water below. Jansen stood back quickly from the wall, startled by how loud the sound was. He hadn't thought of that. He quickly calmed himself with the thought that if anyone had heard, they would assume it was one of the crocodiles being over-active. He stepped forward to peer into the darkness of the water.

At first he could make out nothing, and had the hopeful thought that the corpse had simply sunk straight away. He had to squint into the moon-rippled water to spot the dark shape floating gently away from the wall. The action of falling had flipped the body and it was face-up in the water. The legs seemed to have submerged but the upper chest, the head, and arms gleamed half-sunken on the surface. The momentum of the fall was moving the body slowly out toward what must be the main part of the pond. 'Thank fuck,' thought Jansen. He was hoping that something dramatic would happen; a crocodile rearing out of the water perhaps, to drag the corpse down and away. The pond was silent. Jansen stared hard at the shadow in the water, willing the corpse to sink, until he heard the scuffling sound of Maatjie dragging the dead white man up behind him.

"Fucking big splash," said Maatjie, as he let the corpse tumble in a heap. He came over to the wall and peered over with Jansen.

"Ja," said Jansen. "S'alright. Let's get this next fucker in."

He hoisted the pale corpse up under the armpits and indicated to Maatjie to take up the legs.

"What's the plan?" said Maatjie as he lifted the feet by the heels.

"Get him up and over. Drop him in. Then the Hot-not," Jansen grunted and shifted the weight of the corpse. "Then we are fucking off."

"Toss or drop?" said Maatjie, manoeuvring his hold to beneath the knees,

thereby lifting the body clear of the ground.

"Drop. Straight into the water."

They shuffled to the wall and hoisted the body to rest on the lip. Maatjie disentangled himself from between the man's legs and, as Jansen let the torso topple unceremoniously over, he flicked the heels up so that the body fell in a headlong spiral to splash into the pond below.

"Good." said Jansen and turned immediately to where the coloured man's body lay in the dirt.

First taking hold of the feet, Jansen then gathered up the body just as Maatjie had done, his hands in the crook of the knees. Maatjie stuck his hands into the man's armpits and they lifted together. The corpse was lighter than either of the other two by some margin and, as they moved toward the wall, Maatjie said in a mischievous tone; "Let's toss him."

"Huh?" grunted Jansen.

"Toss him. Make sure he goes right out. Get those crocs interested."

Jansen thought briefly about it and realised that as much as anything else, he would enjoy finishing this bloody night with a bit of a flourish. It would be entertaining to see the skinny little fucker fly through the air. A final indignity to recompense for the hassle that they had been made to endure.

"Good," he said, with a nod and a small smile, "On my count... one... two... and three..."

Underestimating the lightness of the corpse, they gave the throw their fully-mustered effort, expecting it to fly dramatically out over the pond. Their enthusiasm, however, to put an end to the troublesome night with some flourish, also made them mistime their release and the skinny little corpse of the yellow-man had arced high, almost straight up, spinning as it did, and then fell with a meaty 'thwack' onto the top of the wall. They watched, startled, as the last connections holding the head to the torso popped loose and the head shot back up into the air, like a golf ball bouncing off concrete. The body dropped, luckily, over the pond side of the wall and splashed into the water below, but the head fell directly back onto the top of the wall, bounced again and then perversely rolled away from them momentarily, along the top of the wall, before it too

tipped over the edge and fell into the enclosure.

Jansen and Maatjie followed the whole grim progress with their eyes and mouths widening, waiting for the sound of the head splashing in the water to end their anguish, but no splash came. In disbelief they waited a moment more, not trusting their judgement of the time it would take for the head to fall. Then they both rushed the wall at the point they had seen the head go over. They looked and saw that, with inconceivable bad luck, the head had fallen neatly into a clump of reeds and was staring back up at them, the eyelids opened again by the force of the blows.

"Fffffffuck!" said Jansen, shaking his fists skyward in disbelief and frustration.

It was the only growth of reeds along the entire length of wall. To one side of the small clump of its roots was the deeper part of the pond where they had tossed the bodies. On the other, the water grew shallower over one or two metres up to the dry concrete bank that Maatjie had first seen and moved away from.

"Jesus! Fuck!" said Jansen and hit the top of the wall with his fists.

"It's ok," said Maatjie, trying to keep his partner cool. "It's ok. Let's get a few rocks or whatever and knock it into the water."

