

in a zigzag pattern, the soldier unrolled a long white cord to mark off the area. Two of his comrades brought a crate from the truck and began to lay the mines. As they laid each and primed it, the first soldier planted the grass and poured the earth back, handful by handful, patted the surface down, and brushed away all their prints with a hand-broom, moving backwards on hands and knees.

'Get out of the way here,' said someone behind K. 'Go and wait there by the truck.' It was the officer. Rereading, K heard the instructions he was giving: 'Tape two inside the struts at about waist height. Put another under the platform. When they trip it, I want the whole thing to go.'

Everything was packed in, they were about to drive off, with K in the back of the truck among the soldiers, when someone pointed to the heap of pumpkins they had left by the side of the field. 'Load them!' shouted the officer from the jeep. They loaded the pumpkins. 'And fix up that kennel of his so that it looks just the same!' he ordered. They all waited while the roof was replaced. 'Stones to hold it down, like it was! Hurry up!'

They drove off, bumping and jostling on the dirt road, following the jeep. K clutched the strap above his head; he could feel his neighbours holding their bodies stiff to avoid being thrown against him. A cloud of dust billowed up till he could see nothing of what he was leaving behind.

He leaned nearer to the young soldier facing him. 'You know,' he said, 'there was a boy hiding in that house.'

The soldier did not understand. K had to repeat himself.

'What does he say?' asked someone.

'He says there was another boy hiding in the house.'

'Tell him he's dead now. Tell him he's in paradise.'

Then after a while they reached the turnoff. The truck picked up speed, the tyres began to hum, the soldiers relaxed, and the dust blew away to reveal behind them the long straight line of the road to Prince Albert.

❖ TWO ❖

HERE IS A NEW PATIENT IN THE WARD, A LITTLE OLD MAN who collapsed during physical training and was brought in with very low respiration and heartbeat. There is every evidence of prolonged malnutrition: cracks in his skin, sores on his hands and feet, bleeding gums. His joints protrude, he weighs less than forty kilos. The story is that he was picked up all by himself in the middle of nowhere in the Karoo, running a staging post for guerillas operating out of the mountains, caching arms and growing food, though obviously not eating it. I asked the guards who brought him why they made someone in his condition do physical exercise. It was an oversight, they said: he came with the new intake, the processing was taking a long time, the sergeant in charge wanted to give them something to do while they waited, so he made them run on the spot. Couldn't he see this man was incapable? I asked. The prisoner didn't complain, they replied: he said he was fine, he had always been thin. Can't you tell the difference between a thin man and a skeleton? I asked. They shrugged.



Have been struggling with the new patient Michaels. He insists there is nothing wrong with him, he only wants something for his headache. Says he is not hungry. In fact he cannot hold his food down. Am keeping him on a drip, which he fights against feebly.

Though he looks like an old man, he claims to be only thirty-two. Perhaps it is the truth. He comes from the Cape and knows the racecourse from the days when it was still a racecourse. It amused him to hear that this used to be the jockeys' dressing-room. 'I could become a jockey too, at my weight,' he said. He worked for the Council as a gardener, but lost his job and went to seek his fortune in the countryside, taking his mother with him. 'Where is your mother now?' I asked. 'She makes the plants grow,' he replied, evading my eyes. 'You mean she has passed away?' I said (pushing up the daisies?). He shook his head. 'They burned her,' he said. 'Her hair was burning round her head like a halo.'

He makes a statement like that as impassively as if talking about the weather. I am not sure he is wholly of our world. One tries to imagine him running a staging post for insurgents and one's mind boggles. More likely someone came along and offered him a drink and asked him to look after a gun and he was too stupid or too innocent to refuse. He is locked up as an insurgent, but he barely knows there is a war on.

Now that Felicity has shaved him I have had a chance to examine his mouth. A simple incomplete cleft, with some displacement of the septum. The palate intact. I asked him whether there had ever been an attempt to correct the condition. He did not know. I pointed out that the operation is a slight one, even at his age. 'Would he agree to such an operation if it could be arranged?' He replied (I quote): 'I am what I am. I was never a great one for the girls.' I felt like telling him that, never mind the girls, he

would find it easier to get along if he could talk like everyone else; but said nothing, not wanting to hurt him.

I mentioned him to Noël. He couldn't run a darts game, much less a staging post, I said. He is a person of feeble mind who drifted by chance into a war zone and didn't have the sense to get out. He ought to be in a protected environment weaving baskets or stringing beads, not in a rehabilitation camp.

Noël brought out the register. 'According to this,' he said, 'Michaels is an arsonist. He is also an escapee from a labour camp. He was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured. That is the story of Michaels.'

I shook my head. 'They have made a mistake,' I said. 'They have mixed him up with some other Michaels. This Michaels is an idiot. This Michaels doesn't know how to strike a match. If this Michaels was running a flourishing garden, why was he starving to death?'

'Why didn't you eat?' I asked Michaels back in the ward. 'They say you had a garden. Why didn't you feed yourself?' His reply: 'They woke me in the middle of my sleep. I must have looked blank. I don't need food in my sleep.'

He says his name is not Michaels but Michael.

Noël is putting pressure on me to speed up the turnaround. There are eight beds in the infirmary and, at the moment, sixteen patients, the other eight being housed in the old weighing room. Noël asks whether I cannot treat and release them faster. I reply that there is no point in discharging a patient with dysentery into camp life unless he wants an epidemic. Of course he doesn't want an epidemic, he says; but in the past there have been cases of malingering, and he wants to stamp that out. His responsibility is to his programme, I reply, mine to my patients, that is what being medical officer entails. He pats me on the shoulder. 'You

are doing a fine job, I'm not questioning that,' he says. 'All I ask is that they shouldn't get the idea we are soft.'

A silence falls between the two of us; we watch the flies on the windo-pane. 'But we are soft,' I suggest.

'Perhaps we are soft,' he replies. 'Perhaps we are even scheming a bit, at the back of our minds. Perhaps we think that if one day they come and put everyone on trial, someone will step forward and say, "Let those two off, they were soft." Who knows? But that isn't what I am talking about. I am talking about flow. At the moment you have got more patients flowing into your infirmary than flowing out, and my question is, are you going to do something about it?'

When we emerged from his office it was to behold a corporal raising the orange, white and blue on a flagpole in the middle of the track, a five-piece band playing 'Jit die blou,' the cornet out of key, and six hundred sullen men standing to attention, barefoot, in their tenth-hand khakis, having their thinking set right. A year ago we were still trying to make them sing; but we have given up on that.



Felicity took Michael's outdoors for some fresh air this morning. I passed him sitting on the grass holding his face up to the sun like a lizard basking, and asked him how he liked it in the infirmary. He was unexpectedly talkative. 'I'm glad there isn't a radio,' he said. 'The other place I stayed there was a radio playing all the time.' At first I thought he was referring to another camp, but it turned out that he meant the godforsaken institution where he spent his childhood. 'There was music all afternoon and all evening, till eight o'clock. It was like oil over everything.' 'The music was to keep you calm,' I explained. 'Otherwise you might have beaten each other's faces in and thrown chairs through the windows. The music was to soothe your savage breast.' I don't

know whether he understood, but he smiled his lopsided smile. 'The music made me restless,' he said. 'I used to fidget, I couldn't think my own thoughts.' And what were the thoughts you wanted to think? He: 'I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch out my arms and think I was flying over the fences and between the houses. I flew low over people's heads, but they couldn't see me. When they switched on the music I became too restless to do it, to fly.' And he even named one or two of the tunes that had disturbed him most.

