

23:00 SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1989

Pelindaba Nuclear Research Centre

SECURITY WAS SLACK at Pelindaba that night – unusually so for such an important facility. But the guards had become used to it since production had stopped. Except for checking-in the odd mysterious comings and goings late at night, the job was one long, empty, hour after hour. It was also the last hour of the graveyard shift and rumour had it they were all soon to be out of work anyway. So when the camouflage-painted South African Defence Force Unimog recovery vehicle pulled up at the gate, loaded with the large coffin-shaped metal box in the back, it was waved through with the briefest, most cursory inspection. Half-an-hour later, the same Unimog, still loaded with the box, left the facility by the same gate – the guards not even giving it a second glance.

It wasn't always so. Especially in the early days, when the programme began, and security checks had been stringent to the point of paranoia. And doubly so around the aircraft-hanger-like Building 5000, the most secret of secret places. You couldn't even get near it unless you'd been thoroughly vetted and all foreigners were especially forbidden. You had to be a natural-born, white South African to work there – of solid Afrikaans stock preferably.

Now all the work had come to an end. The seven, 1.8m high, 65cm wide, 118 kiloton bombs, each named after a heroic Boer general, lying in their lead-lined vaults were to be finally taken out, made safe, dismantled and then, their

highly enriched uranium hearts harvested and put aside, melted-down into scrap metal. The seven locally-made Israeli Jericho ballistic missiles in the armoury nearby were to suffer the same fate. Originally there had been eight bombs and missiles manufactured at Pelindaba. But the first completed, code-named General Botha had, over the South Atlantic on 22 September, 1979, exploded in a blaze of worldwide intelligence agency chatter and media interest.

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The operation was carried out with military precision, which was not surprising as the four ex-SADF Special Forces members were once part of a battle-hardened forward unit that was sometimes called in to re-arm the Olifant Mk1 tanks that had penetrated, or been cut-off, deep inside Angola during South African 'border war' excursions. They knew how to move dangerous munitions long distances, and load and offload heavy ordnance as quickly as safety or circumstances permitted, and how to fight their way out again under fire from Cuban troops, sometimes with Russian Migs circling overhead. This mission would be nothing – at worse they might have to knock a couple of half-awake guards on the head, but probably not even that.

The seven great Boer generals – Meijer, Kruitzienger, Hertzog, de Wet, Joubert, Cronje and de la Rey, lay silent in their vaults. The men worked almost reverentially. The main building was, as promised, unlocked, and the freshly-oiled doors slid noiselessly apart. They reversed the Unimog back to a row of bays against the back wall. Vault 7, with its heavy, lead-lined steel door was also unlocked, the trolley inside cradling the 1.8m bomb code named de la Rey.

Now came the tricky part. Muscling the trolley up alongside the Unimog, they first opened the metal box on the back and,

using the truck's 1.5 tonne hoist, lifted out and lowered to the floor what appeared to be de la Rey's twin brother. Next they hoisted the genuine bomb off the cradle and into the box and replaced it with the fake. Box closed, and cradle back into Vault 7, they drove out of the hanger, closed the doors and headed back towards the gate. The bored guard gave a half-hearted salute and raised the boom. They were nearly home and dry, just a long drive on deserted Sunday night roads. Piece of cake.

* * *

At exactly 07:00 Monday morning, Jan Coetsee, Commandant of Guards, pulled into the main gate of Pelindaba. The day shift had been on for an hour. Calling one of the guards he asked to see the night book. As expected, not very busy. Nothing the whole night until the early morning when there was a single entry: Army utility vehicle DTD365M, *four military personnel including driver, in 04:45, out 05:12.*

So no problems then. Coetsee drove on to Building 5000, parked in his bay and walked across to the doors – pleased that they looked exactly as he had left them when he locked up. He opened them and strode across to Vault 7 – locked too. He opened it and checked that de la Rey was safe and secure. Locked up again and walked across to his office, sat down and smiled. Everything looked okay. It was going to be a busy day – his staff would be in around eight, the IAEA were coming for their first inspection at 12:00 sharp. His thoughts were interrupted by the phone.

‘Good morning, Coetsee speaking ...’

‘*Môre* Jan. I just wanted to let you know de la Rey is back home, safe and sound.’

‘Thank you Colonel, I'm happy to have been of service. We'll speak soon, *totsiens.*’

‘*Totsiens* Commandant.’

Coetsee put the phone down and lit the first Peter Stuyvesant of the day. Sucking hard, he took the smoke deep into his lungs and exhaled, giving a long sigh of relief.

* * *

The four inspectors of the International Atomic Energy were on time and presented their credentials at the main gate at Pelindaba. The inspectors were accompanied by officials from State President de Klerk’s office and the chief atomic scientist from Armscor, Dr. Henri du Plessis. Coetsee, who had himself seen the delegation through the security procedures, welcomed them and asked what they would like to see first.

‘They want to see the bombs first, Commandant. The six finished and the seventh unarmed one,’ replied one of the officials.

‘We won’t take up too much of your time today Commandant, but over the next few months you’re going to get sick of us,’ added Dr. du Plessis.

Coetsee, thinking that at least he was in a job for a few more months, led them over to the first vault and opened it.

‘I’m happy to help. Meet General Meijer.’

The rest of the inspection went well. Each general was introduced in turn, and when Vault 7 was opened one of the inspectors asked:

‘And this is the one that is under construction, yes?’

‘That’s correct, code name de la Rey.’

Dr. du Plessis cut in: ‘We were going to arm it when the State President called a halt to the programme. The HEU is still in the main stockpile, we haven’t processed it yet.’

Coetsee thought that he caught the slightest wink from du Plessis as he turned towards him but he could have been mistaken. The inspector seemed satisfied.

‘Okay, let’s go see these Israeli rockets you claim to have souped-up.’

* * *

It was the final inspection. The whole rigmarole had taken a lot longer than Coetsee had thought – closer to three-and-a-half years than the couple of months first anticipated. Dozens of inspections were made by several different teams to Pelindaba and Building 5000, to the nearby Armscor facility, Advena Labs, to the old testing site in the Kalahari, and to the nuclear waste facility nearby. All the documents and blueprints for the design of the bombs were destroyed by order of State President de Klerk – all that remained was the destruction of the bombs themselves.

This was finally carried out in April, 1993. The inspectors accompanied by Hazmat suited-up technicians from Armscor.

It took less than a week to dismantle the bombs. Their explosive heads made safe, their HE uranium cores removed and put into lead-lined canisters to be stored in a separate concrete bunker next to other nuclear waste from the Koeberg reactor. This waste facility was deep underground at dry, dusty Vaalputs in the Northern Cape hinterland. The metal bomb casings were then unceremoniously dumped outside the building, to be taken later to the smelter at Iscor iron foundry at Vanderbijlpark, south of Johannesburg.

When the process was complete, Coetsee shook hands with the inspectors, half of whom left to oversee the cores on the long trip to the waste storage facility, half to escort the casings on the much shorter trip to Iscor. As the heavy-duty vehicles with armed outriders left the main gate, the Commandant gave an uncharacteristic skip of delight. They’d actually got away with it. *Magtig!*

THIS YEAR

ONE

Pa

PA WAS DEAD. I caught the Mango red-eye from Cape Town to Lanseria – the puke-orange colour of the 737 and the graphics that went out with bell-bottoms mixed with the smell of aviation fuel nearly bringing up the brandies I'd thought I'd slept off the night before. I was feeling my age. The girl at the Tempest car hire counter didn't help – bubbly and efficient, all teeth and tits – where do they find them? Especially those who are happy to be behind a desk at sparrow's fart. Didn't take long and I was pointing their basic-but-cheap Toyota bakkie back towards Jo'burg and the turn-off to the highway west. It was mid-morning now and you could feel the heat building already. But I'm not a complete *doos*, the bakkie did have aircon and I hadn't forgotten my Polaroids.

The traffic was heavy as I skirted Sandton, then Krugersdorp, stop-start driving through the inevitable roadworks that they promised would be finished back in 2014 and three years later were as bad as ever. But thankfully the roadworks thinned out a little where the dual carriageway petered out. I began

to settle into long distance driving mode, hunched down in the seat, aircon on full blast, elbow out the window – one eye on the potholes, the other looking out for stray cattle, goats, the occasional mangy dog. I set my brain into neutral for the next six or seven, maybe even eight hours – through seemingly endless mielie fields, then cattle country due west to Ventersdorp, Sannieshof, Delareyville and Vryburg. Then into dry bushveld north past Tosca, Pomfret and west again through semi-desert to Terre'Blanche and home. The drive, as it always is in these parts, was interminable. I tried the radio but couldn't find anything other than incessant talkshow chat, township jive or squeezebox-heavy *boeremusiek*. And that's when I could get reception.

You count the distances in hours – hour after mind-numbing hour, the road endlessly straight as an arrow in the heat-stunned distance. You only stop when your stomach says you have to, or your bladder. I stopped at Vryburg, an old Boer settlement, grown fat on the best beef raised in Africa. I had a piece of one at the Durado Steers, flame-grilled, washed down with a Castle Lager. I filled-up the bakkie and, leaving the highway, turned north – nearly half-way.

