



Prologue

1 October 2010, south of Johannesburg

Now the moment is here, Irma doesn't know quite what to do. She pushes the intercom again, careful of her new nails.

'They for sure know we're coming, *ja*?'



'Just leave it,' says Jan, fussing with his camera. 'Get in the picture, eh. Willem, shades off, arm round your ma.'



Willem's eyeroll is almost audible. No, he won't hold her. He feels her neediness and it grosses him out – if she really loved him as much as she's always saying, she wouldn't be leaving him here. For the whole three-hour drive he bored a deep hole in the back of Jan's thick bald head. Finally, Jan – who he'll never call Pa – leaned back and snapped *Answer your mother* but Willem just pushed his earbuds deeper, gloried as Harry was chosen for Gryffindor yet again. He didn't realise he was moving his lips to the words till he caught Jan smirking in the mirror and shuttered



his face with his hoodie. Willem needs magic today, even if he is too old for it.

‘Closer,’ says Jan, edging them towards the white ex-demonstrator four-wheel-drive Ford with good fuel economy that his boss cut him a deal on. ‘Let me get the truck in.’

Irma nudges Willem: ‘Smile nice.’

Willem slides his Oakleys off and half opens his eyes – pilot-light blue, like his pa’s. People are always telling him to smile. He’s not been up this early for what, months, years? His ma swipes his hood off and curls the exact colour of Easter chicks spring away from his face. He’s got a perfect library tan. He’s hiding in his baggiest black hoodie and track pants and his feet flop in bright white Adidas Hi Tops, a puppy growing into his paws. The crappy Casio he got for his sixteenth is back home because who wears a watch now and he’d still be late anyway, Jan says. Willem braces for the flash.

‘Smile,’ sing-songs Jan, cutting the word in two: *SMY-ILL*. He holds the camera out, pushing Willem away. Irma turns her engagement ring, hopes it shows. Her eyes, smudges of no-run mascara, brim with her boy. *When did he get so big? Will this place fix him?* She tugs at the sleeveless white top that doesn’t hug her where she doesn’t want it to and loops her right arm through Willem’s left. She pulls him closer. They’ve not quite finished arranging their faces when Jan clicks the button. The flash is lost in spring sunshine.

Willem bolts over to the gate. It's barbed wire, but barely man-high. Out here walls are lower – you can see gardens. Only the ground-floor windows have bars. There's no movement from the low redbrick homestead up ahead. A shady stoep wraps around it waiting for rocking chairs. A pocked satellite dish clings to the stone chimney. There must be security. Willem identifies some kind of *Prunus* guarding the gate, but the crows have had its fruit.

There are no other houses. No other people. A heavy-shouldered red barn squats on the horizon opposite. Behind it a vast dark steelworks blots out the sky. Clouds belch from giant cooling towers with the ghetto curves all the girls want. Lightsaber-green flames – bright even on a day like today – flicker from skinny sky-high pipes. The air tastes of old torch batteries licked on a dare.

While they stand around waiting for the buzz-click of electric locks Jan checks for cameras. Weekend by weekend he's filled their bungalow with them. He bribed Willem to put the feed on his phone and is gripped: watching empty rooms, waiting for people he knows to walk in and do what they always do. Jan dreams of a panic room. He gives Irma a look as she lights another menthol. She feels her boy moving further and further away. In her head, she goes over all the bits she's packed. The list from New Dawn was detailed, extensive and expensive: two pairs of trousers, two T-shirts, a cap and two dress shirts (all

khaki), then boots, running tekkies, trunks, towels, sheets, sleeping bag, tin plate, mug and bowl and a Bible (travel size). No mobiles but she won't be the one to tell him. A hunting knife will be provided but used only under strict supervision. *Safety First At New Dawn!*

Willem's sick hearing about the camp. The badly photocopied leaflet slid from his Happy Sixteenth card which had boasted a red Ferrari (he has never expressed any interest in any car).

'You'll love it,' Irma tells him – tells herself – for the thousandth time.