I have moved him to the bed by the window, away from the boy with the broken ankle who has taken a dislike to him, God knows why, and lies and hisses at him all day. When he sits up he can now at least see the sky and the top of the flagpole. 'Eat a little more and you can go for a walk,' I coax him. What he really needs, however, is physiotherapy, which we cannot provide. He is like one of those toys made of sticks held together with rubber bands. He needs a graduated diet, gentle exercise, and physiotherapy, so that one day soon he can rejoin camp life and have a chance to march back and forth across the racetrack and shout slogans and salute the flag and practise digging holes and filling them again.



Overheard in the canteen: 'The children are finding it so hard to adapt to life in a flat. They really miss the big garden and their pets. We had to evacuate just like that: three days' notice. I can cry when I think of what we left behind.' The speaker a florid-faced woman in a polka-dot dress, the wife, I think, of one of the NCO's. (In her dreams of her abandoned home a strange man sprawls on the sheets with his boots on, or opens the deep-freeze and spits into the ice-cream.) 'Don't tell me not to feel bitter,' she said. Her companion a slim little woman I did not recognize, with her hair combed back like a man's.

Do any of us believe in what we are doing here? I doubt it. Her NCO husband least of all. We are given an old racetrack and a quantity of barbed wire and told to effect a change in men's souls. Not being experts on the soul but assuming cautiously that it has some connection with the body, we set our captives to doing pushups and marching back and forth. We also ply them with items from the brass band repertoire and show them films of young men in neat uniforms demonstrating to grizzled village elders how to eradicate mosquitoes and plough along the contour. At the end of the process we certify them cleansed and pack them off to the labour battalions to carry water and dig latrines. At the big military parades there is always a company from the labour battalions marching past the cameras among all the tanks and rockets and field artillery to prove that we can turn enemies into friends; but they march with spades on their shoulders, I notice, not guns.

Returning to camp after a Sunday off, I present myself at the gate feeling like a punter paying admission. ENCLOSURE A, reads the sign over the main gate. MEMBERS AND OFFICIALS ONLY, reads the sign over the gate to the infirmary. Why have they not taken them down? Do they believe the track will be re-opened one of these days? Are there still people training racehorses somewhere, convinced that after all the fuss the world will settle down to being as it was?

We are down to twelve patients. Michaels, however, makes no progress. There has obviously been degeneration of the intestinal wall. I have put him back on skim milk.

He lies looking up at the window and the sky, with his ears sticking out of his bare skull, smiling his smile. When he was

brought in he had a brown paper packet which he put away under his pillow. Now he has taken to holding the packet against his chest. I asked him whether it contained his *mini*. No, he said, and showed me dried pumpkin seeds. I was quite affected. 'You must go back to your gardening when the war is over,' I told him. 'Will you go back to the Karoo, do you think?' He looked cagey. 'Of course there is good soil in the Peninsula too, under all the rolling lawns,' I said. 'It would be nice to see market gardening carried on in the Peninsula again.' He made no reply. I took the packet out of his hand and tucked it under the pillow 'for safety.' When I passed an hour later he was asleep, his mouth nudging the pillow like a baby's.

He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature. I cannot really think of him as a man, though he is older than me by most reckonings.

His condition is stable, the diarrhoea under control. Pulse rate low, however, blood pressure low. Last night he complained of being cold, though in fact the nights are getting warmer, and Felicity had to give him a pair of socks. This morning when I tried to be friendly he shook me off. 'Do you think if you leave me alone I am going to die?' he said. 'Why do you want to make me fat? Why fuss over me, why am I so important?' I was in no mood to argue. I tried to take his wrist; he pulled away with surprising strength, waving an arm like an insect's claw. I left him till I had done my round, then came back. I had something

I wanted to say. 'You ask why you are important, Michaels. The answer is that you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten. Remember the sparrows. Five sparrows are sold for a farthing, and even they are not forgotten.'

He gazed up at the ceiling for a long while, like an old man consulting the spirits, then spoke. 'My mother worked all her life long,' he said. 'She scrubbed other people's floors, she cooked food for them, she washed their dishes. She washed their dirty clothes. She scrubbed the bath after them. She went on her knees and cleaned the toilet. But when she was old and sick they forgot her. They put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, "Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us."'

The boy with the broken ankle lay pricking his ears, pretending to be asleep.

I answered Michaels as abruptly as I could; there seemed no point in humouring his self-pity. 'We do for you what we have to do,' I told him. 'There is nothing special about you, you can rest easy about that. When you are better there are plenty of floors waiting to be scrubbed and plenty of toilets to clean. As for your mother, I am sure you have not told the full story and I am sure you know that.'

Nevertheless, he is right: I do indeed pay too much attention to him. Who is he, after all? On the one hand we have a flood of refugees from the countryside seeking safety in the towns. On the other hand we have people tired of living five to a room and not getting enough to eat who slip out of the towns to scratch a living in the abandoned countryside. Who is Michaels but one of a multitude in the second class? A mouse who quit an overcrowded, foundering ship. Only, being a city mouse, he did not know how to live off the land and began to grow very hungry

indeed. And then was lucky enough to be sighted and hauled aboard again. What has he to be so piqued about?



Noël has had a phone call from the police at Prince Albert. There was an attack on the town's water supply last night. The pump was blown up as well as a section of the pipe. While they wait for the engineers they will have to make do with borehole water. The overland power lines are down as well. Evidently yet another of the little ships is sinking, while the big ships plough on through the darkness, more and more lonely, groaning under their weight of human cargo. The police would like another chance to talk to Michaels about those responsible, namely his friends from the mountains. Alternatively they want us to put certain questions to him. 'Haven't they been over him once already?' I protested to Noël. 'What is the point of interrogating him a second time? He is too sick to travel, and anyhow not responsible for himself.' 'Is he too sick to talk to us?' Noël asked. 'Not too sick, but you won't get sense out of him,' I said. Noël brought out Michaels' papers again and showed them to me. Under *Category* I read *Opgarder* in neat country-policeman copperplate. 'What is an *Opgarder*?' I said. Noël: 'Like a squirrel or an ant or a bee.' 'Is that a new rank?' I said. 'Did he go to *opgarder* school and get an *opgarder*'s badge?'

We took Michaels in his pyjamas, with a blanket over his shoulders, to the store-room at the far end of the stand. Paint cans and cardboard boxes piled against the wall, cobwebs in every corner, dust thick on the floor, and nowhere to sit. Michaels confronted us crossly, holding the blanket tight, resolute on his two stick-feet.

'You're in the shit, Michaels,' said Noël. 'Your friends from Prince Albert have been misbehaving. They are making a nuisance of themselves. We need to catch them, have a talk to them. We

don't think you are giving us all the help you can. So you are getting a second chance. We want you to tell us about your friends: where they hide out, how we can get to meet them. He lit a cigarette. Michaels did not stir or take his eyes off us.