I was in that semi-comatose state that most South African drivers slip into when the road is endless and straight when, with a blast of horns, a heavy-duty truck with *Venison Meat Supply* in big letters on the back ripped past me from behind. It woke me up, which was a pretty good thing as the road had deteriorated to the extent where you couldn't tell whether there was more tar or more potholes. Didn't bother me too much though; after all I was in a hired Toyota and, as everyone knows, hire vehicles are indestructible. So I began to think of Pa and what arrangements I'd have to make for the funeral.

Oom Mackie had phoned last night to tell me that Pa had died in a car crash and I felt next to *fokol*. We'd grown apart over the years, especially the last ten after Ma had passed on.

To be sure, we'd never been that close. He'd never been home much when I was growing up – his duties in the army kept him busy and, later, his job heading up security at the atomic energy research facility at Pelindaba, near Pretoria. He wouldn't talk about either. What happened in special ops often wasn't fit conversation for the family dinner table and the security job came under the Official Secrets Act of 1959 and breaking it could end up with a late night visit and a non-return trip to a John Vorster Square holding cell.

Life, from my earliest memories, up to when I went to live with my grandparents at the farm, was a series of army pre-fab houses – married quarters on various bases scattered around the country. Tempe, Heidelberg, Kimberley, Phalaborwa, Middelburg, Oudtshoorn, Potch and, once, even Durban. We'd move every couple of years – new house, new school, new friends, never really settled, always the outsider. The townie kids always made it hard for us army *braks*. But we coped. We had to, and anyway most of us were tough, brought up by tough fathers who wouldn't have it any other way. Also I had rugby. I was quick, and once I'd filled out my lanky frame, stronger than most of the other kids. In the small town schools I went to I was an automatic pick for the first team in my age group, and often in the next group up. A fearsome schoolboy eighth man – one day I was sure to be a Springbok. Of course, once I got to big city university there were six bigger, tougher, faster, more fearsome number eights ahead of me. And I got sorted out quickly.

Pa, now he *was* a rugby star – played for Griquas in the Sixties, a little before their legendary Currie Cup champion heydays. In Kimberley they still talk about Buddy Swartz's two tries in the final against the mighty Blue Bulls of 1970. The few pictures of Pa at the time in the family album show a tall, rangy man, with blue eyes and hair cropped short. He was good-looking in a severe sort of way. (People say that I look a

lot like him, but with almost white hair and Ma's grey eyes.) Ma, a farm girl, fell head over heels – the wedding pictures show her holding on to his arm as if he was about to bolt for it. It might have been better for her in the long run if he had.

I remember fleeting images from the sporadic times Pa was at home – usually he'd be on border patrol (or 'shooting communists' as he called it) for three to six months at a stretch with a month home R&R. These short breaks home always started with two weeks of family time. Ma would fuss about a lot and we'd visit either her parents back at the farm near Terre'Blanche, or we'd camp at a nearby, usually inland, holiday resort. Fish and braai, braai and fish. These were good times, but never lasted. Once we were back, Pa would get together with his mates, other officers and a couple of long-term NCOs, to swop yarns over braaivleis about what they'd been up to on the Caprivi or inside Angola. These get-togethers were always beer and brandy-fuelled and usually degenerated into raucousness, ending in a state of morose, drunken comradeship. After a week or so of this, Pa would go into his shell. He'd stop socialising, stop even talking to us. He'd spend time in the gym, running, or on the shooting range, getting himself back to his fighting-fit self. For the few days before shipping out he'd be wound up like a spring, itching to get back to what really drove him – war. Neither Ma nor I could compete with that sort of pull.

One furlough though, Pa came back from a shorter than usual deployment looking as if he'd seen a ghost. He was a shadow of himself, just sat for days in a room with the shades drawn. Even Ma couldn't get what had happened out of him. The pals as usual came round to braai and drink. But they were also pale imitations of themselves. They still drank, but now with the quiet seriousness as if at a funeral.

I only realised much later that it was indeed something of a death. They were drinking because what had died was their

belief in their own invincibility.

It was kept very quiet at the time, and even today nobody knows what really happened – like most history it depends on which side is writing it. But in March 1988, the South African army retreated from Angola after the bloody battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Where, in the middle of the fight and after virtually destroying the Angolan and Cuban forces, they were ordered by their political masters in Pretoria not to take the town which had been the main objective of the battle. To the soldiers involved it was a betrayal they never got over. To those that died there, well, they didn't give a fuck one way or another.

A few weeks later Pa announced that he was resigning his commission and leaving the army. He was being seconded to a new security service and we were moving to Pretoria.

The country began to change as I drove west. The typical South African grassveld that once fed vast herds of zebra and wildebeest and now grew out prime beef, changed almost imperceptibly into semi-desert thornveld, with game farms and canned lion hunting, which 800 kilometres further on became Kalahari desert sand which grew out *fokol*, except sidewinder snakes and thirst-crazed jackals. But fortunately I wasn't going that far – I was nearly at my destination. I was feeling pretty thirsty myself by this time. Almost hungry for a beer. A cold, cold, *cold* beer.

Terre'Blanche

The new South Africa broom has barely swept away the cobwebs, hardly scratched the surface of the old South African town of Terre'Blanche. Granted the signs that had ordered where whites could piss and blacks should shit, and vice versa, had been long ago taken down. And the dozen or so fast food joints and watering holes, two sex shops and the local massage parlour-cum lap-dancing club on what the townsfolk called the *boerewors* strip, were also colour blind. It was the colour of your money that was their sole concern. But the dust devils still blew down the hard-packed, potholed main street and devilment, if not the devil himself, lurked behind the dark curtained windows of the corrugated iron-fronted houses.

Terre'Blanche was named after a Boer hunter who, legend has it, had fallen off his horse and ended up spending a couple of weeks in the shade of the nearby koppie recovering. It began life as a trading outpost for passing hunters and trekker stock farmers, who were too foot and heart sore to carry on. Later, these early settlers were joined by unreconstructed Boer fighters who wanted to live as far away as possible from the crowds of Brits and chancers from the Cape who had moved into the vacuum of the conquered Boer republics – especially into the rich goldfields of Johannesburg and the Eastern

Transvaal. The town grew to the west of the koppie, the major landmark in the area – a large round-bouldered carbuncle that poked its way out of the surrounding white sand scrubland. At a couple of hundred metres higher than the surrounding flat and dry country, and marking the place of springs that had never been known to dry completely, it was an important beacon for the early Bushman and Khoikhoi wanderers long before the later hunters and trekkers. The hunters who were in search of elephants; the trekkers, greener pastures, which they never found.

The town grew like many South African backveld towns – in fits and starts. And depending on its prosperity and the styles of the times, with buildings that could range from badly-copied Cape Dutch to poorly-built examples of what was thought to be modern or classy. A hotchpotch of mainly square or rectangular houses, some with curvaceous gables and a stoep, large wooden front doors and sash windows with tin roofs instead of the original thatch. Then a big stone church was built, towering over the townspeople. Later there was a spurt of 1950s-ugly during the wool boom – more cement box buildings.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the growth spurts became a flood when the platinum mines opened with, if possible, even uglier buildings – so-called Boere Bauhaus – heavy cement, glass and steel civic monstrosities. And with new suburbs mushrooming that were pure mining town – tin and *broekie* lace. Even the so-called Location, a mile or so out of town, with its wood and iron shacks that itinerant Coloured and Northern Sotho workers called home, was modernised. The shacks torn down and replaced by street after street of concrete boxes with outdoor privies and that were given one of those poetic Afrikaans or vernacular African names that meant Beautiful View or Sunrise, but which seldom lived up to the name. The locals called it the Township.

But all this was overshadowed by the work that was commissioned to celebrate South Africa's twentieth anniversary of becoming a republic – a giant head of assassinated Prime Minister, H.F. Verwoerd, 'the architect of Apartheid', carved out of the great boulder topping the landmark koppie that overlooked the town. Mount Rushmore in the thornveld.

I hadn't been in Terre'Blanche since I'd been kicked out of the police force. Or, more politically correctly, taken my package. Most of my pale male colleagues had done the same – early retirement with a large lump sum and nothing to do with it except buy a bar or bottle store. Most of them did just that and sat around all day in various stages of happiness waiting for the cirrhosis to carry them off. I, of course, was a lot more stupid. I didn't just take my package, but I took my sergeant, Chesney Cook, with me and opened the Rainbow Nation's first, and probably still only, multiracial private detective agency – Koekemoer & Cook, or Cook & Koekemoer depending if we were touting for BEE business. We had cards printed for both eventualities. And up to now both of us had spent most of the time sitting around.