Jansen leant on his thick arms, staring over at the head, took in a breath and nodded. Maatjie turned and scabbled on the ground, scouring for stones big enough to dislodge the incriminating body part. No luck. The ground here was mostly soil and tufts of grass. The only stones he could find were no bigger than half his palm. Not heavy enough to move the head.

"No fucking rocks here," he said over his shoulder at Jansen who was still leaning over the wall. Maatjie's hand brushed over one of the tufts of grass and, without thinking, he grabbed at it and pulled it, roots and all, from the ground. It came away with a good amount of soil clumped at it's base.

"Try this," he said and handed it to Jansen.

Jansen took it, feeling it's weight in his hand, and took careful aim at the head staring up at him. He let fly and the shot was good. The clump of grass and soil exploded ignominiously against the dead man's forehead, leaving behind

a section of grass so it looked like it had taken absurd root in the tight curls of the hairline. But the head barely moved. If anything Jansen thought that the head had been pushed deeper into the nest of reeds. Maatjie saw this too and was silent.

Jansen stared at the head and Maatjie heard him take several deep breaths. Then Jansen turned and looked Maatjie in the eye.

"You have to go in," he said flatly.

Maatjie looked back at his partner, searching to see if there was anything else in his eye beside this bald statement. Maybe the hint of a smile, a tell that Jansen was making a joke, was winding him up. Jansen stared straight back and said the one thing Maatjie did not want to hear.

"Sorry."

Maatjie stared at Jansen's implacable face for a beat, then down to the sick sight of the head gaping upwards at them, with its macabre tuft-of-grass headpiece. His eyes travelled out to the darkness of the water and an involuntary shudder snickered up his spine.

"I'll hold you," said Jansen. "I'll hold you by your feet. Hang you over and you take it and throw it into the water." He paused. "Then I'll pull you back up."

"Fuck that!" was Maatjies' instant reply. "I'm not having you drop me on my head or some croc leaps out and takes me like a fish on a hook. No. Fuck you Jansen. Fuck you."

He was angry now with his partner and friend. None of this bullshit was necessary. None of this should have happened. But here they were. He took a deep breath and, for the sake of getting the job done, forced his emotions back under control.

"Alright," he said tensely, slowly thinking the plan through. "You're going to lower me slowly over the wall by my hands. Not here. There. Where there's no water. I'll walk to the fucking thing and knock it into the water. Then you going to reach over. I'll jump. You catch my hands and you pull me back."

Jansen sensed that Maatjie wanted nothing more from him than a nod of agreement, which he curtly gave and Maatjie turned and walked the five or so metres back to where the wall dropped onto the dry concrete bank. Without any ado he slipped out of his jacket, threw his legs over the wall and flipped onto his stomach. Jansen had to be quick to take his partners hands and help him as he wriggled his torso into the drop. Maatjie got his feet under him a little and against the wall, sliding them down until he was at full length, with his arms raised above him and held tightly at the wrist by Jansen.

"A little more," he said, his voice thin with the effort and the stretch of his torso.

"I can't. I'll flip over," was Jansen's unhelpful reply. He was at full stretch himself and he suddenly wondered about the exit strategy that Maatjie had proposed. It was going to take a hell of an effort for him not to be pulled into the crocodile pen. He put the thought out of his mind and slowly loosened his on his partner's wrists.

"I'm gonna let you drop." he said in a whisper.

Maatjie simply grunted his assent. He was already dealing with the fear that he was moments away from being eaten alive by some over-sized lizard. He felt Jansen's hands loosen and his own slip slowly through until, like a lovers farewell, the tips of their fingers parted and he dropped the half metre or less to the concrete. He landed firmly, but kept his footing and was pleased that the drop had not been further. He would be able to jump that height back into Jansen's grip. He turned carefully, feeling the slope of the bank beneath him and scanned the water for any sign of a crocodile. The water was smooth and dark. Shuffling sideways, keeping his hands and heels flush to the security of the wall behind him, and keeping a constant watch on the water's edge, he made his way to where the head was lodged.