'Michaels,' I said, 'Michael—some of us are not even sure you had anything to do with the insurgents. If you can persuade us you were not working for them, you can save us a lot of trouble and save yourself a lot of unhappiness. So tell me, tell the Major: what were you actually doing on that farm when they caught you? Because all we know is what we read in these papers from the police at Prince Albert, and, frankly, what they say doesn't make sense. Tell us the truth, tell us the whole truth, and you can go back to bed, we won't bother you any more.'

Now he crouched perceptibly, clutching the blanket about his throat, glaring at the two of us.

'Come on, my friend!' I said. 'No one is going to hurt you, just tell us what we want to know!'

The silence lengthened. Noël did not speak, passing the whole burden to me. 'Come on, Michaels,' I said, 'we haven't got all day, there is a war on!'

At last he spoke: 'I am not in the war.'

Irritation overflowed in me. 'You are not in the war? Of course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not! This is a camp, not a holiday resort, not a convalescent home: it is a camp where we rehabilitate people like you and make you work! You are going to learn to fill sandbags and dig holes, my friend, till your back breaks! And if you don't co-operate you will go to a place that is a lot worse than this! You will go to a place where you stand baking in the sun all day and eat potato-peels and mealie-cobs, and if you don't survive, tough luck, they cross your number off the list and that is the end of you! So come on, talk, time is running out, tell us what you were doing so that we can write it down and send it to Prince Albert! The Major here is a busy man, he isn't used to wasting time, he came out of

retirement to run this nice camp and help people like you. You must co-operate.'

Still crouching, ready to evade me if I should spring, he made his reply. 'I am not clever with words,' he said, nothing more. He moistened his lips with his lizard-tongue.

'We don't want you to be clever with words or stupid with words, man, we just want you to tell the truth!'

He smiled back craftily.

'This garden you had,' said Noël. 'what did you grow there? It was a vegetable garden.'

'Who were these vegetables for? Who did you give them to?'

'They weren't mine. They came from the earth.'

'I asked, who did you give them to?'

'The soldiers took them.'

'Did you mind it that the soldiers took your vegetables?'

He shrugged. 'What grows is for all of us. We are all the children of the earth.'

Now I intervened. 'Your own mother is buried on that farm, isn't she? Didn't you tell me your mother is buried there?'

His face closed like a stone, and I pressed on, scenting the advantage. 'You told me the story of your mother, but the Major has not heard it. Tell the Major the story of your mother.'

Again I noted how distressed he becomes when he has to talk about his mother. His toes curled on the floor, he licked at the lip-cleft.

'Tell us about your friends who come in the middle of the night and burn down farms and kill women and children,' said Noël. 'That's what I want to hear.'

'Tell us about your father,' I said. 'You talk a lot about your mother but you never mention your father. What became of your father?'

He closed his mouth obstinately, the mouth that would never wholly shut, and glowered back.

'Don't you have children, Michaels?' I said. 'A man of your

age—don't you have a woman and children tucked away somewhere? Why is it just you by yourself? Where is your stake in the future? Do you want the story to end with you? That would make it a sad story, don't you think?

There was a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places.

'We brought you here to talk, Michaels,' I said. 'We give you a nice bed and lots of food, you can lie in comfort all day and watch the birds fly past in the sky, but we expect something in return. It is time to deliver, my friend. You've got a story to tell and we want to hear it. Start anywhere. Tell us about your mother. Tell us about your father. Tell us your views on life. Or if you don't want to tell us about your mother and your father and your views on life, tell us about your recent agricultural enterprise and the friends from the mountains who drop in for a visit and a meal every now and again. Tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone.'

I paused; he stared stonily back. 'Talk, Michaels,' I resumed. 'You see how easy it is to talk, now talk. Listen to me, listen how easily I fill this room with words. I know people who can talk all day without getting tired, who can fill up whole worlds talking.' Noël caught my eye but I pressed on. 'Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed. You will be a digit in the units column at the end of the war when they do the big subtraction sum to calculate the difference, nothing more. You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you? Well then, talk, make your voice heard, tell your story! We are listening! Where else in the world are you going to find two polite civilized gentlemen ready to listen to your story all day and all night, if need be, and take notes too?'

Without warning, Noël left the room. 'Wait here, I'll be back,' I ordered Michaels, and followed in haste.

In the murky passageway I stopped Noël and pleaded with him. 'You are never going to get sense out of him,' I said, 'surely you see that. He is a simpleton, and not even an interesting simpleton. He is a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out on to the battlefield, if I may use that word, the battlefield of life, when he should have been shut away in an institution with high walls, stuffing cushions or watering the flower-beds. Listen to me, Noël, I have a serious request to make. Let him go. Don't try beating a story out of him . . .'

'Who spoke about beating?'

' . . . Don't try twisting a story out of him, because truly there is no story to be had. In the profoundest sense he does not know what he is doing. I have watched him for days and I am sure of it. *Make up something for the report*. How big is this Swartberg insurgent gang, do you think? Twenty men? Thirty men? Say that he told you there were twenty men, always the same twenty. They came to the farm every four, five, six weeks, they never told him when they would be coming next. He knew their names, but only their first names. Make up a list of their first names. Make up a list of the arms they carried. Say they had a camp in the mountains somewhere, they never told him exactly where, except that it was high up, that it took two days to get there from the farm on foot. Say that they slept in caves and had women with them. Children too. That's enough. Put it in a report and send it off. It's enough to keep them off our backs, so that we can get on with our jobs.'

We stood outside in the sunlight under the blue spring sky.

'So you want me to make up a lie and sign my name to it.'

'It's not a lie, Noël. There is probably more truth in the story I told you than you would ever get out of Michaels if you used thumbscrews on him.'

'And what if this gang doesn't live in the mountains at all? What if they live around Prince Albert, quietly doing their jobs by day like they are told, and then when the children are asleep

take out guns from under the floorboards and roam around in the dark blowing up things, setting fires, terrorizing people? Have you thought of that possibility? Why are you so keen to protect Michaels?

'I am not protecting him, Noël! Do you want to spend the rest of today in that filthy hole twisting a story out of a poor idiot who doesn't know his arse from his elbow, who quakes in his pants when he thinks of a mother with flaming hair who visits him in his dreams, who believes that babies are found under cabbage bushes? Noël, we have got better things to do! There is *nothing there*, I'm telling you, and if you handed him over to the police they would come to the same conclusion: there is nothing there, no story of the slightest interest to rational people. I have watched him, I know! He is not of our world. He lives in a world all his own.'

So, Michaels, the long and the short of it is that by my eloquence I saved you. We will make up a story to satisfy the police, and instead of travelling back to Prince Albert handcuffed in the back of a van in a pool of urine you can lie in clean sheets listening to the cooing of the doves in the trees, dozing, thinking your own thoughts. I hope you will be grateful one day.

Extraordinary, though, that you should have survived thirty years in the shadows of the city, followed by a season footloose in the war zone (if one is to believe your story), and come out intact, when keeping you alive is like keeping the weakest pet duckling alive, or the runt of the cat's litter, or a fledgling expelled from the nest. No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy.



The first warm day of the summer, a day for the beach. Instead of which a new patient has been brought in exhibiting a high

fever, dizziness, vomiting, swelling of the lymph nodes. I isolated him in the old weighing room and sent off blood and urine samples to Wynberg for analysis. Half an hour ago, passing the mail room, I noticed the package still lying there with the red cross and the URGENT stamp clear for all to see. The mail van doesn't come today, the clerk explained. Couldn't he have sent it with a messenger on a bicycle? No messenger to send, he replied. It's not a matter of one prisoner, I said, it's a matter of the health of the whole camp. He shrugged. *Môre is nog 'n dag*. What's the hurry? On his desk an open girls' magazine.

