

The end of everything that stands.

The end.

THE DOORS, THE END

EVERYTHING THAT STANDS

Jeremy Holt

 greenhill

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FOR KATHLEEN, GUY, MARY, AND GLADSTONE

*For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind,
and to melt into the sun?
And what is it to cease breathing,
but to free the breath from its restless tides,
that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?*

K AHLIL GIBRAN, THE PROPHET

No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun; despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning.

ECCLESIASTES 8:17

*Why does the bird sing?
Because it has a song.*

ANTHONY DE MELLO, THE SONG OF THE BIRD

*When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?*

WILLIAM BLAKE, THE TYGER

We have not yet arrived, but every point at which we stop requires a re-definition of our destination.

BEN OKRI, TALES OF FREEDOM

A LUMINOUS DARK

Gunfire smacks into the lower reaches of the trees above.

With a short gulp of air, I rise to my feet and run.

Again.

I shout to my brother above the din, but I'm unsure whether he hears. A fearful thud-thud-thudding tracks me, and he materialises to my left.

Branches slap and sting my face and forearms as I scamper away into the black shadows of the morning. Between dust and darkness, despair and desperation, I am haunted by this life, this death.

We need to be far away before it grows light, before we're flushed out into the open like scatterling guinea fowl.

Phlegmatic fireflies, tracers, flick past me. My heart jackhammers in my head, drowning out the panoply of noise.

I can do nothing other than run.

I lose my footing, but my brother grabs my jumper and heaves me upright just before I sprawl into the undergrowth.

I allow myself a quick over-the-shoulder glance.

Apart from an unforgiving landscape...

Nothing.

I speed up; utter a prayer for God to deliver us.

The cacophony behind dissipates and I settle into a pace I can uphold. Blaise remains steady on my left shoulder.

Neither of us speaks.

We concentrate on regulating our breathing. For the trials that lie in wait, we must preserve our energy as best we can.

Sounds of silence, apart from the persistent undertone of cicadas, replace the hurly of our hunters.

Daybreak's first crimson appears to the east, and we adjust to bear in the opposite direction.

Flaking lips, parched mouth, swallow-sharpened throat.

Unsteady legs and aching feet, the prelude to mushrooming blisters.

To find water is a priority, even though I know to break rhythm would be folly.

Blaise points to the right and, slowing to a trot, I follow the arc of his finger and spy a brackish waterhole amongst an assembly of thorn trees. Despite its sinister discolouration, it heightens my thirst.

We sink into the scrub.

I look. Listen. Linger.

Breathing deeply, I resist the urge to plunge into the water.

Our eyes comb the terrain, scrutinising every dark recess amongst the trees.

Blaise nods at me and I inch forward. Firearm cradled in his right hand, he scans right to left. I squat and scoop water to my mouth with cupped hands, drink more than I should.

We reverse roles. Blaise passes the weapon to me. I melt back into cover, take up a defensive position. I wrap my fingers around the pistol's grip, its textured surface biting into my skin.

My right index finger hovers over the trigger.

My brother takes a knee, splashes water on his face and the back of his neck, slakes his thirst.

My stomach cramps and I bend over to quell the pain.

An inexplicable fear squeezes my chest and I jerk my head upwards. Sensing danger, Blaise leaps to his feet, pivots and obstructs my line of sight.

A shadowy figure, whose features I cannot determine, has emerged from the darkness. Right arm extended, he aims a pistol at Blaise's chest.

My brother raises his hands, fingers pointing to the heavens. The gun wavers in a silhouetted fist, oscillates between Blaise and me. I bring my pistol to bear.

Hands stiffen, fingers tighten.

Blaise opens his mouth to protest, but before he can move or utter a sound, a string of dissonant shots splinters the nascent redness.

And I am up and running.

Forever running.

Away from that waterhole, toward the crawl of a luminous dark.

FORGET-ME-NOT

NO SOUND BUT THE early evening breeze caresses the jacaranda trees. They purr their pleasure. Through the tree line behind them, the sun dips towards the horizon, heralding the onset of yet another bloodied African dusk.

The jacarandas are in full bloom, each with a cascade of royal mauve and pink, breathing sticky, spicy perfume to the mild wind.

Beneath this grove lies an inviting, sensual covering of lavender and lilac with a palette of shades in between.