I parked in front of the Royal Hotel which had been my drinking hole in my varsity holidays and sporadic visits home. The place hadn't changed much. At three in the afternoon almost deserted – a couple of locals at the bar, a miner passed out at a table, lying with arms stretched out, one big hand clutching a glass that had contained the last of a string of double spook and diesels. The other hand holding onto the edge of the tabletop as if it were flotsam from a shipwreck. Let go and he'd surely drown.

The first Castle didn't touch sides. They still kept them ice-cold at the Royal. The second began to revive me. I felt almost normal again as I asked the barman for a third. He was fat faced with a ponytail and looked like a middle-aged refugee from a Jo'burg advertising agency. I didn't know him,

but that wasn't unusual – country pub barmen come and go. I said thanks for the beer and asked him if he was from these parts. Now, anyone who's spent a lot of their life sitting on a bar counter knows there are only two types of barmen. The talkative ones, and those that say nothing. Fat Face was the former.

'Naw, been here eighteen months, feels like eighteen years.'

'Where from?' I asked.

'Cape Town.'

'Cape Town, *fok*, you're a long way from home, what happened, take a wrong turn at the Bellville flyover?'

He laughed, and said, 'Naw, followed my chick here, she's working as a hostess at the Slipped Disc.'

I assumed this was one of establishments on the strip and nodded.

'Anything happening here?' And nodding towards the comatose miner, 'Or is it as sleepy as the oke over there?'

Now he really got into the swing of things, probably hadn't had an ear to bend since he'd arrived.

'We still have our moments but it's pretty quiet these days, everyone's shit-scared over what's going to happen at the mine. They say prices are so low it's hardly worth mining anymore. The company's already moved their head office from Jo'burg to overseas. The owners have fucked off too ... they're more interested in mining London property than holes in the veld they say. I hear though that a curry muncher company is interested in buying them out here and that there's going to be a new mine opening and lots of cash floating around. But it's probably just bullshit. Naw, I think we're going to have to split ... I hear good things about Botswana. They've got diamonds coming out of their ears there. There'll be lots of thirsty miners there and plenty looking for a *pomp* ... shit, a fucking gold mine for me and the chick or a diamond mine ... *Ja*, Botswana here we come ...'

Fok. Once I'd turned on his tap it was impossible to switch it off. I paid the bill and chucked another twenty down on the counter and told my new best friend to have one on me. I couldn't put it off any longer, it was time to head out to the old place.

Klein Drinkwater

The farm was named *Klein Drinkwater* by the Boer trekker that first settled there and who had come from a rock-strewn dot on the map called *Onder Klein Drinkwater*, about half-way between Adelaide and Cradock in the Eastern Cape. He was Petrus de Jager and was my mother's great-grandfather. He was considered somewhat eccentric, if not mad, especially for the times he lived in. Instead of clearing out the Khoikhoi families he found on 'his' new property, he offered them a deal. They could continue to live on the land and come and go as they pleased so long as one family stayed on permanently to work as herdsmen. Over the next hundred and fifty years this worked surprising well. The Khoikhoi who lived on the farm eventually even taking a version of the de Jager family name, first as '*die swart de Jagers*' as the Boer neighbours mockingly called them. By the 1900s they were known as '*swart Jagers*', eventually simply called *Swartjagter* – which for a people with a couple of thousand years heritage of hunting the land around is not a bad name I reckon.

Although there was, especially in the Apartheid years after 1950, a racial chasm between the de Jagers and the Swartjagters, there was a close symbiotic relationship. The Swartjagters prospered as the de Jagers prospered. But not to the same extent. The relationship fell apart eventually when

the pull of jobs on the mines and in town became irresistible. Still, remnants of the Swartjagter clan remained on *Klein Drinkwater*.

I'd always thought of the farm as my second home. Besides the family visits on Pa's short R&Rs from the army, I spent most school holidays there with my grandparents, especially after the family move to Pretoria. And for the last two years of my high school education it really was home to me. Ma and Pa were going through bad times and Ma thought I'd be better off out of the line of fire. I didn't mind – school in Pretoria was not much fun. So it was quite a relief to get away. Of course I never would have agreed if I'd known how ill Ma was. I guess she thought it better for me not to know. Oupa and Ouma were old school Afrikaners – church every Sunday and brandy reserved for special occasions – christenings, weddings, funerals and at the annual big hunt where half the district turned out to shoot Oupa's *spingbokke*.

Ouma baked thick crusty farm bread, *koeksisters*, *melkertert*, *roosterkoek*, jam tarts, apricot, apple and lemon meringue pies, and cakes of endless variety. Oupa chain-smoked Lexingtons. They put up with Pa because he was married to their favourite daughter but they didn't like him much. I was the son they'd never had and while Ouma tried her best to feed me up, Oupa taught me the things important to him. Man's things, like cleaning the rifle after using it, how to whistle in dog language, and to never trust a man whose eyes are too close together.

The drive was, even after so many years away, familiar. The never-forgotten landmarks: a rocky outcrop home to countless generations of dassies, the old cement reservoir with the remnants of a long-broken *windpomp*, the gully where I'd laid-up waiting for the springbok to pour past, chased by herdsmen on the nimble Basuto ponies used for rounding up the sheep in the backveld. I shot my first buck there – I remember Pa

making me eat the heart raw as his pals laughed and shouted encouragement.

‘Eat boy you’re a *jagter* now.’

I remember too, how pissed they all got at the braai after the hunt. And my first taste of the brandy I necked from the bottle when they were too far gone to notice. I spat it out then ... *sies*. Pity I got a taste for it just a few years later.

The farmhouse hadn’t changed. A solid, thick-walled rectangle with big windows and heavy wooden shutters and a shady reed-ceilinged stoep around all four sides, backing on to a rocky, round-bouldered koppie like the many others that every here and there poked their heads out of the flat dry thornveld of the district. The tall gables promised an indoors of spacious rooms and high ceilings, with plenty of dark attic space under the Karroo-red painted corrugated iron roof. The sort of house that was at once at home in Africa whilst daring the elements to throw everything it could at it. Blistering, unrelenting heat much of the year ... bitter cold winter nights ... high winds and dust storms sand-blasting across the thousand kilometres of highveld ... torrential rain and flash flood, thunder and lightning heralding hailstones the size of guineafowl eggs drumming on the roof like stampeding wildebeest. The house had survived them all.

I pulled up under the straggly pin oak which Ouma had nurtured and cherished for fifty years and which had grudgingly responded by merely surviving. I got out of the car, alone with my thoughts, when I was interrupted.

‘*Kleinbaas* Jaco! Ai, ai, such sorry times bring you home.’

It was Annetjie, matriarch of the Swartjagter family, and housekeeper for as long as I can remember. Once almost a mahogany carbon copy of Ouma, but now wizened, face furrowed and concerned.

‘I have cleaned the house and made up the bed in your old room, I knew you’d be coming. I asked the Lord and he said

yes, Annetjie, he'll be sure to come.'

Grabbing my travel bag and laptop, I followed her into the house, a pace or two behind, bowing my head so she couldn't see the tears that had suddenly filled my eyes. As I surreptitiously brushed them away, I saw in the gloom all the familiar things. The precious *wakis* that old Petrus De Jager had carried on the back of his wagon all the way from the Eastern Cape in the 1830s, the later-added stinkwood tallboy and dining table, the big Aga stove bought after an especially good wool cheque, the fly-proof mesh section of the stoep where the biltong was cured in the cold dry winter air. The recipe was an old family one that was followed religiously. The meat, fat on, cut lengthways into strips. The secret marinade rubbed into each strip. The day's soaking. The careful hanging to make sure no single strip touches another. And then the wait, the impatient testing, cutting small slivers until it is just how wet or dry you like it best.

I dropped the bag in the room and followed Annetjie back to the kitchen. She had a sandwich of fresh farm bread and cold mutton with home-made apricot chutney waiting for me.

When I finished eating I went outside again, where Annetjie's son Carolus was waiting, hat held before him, quiet, solemn-featured.

'Evening Boss,' he greeted me.

Carolus was the last Swartjagter man left on the farm. The rest had drifted off to work in the mines or to follow one dream or another in the city. There was little enough to keep anyone here now Pa was gone, and anyway he'd never been much of one for farming. So he more or less gave Carolus the run of the place to do what he wanted. This worked out well for Carolus as he'd always hated the thought of mining. From boyhood he'd had great affinity for animals – sheep would follow him as if he was the Messiah. Which to the sheep, especially when he broke out the bales of lucerne in winter, he was.

I asked Carolus to show me around, not expecting much. He had anticipated me and already had a couple of horses saddled. Boerperds – that mixed breed of Arab, thoroughbred and Flemish horses that ran the British troops ragged in the Anglo-Boer War for three years. Boerperds are known for their stamina and ability to get by on meagre rations and just veld grass if necessary. The Brits had thoroughbreds shipped out from England that needed to be grain-fed and pampered.

I couldn't remember when last I'd ridden but was happy not to embarrass myself getting on. It took a while before I felt fully in control again and then, slowly, that surge of enjoyment when you become almost part of the horse.