Behind the west wall, behind the brick and barbed wire, the oaks along Rosmead Avenue have exploded these last few days into dense emerald green. From the avenue comes the clip-clop of horses' hoofs, and now from the other direction, from the exercise terrain, the strains of the little choir from the church in Wynberg who come every second Sunday, with their accordionist, to sing to the prisoners. '*Loof die Heer*' they are singing, their closing number, after which the prisoners will be marched back to Block D for their meal of *pap* and beans and gravy. For their souls they have a choir and a pastor (there is no shortage of pastors), for their bodies a medical officer. Thus they lack for nothing. In a few weeks they will pass out certified pure of heart and willing of hand, and there will be six hundred bright new faces coming in. 'If I don't do it, somebody else will,' says Noël, 'and that somebody will be worse than me.' 'At least prisoners have stopped dying of unnatural causes since I took over,' says Noël. 'The war can't go on forever,' says Noël, 'it will have to end one day, like all things.' The sayings of Major van Rensburg. 'Nevertheless,' I say, when it is my turn to speak, 'when the shooting stops and the sentries are fled and the enemy walk through the gates unchallenged, they will expect to find the camp commandant at his desk with a revolver in his hand and a bullet through his head. That is the gesture they will expect, despite

everything.' Noël makes no response, though I presume he has thought it all out.



Yesterday I discharged Michaels. On the discharge slip I clearly specified exemption from physical exercise for a minimum of seven days. Yet when I emerged from the grandstand this morning the first thing I saw was Michaels slogging it out around the track with the rest of them, stripped to the waist, a skeleton trailing behind forty vigorous human bodies. I remonstrated with the duty officer. His reply: 'When he can't take any more, he can drop out.' I protested: 'He will drop dead. His heart will stop.' 'He has been telling you stories,' he replied. 'You mustn't believe all the stories these buggers tell you. There's nothing wrong with him. Why are you so interested anyway? Look.' He pointed. Michaels passed us, his eyes shut, breathing deeply, his face relaxed.

Perhaps I do indeed believe too many of his stories. Perhaps the truth is simply that he needs to eat less than other people.



I was wrong. I should not have doubted. After two days he is back. Felicity went to the door, and there he was, supported between two guards, unconscious. She asked what had happened. They pretended not to know. Ask Sergeant Albrechts, they said.

His hands and feet were cold as ice, his pulse very weak. Felicity wrapped him in blankets with hot water bottles. I gave him an injection, and later fed him glucose and milk through a tube.

Albrechts sees the case as one of simple insubordination. Michaels refused to participate in prescribed activities. As punishment he was made to do exercises: squats and star-jumps. After half a dozen of these he collapsed and could not be revived.

'What was it that he was refusing to do?' I asked.

'Sing,' he said.

'Sing? He's not right in the head, man, he can't speak properly—how do you expect him to sing?'

He shrugged. 'It won't hurt him to try,' he said.

'And how can you punish him with physical exercise? He's as weak as a baby, you can see that.'

'It's in the book,' he replied.



Michaels is conscious again. His first act was to pull the tube out of his nose. Felicity coming too late to stop him. Now he lies near the door under his heap of blankets looking like a corpse, refusing to eat. With his stick-arm he pushes away the feed bottle. 'It's not my kind of food' is all he will say.

'What the hell is your kind of food?' I ask him. 'And why are you treating us like this? Don't you see we are trying to help you?' He gives me a serenely indifferent look that really rouses my ire. 'There are hundreds of people dying of starvation every day and you won't eat! Why? Are you fasting? Is this a protest fast? Is that what it is? What are you protesting against? Do you want your freedom? If we turned you loose, if we put you out on the street in your condition, you would be dead within twenty-four hours. You can't take care of yourself, you don't know how. Felicity and I are the only people in the world who care enough to help you. Not because you are special but because it is our job. Why can't you co-operate?'

This open row caused a great stir in the ward. Everyone listened. The boy I had suspected of meningitis (and whom I caught yesterday with his hand up Felicity's skirt) knelt on his bed craning to see, a broad smile on his face. Felicity herself dropped all pretence of pushing the broom.

'I never asked for special treatment,' croaked Michaels. I turned my back and walked out.

You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you.

Later, when things had calmed down in the ward, I returned and sat down at your bedside. For a long while I waited. Then at last you opened your eyes and spoke. 'I am not going to die,' you said. 'I can't eat the food here, that's all. I can't eat camp food.'

'Why don't you write out a discharge for him,' I pressed Noel. 'I'll take him to the gate tonight and put a few rand in his pocket and chuck him out. Then he can start fending for himself like he wants to. You write a discharge and I'll make out a report for you: "Cause of disease pneumonia, consequent on chronic malnutrition precluding admission." We can cross him off the list and we won't have to think about him any more.'

'I am baffled by this interest you have in him,' said Noel. 'Don't ask me to tamper with records, I am not going to do it. If he is going to die, if he is starving himself to death, let him die. It's simple enough.'

'It's not a question of dying,' I said. 'It's not that he wants to die. He just doesn't like the food here. Profoundly does not like it. He won't even take babyfood. Maybe he only eats the bread of freedom.'

An awkward silence fell between us.

'Maybe you and I wouldn't like camp food either,' I persisted. 'You saw him when they brought him in,' said Noel. 'He was a skeleton even then. He was living by himself on that farm of his free as a bird, eating the bread of freedom, yet he arrived here looking like a skeleton. He looked like someone out of Dachau.' 'Maybe he is just a very thin man,' I said.



The ward was in darkness, Felicity asleep in her room. I stood over Michaels' bed with a flashlight, shaking him till he woke

and shielded his eyes. I spoke in a whisper, bending so close that I could smell the odour of smoke he somehow carries with him despite his ablutions.

'Michaels, there is something I want to tell you. If you don't eat, you are truly going to die. It is as simple as that. It will take time, it will not be pleasant, but in the end you will certainly die. And I am going to do nothing to stop you. It would be easy for me to tie you down and strap your head and put a tube down your throat and feed you, but I am not going to do that. I am going to treat you like a free man, not a child or an animal. If you want to throw your life away, so be it, it is your life, not mine.'

He took his hand away from his eyes and cleared his throat deeply. He seemed about to speak, then shook his head instead and smiled. In the torchlight his smile was repulsive, sharklike.

'What sort of food do you want? I whispered. 'What sort of food would you be prepared to eat?'

Reaching out a slow hand he pushed the flashlight aside. Then he turned over and went back to sleep.



The training period for September's intake is over, and this morning the long column of barefoot men, headed by a drummer and flanked by armed guards, set out on the twelve-kilometre march to the railway yards and dispatch up-country. They leave behind half a dozen of their number classed as intractable and locked up waiting to be shipped to Muldersrus, plus three in the infirmary not fit to walk. Michaels is among the latter: nothing has passed his lips since he refused to be fed by tube.

There is a smell of carbolic soap on the breeze and a pleasant stillness. I feel lightened, almost happy. Is this how it will be when the war is over and the camp is closed down? (Or will the camp not close down even then, camps with high walls always having their uses?) Everyone save a skeleton staff is off on a

weekend pass. On Monday the November intake is due to arrive. Rail services have deteriorated so badly, however, that we can plan ahead only day by day. There was an attack on De Aar last week, with significant damage to the yards. It did not get into the news bulletins but Noël heard of it reliably.