Where he had landed, the water was about a metre or so away, but as he crept along the wall the distance shortened and, quicker than he'd anticipated, the pond curved towards him and filled in close against the wall. He took his eyes off the water and looked to his right. The clump of grass was sitting in a few inches of water just more than a metre and a half away, against the wall. He could see the paler skin of the head inside the darker shoots of the grass, obscene and dangerous. Maatjie looked out at the water again and took a few steady breaths to calm himself. He could feel the blood surging in his body as adrenaline worked its way through him. His heart was racing. He exhaled

determinedly and started to lean towards the clump of grass. He kept his body facing outwards and used the wall of the pen behind him as a support whilst he bent at the waist and knee to reach along the whitewash towards the grass. He let his eyes track across the open water for any ripple or sign that a crocodile was approaching. He leaned further. His left foot extended out as a counterbalance, only touching the ground with the toe of his shoe.

"Nearly there," came Jansen's voice from above, forcing Maatjie to glance up and see the big man leaning over the wall to watch.

"Keep going."

"Fuck off, man."

The distraction of the voice and the thought that he was nearly at his goal broke Maatjie's concentration. Without thinking, he shifted his right foot a half step and into the water. The concrete below the water line was slick as a greased sheet with a slime of black algae. In a microsecond Maatjie's purchase on the bank went from under him. His right foot shot out along the wall and deeper into the water. His left twisted and held, splitting his legs wide. The sharp pain of pulled tendons fired through his groin. He let out a little yelp and bounced forward off the wall onto his hands. His hands were no better at gripping the slime than his foot and they shot forward into the water so he fell, splayed, into the shallow, slippery edge of the pond.

Panic shut down any sense of calm or rational thinking in Maatjie's brain. He clawed in a desperate attempt to get back onto the dry part of the bank but his hands could take no hold on the slimy bottom. His left leg had involuntarily joined his right in the shallows and they were both paddling wildly to try and find any sort of holdfast. The combined thrashing of his limbs on the algaed concrete slid his body deeper into the water, inducing even greater terror. He started to swear in short, sharp, high pitched yelps.

"Fok! Fok! Fok!"

The bank of concrete dropped suddenly away into the deep of the pool and Maatjie felt himself sliding irrevocably into its depth. He was certain the sound of his thrashing and the temptation of his torso in the deeper water meant that he was seconds away from being eaten. His cries took on a more desperate tone.

"Jesus fok! Fokkin' help! Help me fuck! Jansen!"

Blind with fear, he didn't realise that just to his left was the clump of grass holding the decapitated head. His wild flailing took him close enough to it that his left hand struck the grass and he clutched at it desperately. The blow and the pull on the grass dislodged the head neatly and it plopped into the shallow water right in front of Maatjie's face. It bobbed nose to nose with him, staring blankly at his wide, terrified eyes. Maatjie squealed in terror. He grabbed at the head with his right hand, grabbed it by the ear and mashed cheekbone, and flung it, arcing away into the dark water behind him. The force of the throw, his grip on the clump of grass and his absolute dread of what might lurk in the pond energised his body to propel itself like a strange water creature up out of the deep. The side of his shoes scrapped against the shallow bottom, giving his movement a modicum of purchase and he dug his nails into the slime and concrete below it to slither and haul himself out onto the dry concrete. His fear had him on his feet as soon as he was clear of the water, and he stood, well away from the edge, his back against the wall, breathing in deep rasping gasps and sluicing dank water and slime from his clothes and sodden footwear. Slowly he became aware, through the dark sound of his blood pumping in his ears, the soft call of Jansen above him.

"Maatjie! Maatjie! You right?"

Maatjie looked up. Above him Jansen leant over the wall with an enormous smile on his face.

"Yerrrrr. Fok. That was the funniest thing I've seen you do in my life."

Jansen was smiling. Maatjie couldn't believe it. Smiling? He'd nearly died. He'd nearly been eaten by a crocodile. Fuck sakes.

"Come. Jump. I'll catch you. Wait. Wipe your arms first."

Jansen was leaning further out over the wall and had his hands and thick arms hanging down towards Maatjie. Dazed by the horror of the experience and by the sight of his partner grinning at him, Maatjie did as he was told. He slicked off his forearms, wrists and hands. Unconsciously he wiped them on his trousers before realising that he was, of course, soaked from head to foot. He shook his arms absently, as if that would dry them further, then reached up towards Jansen's outstretched hands.

"No you have to jump. Remember?" said Jansen.