We didn't have much time to look around though, dusk was fast approaching. But what I saw was good. The fences were strung tight as guitar-strings and the stock – mainly sheep but with some goats and a herd of Nguni cattle, cows with calves at foot looked good too. The Ngunis were a testament to Oupa's insistence years ago that to thrive as a cattle farmer in African veld you needed African cattle. I could see Carolus thought the same from the light in his eyes as he pointed out his favourites, telling me the names of each one. One a brown and white bull with horns that wouldn't be out of place in Texas was called, surprisingly, Shortie.

We got home just as night fell. I helped Carolus unsaddle and turn the horses into the stock pen. I told him I thought he'd done a fine job and I'd like to see more tomorrow. He said that would be fine. He wasn't going anywhere in a hurry.

It had been a long day. That night I slept like the dead.

Oom Mackie

I woke up with a clear head – clean air and sleep without the aid of brandy will do that. I smelled coffee – *moer koffie*, a potent blend of pulverised coffee and chicory simmered in a blue enamel coffee pot on the Aga; no filters, just the grounds in water bubbling away, thick and strong with a layer of sediment at the bottom of the pot. I washed quickly and headed for the kitchen.

‘How many eggs, boss Jaco?’ Was old Annetjie’s greeting.

‘Three please, but first coffee.’

It was a while since I’d had *moer koffie* and I scorched my hand grabbing the pot off the stove. I used a tea cloth and was more successful, pouring the steaming black liquid through a strainer into a matching enamel mug. I added a big dollop of sweetened condensed milk straight from the can into the coffee, then stirred and watched as it turned a perfect golden-brown. I blew on it and took a sip ... it was still much too hot, but delicious.

After breakfast I phoned Oom Mackie and said I’d arrived. He farmed about thirty kilometres away, close to the Botswana border. He said he was glad I’d made it alright and he was on his way – be about an hour as he had to stop in town first.

To kill time, I decided to begin to sort through Pa’s office. It had a large roll top desk and an old swivel leather chair, a

four-drawer metal filing cabinet, a gun safe, three bookcases filled with what looked like books on war and the military, and a small table with a surprisingly expensive desktop computer, and a brand new scanner-printer. I wanted to see if he had left any instructions about what he wanted in the way of a funeral. Check if there were any outstanding bills to pay – all the things some sad person in the family was always left to do after a death. I began with the desk. It was unlocked but I felt like a burglar going through Pa's stuff. Of course I'd rifled through plenty of people's possessions as a cop without any thought. This was different. I thought the old man was going to walk in any moment and catch me at it.

The desk looked like it was on inspection – a place for everything and everything in its place. Pens in the left drawer, paperclips and stapler in the right. There was a stack of bills all marked 'paid', and a batch of letters with a rubber band round them. His identity documents, passport, army pension card, marriage certificate and Ma's death certificate were in a clear plastic envelope. Other plastic envelopes contained property deeds and mortgage certificates, livestock sale invoices and statements, life insurance certificates and a funeral plan, South African Revenue Service tax returns for ten years, Absa bank statements and one with a label that said 'miscellaneous correspondence' which mainly contained notifications of stock sales, and junk mail selling farm equipment and life insurance. There was one interesting letter though, which Pa had scored through with a red pen – a letter from local lawyers Eloff en Seun, with a firm offer to buy 'the farm known as Klein Drinkwater, District of Terre'Blanche, North-West Province'. This I took out of the pile and put aside, as well as the Avbob funeral insurance document – I figured I'd need both.

The rest of the papers were nothing out of the ordinary. I left them in the desk more or less where they'd been. There were also three sets of keys, one labelled 'gun safe', one labelled

'bakkie spares' and the third, 'spare farm keys'. First I opened the gun safe. There was a shotgun and four rifles in it, and a 9mm pistol – an army issue Star Parabellum. The shotgun was a battered Greener 12 bore; the rifles an old full-stock Mannlicher; Oupa's 'sporterised' second world war .303 Lee-Enfield; a nice Remington model 70 in 30-06 which I assumed was Pa's; and a full-on FN R1 assault rifle, also Pa's. I locked the safe again and turned to the filing cabinet. It was locked and none of the keys in the three sets fitted it. It looked like I'd have to force the lock, but holding my impatience in check, I searched the desk again. The key was taped to the underside of the left-hand drawer. I was about to open the cabinet when I heard a vehicle coming up the farm road. I slipped the key into my pocket and went out to greet Mackie.

It was good to see him again – Koos 'Mackie' McNaughton (an offshoot from the Scots family who'd settled in and near Graaff-Reinet back in the 1820s) was almost sixty but could pass for ten years less. He was a long drink of water with a craggy face and short-cropped grey hair and a faraway look in his eyes – the sort you get when you're used to shooting running springbok over open sights, four hundred metres away. He had inherited a small farm from his father and through hard work and some inherited Scots canniness had built it into one of the most productive cattle spreads in the Terre'Blanche district. He'd married Ma's much younger sister, Hester, who had been on a tighter rein than Ma and was kept away from anyone Ouma and Oupa thought unsuitable, and had produced five sons, their personal small clan of McNaughtons. The eldest, Stefan, was my age and farming with his dad, the other four, like many South African sons, had spread around the world with families of their own.

We shook hands and Mackie said:

'Jaco, I'm so sorry. Your father was a good friend and I'll miss him. Anything I can do to help, just ask.'

I invited him into the house and we sat down in the front room where Annetjie had laid out more coffee and rusks. He had pain in his eyes that you can't fake. It was strange, but out of everyone I knew who knew Pa, either in the army or later, Mackie was the only one that he'd had a genuine bond of friendship with.

Mackie told me that Pa had died three days ago, that he'd been killed instantly when his bakkie left the road at the sharp bend outside town and rolled. He hadn't been wearing a seat belt and had been thrown clear, head first into a rock. He hadn't stood a chance.

He said that the cops had tried several times to phone me in Cape Town, but couldn't get a reply, so had informed him instead.

'Where's his body?' I asked. 'I suppose they'll need me to identify it.'

Mackie said, 'No, I've already done that, and I got hold of Avbob to arrange things.'

Avbob, of course, is the ubiquitous Afrikaans funeral company – there's a branch in just about every town and city in South Africa. Terre'Blanche was no exception and as the old joke went, Afrikaners wouldn't be caught dead using anyone else.

I said, 'Thanks, I'll get hold of them in the morning. And also the local police – I'd like to check out the accident report. Who's the station commander, still that prick van Schalkwyk?'

'No, van Schalkwyk was given his marching orders quite a while back. He's a big shot now – in business, in Pretoria. We've had a few chiefs since and the new man's a Zulu. He's a full captain. Nathi Mpanza he's called.'

I said, 'They're all full captains now. Shit, the local Boere must be pissed off.'

'They were at first. But Mpanza's actually been quite jacked up. He's polite and surprisingly efficient. So, so far, so good.'

We talked a bit about farming things, the price of cattle, and what Mackie's sons were up to overseas and, of course, as is inevitable when *Boere* get together, rugby. Oom Mackie for the hundredth time telling me that I'd had the talent to go much further than I had. And me responding with my usual story about it was my hair that prevented it. My hair was a shock of nearly white blonde – a throwback to some long ago *kaaskop* Hollander forebear no doubt. My bloody hair. It made me a marked man, especially for selectors. They noticed me more often. Which was fine if I played well but if, as more often happened, I knocked on, dropped the ball, or missed a tackle, the hair gave it away. In truth, I was never good enough and knew it.

Just before Oom Mackie left he asked me how things were going in the Cape and had I thought about what I was going to do with the farm? I told him I hadn't given it any thought at all but that I knew I'd have to.

'Whatever you decide to do, you should look after that foreman of your Pa's. Carolus – he's a diamond and the best stockman I know. I'll hire him like a shot if you decide to sell up,' he said.

We shook hands again and I waited as he drove off, watching the plume of dust kicked up as his vehicle receded into the distance. I turned back into the house. Time had flown, lunch was waiting I hadn't had it so good in years.

Later that afternoon Carolus and I headed out on horseback again. I was stiff from yesterday's short ride. We took the same route as we did previously but instead of stopping where we'd seen the Nguni cattle grazing we carried on a kilometre or so. Carolus wanted to show me something. We stopped next to a small koppie and dismounted. Carolus led me on a short climb about halfway up the slope and said:

'Boss, last week I was checking the cattle when I heard hammering sounds coming from this direction. I was worried

it could be poachers so I rode over this way and saw this young guy with a small pickaxe working on rocks up there. He got a big fright when he saw me.'

'What did you do?'

'Well I thought that maybe he was doing something for *oubaas* Jaco, so I asked him if I could help. He said, no, he was finished. And he picked up a heavy rucksack, got on a motorbike and rode away.'

I could just make out thin tyre tracks heading towards our boundary. The ground was hard and dry and they hardly showed.

'That's strange, Carolus, what did the *oubaas* say?'

'He said ignore it. It was nothing important, just someone he'd hired to do some testing for water.'

'Hmph,' I grunted, and we rode on.