I bought a butternut squash from a hawker on the Main Road today, which I cut into thin slices and grilled under the toaster. 'It's not pumpkin,' I told Michaels, propping him up with pillows, 'but it tastes nearly the same.' He took a bite, and I watched him mumble it around in his mouth. 'Do you like it?' I asked. He nodded. I had sprinkled the squash with sugar but had not been able to find cinnamon. After a while, to spare him embarrassment, I left. When I came back he was lying down, the plate empty beside him. I presume that when Felicity next sweeps she will find the squash under the bed covered in ants. A pity.

'What would persuade you to eat?' I asked him later on.

He was silent so long that I thought he had gone to sleep. Then he cleared his throat. 'No one was interested before in what I ate,' he said. 'So I ask myself why.'

'Because I don't want to see you starve yourself to death. Because I don't want anyone here to starve to death.'

I doubt that he heard me. The cracked lips went on moving as though there were some train of thought he was afraid of losing. 'I ask myself: What am I to this man? I ask myself: What is it to this man if I live or die?'

'You might as well ask why we don't shoot prisoners. It is the same question.'

He shook his head from side to side, then without warning opened the great dark pools of his eyes on me. There was something more I had wanted to say, but I could not speak. It seemed foolish to argue with someone who looked at you as if from beyond the grave.

For a long while we stared at each other. Then I found myself speaking, in no more than a whisper. As I spoke I thought: Surrender. This is how surrender will feel. 'I might ask the same question of you,' I said, 'the same question you asked: What am I to this man? Even softer I whispered, my heart hammering: 'I did not ask you to come here. Everything was well with me before you came. I was happy, as happy as one can be in a place like this. Therefore I too ask: Why me?'

He had closed his eyes again. My throat was dry. I left him, went to the washroom, drank, and for a long while stood leaning on the basin, full of regret, thinking of the trouble to come, thinking, I am not ready. I returned to him with a glass of water. 'Even if you don't eat, you must drink,' I said. I helped him to sit up and take a few mouthfuls.



Dear Michaels,

The answer is: Because I want to know your story. I want to know how it happened that you of all people have joined in a war, a war in which you have no place. You are no soldier, Michaels, you are a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man. What is your business in this camp? There is nothing we can do here to rehabilitate you from the vengeful mother with flaming hair who comes to you in your dreams. (Do I understand that part of the story correctly? That is how I understand it anyhow.) And what is there for us to rehabilitate you into? Basketwork? Lawn-mowing? You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape. You are like a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow fragile stick-legs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing. Why did you ever leave the bushes, Michaels? That was where you belonged. You should have stayed all your life clinging to a nondescript bush in a quiet

corner of an obscure garden in a peaceful suburb, doing whatever it is that stick insects do to maintain life, nibbling a leaf here and there, eating the odd aphid, drinking dew. And—if I may be personal—you should have got away at an early age from that mother of yours, who sounds like a real killer. You should have found yourself another bush as far as possible from her and embarked on an independent life. You made a great mistake, Michaels, when you tied her on your back and fled the burning city for the safety of the countryside. Because when I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight, choking in the smoke, dodging the bullets, performing all the other feats of filial piety you no doubt performed, I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating out your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother-Death. And now that she is gone you are plotting to follow her. I have wondered what it is you see, Michaels, when you open your eyes so wide—for you certainly do not see me, you certainly do not see the white walls and the empty beds of the infirmary, you do not see Felicity in her snow-white turban. What do you see? Is it your mother in her circle of flaming hair grinning and beckoning to you with crooked finger to pass through the curtain of light and join her in the world beyond? Does that explain your indifference to life?

Another thing I would like to know is what the food was that you ate in the wilderness that has made all other food tasteless to you. The only food you have ever mentioned is pumpkin. You even carry pumpkin seeds with you. Is pumpkin the only food they know in the Karoo? Am I to believe that you lived for a year on pumpkin? The human body is not capable of that, Michaels. What else did you eat? Did you hunt? Did you make yourself a bow and arrows and hunt? Did you eat roots and berries? Did you eat locusts? Your papers say that you were an *opgarder*, a storage man, but they do not say what it was you stored. Was it manna? Did manna fall from the sky for you, and did you store it away in underground bins for your friends to

come and eat in the night? Is that why you will not eat camp food—because you have been spoiled forever by the taste of manna? You should have hidden, Michaels. You were too careless of yourself. You should have crept away in the darkest reach of the deepest hole and possessed yourself in patience till the troubles were over. Did you think you were a spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations? Well, the laws of nations have you in their grip now: they have pinned you down in a bed beneath the grandstand of the old Kenilworth racecourse, they will grind you in the dirt if necessary. The laws are made of iron, Michaels, I hope you are learning that. No matter how thin you make yourself, they will not relax. There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas.

If you will not compromise you are going to die, Michaels. And do not think you are simply going to waste away, grow more and more insubstantial till you are all soul and can fly away into the aether. The death you have chosen is full of pain and misery and shame and regret, and there are many days to endure yet before release comes. You are going to die, and your story is going to die too, forever and ever, unless you come to your senses and listen to me. Listen to me, Michaels. I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp, nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask. You are precious, Michaels, in your way, you are the last of your kind, a creature left over from an earlier age, like the coelacanth or the last man to speak Yagui. We have all tumbled over the lip into the cauldron of history: only you, following your idiot light, biding your time in an orphanage (who would have thought of that as a hiding-

place?), evading the peace and the war, skulking in the open where no one dreamed of looking, have managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does. We ought to value you and celebrate you, we ought to put your clothes on a maquette in a museum, your clothes and your packet of pumpkin seeds too, with a label, there ought to be a plaque nailed to the racetrack wall commemorating your stay here. But that is not the way it is going to be. The truth is that you are going to perish in obscurity and be buried in a nameless hole in a corner of the racecourse, transport to the acres of Wolemade being out of the question nowadays, and no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!*

A friend.



After a flurry of rumours, definite word at last about this month's intake. The main batch is held up on the line at Reddersburg waiting for transport. As for the batch from the Eastern Cape, it will not be coming at all: the staging camp at Uitenhage no longer has the staff to separate prisoners into hard and soft, and all detainees in that sector are being committed to high-security camps until further notice.

So the holiday-camp atmosphere at Kenilworth lingers on. A cricket match has been arranged for tomorrow between camp personnel and a team from the Quartermaster-General's. Great activity out in the middle of the course, where they are mowing and rolling a pitch. Noël is to captain the team. It is thirty years since he last played, he says. He cannot find a pair of white trousers to fit him.

Maybe if tracks continue to be blown up and the transports are halted everywhere, the Castle will forget about us and leave

us to play out the duration of the war in quiet oblivion behind our walls.