Willem turns away and watches a column of dark brown ants besiege the gate: *Anoplolepis custodiens*, the Common Pugnacious. Nippy. He wills them towards Jan.

'It'll be *lekker*,' Irma chirps. 'Load of other boys and you'll all be proper rangers at the end!'

'He fuckin' better,' says Jan. 'I'm down 22,000 rand! He needs to man up, stand on his own two feet.'

The ants breach the gate and as Willem turns to answer back a battered red bakkie dust-clouds towards them from behind the house.

'Hush,' Irma begs, smoke-signalling distress with her menthol. 'For Chrissake, shut up.'

Big dogs tumble round the wheels. Willem makes out Boerboels. As the bakkie roll-stops they drop silently, stubby tails quivering, drool pooling round powerful jaws. They are as still as the stupid plastic

giraffe his ma worries will wander from their garden. Like anybody would steal that.

The windows are security dark so the first Willem sees of anyone from New Dawn is a pair of dusty black boots with khakis tucked in. As he tries to imagine the rest a boy, barely taller than him, steps carefully from behind the door. His hair is black velvet buzzed to nothing. Willem spots a rusty cut on his head as he pulls on a camo cap. A short-sleeved khaki shirt flaps round pale arms. He holds on to the door.

Willem's shoulders drop. As the gate swings inwards he reaches for it, doesn't know why. Irma grabs him, nearly burns him with her menthol. She can't take any more of this – he doesn't listen, never thinks, stays up all night in his room instead of going out and being normal. She points to a yellow sign with a lightning bolt and skull.

Jan orders her back into the Ford so they can drop him off and get home before dark, they can't be driving then, not these days. The other boy shakes his head and steps forward, careful to stay behind the fan in the dust left by the gate.

'J-j-ust h-h-him.'

Willem raises a hand to his chest.

'But,' begins Irma. This is not how she thought it would go. 'His things.'

Jan pushes past and opens the boot, leans in and heaves out his old army duffel – Irma thinks he's sweet to let Willem have it. The tin mug clatters as

it lands by the bakkie. 'He can get it. Good practice, eh?'

The boy glances back to the silent house then leans down as Willem steps forward. They almost bump heads. Willem feels the twinge of defeat as the other boy swings it onto the bakkie with surprising ease then gets in and throws open the door. 'Geldenhuis,' he says, pointing to his badge. He sounds like the boarding-school boys Willem avoided on the bus.

As Willem climbs in he realises he's not said good-bye. The door click-locks. The bakkie is already reversing so he waves to his ma who's waving back and getting smaller as Jan reverses onto the dirt road but she can't see him through treacherous mascara. Suddenly Willem doesn't want her to go. He feels the other boy glance and lays both hands flat then tries to spread on his seat Jan-style. Willem steals a look at this Geldenhuis who is spinning the wheel unworried by the chasing dogs. Up close the cut by his ear looks old but there are fresher ones. Willem wonders what his hair was like before. Passing the postcard old homestead they head straight for another bigger gate crowned with razor wire. A red, white and black flag snaps against the blue spring sky.

'H-h-howzit, b-b-bru?' laughs Willem, slipping his Oakleys back on. Geldenhuis can't even be bothered to be bothered, just brakes at the second gate and sounds the horn three times. A walkie-talkie crackles from the floor: '*Veilig?*' Then, not a second later,

Tuesday 1 January, just after breakfast

We know they are coming. We've watched the smoke rise for two weeks now knowing they will soon be at our gates, the gates you promised to finish white-washing when you returned. All day, every day, tidy pillars billow straight up into the summer sky, no breeze dares bother them.

Day by day, farm by farm, the English draw closer.

Even on Christmas morning we woke to smoke spooling across the sky like wool waiting to be wound. It cleared as you said prayers and we sat down to lunch – I still worry that pork was dry. The Kriels are only six miles east and when their big red barn goes up – the barn it took twenty men a winter to build – it'll be us next. The chair I'm sitting on, every berry ripening on the tree outside the window – every fruit, every tree. They will all go.