Adore or abhor them, jacarandas discard all year. At the end of autumn, they jettison ferny fronds. In spring, the blossoms opt for freedom; and throughout the summer, coffee-coloured seed pods scatter largesse wherever and whenever they please.

Should a jacaranda flower drop upon your head, local legend contends the act will endow you with a life of good fortune. The fates have never sanctified me in this way, although I recall that in my salad days many of my varsity friends, in a fit of futile optimism, would sit beneath the jacarandas come exam time.

It has been many years since I visited Pretoria, the City of Jacarandas. I never believed I'd return to one of its distinctive spaces, Voortrekkerhoogte. It was established after the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1905 as Roberts Heights for the commander-in-chief of the British forces, Lord Frederick Roberts, but found its apotheosis as

Voortrekkerhoogte in the 1930s. It was so named by the then Nationalist Government at the commissioning of the Voortrekker Monument, at a time of growing Afrikaner nationalism. Following the end of Apartheid, it was reborn as Thaba Tshwane.

So much for nomenclatures. For me, it will forever be Voortrekkerhoogte.

I finished school in Salisbury in 1979, during a turbulent year marking the demise of Ian Smith's UDI in Rhodesia and the failed power-sharing model under Bishop Abel Muzorewa. Afterwards, along with many other families fearful of post-Lancaster House Agreement chaos, my family had 'taken the gap' and crossed the African Rubicon – the Limpopo River – to South Africa.

Their fears were well-founded. In the autumn of 1980, the predicted rise and rise of Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party to power presaged the gradual fall of Zimbabwe into a starless oligarchy over ensuing decades.

I was conscripted into the South African Defence Force in the early 1980s. Having completed my basic training and officer's course in Oudtshoorn, I spent time in Rundu on the Kavango River in South-West, and other unspecified locations in southern Angola in 'The Battle for Africa'. Thereafter, I endured a considerable time in my home-away-from-home 1-MIL, the premier military hospital in Voortrekkerhoogte, requiring reconstructive knee surgery courtesy of Operation Askari, in which my *Ratel's* turret took a direct hit from a 23-mm mortar shell.

I had vowed never to return.

Such is the conundrum of life. It interrupts our best-laid plans.

A vida continua.

Just as the wind can shift unexpectedly, powers beyond our imaginings can thwart our endeavours. All that remains is our last fragile freedom: to choose how we respond.

‘Follow your conscience, Baron. Not making a choice is still making one,’ Mum said. ‘The decisions you make will determine the life you lead. Do the next right thing as an act of faith.’

I made my choice in good faith, not fully expecting the magnitude of the consequences.

Life continues.

For refusing, on the grounds of conscience, a military call-up for township duty during the national State of Emergency, I found myself incarcerated in the SADF Detention Barracks, a stone’s throw from 1-MIL...

A vida continua...

... with a three-year sojourn, reduced to eighteen months, spent in a familiar space I had grown to accept, and despise.

The irony was difficult to avoid.

After a second internment, I never imagined I would revisit the place that conjured those ancient, mythical, mystical creatures that have tourniqueted my heart over the years.

But it is time.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

Time to loosen their hold.

Time to face up to the guilt, shame and anger of my past; spark a third iteration to break the pattern.

I am not alone.

The family is present to show its support. Anne, my wife, who spent her childhood in Salisbury during the Rhodesian Bush War, is with me, as are my eldest daughter, her husband and their three boys, my younger daughter, and my two sons.

My parents are not.

Thus do the joys of this world pass us by.

Time may soften memories, but I have not found this to be the case. Time itself does not console, nor does it make things better or worse. Rather, it puts them into perspective. While only recently deceased, neither Mum nor Dad recovered from the fateful events that occurred so long ago.

Requiescat in pace.

May they rest in the peace they deserve.

To the east, the iconic Voortrekker Monument looms above me, an imposing granite Adamastor and mute testament to a troubled and conflicted country.

Within the variegated jacaranda palette nestles the memorial I have avoided but am impelled to visit. Mindful that I walk on holy ground, I tread towards it with restrained steps.

The members of my family keep their distance.

An assortment of wreaths and flower bouquets braces the steps, bearing poignant and silent witness to the many people anguished by events that occurred so long ago.

