

♦ THREE ♦

W EAK AT THE KNEES AFTER HIS LONG WALK, SCREWING UP his eyes against the brilliant morning light, Michael K sat on a bench beside the miniature golf course on the Sea Point esplanade, facing the sea, resting, gathering his strength. The air was still. He could hear the slap of waves on the rocks below and the hiss of retreating water. A dog stopped to sniff his feet, then peed against the bench. A trio of girls in shorts and singlets passed, running elbow to elbow, murmuring together, leaving a sweet smell in their wake. From Beach Road came the tinkle of an ice-cream vendor's bell, first approaching, then receding. At peace, on familiar ground, grateful for the warmth of the day, K sighed and slowly let his head sag sideways. Whether he slept or not he did not know; but when he opened his eyes he was well enough again to go on.

More of the windows along Beach Road than he remembered seemed to be boarded shut, particularly at street level. The same cars were parked in the same places, though rustier now; a hulk, stripped of its wheels and burnt out, lay overturned on its side against the sea-wall. He passed along the promenade, conscious of being naked inside the blue overalls, conscious that of all the

strollers he was the only one not wearing shoes. But if eyes flickered toward him at all, it was toward his face, not his feet.

He came to a stretch of scorched grass where amid broken glass and charred garbage new points of green were already beginning to shoot. A small boy clambered up the blackened bars of a play apparatus, his soles and palms sooty. K picked his way across the lawn, crossed the road, and passed out of sunlight into the gloom of the unit entrance hall of the Côte d'Azur, where along a wall in looping black spraypaint he read JOEY RULES. Choosing a place across the passageway from the door with the monitor's head where his mother had once lived, he settled down, squatting on his heels against the wall, thinking: It is all right, people will take me for a beggar. He remembered the bet he had lost, that he might have put beside him for alms, to complete the picture. For hours he waited. No one came. He chose not to get up and try the door, since he did not know what he would do once it opened. In mid-afternoon, when his bones had begun to grow cold, he left the building again and went down to the beach. On the white sand under the warm sun he fell asleep.

He awoke thirsty and confused, sweating inside the overalls. He found a public toilet on the beach, but the taps were not working. The lavatory pans were full of sand; driftsand lay against the far wall a foot deep.

As K stood at the basin thinking what to do next, he saw in the mirror three people enter behind him. One was a woman in a tight white dress wearing a platinum-blond wig and carrying a pair of silver high-heeled shoes. The other two were men. The taller of them came straight up to K and took him by the arm. 'I hope you are finished your business here,' he said, 'because this place is booked.' He steered K out into the dazzling white light of the beach. 'Plenty of other places to go,' he said, and gave him a slap, or perhaps a light push. K sat down on the sand. The tall man took up position beside the toilet door, keeping an eye on him. He had a check cap, which he wore cocked to one side.

There were bathers dotted over the little beach but no one in the water save a woman standing in the shallow surf, her skirt tucked up, her legs sturdily apart, swinging a baby by its arms, left and right, so that its toes skimmed the waves. The baby screamed in terror and glee.

'That one is my sister,' remarked the man at the door, indicating the woman in the water. 'The one in there'—he pointed over his shoulder—'is also my sister. Plenty of sisters I have. A big family.'

K's head was beginning to throb. Longing for a hat of his own, or a cap, he closed his eyes.

The other man emerged from the toilet and hurried up the steps to the esplanade without a word.

The rim of the sun touched the surface of the empty sea. K thought: I will give myself time till the sand cools, then I will think of somewhere else to go.

The tall stranger stood over him poking him in the ribs with the toe of his shoe. Behind him were his two sisters, one with the child tied on her back, the other bareheaded now, carrying both wig and shoes. The probing toe found the slit in the side of the overalls and pushed it open, revealing a patch of K's bare thigh. 'Look, this man is naked!' called out the stranger, turning to his two women, laughing. 'A naked man! When did you last eat, man? He prodded K in the ribs. 'Come, let us give this man something to wake him up!'

From a bag the sister with the baby took a bottle of wine wrapped in brown paper. K sat up and drank.

'So where are you from, man?' said the stranger. 'Do you work for these people?' He pointed a long finger at the overalls, at the gold lettering on the pocket.

K was about to reply when without warning his stomach contracted and the wine came up in a neat golden stream that sank at once into the sand. He closed his eyes while the world spun.

'Hey!' said the stranger, and laughed, and patted K on the back. 'That is called drinking on an empty stomach! Let me tell you,

when I saw you I said to myself, "That man is definitely undernourished! That man definitely needs a square meal inside him!" He helped K to his feet. 'Come with us, Mister Treefeller, and we will give you something so that you will not be so thin!'