We spent the rest of the afternoon crisscrossing the thornbush veld. It was looking lush – the rains last month had been good. We saw lots of buck – mainly springbuck. But there were also kudu and hartebeest and a small group of zebras and, as always, plenty of warthogs. One big old boar that been sleeping in a hollow next to the track was kicked up by my horse. I don't know who got a bigger fright, me or the warthog. Carolus thought it was very funny and, after a bit, so did I. I told him I hadn't seen so much game ever on the farm and he said, 'It's been a good couple of years, but it brings its problems.'

And added as he spat on the ground, 'Poachers.'

It was dark by the time we got back. I hit the sack early.

Avbob, Eloff en Seun, Royal Hotel

It was early, the sun was just over the horizon and the air still cool and crisp. I stretched and looked out of the bedroom window – two duikers were nibbling at buds growing on the remnants of what had once been Ma's rose garden gone wild. I felt the sudden urge for a smoke. I'd given up five years before, but isn't it amazing how you can't ever shake off the need. I had a shower instead. I'd just finished getting dressed when I heard Annetjie opening the back door and then the rattle of the coffee pot on the iron stove top. It drew me like a magnet to the kitchen.

I was just about to leave after breakfast when the phone rang. It was a woman who said she was with Eloff en Seun the lawyers, and they were representing my father's estate, and was it possible that I could come in to their offices as soon as possible. I said I was on the way into town and could probably see them around midday. She said that would be perfect, and gave me the address.

I drove into town and turned into the Avbob parking lot. The funeral parlour itself was a low slung, Sixties-style building painted railway station brown and cream, with a small stone chapel attached. I walked into the front office, and asked the pretty, blonde receptionist, who looked all of fourteen years old, if I could talk to someone about arranging my father's

funeral and that Mr. McNaughton had already told them that I'd be coming.

'Oh yes, Oom Mackie. You must be his nephew, Jaco. So sorry about your father. I'll just call Mrs. Nienaber.'

With this she picked up the phone and said, 'Mrs. Nienaber, I have Oom Mackie's nephew Jaco in reception Mister ... ?' Looking up at me.

'Koekemoer.'

She repeated this into the mouthpiece, turned to me and said that Mrs. Nienaber would be with me in a moment, would I like to take a seat, coffee? I said no, I'd just had some and sat down. I had expected to see a man – probably a long, thin, cadaverous specimen with a soft handshake and an unctuous manner. What sort of woman could Mrs. Nienaber be? Morticia Adams?

I was nearly right about the name, not the rest. This good-looking, dark-haired woman in an expensive suit walked up and said:

'Mr. Koekemoer? Welcome, I'm Mauretia Nienaber, please come with me.'

I followed her, trying not to stare at her legs. I reckon she guessed, as I think I caught a wisp of a smile when we had a little awkward moment as she opened the office door and gestured me to go in before her and we did a quick two-step when I said, 'No, ladies first.'

She led me to a couple of comfortable-looking two-seater sofas either side of a coffee table with a laptop on it and said, 'Lets sit here.'

She sat down and crossed her legs, I did the same. Again the smile, this time a little wider.

She had green eyes and fine high cheekbones. And she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I wondered why? Shit, Koekemoer, I thought, stop it, this is a funeral parlour and you've come to bury your father you idiot. I realised she was speaking.

‘Sorry? What did you say?’

She smiled again: ‘Would you like some coffee?’

I said no thanks, the girl at the front had already asked me, then I handed her the Avbob funeral insurance document I’d found last night and said I’d never buried anyone before and where did we begin?

Again that fleeting smile. ‘Well the funeral plan’s a good place to start.’

She looked at the papers and tapped into the laptop.

‘It’s all fine and paid up to date. What sort of funeral do you think your father would have wanted, did he say in his will?’

Stupid me, the will.

‘I didn’t even think of that,’ I said.

‘Be easier if you could find out. Have you done the other formalities? Identified the body? Got the death certificate?’

‘My uncle, Koos McNaughton, has done the I.D. Where do I get the death certificate?’

‘I can do it for you if you like, we deal with the coroner all the time. You’ll just have to sign a waiver and fill in your details and cell phone number.’

I filled-in and signed the paper she put in front of me and got up to leave. She got up too and put out her hand. For one crazy moment I considered kissing it, but shook it instead. She said she’d call me in the morning.

I got to the lawyers with time to spare.

Twenty-seven Fanie Viljoen was a couple of streets behind what was formerly Paul Kruger, now Nelson Mandela Avenue, the main street of Terre’Blanche. Eloff en Seun Attorneys at Law were, like most rural South African law practices, in an old house converted into offices. They were a new firm though, that must have opened in the last few years – the paint on the sign hadn’t yet been bleached away by the sun. The receptionist, who looked like an advertisement for Pep Stores

and had big hair that wouldn't have been out of place in *Mad Men*, looked up from examining her nails and greeted me.

'Good morning Oom.' Then seeing my frown, began again with 'Can I help you, Sir?'

I told her I was Jaco Koekemoer and that I had an appointment at twelve. She said, 'Oh yes, I phoned. It's about your father's will.'

I wondered how they knew so quickly I was in town, but put it down to the local grapevine. Miss Pep Stores asked me if I wanted coffee and that Mr. Eloff had just stepped out but would be back in a minute or two. I said no to the coffee and that I'd wait.

A few minutes later Mr. Eloff arrived. I assumed it was Mr. Eloff senior and not the son. It wasn't a great feat of detection – he was around seventy-years-old. He ushered me into his office, this time I had no interest in legs.

Eloff dressed like an old-school, Apartheid-era civil servant – black suit, white shirt, grey tie, matching grey shoes. The tufts of hair that sprouted from his ears and round-rim glasses gave him an owlish expression which was enhanced by his habit of looking straight at you and slowly blinking his eyes as punctuation to almost every sentence. He offered me his condolences on my loss and got down to business. It didn't take long. He told me that Pa had appointed him executor of his estate and that he had left me the farm, all the equipment and livestock, a sum of R200 000 from a Sanlam annuity and another R150K in an Absa account. In addition he had provided legacies of R10K each to Annetjie and Carolus Swartjagter and his antique full-stock Mannlicher-Schoenauer 6.5 x 54 rifle, to Mr. Jacobus (Koos) McNaughton. Pa used to boast it was the same as the gun the famous *rooinek* hunter, Karamojo Bell shot all his elephants with in East Africa.

I wasn't surprised to get the farm or about the legacies to

Annetjie, Carolus and Oom Mackie, but I was surprised at the amount of money Pa had left me. The army never paid much and I know Ma's illness had cost plenty. Maybe the Pelindaba security job was a bigger earner than I realised, but I had my doubts.

I asked Eloff what the next step was. He said that everything would have to go through probate, but he didn't expect any hold-ups, the estate was quite straightforward – perhaps six months at the most. I said that sounded a long time, he snorted and said, 'Mr. Koekemoer this is the new South Africa, six months is short. I've known some estates take over six *years* to be wound up. It's not like the old days. The courts are jammed-up and nobody wants to work anymore.'

I nodded, and said I was sure he'd do his best.

I had planned to show him the letter he'd sent Pa about buying the farm and that Pa had scratched through in red pen, but something held me back. So I made a move to get up and leave when he asked me if he could take up a bit more of my time as there was something else he wanted to talk to me about.

I said, 'Go ahead...'

He said: 'I don't know if your father told you that he was planning to sell the farm and had, in fact, been made a very fine offer which he was carefully considering.'

(So carefully that he'd crossed through it with a red pen, I thought) and answered: 'No. He never said anything to me.'

'Well there has been a good offer and now you're the owner, or at least will be once everything's settled. Maybe you'd be interested?'

I said: 'How much?'

'Over two million ... but they could go more.'

I told him it was tempting but that I didn't think I would be interested, *Klein Drinkwater* had been in the family for generations. Then I stupidly said, 'Anyway, I was planning to

maybe farm it from long distance. Make the foreman, Carolus Swartjagter, who was the real farmer there, not Pa, a partner, and see if it would work. In fact, here's a plan. Why don't you draw up a partnership agreement for me and Carolus. Just leave the percentages part blank for the moment. I must give it a little more thought.'

Eloff looked somewhat startled by this and said he'd draw something up if that was really what I wanted, but he's still like to see if he could get me a better offer for the farm. I said: 'No, just draw up the partnership, forget any further offers.'

I got up and left, the girl at reception was still filing her nails. Little did I know my parting shot to Eloff was going to stir up a hornet's nest.

Business with the lawyer had left a bad taste in my mouth. So I headed to the Royal for some mouthwash – the kind that's got a label that reads 'Castle Lager'. Parked outside was a dust and graffiti encrusted bus with Western Province number plates. A banner across the rear window said '#VerwoerdMustFall!' As I walked up the stairs to the stoep and the front doors, and adjusted my eyes from the outside glare to inside semi-darkness, I could hear loud voices and the pukka-pukka-puk of a bongo drum. What the fuck? I nearly turned around and left, but the thirst for a cold one won out.