I still struggle to believe the news that reaches even our half-painted gates. Soon, everything we've

built in our ten years here will be gone. I've taken to rising even earlier so I can wander our five rooms alone – remember when we had just one! I blink hard and press my eyelids together to engrave it all where I can always see it. I hope you remember it too, Samuel.

I've often embarked on a diary with the new year and found my thoughts ran out long before the pages, but I'm resolved to keep at this. I'm setting these words down for us and for Fred – he's outside bothering Lettie who is calling so I must go in a minute. I'm writing at our kitchen table where we sat and prayed and talked and laughed and worried all these married years. Every evening after dinner you tapped your pipe out and it left little scorches. Now I run my fingers over the marks regretting every tut. I'll read this to you when you return victorious. Our cause is just. God will preserve you, Samuel. Remember Psalm 110: *The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath.*

That day is coming.

Now I must go and see what Lettie wants.

She was only calling to say the chickens were fussing – Fred hadn't collected their eggs and you know they won't lay if they find another egg there, they're so particular. So we made a game of finding them all. Afterwards, Lettie helped me hide the tea service your family gave us for our wedding – twelve dainty cups



and saucers, each wreathed in tiny pink roses. Still in the box it came in all the way from Pretoria. I only ever got it out once, that first time Mrs Kriel visited. You were at market, I think. She poked her plump little finger up in the air and lifted her saucer to peer below! She didn't stay for a second cup, but her eyes gulped down every little thing. Even she shunned my *koekies*. Samuel, it's a good job you didn't follow your own dear father because my baking alone would have made me a terrible pastor's wife.



Lettie and I wrapped each piece in rags and stuffed the box with straw then buried it under the mulberry – the first tree we planted. Now its branches hold our home and its big heart-shaped leaves give us shade. I know you find the berries too much. The market for them is not so big. Its roots are splattered with fallen fruit that Fred takes delight stomping on. Our apricots have never done better. Even when the sun scorches them or some small something gets in and twists them they still taste good. When we started putting them in you laughed at how familiar I was with the shovel – I don't think you really believed I'd grown up on a farm till then. It's a good job one of us did. Your hands were made for holding books. Each tree stubbornly marks all four seasons even though we really only get two. I think they remember Europe better than we who took root more recently. I wonder if they're used to summer in January? I buried Fred's





silver christening spoons too, back in the ground they came from. Don't worry, we've not hidden everything – they need something to take. It's best that men with little to lose don't have to look too hard, you said. So, we bustle around preparing for our un-guests and now they're close I feel something like excitement. I've never met an Englishman, except in novels. There's strangely little to do now but wait.

I'm getting so carried away I nearly forgot dinner – we eat like kings now! The more we eat, the less we leave for the Khakis. Pork again!

Three entries in one day! I won't keep it up, I know. I can't sleep without you. Are you lying under the stars? Tucked up in a tent?



Since you rode out – was it really only a week ago? – we've been able to smell the smoke. We feed the strays that beg at our gates. Women and children and Kaffirs. More every day. We give what we can and listen to their tales – they can't all be true. The English are, after all, the same race as us. They share our faith if not our faithfulness. Our Father is their Father. They're losing everywhere but you are nowhere to be found which sends them mad. I knew you'd leave when Lord Roberts' order finally reached our gates: 'It is absolutely essential to force all the people to submit and it is now clear that this can only be done by severe measures. You must please



have no mercy, and what you cannot bring away you must destroy ... ’

They’re calling it Scorched Earth. I begged you to go and be a pastor instead – you carry your father’s church calm. You said if Boer prayers could beat English bullets we’d have won already. Now you’re not here. I understand, I do, and Fred does too, really. He’s being very good, as grown-up as a six-year-old can be. My freckles speckle his face. I tell him they’re like the stars that fill our sky at night which doesn’t stop him trying to wipe them off. This morning Lettie caught him trying to ride one of the pigs and Jakob had to lift him out the sty. He was caked so we had to boil water for a bath. I told him he deserved it cold and I got tears instead of his usual giggle. I almost cried myself.