Noël came over on an inspection. There were only two prisoners in the ward, Michaels and the concussion case. We spoke about Michaels, keeping our voices low though he was asleep. I could still save him if I used a tube, I told Noël, but was reluctant to force anyone to live who did not want to. The regulations are clearly behind me: No force-feeding, no artificial prolongation of life. (Also: No publicity to hunger strikes.) 'How much longer will he last?' asked Noël. Perhaps two weeks, perhaps as long as three, I told him. 'At least it is a quiet end,' he said. 'No, I said, it is a painful and distressing end. Isn't there some kind of injection you can give?' he asked. 'To put him down?' I said. 'No, I don't mean to put him down,' he said, 'just to make the going easier for him.' I refused. I cannot take on that responsibility while there is still a chance he might change his mind. We left it at that.



The cricket match is played and lost, with the ball shooting through off the uneven grass and batsmen jumping about to avoid being hit. Noël, playing in a white track suit with red piping that made him look like Father Christmas in thermal underwear, batted number eleven and was bowled first ball. 'Where did you learn your cricket?' I asked. 'Moorreesburg, in the 1930s, in the school playground, in the lunch break,' he replied.

He strikes me as the best kind of person we have.

Partying deep into the night after the game. A return match promised for February, at Simonstown, if we are still around.



Noël very despondent. He heard today that Uitenhage was just the beginning, that the distinction between rehabilitation camps

and internment camps is to be abolished. Baardskederbos is to be closed down and the remaining three, including Kenilworth, will be converted into straight internment camps. Rehabilitation, it would seem, is an ideal that has failed to prove itself, as for the labour battalions, they can be supplied just as well from the internment camps. Noël: 'You mean you are going to intern battle-hardened soldiers here in Kenilworth, in the heart of a residential area, behind a brick wall and two strands of barbed wire, with nothing but a handful of old men and boys and heart cases to guard them?' The reply: The drawbacks of the Kenilworth camp have been taken note of. There will be physical modifications, including lights and guard towers, before it is re-opened.

To me Noël confides that he is thinking of resigning: he is sixty, he has given enough of his life to the service, he has a widowed daughter who is pressing him to come and live with her in Gordon's Bay. 'You need an iron man to run an iron camp. I am not that kind of man. I could not disagree. Not being iron is his greatest virtue.'



Michaels is gone. He must have escaped during the night. Felicity noticed that his bed was empty when she arrived this morning, but did not report it ('I thought he had gone to the toilet'—). It was ten o'clock before I found out. Now, in retrospect, one can see how easy it must have been, or would be for anyone in normal health. With the camp nearly empty, the only sentries on duty were at the main gate and the gate to the personnel compound. There were no perimeter patrols and the side gate was simply locked. There was no one inside to break out, and who would want to break in? Well, we forgot about Michaels. He must have tiptoed out, climbed the wall—God knows how—and stolen away. The wire does not seem to have been cut, but then Michaels is enough of a wraith to slip through anything.

Noël is in a quandary. The specified procedure is to report the

escape and pass responsibility to the civil police. But in that case there will be an investigation, and the happy-go-lucky state of affairs here will undoubtedly emerge: half the personnel out on overnight passes, foot patrols discontinued, etc. The alternative is to concoct a death report and let Michaels go. I have been urging this course on Noël. 'For God's sake close the story of Michaels here and now,' I told him. 'The poor simpleton has gone off like a sick dog to die in a corner. Let him be, don't haul him back and force him to die here under a spotlight with strangers looking on.' Noël smiled. 'You smile,' I said, 'but what I say is true: people like Michaels are in touch with things you and I don't understand. They hear the call of the great good master and they obey. Haven't you heard of elephants?'

'Michaels should never have come to this camp,' I went on. 'It was a mistake. In fact his life was a mistake from beginning to end. It's a cruel thing to say, but I will say it: he is someone who should never have been born into a world like this. It would have been better if his mother had quietly suffocated him when she saw what he was, and put him in the trash can. Now at least let him go in peace. I'll write out a death certificate, you countersign it, some clerk in the Castle will file it away without giving it a glance, and that will be the end of the story of Michaels.'

'He is wearing camp issue khaki pyjamas,' said Noël. 'The police will pick him up, they will ask where he comes from, he will tell them he comes from Kenilworth, they will check and find there has been no escape reported, and there will be hell to pay.'

'He was not wearing pyjamas,' I replied. 'What he found to wear I don't yet know, but he left his pyjamas behind. As for admitting he comes from Kenilworth, he won't do that for the simple reason that he doesn't want to be returned to Kenilworth. He will tell them one of his other stories, for example that he comes from the Garden of Paradise. He will bring out his packet of pumpkin seeds and rattle them, and give them one of his smiles,

and they will pack him straight off to the madhouse, if the mad-houses haven't all been closed down yet. You have heard the last of Michaels, Noël, I swear it. Besides, do you know what he weighs? Thirty-five kilos, all skin and bone. For two weeks he has eaten nothing whatever. His body has lost the ability to digest ordinary foodstuffs. I am amazed he had the strength to stand up and walk; it is a miracle that he climbed the wall. How long can he possibly last? One night in the open and he will be dead of exposure. His heart will stop.'

'Speaking of which,' said Noël: 'has anyone checked that he is not lying outside somewhere—that he didn't climb the wall and fall straight down the other side?' I stood up. 'Because the last advertisement we need,' he went on, 'is a body lying outside the camp with flies all over it. It isn't your job, but if you want to check by all means do so. You can take my car.'

I did not take the car, but made a circuit of the camp on foot. There were weeds growing thickly all around the perimeter, along the back wall I had to struggle through knee-high grass. I saw no body nor any break in the wire. In half an hour I was back where I had started, a little surprised at how small a camp can seem from the outside that is, to those who dwell within, an entire universe. Then, instead of returning to report to Noël, I wandered down Rosmead Avenue in the dappled shade of the oak-trees, enjoying the midday stillness. An old man passed me riding a bicycle that creaked with every stroke of the pedals. He raised a hand in greeting. It occurred to me that if I followed after him, proceeding down the avenue in a straight line, I could be at the beach by two o'clock. Was there any reason, I asked myself, why order and discipline should not crumble today rather than tomorrow or next month or next year? What would yield the greater benefit to mankind: if I spent the afternoon taking stock in the dispensary, or if I went to the beach and took off my clothes and lay in my underpants absorbing the benign spring sun, watching the children frolic in the water, later buying an

ice-cream from the kiosk on the parking lot, if the kiosk is still there? What did Noël ultimately achieve labouring at his desk to balance the bodies out against the bodies in? Would he not be better off taking a nap? Maybe the universal sum of happiness would be increased if we declared this afternoon a holiday and went down to the beach, commandant, doctor, chaplain, PT instructors, guards, dog-handlers all together with the six hard cases from the detention block, leaving behind the concussion case to look after things. Perhaps we might meet some girls. For what reason were we waging the war, after all, but to augment the sum of happiness in the universe? Or was I misremembering, was that another war I was thinking of?

'Michaels is not lying outside the wall,' I reported. 'Nor is he wearing clothes that will incriminate us. He is wearing royal blue overalls with the legend TREPPERS emblazoned on back and front that have been hanging on a nail in the grandstand toilets since God knows when. Therefore we can safely disclaim him.'

Noël looked tired: an old and tired man.

'Also,' I said, 'can you remind me why we are fighting this war? I was told once, but that was long ago and I seem to have forgotten.'

'We are fighting this war,' Noël said, 'so that minorities will have a say in their destinies.'

We exchanged empty looks. Whatever my mood was, I could not get him to share it.

'Let me have that certificate you promised,' he said. 'Don't fill in the date, leave it blank.'