At the bar counter was a multi-ethnic group of, what I later discovered, were students from the University of Cape Town. Seated nearby at two tables which they'd pushed together, were several more students, the guys shaven-headed or with pony tails or those weird bun things that Japanese sumo wrestlers wear to keep their hair up and made popular by overseas soccer stars. The girls were dressed in the flowing, eastern printed, beaded, laid-back look that hasn't changed much since the Sixties. The bongo player was predictably dreadlocked and stoned.

The group at the bar was dominated by a large young black guy, pissed as a rat, haranguing Fat Face, the barman.

‘Yes, we’re going to make him fall. But first, we’re going to shit on his head.’

I was sure I’d seen the black guy before, and then realised Of course – on TV. Thabo Mkhize. He was one of the #RhodesMustFall leaders who’d forced Cape Town university to pull down the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, their greatest benefactor. Taking a good pull of the icy bottle Fat Face had placed in front of me, I addressed Thabo Mkhize in my best ex-cop voice.

‘Who are you going to make fall, Mr. Mkhize?’

Mkhize blinked a couple of times.

‘Verwoerd.’

‘Verwoerd? But he’s already fallen. A short fat Greek with a long knife did for him in parliament fifty years ago.’

‘No ... not Verwoerd, Verwoerd ... Verwoerd the face on the mountain. That giant piece of racist shit just out of town.’

‘*Ja?* Well good luck with that. You’re going to need a ton of dynamite.’

I turned away and asked Fat Face for another Castle. He told me the students had been in since opening time and had, except for Mkhize’s occasional ranting, been no trouble at all. I asked him how the plans were going for Botswana and he said he’d decided to stick around a while longer and that it seemed likely that the Indian company was indeed going to buy the mine, or so he’d heard. I told him good luck with that and left for the farm.

TWO

Secrets

HELL, I COULD GET USED TO this waking up with eggs, sausages and *roosterkoek* ready and waiting. And coffee of course, strong moer koffie. Only problem, I'd be fifty kilos heavier in months, if not weeks. I'd better talk to Annetjie about provisions though. I never checked how much Pa had in and we'd certainly need to replenish them if I was going to stay a while longer and sort out the funeral. Annie said she'd make a list but there was no hurry, we had enough in the larder and deep freeze to feed an army.

So forgetting town, I decided I'd spend the day properly sifting through Pa's filing cabinet. I opened it and saw that, except for some empty folders in the back of the bottom drawer, it was stuffed chock-a-block with plastic folders. I decided that slow and methodical was the way forward. So I started with the top drawer, from front to back, and worked my way to the bottom of the four-drawer cabinet.

It was a long, laborious job – but at the same time fascinating. If you wanted a history of one man's role in the Apartheid-era wars, this was it. It gave me a much deeper insight into Pa's army career than I'd had before and, at the

same time, the devious ways of governments and diplomacy. He had made a serious study of the Angolan war, but there was also a lot on Mozambique and Rhodesia. Each folder contained files of official army papers, many of which he probably had no right to have, or that were copied from back issues of the official military history society magazines or downloaded from the Internet. All had been carefully referenced with a label and a number – 3A 11 Ch6 or 1B 3 Ch7, etcetera. I couldn't work out what this code meant until I found one that read 2A 7 Ch2 Steenkamp, Border War, when I realised they were book references and on examining the bookcases, that they referenced the books in the collection. So 2A 7 Ch2 was the book in the second bookcase, the A was the top shelf (of three), the 7 was that it was the seventh book along and the Ch2 was the chapter in the book that expanded on the paper. Some of the papers had several codes on them meaning that there were various differing interpretations of the actions or orders the papers described. Once I got used to it was easy. Read the paper – find out what various authorities had to say about it. The official South African position differing widely from the Cuban or even from allies like the USA.

Attached to many of the papers were notes in Pa's handwriting with comments like: 'Bullshit, I was there – it wasn't like that at all'. Or: 'Bloody politicians let us down, again'. Or: 'Cubans half-starved and badly equipped'.

After many, many, hours I realised that to get access to, especially the official secret documents, Pa must have been more than an officer in the regular army and more likely to have been in military intelligence. Also that he was planning to maybe write a book on it all – and what a book it would have made.

It was only when I'd almost reached the end of the cabinet that I realised that I hadn't found anything on Pa's life after the army. Nothing about his hush-hush job at Pelindaba.

It was in the very last plastic folder I opened, labelled 'de la Rey', that I found the letter and the memory stick. They were in an envelope addressed to me. The letter was from Pa and it began:

Son, if you're reading this I am already dead. Please don't judge me for what you find on the memory stick. Times were very different then. I made certain decisions that I thought were necessary for the safety of our country. There are no hard copies left of the documents I scanned onto the stick, I've burnt them all. Do what you think is best, but be careful who you talk to. Pa.

I pocketed the stick, grabbed a sandwich and a coffee, fetched my laptop from the bedroom and sat down on the sofa in the sitting room. I plugged the blade into my Mac and started to open the files. There were four in total. The first said 'History'. The second: 'The Politics of the SA Atomic Programme'. The third: 'Dismantling the Project'. And the fourth: 'Project de la Rey'. I wondered what the hell the old man had been up to. Several hours later I knew. And I didn't like it at all.

You can get the gist of the first three files by some careful reading on the Internet. You just have to balance out the facts from the conspiracy theories and the South Africa propaganda from the left-wing politically correct bullshit. Somewhere in the middle is the truth.

The history is well recorded. Originally it was thought that nuclear explosives could play a role in deep gold and platinum mining operations, and in the early 1970s South Africa joined the USA's 'Peaceful Nuclear Explosions' programme. This proved to be a cover for building nuclear weapons and by the mid-Seventies South Africa had two test sites built in the Kalahari Desert and nuclear devices ready to test. The first test was aborted when the site was discovered through Soviet espionage and pressure was put on South Africa by America to stop proceedings. The site was then abandoned but, two years

later, a US military satellite recorded 'a double flash' over the South Atlantic – suspected to be a joint SA-Israeli test. This was denied by both parties. The programme was accelerated through the 1980s with the testing and building of delivery systems – with rockets that were supposedly developed by the South African 'space programme' but were essentially enhanced Israeli Jericho missiles with intercontinental capabilities.

South Africa now had a viable nuclear deterrent, which was, in the paranoia of the P.W. Botha regime, scary to contemplate. Everything changed, however, when F.W. de Klerk took over and the talks with the ANC began. The world was allowed to take a look behind the gates at Pelindaba and the nearby Armscor Nuclear Research facilities. This was in preparation for the announcement that South Africa was, in the spirit of reconciliation, to give up its nuclear arsenal. By the time of the referendum in 1992, the nuclear arsenal had been inspected and the six finished and one half-completed Hiroshima-sized bombs were dismantled under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency and all plans and technical drawings destroyed. But not the pictures of the bombs lying in their purpose-built cradles at Pelindaba.

Personally I think that for 'spirit of reconciliation' you should read: 'We don't want the bombs to fall in the hands of a black government'. But call me cynical.

You'll also find carefully thought-out political reasons on the Internet and in books about why South Africa wanted a nuclear deterrent in the first place. Most will hypothesize that it was designed as a last resort if the Angolan adventure proved to be a total disaster and the Russian/Cuban armies swept across the border – but take that with a large pinch of salt. It was much more likely that it was simply a matter of boy's toys. The military wanted to play in the big league and, in paranoid Apartheid South Africa, what the military wanted, it got.

The fourth, 'de la Rey' file you won't find on the Net. This

was Pa's doing, and Pa's alone. It was all laid out in a perfectly reasoned plan, how he, and a very small group of fellow 'patriots', had stolen one of the bombs and replaced it with a dummy two weeks before the first IAEA inspection. And that this bomb was now hidden where no one would think of looking for it.

His reasons for doing this were laid out logically and in a reasonable tone. I'd thought his doubts about the army had begun after the Cuito Cuanavale debacle, but realised they had been brewing for much longer. In fact, they had begun fifteen years earlier during the first Angolan incursion which was taken at the behest of the Americans who had asked for help to support the pro-Western liberation group, Unita, against the pro-Soviet Union MPLA. Both groups had been involved in the liberation war against Portugal, but neither accepted sharing political power. The South Africans responded to this call for help from the Americans seriously and went in boots and all.

There was possibly a bad misreading by the CIA or American politicians about how capable the South African army actually was. Certainly things happened much faster than anyone expected. On the big push into Angola in 1975 the SADF forces reached the outskirts of the capital, Luanda, in less than a week and were waiting for orders to take it, when the Yanks, fearing a face-off against Russia, panicked and said pull back – we didn't really *mean* for you to beat them so quickly. Or maybe it was wishful thinking by the Apartheid government that the US had ever given them a full go-ahead to take Angola.

The dossier (because that was what it was) went on to illustrate dozens of further mistakes, in Pa's mind anyway, that the army chiefs and the politicians had made during the following years, culminating with the failure to use one of the A-bombs when the troops were bogged down at Cuito

Cuanavale.