The memorial is unassuming in its design. Two large, identical rectangular concrete tablets lean in towards an airy spine. Connecting them is a dedicatory plaque.

It proclaims:

*This memorial is to commemorate the lives of 107 holiday-makers
and crew murdered in the world's first 9/11-style attacks
to destroy passenger aircraft in flight when Rhodesia Air's Viscounts
Hunyani and Umniati were brought down with SAM 7 missiles on...
03 September 1978 and 12 February 1979.*

At the apex of the Viscount Memorial, above the interconnected tablets and embedded in the top of the plaque, sits the stylised metallic icon of the Viscount – nose, wings and tail-fin – reminiscent of an unfurled snake eagle.

Etched into black marble are the Rolls of Honour with the names of those killed, the *Hunyani* on the left and the *Umniati* on the right.

I approach the Roll to the left, a solemn face mirroring mine in the polished stone.

At my feet, an unpretentious green wreath captures my attention. It is foregrounded by clustered sky-blue flowers, the centre of each splashed with white and yellow. Its soft sillage floats in the lingering kiss of the departing sun.

The warm forget-me-not fragrance filling my senses, I view the list of names. Each carved-out name has its story locked in the memories of the loved ones remaining.

From beyond the names, a familiar face rises to greet mine.

I reach out and trace the letters of one name in particular, whose story is intertwined with my own.

Reflected fingers touch mine, trace letters chiselled into the marble... and in that moment, a patchwork of memories enshrouds me against my will in a smothering of colours, sounds, smells and emotions.

And I remember.

THE-YOU-KNOW-WHAT

‘YEE-HAH!’

In burst Blaise.

Our Blaise.

Rugger ball in two hands, he sidestepped me and dived onto his bed. He flipped over and with consummate ease bounced the ball off the wall above and behind his head.

I busied myself, stowing my clothes and tidying my stuff.

The thumping stopped. ‘Hey Baron, are you good to go? Ready for some razzle-dazzle?’

‘Just about. And you?’

‘Almost. Still a few things to sort,’ he replied, making no effort towards sorting.

The thud-thud-thud of the ball resumed, hammering its incessant drumbeat on the pockmarked wall.

‘Shouldn’t you pack?’

‘Ja, I suppose. But hey, Bar, we don’t need much, do we? Cozzies and flip-flops only, I reckon. I mean, a week in Kariba. Party Central!’

‘What with finals coming up in two months, I assumed you’d at least be taking prep work with you.’

‘It’s the hol-i-days, brother Baron! You recall what that means, doncha?’

‘Yeah, *holy days*, I hear you. I -’

‘No, *Boet*. Seven days of amusement and leisure. I’ll worry about exams after our return to Salisbury. No, better yet. I’ll let you do the fretting. You’ll produce enough for both of us.’

‘Pity about Mum and Dad, though,’ I said, deflecting his barb.

‘*Ag*, shame. A real bummer. The Black Residence Man Cave’s gonna be out of commission for an entire week.’

‘Ha-ha. Hilarious. I laughed ’til I stopped. It means those garden chores will double up for you, my man!’

Blaise and I lived in a large-gardened redbrick house on Borrowdale Road, in a leafy, salubrious part of Salisbury near St George’s, the Jesuit College where we were students in our A-Level year. School had closed for the Michaelmas holidays; Mom and Dad were headed overseas on a quick business trip, while we were off to see our godparents on the Rhodesian Riviera.

‘C’mon, B-man. Kariba. Aunty Jo and Uncle Monty. Fothergill Island. Matusadona. The Vic Falls! What could be better?’

The Falls.

One of the world’s seven natural wonders, formed in deep time when starry spears collided with a malleable earth, its mention triggers the imagination.

Moved by their beauty, David Livingstone, Scottish missionary, explorer and first-ever European to view them in 1855, wrote in an otherwise dour journal: ‘scenes so lovely... gazed upon by angels in their flight.’

To visualise a more extraordinary waterfall was a challenge.

I recalled our first family visit there.

You detect a muted hum first, rising to a rumble then a reverberating thunder shaking the earth.

As you approach, pinprick pulses stimulate the balls of your feet, throbbing to the hairs covering your entire body. Plumes of vapour explode from myriad points, battering your senses. Close up, its hypnotic voice and racing heartbeat overwhelm you.