Then as I sat at the nurse's table in the evening, with nothing to do and the ward in darkness and the south-easter beginning to stir outside and the concussion case breathing away quietly, it came to me with great force that I was wasting my life, that I was wasting it by living from day to day in a state of waiting, that I had in effect given myself up as a prisoner to this war. I went outside and stood on the empty racetrack staring up into a

sky swept clean by the wind, hoping that the spirit of restlessness would pass and the old calm return. War-time is a time of waiting, Noël once said. What was there to do in camp but wait, going through the motions of living, fulfilling one's obligations, keeping an ear tuned all the time to the hum of the war beyond the walls, listening for its pitch to change? Still, it occurred to me to wonder whether Felicity, to name only Felicity, thought of herself as living in suspension, alive but not alive, while history hesitated over what course it would take. Felicity, if I am to judge by what has passed between Felicity and me, has never conceived of history as anything but a childhood catechism. ('When was South Africa discovered?' '1652.' 'Where is the biggest man-made hole in the world?' 'Kimberley.') I doubt that Felicity pictures to herself currents of time swirling and eddying all about us, on the battlefields and in the military headquarters, in the factories and on the streets, in boardrooms and cabinet chambers, murky at first, yet tending ever towards a moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning. Unless I mistake her, Felicity does not think of herself as a castaway marooned in a pocket of time, the time of waiting, camp time, war-time. To her, time is as full as it has ever been, even the time of washing sheets, even the time of sweeping the floor; whereas to me, listening with one ear to the banal exchanges of camp life and with the other to the suprasensual spinning of the gyroscopes of the Grand Design, time has grown empty. (Or do I underestimate Felicity?) Even the concussion case, turned wholly inward, wrapped up in the processes of his own slow extinction, lives in dying more intensely than I in living.

Despite the embarrassment it would cause us, I find myself wishing that a policeman would arrive at the gate holding Michaels by the scruff of the neck like a rag doll, saying, 'You should watch the bastards more carefully,' and deposit him there, and march off. Michaels with his fantasy of making the desert bloom

with pumpkin flowers is another of those too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history.



This morning, without notice, a convoy of trucks arrived bringing four hundred new prisoners, the batch held up first at Redersburg for a week and then on the line north of Beaufort West. All the time we were playing games here, and spending time with girlfriends, and philosophizing about life and death and history, these men waited in cattle trucks parked in sidings under the November sun, sleeping packed against each other in the cold of the highland nights, let out twice a day to relieve themselves, eating nothing but porridge cooked over thornbush fires beside the tracks, watching cargoes more urgent than themselves rumble past while the spider spun his web between the wheels of their home. Noël says he was going to refuse delivery point-blank, as he might be entitled to do, given the facilities here, until he smelled the prisoners, saw their lassitude and helplessness, and knew that if he created difficulties they would simply be driven back to the railway yards and herded into the same trucks they came in to wait till someone somewhere in the unimaginable bureaucracy above bestirred himself or else till they died. So we have been working all day, all of us, without a break, to process them: to delouse them and burn their old clothes, to fit them out in camp uniform and feed them and dose them, to separate the sick from the merely starved. The ward and its annexe are bursting at their seams again; some of the new patients are no less fragile than Michaels, who approached, I thought, as near to a state of life in death or death in life, whatever it was, as is humanly possible. All in all, then, we are back in business, and before long there will once again be flag-raising exercises and educative chanting to spoil the peace of the summer afternoons.

There were at least twenty deaths en route, the prisoners told us. The dead were buried in unmarked graves out in the veld.

Noël checked the papers. They turn out to be a fresh set drawn up in Cape Town this morning, reflecting nothing but the number of arrivals. 'Why don't you demand the embarkation documents?' I asked him. 'It would be a waste of time,' he replied. 'They would say the papers haven't come through yet. Only the papers will never come through. No one wants an inquiry. Besides, who is to say that twenty in four hundred is an unacceptable rate? People die, people are dying all the time, it's human nature, you can't stop them.'

Dysentery and hepatitis are rife, and of course worms. Felicity and I will plainly not be able to cope. Noël has agreed that I should impress two prisoners as orderlies.

Meanwhile plans go ahead for the upgrading of Kenilworth to high-security status. March 1 is set as the changeover date. There will be major modifications, including the flattening of the grandstand, and huts to house five hundred more prisoners. Noël telephoned the Castle to protest the shortness of the notice and was told: Calm yourself. Everything is taken care of. Help us by setting your men to clearing the ground. If there is grass, burn it. If there are stones, remove them. Every stone casts a shadow. Good luck. Remember, *'n boer maak 'n plan*.

I suspect that Noël is drinking more than usual. Perhaps now would be a good time, for him as for me, to quit the fortress—for that is what the Peninsula is clearly to become—leaving behind the prisoners to guard the prisoners, the sick to cure the sick. Perhaps the two of us should take a leaf out of Michaels' book and go on a trip to one of the quieter parts of the country, the obscurer reaches of the Karoo for example, and set up house there, two gentleman deserters of modest means and sober habits. How to get as far as Michaels did without being picked up is the main difficulty. Perhaps we could make a start by discarding our uniforms and getting dirt under our fingernails and walking a little closer to the earth, though I doubt we will ever look as nondescript as Michaels, or as Michaels must have looked in the days before

he turned into a skeleton. With Michaels it always seemed to me that someone had scuffed together a handful of dust, spat on it, and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes (the mouth, and without a doubt the contents of the head), omitting one or two details (the sex), but coming up nevertheless in the end with a genuine little man of earth, the kind of little man one sees in peasant art emerging into the world from between the squat thighs of its mother-host with fingers ready hooked and back ready bent for a life of burrowing, a creature that spends its waking life stooped over the soil, that when at last its time comes digs its own grave and slips quietly in and draws the heavy earth over its head like a blanket and cracks a last smile and turns over and descends into sleep, home at last, while unnoticed as ever somewhere far away the grinding of the wheels of history continues. What organ of state would play with the idea of recruiting creatures like that as its agents, and what use would they serve except to carry things and die in large numbers?

Whereas I—if one dark night I were to slip into overalls and tennis shoes and clamber over the wall (cutting the wire, since I am not made of air)—I am the kind who would be snapped up by the first patrol to pass while I yet stood dithering over which way lay salvation. The truth is that the only chance I had is gone, and gone before I knew. The night that Michaels made his break, I should have followed. It is vain to plead that I was not ready. If I had taken Michaels seriously I would always have been ready. I would have had a bundle at hand at all times, with a change of clothing and a purse full of money and a box of matches and a packet of biscuits and a can of sardines. I would never have let him out of my sight. When he slept I would have slept across the door-sill; when he woke I would have watched. And when he stole off I would have stolen off behind him. I would have dodged from shadow to shadow in his tracks, and climbed the wall in the darkest corner, and followed him down the avenue

of oaks under the stars, keeping my distance, stopping when he stopped, so that he should never be forced to say to himself, 'Who is this behind me? What does he want?' or perhaps even start running, taking me for a policeman, a plain-clothes policeman in overalls and tennis shoes carrying a bundle with a gun in it. I would have dogged him all night through the side streets till at daybreak we would have found ourselves on the fringes of the wastes of the Cape Flats, plodding fifty paces apart through sand and bush, avoiding the clusters of shanties where here and there a curl of smoke would be climbing into the sky. And here, in the light of day, you would at last have turned and looked at me, the pharmacist turned makeshift medical officer turned foot-follower who before seeing the light had dictated to you when you might sleep and when you might wake, who had pushed tubes up your nose and pills down your throat, who had stood in your hearing and made jokes about you, who above all had unrelentingly pressed food on you that you could not eat. Suspiciously, angrily even, you would have waited in the middle of the track for me to approach and explain myself.