He then gave a summary (and this is when I realised how deluded Pa had actually been) of what he expected to happen in the new South Africa – ‘the traitor de Klerk’s pipe dream’ he called it. And how the Afrikaner nation would need the A-bomb he had stolen, or at least the deterrent of using it, when they’d had enough of the new South Africa and would take their rightful place running the country they had built on the blood of their ancestors.

This was followed by a precise description of how the bomb was stolen. That they were code-named after Afrikaner Boer War generals and that a dummy bomb casing had been secretly manufactured. There was a purchasing order to a Johannesburg industrial boiler making company with detailed engineering drawings attached of the ‘boiler for display purposed only’. This order had specific instructions of the materials to be used, sizes to the millimetre and a delivery address: *Klein Drinkwater*, Terre’Blanche District, and a map how to get there. I compared the engineering drawings with the photographs of the bombs lying in their cradles, and the ‘boiler’ was identical to the bomb casings.

There was also official correspondence between the director general of the Pelindaba facility and State President de Klerk’s office, confirming that there were six completed bombs and one that still had to be armed. Most of this counter-signed by Col. J. Koekemoer, Chief of Security. There were diagrams of alarm systems and precise timetables of movements of guards. And finally, a short list of names – Jan Pieter Coetsee, Gerhardus Tertius van Niekerk, Danie Pienaar, Derrick Smit, Carel (Boet) Bezuidenhout – and written on the bottom of this was a somewhat cryptic inscription in my father’s hand: ‘de la Rey is under Verwoerd – PAL code:1847’.

I spent half the night thinking about what I’d found on the

memory stick and especially the final message Who were these names? Why was de la Rey under Verwoerd? And what was PAL code: 1847? A bank pin number? Key to a combination lock? A grave site?

Just before I fell asleep I remembered that Mauretia Nienaber from Avbob hadn't phoned me about the funeral. Later I dreamt about her and Pa and A-bombs and del la Rey riding through the veld, his horse wild and black with nostrils snorting fire. All to the soundtrack of Bok van Blerk singing: *'De la Rey, de la Rey ...'*

Mpanza

It took me two mugs of Annetjie's moer koffie to shake off the restless night. I was just about to pick up the phone and call Mauretia Nienaber when she called me. Talk about great minds thinking alike. She said she was really sorry she hadn't got hold of me yesterday but that there was something of a problem, which she'd thought she could sort out, but wasn't able to. I asked what problem?

'They won't release your father's body yet.'

I said, 'Why not?'

'It's the police. The coroner wouldn't tell me why, but maybe you can pull some strings being part of the force. Or ex-part of the force.'

I said I'd talk to the local cops and see what the problem was and I'd get hold of her shortly.

The police station was much as I remembered it when I was posted there for my first job as a newly-minted detective constable thinking I knew it all having finished my degree and passed out of the police academy in Pretoria. Only instead of a fat white sergeant with a droopy moustache manning the charge office desk, who pretended to be busy when you approached and wouldn't look up, there was a plump black

lady sergeant who, deep in a book, ignored me. Also the picture of the State President had changed from a smug F.W. de Klerk to an even smugger Jacob Zuma.

I'd done the lady sergeant a disservice. When she noticed me she leapt up and said: 'Sorry Sir, I'm Sergeant Gugu Mayisela, I'm studying for exams, I was lost in my book.'

'What book?' I asked.

She said: 'You probably won't know it. Snyman's Criminal Law Casebook.'

I laughed, 'I studied Snyman when I was doing Criminology at Tukkies twenty years ago'.

She said: 'I'm doing my degree online, through Unisa. Are you a lawyer, sir?'

I laughed again. 'No, I was like you. Police. Is it possible to see Captain Mpanza?'

'I'll see if he's available, what's your name?'

'Jaco Koekemoer.'

'Captain? Major?'

'No. Now I'm just plain mister.'

She rang through to her superior and said: 'Captain, there's an ex-police officer Koekemoer here to see you.'

I could hear Mpanza ask her something. She looked up from the phone:

'Are you Colonel J. Koekemoer's son?'

'Yes.'

'The captain wants to see you immediately. Let me show you the way.'

I told her it wasn't necessary, I knew where the station commander's office was – two doors down the corridor to the right – and she should get back to her studies. She said thanks, she would.

Nathi Mpanza was a large, handsome Zulu, not quite my height but with even broader shoulders. He shook my hand with the gentle handshake typical of his people. The soft grip,

not a sign of weakness, as some fools have found out to their cost, but one of respect. He said that he was very sorry about my father and that it was a terrible thing. I said: 'Yes, to die that way, alone in a motor accident ...'

He looked up at me and said, 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we're not treating it as an accident.'

'What then? Suicide? I can't believe it ... he'd never ...'

'No. We think homicide. The evidence points to him being deliberately run off the road or hit and run at the very least.'

'Homicide ... but who would want to kill ... what happened?'

I could see that Mpanza was sizing me up, wondering how much he should tell me. He gave a little nod to himself, got up and said: 'Come with me.'

As we walked towards the station's vehicle impoundment yard, I thought that now I know why they won't release the body. If it had been a road accident, the autopsy would have been done by the duty pathologist, with the minimum of fuss and the body probably already released. But in a case of suspicious death, a competent investigating officer would want as thorough a medical examination as possible by a senior pathologist. Sometimes this could add days onto the releasing of the body.

Mpanza was saying something. I said: 'Sorry, my mind was elsewhere.'

He passed me a pair of blue latex gloves and said: 'Here is the vehicle your father was driving. I'm only showing you this as a courtesy to an ex-police officer, and I know you were in Serious Crimes so you know what to do and what not to.'

Naturally he'd checked up on me, I would have done the same in his shoes. I'd been in Serious Crimes in Jo'burg and Cape Town before I'd set out in the wonderful world of private-eyeing. I guess the report he got about me was a pass mark, or I wouldn't be here with him.

The vehicle, a white Toyota Hi-lux double-cab about ten years older than the bakkie I'd hired from Tempest, was a wreck. It had obviously rolled a dozen or more times down a rocky incline and was so smashed up it looked like it had been attacked by multiple sledgehammers. The roof was slanted at forty five degrees, the driver's side pillars had caved in and both front and back had concertinaed. Three of the tyres had burst and the front bumper had bent almost in two. This was probably caused by the tow-truck pulling it out of the donga. Shit, no-one could have survived a crash like this.

'What am I looking for?' I asked Mpanza.

He lead me round to the back of bakkie: 'See this? The black stripe. Like a scar on white skin.'

'Yes.'

'That's where it got hit. The other vehicle came up from behind, fast, and knocked him off the road. Probably had bull bars on the front. You see how the dent of the impact is rounded?'

'Must have been a big vehicle to knock a double-cab off the road.'

'Yes, my thoughts exactly.'

'You sure that black scar wasn't caused by the tow truck pulling the double cab back onto the highway?'

'No, I checked that first off. The tow truck had a bull bar, but a stainless steel one. No black anywhere.'

'Did you find anything else at the scene?'

'Some broken glass, probably from your father's bakkie but we can't be sure that some of it wasn't from another vehicle. I've sent all we collected to forensics and a sample of the paint from the black stripe. There was also the normal rubbish people throw out of their car windows, but nothing else relevant to the investigation.'

'Do you mind if I go have a look?'

Captain Mpanza shrugged, 'Be my guest. I doubt we've

missed anything, but if we have, I ask you please to contact us immediately.’

‘Promise.’

Mpanza told me to follow him back to the office where he’d give me a copy of the official diagram of the scene of the crime. This was highly irregular but, I’d begun to realise, so was Mpanza. When we got back to the charge office he asked me to wait while he got the copy. The sergeant was head down, nose stuck in her book. Mpanza smiled her way and left. He was back shortly and handed me an envelope with his police business card stapled to it. He also told me that while he was in his office the coroner had phoned and said that the autopsy would be carried out that afternoon and the body would be released first thing in the morning. I suspected that Captain Mpanza had put a little pressure on them to hurry up, and thanked him.

‘*Ngiyabonga* Captain. You’ve been a great help.’

I drove round to Avbob to give Mauretia the news about Pa’s body being released in the morning. But she wasn’t there so I left a note with the fourteen-year-old blonde to say the body could be picked up in the morning and I was sorry I’d missed her. Really romantic stuff.

A beer was calling me loudly but I decided I’d head out to the scene of the crime instead. I poked around in the heat for a bit but Mpanza was right, I found nothing. So I headed to the Royal – I had to make some calls to my business partner, Chesney Cook, for one. I needed to put him in the picture about what was up and also to ask him to check out a few people. Cook, besides being one of the best Google detectives I’ve ever met, also seemed to have a girlfriend in every official records office in the country and I guess the cool of the Royal bar would be as good a place as anywhere to call from.