Fred is excited by the fires – I suppose all little boys must be. At night they’re almost beautiful, which makes it hard for me to be stern with him when I catch him watching too. You need only raise your voice a little above your church tones – *FRED-ER-RICK*. He knows too well I can barely raise my voice, never mind my hand. Coming from a brood of girls such glee is strange to me but so little happens out here that any departure is exciting. Remember when the rains came a week early? It was all we talked about it till the next summer. The spruit behind the sties went from trickle to torrent and overnight the veldt frothed with

flowers – yellows and purples tailor-made for town hats. The cracked red earth steamed like freshly baked bread. The three of us found a rock that had already dried and made a picnic and I complained that the sudden flowers didn't smell. You said they were doing quite enough already. You were right. All last week, thunder rumbled but it brought no lightning, no rain of relief followed by that sweetness rising almost visibly. It's charged with sparkling possibility, it's the smell of home, no – homeland. Is there a name for it? You'd know. You hoard words the way my father stored seeds. You have given me so many. Your father taught himself English, so he could pray with the Khakis dying in our first war with them, the war which pushed us out here where we might observe our own ways. A poor worldly tongue, my mother said: you only need the one book. But she'd never read *Wuthering Heights* or *The Woman in White*. Never read anything. My English is the English of the novels you and I squandered countless candles over. You always fell asleep first, so I admit now to reading on and pretending to be surprised the next night. It was easy to cry again for Little Nell. I loved the feel of your face next to mine as you turned teacher – words were not thought essential for one of six girls on a sheep farm a full day's wagon from the nearest town. Fathers taught sons anything that needed to be known and we all bowed our heads to the dominee when he

rode up in his donkey cart once a month. I wasn't ashamed; just glad of another reason to be closer to you. I always had more questions but knew better than to ask. Never be cleverer than your man – my mother again. And now here I am filling these pages for you.

But this new thunder is the booming of the big guns brought over on great ships from England, more noise than has ever been heard in our young country. Thunder with deadly rain. At first the birds froze on their branches and even the crickets went quiet but now they barely budge. 'Maxim,' says Fred, with every boom. 'They've got Maxims and we've got Long Toms, but our Mausers shoot better than their Martinis.'

I let him sleep holding the Mauser you gave him on Christmas morning, just before you told him you were going. I thought he'd never stop crying and I loved you not stopping him. I've told him over and over how you carved it from the cherry tree you downed to make way for the new sty, how I helped you rope it to Oupa who dragged it over to the Kriels' barn where it dried for months – cherry is weak, a womanly wood, Mrs Kriel said. Certainly, it struggled, its leaves scorched before they were out. Sometimes I think nothing is supposed to live out here, not even us. My little vegetable garden can disappear in an hour if locusts get to it. The sheep endure but if the boys weren't there to burn



the ticks off they'd soon stagger into the dust. Yet we're still here. I've told Fred how you sat by the fire every night for weeks whittling and polishing his Mauser so it looked like it could almost fire a bullet. Now he loves it even more. The more he takes aim, the redder it turns. For now, he's not much taller than it. He sleeps holding it. I sleep holding the key to his room. When I sleep. Most nights I pull my wrap round my shoulders and walk out onto the stoep and stare up at our stars. I can almost feel the world turn. Only after I've found the Southern Cross do I know I'll be able to close my eyes when I go back in.

Thursday 3 January



Already I've missed a day but it's only now, with night tucking in the corners of the sky, that I can sit down. If you were here, you'd read to me, but this is the next best thing.

While I was trying to make Fred eat his breakfast, another Kaffir stopped at the gate. The English really are freeing them all to roam wild with no thought for their welfare. After you gave ours the choice most went back to the bush to find their own. I can't think any of ours turned. Only Lettie and Jakob stayed. Even though it's just the two of them and they've been with us for ever I feel