Together they walked along the esplanade till they found an empty bus shelter. From the bag the stranger produced a new loaf of bread and a can of condensed milk. From his hip pocket came a slim black object which he held up before K's eyes. He did something and the object transformed itself into a knife. With a whistle of astonishment he displayed the glinting blade to all, then laughed and laughed, slapping his knee, pointing at K. The baby, peering wide-eyed over its mother's shoulder, began to laugh too, beating the air with a fist.

The stranger recovered himself and cut a thick slice of bread, which he decorated with loops and swirls of condensed milk and presented to K. With everyone watching, K ate.

They passed an alley with a dripping tap. K broke away to drink. He drank as if he would never stop. The water seemed to pass straight through his body: he had to retire to the end of the alley and squat over a drain, and after that felt so dizzy that he took a long time to find the arms of the overalls.

They left the residential area behind and began to climb the lower slopes of Signal Hill. K, at the tail of the group, stopped to catch his breath. The sister with the baby stopped too. 'Heavy!' she remarked, indicating the baby, and smiled. K offered to carry her bag, but she refused. 'It's nothing, I'm used to it,' she said.

They passed through a hole in the fence that marked the boundary of the forest reserve. The stranger and the other sister were ahead of them on a track that zigzagged up the hill; below them the lights of Sea Point began to wink; sea and sky glowed crimson on the horizon.

They halted under a clump of pines. The sister in white disappeared into the gloom. In a few minutes she came back wearing jeans and carrying two bulging plastic packets. The other sister

opened her blouse and offered her breast to the baby. K did not know which way to look. The man spread a blanket, lit a candle and struck it in a can. Then he set out their supper: the loaf of bread, the condensed milk, a whole polony sausage ('Gold!' he said, wagging the sausage in K's direction. 'For this you pay gold!'), three bananas. He screwed the cap off the bottle of wine and passed it over. K took a mouthful and returned it. 'Have you got any water?' he asked.

The man shook his head. 'Wine we have got, milk we have got, two kinds of milk—casually he indicated the woman with the baby—but water, no, my friend, I regret there is no water in this place. Tomorrow, I promise. Tomorrow will be a new day. Tomorrow you will have everything you need to make a new man of you.'

Lighted from the wine, gripping the earth every now and again to steady himself, K ate of the bread and condensed milk, even ate half a banana, but refused the sausage.

The stranger spoke of life in Sea Point. 'Do you think it is strange,' he said, 'that we are sleeping on the mountain like tramps? We are not tramps. We have food, we have money, we make a living. Do you know where we used to live? Tell Mister Treefeller where we lived.'

'Normandie,' said the sister in jeans.

'Normandie, 1216 Normandie. Then we got tired of climbing steps and came here. This is our summer resort, where we come for picnics.' He laughed. 'And before that do you know where we lived? Tell him.'

'Clippers,' said the sister.

'Clippers Unisex Hairdressers. So you see, it is easy to live in Sea Point if you know how. But now tell me, where do you come from? I have not seen you before.'

K understood that it was his turn to speak. 'I was three months in the camp at Kenilworth, till last night,' he said. 'I was a gardener once, for the Council. That was a long time ago. Then I

had to leave and take my mother into the country, for her health. My mother used to work in Sea Point, she had a room here, we passed it on the way.' A wave of sickness came up from his stomach; he struggled to control himself. 'She died in Stellenbosch, on the way up-country,' he said. The world swam, then became stable again. 'I didn't always get enough to eat,' he went on. He was aware of the woman with the baby whispering to the man. The other woman had gone out of range of the wavering candlelight. It struck him that he had not seen the two sisters address each other. It struck him too that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge. Or else he simply did not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive. The nausea passed but the sweat that had broken out on him was turning cold and he had begun to shiver. He closed his eyes.

'I see you are sleepy!' said the strange man, slapping him on the knee. 'Time to go to bed! Tomorrow you will be a new man, you will see.' He slapped K again, more lightly. 'You are all right, my friend,' he said.

They made their bed on the pine needles. For themselves the others seemed to have bedclothes unfolded from their bags and packets. For K they had a sheet of heavy plastic in which they helped him wrap himself. Closed in the plastic, sweating and shivering, troubled by a ringing in his ears, K slept only fitfully. He was awake when in the middle of the night the man whose name he did not yet know knelt over him, blotting out his sight of the treetops and the stars. He thought: I must speak before it is too late, but did not. The strange hand brushed his throat and fumbled with the button of the breast pocket of the overalls. The packet of seed emerged so noisily that K was ashamed to pretend not to hear. So he groaned and stirred. For a moment the hand froze; then the man withdrew into the darkness.

For the rest of the night K lay watching the moon through the branches as it crossed the sky. At daybreak he crawled out of the

stiff plastic and went over to where the others lay. The man was sleeping close beside the woman with the baby. The baby itself was awake; fondling the buttons of its mother's jersey, it regarded K with unafraid eyes.