And I would have come before you and spoken. I would have said: 'Michaels, forgive me for the way I treated you, I did not appreciate who you were till the last days. Forgive me too for following you like this. I promise not to be a burden.' (Not to be a burden like your mother was? That would perhaps be imprudent.) 'I am not asking you to take care of me, for example by feeding me. My need is a very simple one. Though this is a large country, so large that you would think there would be space for everyone, what I have learned of life tells me that it is hard to keep out of the camps. Yet I am convinced there are areas that lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of the camps—certain mountaintops, for example, certain islands in the middle of swamps, certain arid strips where human beings may not find it worth their while to live. I am looking for such a place in order to settle there, perhaps only

till things improve, perhaps forever. I am not so foolish, however, as to imagine that I can rely on maps and roads to guide me. Therefore I have chosen you to show me the way.'

Then I would have stepped closer till I was within touching distance and you could not fail to see into my eyes. 'From the moment you arrived, Michaels,' I would have said, had I been awake and followed you, 'I could see that you did not belong inside any camp. At first I thought of you, I will confess, as a figure of fun. I did indeed urge Major van Rensburg to exempt you from the camp regime, but only because I thought that putting you through the motions of rehabilitation would have been like trying to teach a rat or a mouse or (dare I say it?) a lizard to bark and beg and catch a ball. As time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. You were not a hero and did not pretend to be, not even a hero of fasting. In fact you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump a third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap; and we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. So we picked you up, finding that you weighed no more than a sack of feathers, and set you down before food, and said: Eat, build up, your strength so that you can exhaust it again obeying us. And you did not refuse. You tried sincerely, I believe, to do as you were told. You acquiesced in your will (excuse me for making these distinctions, they are the only means I possess to explain myself), your will acquiesced but your body balked. That was how I saw it. Your body rejected the food we fed you and you grew even thinner. *Why?* I asked myself: why will this man not eat when he is plainly starving? Then as I watched you day after day I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were trying secretly, unknown to your conscious self (forgive the term), for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply. Your

will remained pliant but your body was crying to be fed its own food, and only that. Now I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. The body, I had been taught, wants only to live. Suicide, I had understood, is an act not of the body against itself but of the will against the body. Yet here I beheld a body that was going to die rather than change its nature. I stood for hours in the doorway of the ward watching you and puzzling over the mystery. It was not a principle, an idea that lay behind your decline. You did not want to die, but you were dying. You were like a bunny-rabbit sewn up in the carcass of an ox, suffocating no doubt, but starving too, amid all those baskets of meat, for the true food.'

Here I might have paused in my discourse on the Flats while from somewhere in the middle distance behind us came the sound of a man coughing and hawking and spitting, and the smell of woodsmoke; but my glittering eye would have held you, for the time being, rooted where you stood.

'I was the only one who saw that you were more than you seemed to be,' I would have proceeded. 'Slowly, as your persistent No, day after day, gathered weight, I began to feel that you were more than just another patient, another casualty of the war, another brick in the pyramid of sacrifice that someone would eventually climb and stand straddle-legged on top of, roaring and beating his chest and announcing himself emperor of all he surveyed. You would lie on your bed under the window with only the night light shining, your eyes closed, perhaps sleeping. I would stand in the doorway breathing quietly, listening to the groans and rustlings of the other sleepers, waiting; and upon me the feeling would grow stronger and stronger that around one bed among all there was a thickening of the air, a concentration of darkness, a black whirlwind roaring in utter silence above your body, pointing to you, without so much as stirring the edge of the bedclothes. I would shake my head like a man trying to shake off a dream, but the feeling would persist. "This is not my imag-

ination," I would say to myself. "This sense of a gathering meaningfulness is not something like a ray that I project to bathe this or that bed, or a robe in which I wrap this or that patient according to whim. Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me. If it were, if the origin of this meaning were no more than a lack in myself, a lack, say, of something to believe in, since we all know how difficult it is to satisfy a hunger for belief with the vision of times to come that the war, to say nothing of the camps, presents us with, if it were a mere craving for meaning that sent me to Michaels and his story, if Michaels himself were no more than what he seems to be (what you seem to be), a skin-and-bones man with a crumpled lip (pardon me, I name only the obvious), then I would have every justification for retiring to the toilets behind the jockeys' changing-rooms and locking myself into the last cubicle and putting a bullet through my head. Yet have I ever been more sincere than I am tonight?" And standing in the doorway I would turn my bleakest stare in upon myself, seeking by the last means I knew to detect the germ of dishonesty at the heart of the conviction—the wish, let us say, for example, to be the only one to whom the camp was not just the old Kenilworth racetrack with prefabricated huts dotted across it but a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world. But if such a germ lurked within me it would not raise its head, and if it would not what could I do to compel it? (I am dubious anyhow that one can separate the self that scrutinizes from the self that hides, setting them at odds like hawk and mouse; but let us agree to postpone that discussion for a day when we are not running away from the police.) So I would turn my gaze out again, and, yes, it would still be true, I was not deceiving myself, I was not flattering myself, I was not comforting myself, it was as it had been before, it was the truth, there was indeed a gathering, a thickening of darkness above one bed alone, and that bed was yours.'

At this stage I think you might already have turned your back

on me and begun to walk off, having lost the thread of my discourse and anyhow being anxious to put more miles between yourself and the camp. Or perhaps by now, attracted by my voice, a crowd of children from the shanties would have gathered around us, some in their pyjamas, listening, open-mouthed to the big passionate words and making you nervous. So now I would have had to hurry after you, keeping close at your heels so as not to have to shout. 'Forgive me, Michaels,' I would have had to say, 'there is not much more, please be patient. I only want to tell you what you mean to me, then I will be through.'

At this moment, I suspect, because such is your nature, you would break into a run. So I would have to run after you, ploughing as if through water through the thick grey sand, dodging the branches, calling out: 'You stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed. Do you know what thought crossed my mind when I saw you had got away without cutting the wire? "He must be a polevaulter"—that is what I thought. Well, you may not be a polevaulter, Michaels, but you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take off my hat to you!'

By this time, what with the running and the explaining, I would have begun to gasp for breath, and it is even possible that you might have begun drawing away from me. 'And now, last topic, your garden,' I would have panted. 'Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way.'

Would I be imagining it, or would it be true that at this point you would begin to throw your most urgent energies into running, so that it would be clear to the meanest observer that you were running to escape the man shouting at your back, the man in blue who must seem to be persecutor, madman, bloodhound, policeman? Would it be surprising if the children, having trotted after us for the sake of entertainment, were now to begin to take your part and harry me from all sides, darting at me, throwing sticks and stones, so that I would have to stop and beat them away while shouting my last words to you as you plunged far ahead into the deepest wattle thickets, running more strongly now than one would ever expect from someone who did not eat—'Am I right?' I would shout. 'Have I understood you? If I am right, hold up your right hand; if I am wrong, hold up your left!'