On an unbroken, flat plateau, the land disappears abruptly and 'God's Highway' slip-slides through a fracture in the earth's surface, much like drenching rain seeping through fissured sandstone.

The water pounds the chasm's uncompromising base then rebounds upwards, hammer blows on multiple anvils.

In an instant, the world upends, and mizzle-comets fall skywards. Showery mists and haloed moonbows ascend, melding the sacred and profane. Apart from touching the divine face, you inhale its moist, sweet, cooling breath.

*Livingstone named his discovery to honour Queen Victoria,
an act of colonial arrogance that hid a deeper truth.
The Falls had older, poetical indigenous names:
Seongo, the Place of the Rainbow, and Mosi-oa-Tunya,
the Cloud (or Smoke) that Thunders.*

Mosi-oa-Tunya's joint width and height made it the world's vastest curtain of cascading water, eclipsing both the Niagara and Iguazu. It is composed of five distinctive waterfalls, including Rainbow Falls and Devil's Cataract. The Zambezi plunges over Devil's Pool into the Boiling Pot beneath, and Nyaminyami, ancestral spirit, protector and serpentine river god, spits rainbows into the churning, frothing basalt gorges beyond.

'Hey, Baron, distracted again, I see. You okay? *I wait upon your leisure, worthy Thane.*'

'You're such a smart arse, Blaise. *Give me favour at least. My dull brain was wrought with things forgotten,* little brother,' I parried.

The feint wasn't long in coming. 'More likely, *wrought with things remembered*. Talking of weirdos, I believe you just spoke with Jo and Monty on the phone? To you, *they have showed some truth, yeah?*'

'That's unkind, Blaise. Odd and eccentric, maybe. But weirdos?'

'Now, don't get all self-righteous on me, Baron. *Let's speak our free hearts each to other*, remember?' he jabbed.

'But also *fair hearts. Keep bosom franchised and clear*, huh?'

'*I shall be counselled.*'

'That remains to be seen. *Time and the hour runs through the roughest day*, not so?'

Blaise leapt from his bed and, with a twirl and flourish of the rugby ball, saluted me. '*Touché*, Baron. *Out-Shakespeareed*. Your Will-power is better than mine.' He bowed. 'I acquiesce to your superior wit and pledge my fealty.'

'Monty and Jo sounded delighted,' I said, trying not to laugh at his antics. 'They're even promising us a surprise when we show up.'

'I love surprises, but I'm never confident where Jo and Monty are involved. I hope this one's better than their last offering.'

Blaise had slumped back onto his bed and balanced the rugger ball on his left index finger, slapping it with his right hand. It spun on his extended fingertips like a pirouetting dancer.

'You mean the Christmas present last year? The dolls?'

'With those two, expect the unexpected. That's the only given.'

'Yep. Play what's in front of you. A useful philosophy for living.'

'As good as any other, I reckon.'

With a roll of wrists and a flick of fingers, Blaise floated the ball upwards. It spiralled toward the ceiling and wavered just shy of the vaulted wooden panels, before gravity tugged it back down into his outstretched hands.

'Now, tell me. Why the Eeyore face? Is there something we should worry about?' Blaise said without looking in my direction, his attention

absorbed by the ball. ‘You were preoccupied when I came in. Although that’s about right.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, as I stacked the pile of books on my desk in the bookcase. ‘Apart from *the-you-know-what*, that is.’

‘That’s also about right,’ Blaise said. ‘What else other than *the-you-know-what*?’



In normal circumstances, the Falls trip would have thrilled me; but the hostile African bush that marked the route to our destination made me uneasy. For the Rhodesian Bush War, the Chimurenga, or as we called it, ‘the-you-know-what’, was in full sway.

TV evening news carried daily reports of the ongoing conflict, always ending with the names of young men, either killed in action or MIA, scrolling across our screens. Since the collapse of Portuguese rule in Mozambique at the end of 1974, counter-insurgency clashes had escalated and the number of casualties was mounting.

There wasn’t a family we knew that hadn’t been touched by the war. Civilian deaths in a firefight in Salisbury in May of the preceding year and the Woolworths’ store bombing four months later had tossed the war into our homes. Rural communities were not exempt, either. The St Paul’s Musami murders and the Elim Mission massacre had humanised its face.