K shook the man by the shoulder. 'Can I have my packet?' he whispered, trying not to wake the others. The man grunted and turned away.

A few yards distant K found the packet. Searching on hands and knees he recovered perhaps half of the scattered seeds. He buttoned them in his pocket, abandoning the rest, thinking: What a pity—in the shade of a pine tree nothing will grow. Then he picked his way down the zigzag track.

He passed through the empty early-morning streets and went down to the beach. With the sun still behind the hill, the sand was cold to his touch. So he walked among the rocks peering into the tidal pools, where he saw snails and anemones living lives of their own. Tiring of that, he crossed Beach Road and spent an hour sitting against the wall before his mother's old door, waiting for whoever might live there to emerge and be revealed. Then he returned to the beach and lay on the sand listening to the ringing mount in his ears, the sound of the blood running in his veins or the thoughts running through his head, he did not know which. He had the feeling that something inside him had let go or was letting go. What it was letting go of he did not yet know, but he also had a feeling that what he had previously thought of in himself as tough and rope-like was becoming soggy and fibrous, and the two feelings seemed to be connected.

The sun was high in the sky. It had arrived there in the flicker of an eyelid. He had no recollection of the hours that must have passed. I have been asleep, he thought, but worse than asleep. I have been absent; but where? He was no longer alone on the beach. Two girls in bikinis were sunbathing a few paces from him with hats over their faces, and there were other people too.

Hot and confused, he stumbled across to the public toilet. The taps were still dry. Slipping his arms out of the overalls, he sat on the bed of driftsand naked to the waist, trying to collect himself.

He was still sitting there when the tall man entered with the one he thought of as the second of the sisters. He tried to get up and leave, but the man embraced him. 'My friend Mister Tree-feller!' he said. 'How happy I am to see you! Why did you leave us so early this morning? Didn't I tell you this is going to be your big day? Look what I have brought you! From the pocket of his jacket he drew a half-jack of brandy. (How does he stay so neat, living on the mountain? K marvelled.) He guided K back on to the driftsand. 'Tonight we are going to a party,' he whispered. 'There you will meet lots of people.' He drank and passed the bottle. K took a mouthful. A languor spread from his heart, bringing a blessed numbness to his head. He lay back swimming in his own dizziness.

There was whispering; then someone unbuttoned the last button of the overalls and slipped a cool hand in. K opened his eyes. It was the woman: she was kneeling beside him fondling his penis. He pushed her hand away and tried to struggle to his feet, but the man spoke: 'Relax, my friend,' he said, 'this is Sea Point, this is the day when all good things happen. Relax and enjoy yourself. Help yourself to a drink.' He settled the bottle in the sand beside K and was gone.

'Who is your brother?' asked K with a thick tongue. 'What is his name?'

'His name is December,' said the woman. Did he hear her correctly? It was the first time she had spoken to him. 'That is the name on his card. Tomorrow maybe he has a different name. A different card, a different name, for the police, so that they mix him up.' She bent down and took his penis in her mouth. He wanted to push her off but his fingers recoiled from the stiff

dead hair of the wig. So he relaxed, allowing himself to be lost in the spinning inside his head and in the faraway wet warmth.

After a time in which he might even have slept, he did not know, she lay down next to him on the driftsand, still holding his sex in her hand. She was younger than the silver wig made her seem. Her lips were still wet.

'So is he really your brother?' he mumbled, thinking of the man waiting outside.

She smiled. Leaning on an elbow she kissed him full on the mouth, her tongue cleaving his lips. Vigorously she pulled on his penis.

When it was over he felt that for the sake of both of them he ought to say something; but now all words had begun to escape him. The peace the brandy had brought seemed to be departing. He took a drink from the bottle and passed it to the girl.

There were shapes looming over him. He opened his eyes and saw the girl, wearing her shoes now. Beside her stood the man, her brother. 'Get some sleep, my friend,' said the man in a voice that came from a great distance. 'Tonight I will come back and fetch you for the party I promised, where there will be plenty to eat and where you will see how Sea Point lives.'

K thought they had finally gone; but the man returned and bent over him to whisper last words in his ear. 'It is difficult to be kind,' he said, 'to a person who wants nothing. You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it. That is my advice to you, my thin friend.' He gave K a pat on the shoulder.

Alone at last, shivering with cold, his throat parched, the shame of the episode with the girl waiting like a shadow at the edge of his thoughts, K buttoned himself and emerged from the toilet on to a beach where the sun was going down and the girls in the bikinis were packing up to leave. Wading through the sand was harder than before; once he even lost his balance and toppled sideways. He heard the tinkle of the ice-cream man and tried to

hurry after him before he remembered he had no money. For a moment his head cleared enough for him to realize that he was sick. He seemed to have no control over the temperature of his body. He was cold and hot at the same time, if that was possible. Then a haze fell over him again. At the foot of the steps, as he stood holding the rail, the two girls passed him, averting their gaze and, he suspected, holding their breath. He watched their backsides ascend the steps and surprised in himself an urge to dig his fingers into that soft flesh.