Maatjie nodded. As the adrenaline soaked away from his muscles he wasn't sure that he had the energy to stand, let alone jump. His legs were melting beneath him. He looked up at Jansen, bent his knees and propelled himself as best he could up against the wall. He barely made it half the distance he needed. He felt exhausted and the sound of his socks squelching in his shoes as he landed disheartened him further. He leaned his head on his open hands against the wall and closed his eyes. After taking a moment to let his body process the sensations it had endured, he allowed his mind to realise that there was only one way out of this infested pen and that he would need to find the energy to do it. He pushed back on the wall and let out a sharp, determined breath.

"Stand back a step," came Jansen's voice above him. "Take a little run. It'll help."

Maatjie looked over his shoulder. He had escaped far enough that there was again a dry bank between the wall and the waters' edge. As he looked at the shimmering surface he could feel the fear and panic rising in him again. He forced it down.

'Ok. Come on man,' he thought to himself, 'you've been in worse spots than this. You just got a fright and now it's over.'

He looked up at Jansen's hands to get a sense of the jump needed. He let go of the wall and, keeping a very keen eye on the edge of the water, took a couple of steps back. He didn't feel like he had more than one jumps' worth in him so he bent over to gather himself.

"Croc!" Jansen said suddenly.

Maatjie turned, panic clouding his vision again.

"Where! Fuck!"

"Behind you! In the water! Run!"

Maatjie didn't need any more spur than the urgency in his partners' voice. He took two strides and threw himself up the wall. His terror drove an undiscovered athleticism and he jumped high enough that Jansen's big hands closed roughly around his one elbow and below the others' armpit. He dug his

feet against the wall to scabble upwards. Jansen pulled and their efforts together shot Maatjie over the wall so determinedly that they fell backwards into the dirt in a tangle of bodies and wet clothing. Maatjie sprang instantly to his feet, panting and holding his chest. He looked down at his partner, who was rolling on the ground in a loose foetal curl. Maatjie thought at first he was hurt, but then he heard the unique sound of Jansen crying with laughter. The emotions of the last five minutes overwhelmed him and Maatjie stepped forward and gave his partner a solid kick in the ribs. Jansen took the kick and laughed harder, rolling onto his knees and holding one hand up to stay any further retribution.

"No. Ok. I'm sorry," he gasped. "Oh man. I've never seen you move like that." Another spasm of laughter. "You was like a gazelle! A fucking gazelle!"

Maatjie looked down at Jansen and shook his head. The shock of his experience was washing away and was replaced by a mild embarrassment. He looked down at his sodden clothing. The knee of his pants had a hole showing and his shoes were wrecked. He made a mental note to charge Jansen for their replacement, then he looked away to the distant mountains. They were distinct now against the sky. They had maybe an hour before the sun came fully up and less before the first light of day.

"Fuck you," he said flatly to Jansen. "Come, let's go. Time's ticking." He found his jacket next to the wall then walked off towards the hole under the fence.

He heard Jansen call him quietly as he walked, but he did not respond. He was cold, wet, pissed off and tired. He wanted a brandy and dry clothes. He slithered under the fence, further ruining his shirt and trousers and stood waiting by the open door of their car. Moments later Jansen appeared. He looked at Maatjie through the mesh.

"Sorry man. Was just helluva funny."

Maatjie said nothing and Jansen took up the spade and crawled with it under the fence. Without saying anything more he turned to release and thread back through the tow strap. The fence sprang back into position with a soft, metallic rattle. Jansen quietly and efficiently moved the soil back into the hole so that it came up to cover the bottom of the fence. He realised that there was still a pile of soil on the other side but he was past caring.

'Fuck it,' he thought. 'If they find it, they find it. And the bodies. Fuck it.'

He gathered up the other spade and the pick. He carried them to the boot of their car, glancing at Maatjie, who had not moved from his position. Dumping the implements, he felt around the side of the boot for the small bottle he kept there for emergencies. He walked back with it to stand in front of Maatjie.

"Sorry man," he said again, and proffered the quarter-jack of rum as a peace offering.

Maatjie took it silently, cracked the lid and took a deep, restorative draught. He swallowed and handed it back.

"You poes," he said, but Jansen saw his face mellow as the liquor warmed his gut.

"'Sa pleasure," he replied. He took a deep swig himself, smiled and handed the bottle back for Maatjie to finish.

"Now," said Jansen after he had watched Maatjie take another deep pull at the bottle, "let's get these cars, those clothes and us the fuck out of here."