We had a long chat – he filled me in about the case we’d

been working on before I was called away to Terre'Blanche. It had a lot to do with fishing permits, illegal fishing, Chinese trawlers and great white sharks, and he seemed to have things under control. Rather him than me, I thought. I quickly filled him in on what I'd been up to and gave him my list. First the names at the end of Pa's 'Pelindaba' folder – Coetsee, van Niekerk, Pienaar, Smit, Bezuidenhout – who were they? Also I asked him to find out what he could about the lawyer Eloff and, lastly, Captain Nathi Mpanza of the Terre'Blanche police. Cook said he'd get on to it right away.

The bar was cool, and this time, a lot quieter. Fat Face the barman told me that I should have been in last night. The gang of UCT students had been joined by another bunch from Wits and things had got pretty raucous. He said they'd told him they were planning to stick around a while and were going to set up camp at the koppie. I told him that they'd better watch out for snakes.

After another couple of beers I headed to the farm.

I hadn't been back home more than a couple of minutes when I noticed the dust of two vehicles that had turned off the tar road and were coming towards the farm. I waited for them on the front stoep. They pulled up under Ouma's pin oak. I wasn't that surprised when the lawyer, Eloff, got out of the first car – a five-year-old Merc that looked like it had a couple of hundred thousand kilometres on the clock but probably only had a few thousand, the local roads will do that. The second vehicle was brand new – a Toyota Land Cruiser Station Wagon, which cost nearly four times the average police captain's annual salary. Ex-police captain Wouter van Schalkwyk stepped out of the Cruiser and smiled up at me. A crocodile's would have been warmer.

Bastards

Wouter van Schalkwyk was a genuine two-time bastard. Not only through paternity but by inclination also.

He was brought up by Oom Swart Danie van Schalkwyk his grandfather who, by hook or by crook, ended up owning just about half of the buildings and businesses in town. Swart Danie had arrived in the district in last days of WWII having trekked with his herd of sheep up the National road from Cookhouse in the Eastern Cape nearly eight hundred kilometres to the south, grazing them on the sides of the road. It took almost two years to get to Terre'Blanche and why he finally stopped there nobody knows – maybe he felt at home with the jackal buzzards flying above. Somewhere along the long road north he'd picked up a woman – a long, gaunt, heavy-boned, haunted-eyed woman who he drove north alongside the sheep.

But two years of living and sleeping among sheep on the side of the National road cured Swart Danie of any affinity with sheep and instead of setting up as a stock farmer, he sold the lot, bought a pub and a greasy spoon restaurant, and set out to shear the people of Terre'Blanche instead.

Swart Danie and the gaunt woman had produced only one child, Petronella, who had fled home for Johannesburg and had only come back once to drop off her own child, Wouter.

She told them she didn't know who the father was, and didn't care. She never returned to pick him up.

Wouter was, for a short time, my boss. He made life difficult for me. A few years older than me, he'd left the local high school before I got to Terre'Blanche. And went on to study, of all things, Divinity, at Potchefstroom University. I'd played rugby for Tukkies against him once in a grudge intervarsity game. I don't think he ever forgave me the dummy I sold him to set up the winning try. But he treated Pa with great respect. He knew that Pa, while not that active in right wing politics, had connections at the very top of the movement. Van Schalkwyk, if the old Apartheid regime had continued, would have no doubt risen to high rank in the police. Maybe even the top job. When I worked for him he was head of the local detective division and already building a power base in the west of Transvaal. Later, as chief of police he was an important figure in the district with important Party affiliations. He knew where most of the bodies were buried – but then he'd buried many of them himself. He'd clearly done well in the new South Africa though – he was looking seal-sleek and prosperous.

We shook hands – we're polite people, us Afrikaners. I counted my fingers to see if they were all still there and invited van Schalkwyk and Eloff into the house.

We got down to business right away, van Schalkwyk opening with: 'Jaco, Eloff here told me that you've rejected, out of hand, the offer I made on the farm.'

'*You* made the offer?'

'Yes, if it wasn't enough, I apologise, I can go higher.'

'It's not the money, Wouter. This place was Ma's family's farm and I want to keep it so. Anyway since when did you become a farmer?'

He laughed, showing a fine set of freshly-capped teeth.

'No, I want it as a game farm. For entertaining customers.'

'Business must be good.'

'It's more than good. Van Schalkwyk Makatini Investments is one of the fastest growing corporations in South Africa.'

'Makatini? Who's that?'

I'm surprised you haven't heard of them. They're the big Jo'burg mining company. Bought out half of Anglo. They're my partners.'

Then van Schalkwyk wrote something brief on a piece of paper, folded it and gave it to me, saying: 'We've got things to discuss in town, but when we're gone, please look at the number on this and get hold of me through Eloff.'

I walked them to their vehicles, we shook hands and again I counted my fingers. Van Schakwyk drove off first, Eloff hung back, eating his dust. I walked back to the stoep and stopping, took a look at the note van Schalkwyk had given me. There was a three on it followed by six zeroes. Three million rands. I went inside and sat down.

Jesus.

My daydreams of what I could do with three million bucks were interrupted by the ring of the landline. It was Mauretia. She told me that she'd got my message and that Pa's body was on its way to the funeral parlour, and could I come into town and discuss the funeral plans.

I said, 'Sure, what time?' We agreed on ten a.m. the next day.

A little later I got another call. It was from a young guy with an English accent. He said his name was Jack Bolton.

'Can I speak with Colonel Koekemoer, please?'

I said, 'Sorry. That's not possible.'

'When would it be convenient, then?'

'I'm afraid the Colonel is dead. A car accident.'

'Oh. I am sorry to hear that. Who's speaking?'

I told him.

He said, 'Then you're probably the right person to send my report to. Can I have your e-mail address?'

I asked, 'What report?'

'The geological report the Colonel wanted.'

'Oh that one. Yes, e-mail it to me please, and your details, my address is ...'

A few minutes later my Mac went 'ping'. There was something waiting in the inbox and it was indeed the report from a company called Geo Logical. It took me a while to get through it. To put it plainly I didn't know my late Archean from my early Proterozoic or my hornfels from my leptites. There was, however, a semi-understandable summary at the end which essentially said that the underground platinum reef that geologists had years ago determined petered out just west of Terre'Blanche, did indeed end there, but there was 'strong evidence' that the reef re-emerged on the farm *Klein Drinkwater* two kilometres to the west. My farm. And that further exploration and prospecting was needed to confirm this.

So much for van Schalkwyk's 'game farm'. What he was hunting went much deeper. Bastard.

I thought I'd better get hold of Chesney Cook again and ask him to make a few additions to the list I'd given him. Such as Makatini Investments, Geo Logical and ex-police captain Wouter van Schalkwyk.

Cook said he'd get on to it right away, but meantime he had tracked down some info on the earlier names I'd given him. He told me that Coetsee, van Niekerk, Pienaar, Smit and Bezuidenhout were all ex-army. But whereas Coetsee had been in weapons procurement and had been in charge of security at the main weapons depot at Kimberley, the other four were hard-core fighting men.

'I smell ex-Special Forces,' he told me. 'Maybe even Koevoet or the Recces. I'm waiting for their files.'

I said, 'Can you try to track down where they are now? Also Coetsee.'

'Will do.'

'Anything on Captain Mpanza?'

'Now there's an interesting oke. He comes from a small village near Kamberg in the Drakensberg and his father's a labourer on a dairy farm. He was educated at a local farm school but obviously had brains because he got matric and then a B.A. in Criminology from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and finished top of his class at the Chatsworth Police Academy. He made captain in the Durban detective squad faster than anyone ever in the police, even you Koekie, and he'd just got a promotion to Pretoria headquarters when the shit hit the fan and he was posted to Terre'Blanche instead.'

'Fok, what happened?'

'Apparently, he was heading back to Durban from a trip to his family kraal up in Kamberg when, on the highway near 'Maritzburg there was a traffic accident just in front of him and he stopped to see if he could help. It wasn't that major a prang, but a small car had been shunted in the back by a BMW 4x4. Apparently, as Mpanza approached the two cars, this very angry, very *dronk* Zulu gets out of the Beemer and starts shooting at the whiteys in the car he'd pranged, Bam! Bam!, Bam!, Bam! Glass exploding everywhere. It was by sheer luck he didn't kill anyone. He was so pissed he didn't even see Mpanza walk up on him – one klap on the back of his head and it was lights out.'

'Shit, and then?'

'Well Mpanza called the local station and when they arrived, he identified himself and told them to arrest and cuff the Zulu who'd now woken up, and then to take a statement from the whiteys. The sergeant in the squad car said he wouldn't do it and asked Mpanza if he realised who the man was he was arresting. Mpanza apparently said that he didn't care if it was

the Honourable State President himself. 'Arrest this man or I'll put you under arrest.'

'And then?'

'Well it obviously wasn't the President, but it was a nephew. And he had the cheek to lay a charge of assault against Mpanza himself.'

'Christ, and I suppose the people in the other car wouldn't back him up?'

'No, they'd been got at. Shit scared, said they saw nothing.'

'So that's how Mpanza ended up here. Transferred as far away as possible from the shit-storm. Typical police management. Bastards.'