He drank from the tap behind the Côte d'Azur, closing his eyes as he drank, thinking of the cool water running down from the mountain to the reservoir above De Waal Park and then through miles of piping in the dark earth beneath the streets to pour forth here and quench his thirst. He voided himself, unable to help it, and drank again. So light now that he could not even be sure his feet were touching the ground, he passed from the last daylight into the shade of the passageway and without hesitating turned the handle of the door.

In the room where his mother had lived there was a dense clutter of furniture. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the dimness he made out scores of tubular steel chairs stacked from floor to ceiling, huge furled beach umbrellas, white vinyl tables with holes in their centres, and, nearest the door, three painted plaster statues: a deer with chocolate-brown eyes, a gnome in a buff jerkin, knee-breeches and green tasselled cap, and, larger than the other two, a creature with a peg nose whom he recognized as Pinocchio. Over everything lay a film of white dust.

Led by the smell, K explored the dark corner behind the door. He groped and found a crumpled blanket on a bed of flattened cartons on the bare floor. He knocked over an empty bottle which rolled away. From the blanket came the mixed odours of sweet wine, cigarette ash, old sweat. He wrapped the blanket around himself and lay down. As soon as he had settled the ringing began to mount in his ears, and behind it the thud of the old headache.

Now I am back, he thought.

The first siren went off announcing the curfew. Its wail was taken up by sirens and hooters across the city. The cacophony rose, then died away.

He could not sleep. Against his will the memory returned of the casque of silver hair bent over his sex, and the grunting of the girl as she laboured on him. I have become an object of charity, he thought. Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me. All these years, and still I carry the look of an orphan. They treat me like the children of Jakalsdrif, whom they were prepared to feed because they were still too young to be guilty of anything. From the children they expected only a stammer of thanks in return. From me they want more, because I have been in the world longer. They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. And if I had learned storytelling at Huis Norenus instead of potato-peeling and sums, if they had made me practise the story of my life every day, standing over me with a cane till I could perform without stumbling, I might have known how to please them. I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me off to scrub the floor. When my story was finished, people would have shaken their heads and been sorry and angry and plied me with food and drink; women would have taken me into their beds and mothered me in the dark. Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground.

K tossed restlessly on the cardboard. It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, *the truth, the truth about me. 'I am a gardener,'* he

said again, aloud. On the other hand, was it not strange for a gardener to be sleeping in a closet within sound of the beating of the waves of the sea?

I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence. But a mole or an earthworm on a cement floor?

He tried to relax his body inch by inch, as he had once known how to do.

At least, he thought, at least I have not been clever, and come back to Sea Point full of stories of how they beat me in the camps till I was thin as a rake and simple in the head. I was mute and stupid in the beginning. I will be mute and stupid at the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple. They were locking up simpletons before they locked up anyone else. Now they have camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads and people with little heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-water drains, camps for street girls, camps for people who can't add two and two, camps for people who forget their papers at home, camps for people who live in the mountains and blow up bridges in the night. Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being. How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too.

The mistake I made, he thought, going back in time, was not to have had plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket: pumpkin seeds, marrow seeds, beans, carrot seeds, beet-root seeds, onion seeds, tomato seeds, spinach seeds. Seeds in my shoes too, and in the lining of my coat, in case of robbers along

the way. Then my mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch. I should have planted them one at a time spread out over miles of veld in patches of soil no larger than my hand, and drawn a map and kept it with me at all times: so that every night I could make a tour of the sites to water them. Because if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything.

(Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the course of events, when you least expect them?)

He thought of the farm, the grey thornbushes, the rocky soil, the ring of hills, the mountains purple and pink in the distance, the great still blue empty sky, the earth grey and brown beneath the sun save here and there, where if you looked carefully you suddenly saw a tip of vivid green, pumpkin leaf or carrot-brush.

It did not seem impossible that whoever it was who disregarded the curfew and came when it suited him to sleep in this smelly corner (K imagined him as a little old man with a scrop and a bottle in his side pocket who muttered all the time into his beard, the kind of old man the police ignored) might be tired of life at the seaside and want to take a holiday in the country if he could find a guide who knew the roads. They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before; in the morning, at first light, they could go out searching the back streets for an abandoned barrow; and if they were lucky the two of them could be spinning along the high road by ten o'clock, remembering to stop on the way to buy seeds and one or two other things, avoiding Stellenbosch perhaps, which seemed to be a place of ill luck.

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself (things were gathering pace now) and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying, 'What are we going to do about water?', he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from

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his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up, there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live.

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