With Mozambique breaking free from its colonial shackles, the Rhodesian military could no longer garrison the country, or stem the flow of cadres across landlocked borders. They adopted a twofold strategy: ‘contain and hold’ the key towns and installations, and ‘search and destroy’ hot pursuit sorties beyond international borders when and where deemed crucial. While guerrillas roamed the Rhodesian bush with growing regularity, they did so knowing the Security Forces would retaliate with a destructive fire-force.

Our direct experience of the Bush War occurred at Christmastime when we travelled on our annual holiday. Accompanied by a military escort, we drove to destinations in South Africa in convoy with other Rhodie families from Salisbury to Fort Victoria and on to Beit Bridge, a distance of 600 kilometres.

The visceral fear and the intangible uncertainty of ambush on each of those trips, as I sat hunched in the back seat of our second-hand family Audi, remain my overriding memory.

Dad always carried a loaded 9-mm pistol in the glove box. Each of us was adept at firing it, as Dad had insisted we learned how to shoot. Mum, Blaise and I spent many an hour at the range honing our skills. We could also pull the weapon apart and reassemble it with speed and accuracy.

Part of our abnormal normal.

‘We won’t live a life out of fear,’ Dad said. ‘Or apologise for who we are or what we stand for. We’ll create our own *normal* and damned be anyone who denies us that right. That doesn’t mean we’re not taking precautions.’

It was another reason we attended basic self-defence classes.



The least safe stretch of our annual journey south was from Fort Victoria, the country’s oldest township close to the Zim-Ruins, to Beit Bridge, the border post. The bridge spanned the Limpopo River, fusing Rhodesia to South Africa.

Before the departure of each convoy that gathered at the designated spot, I well remember the early morning police briefings, which I attended with Dad.

'Morning, Everyone. Welcome to Echo Convoy. We have air cover all the way today. If ambushed, our top priority is to reach the border. If we have to stop, get in the ditch on the side of the road. Don't venture into the bush. If our armoured convoy vehicles see movement, they'll assume they're terrors. There's been some terrorist activity in the area over the last fortnight, but it's rare anything will happen. We have never experienced an ambush, and it's unlikely we will. Departure at zero six hundred.'

The convoy halted.

'Out!' yelled Dad.

We obliged.

Ahead and behind, car doors opened and people scrambled for cover. The four of us clambered into a shallow *donga* to our car's left. Heads to chests, bodies tensed and senses tingling, we huddled in the unnatural quiet.

And waited.

Grunting and threshing from somewhere close by in the bushy terrain disturbed those sounds of silence.

It grew louder.

A makeshift military escort vehicle hove into view and, within a stone's throw of where we lay, shuddered and lurched to a standstill, engines complaining.

A voice squawked from a loudhailer.

'All clear! Return to your vehicles. The terrors dug two trenches across the road. They've also trashed the nearby telephone poles and ripped out the lines.'

Anxious and uncertain, we idled on that road, the umbilical cord to the outside world, while two sappers went to work with a mine-detector.

In such a wild place besieged by squat, bald *kopjes*, it was a nervy delay, and the stifling stillness heightened our sense of dis-ease.

‘This place gives me the creeps.’

With prickling skin, I glanced up to see a moustached youngster in military fatigues crouched behind a 12.7-mm Browning in his cage atop the front escort vehicle. He scanned the skyline. ‘An ideal spot for an ambush,’ he muttered. ‘The worst tribal trust land in the country.’

For non-Rhodesians, such an incident would have been extraordinary. For us Rhodies, it did not qualify as significant. Until someone was injured, shots fired into the convoy were a non-event.

Also part of our normal abnormal.

Roadkill and debris littering the verges of the roadway was common, a constant hint of insurgency tactics to sow fear and turmoil.

The terrors placed dead livestock or tree trunks across the roads, but the ruse proved ineffective as the escort vehicles smashed them aside. A refined variation of this guerrilla stratagem was to corral cattle onto the roads. This ploy also failed, as the armed escorts eliminated the cow threat using their mounted guns.

The roadkill could stretch for miles, a cornucopia of putrefying carcasses stiffening in the blood-bathed wasteland attended by squadrons of swirling flies and carrion-eaters bunched together, squabbling for a feed.

Two specific memories remain seeded in my brain.

The first involved chasing the convoy from Beit Bridge to Fort Vic. We had missed it by a few minutes.

‘So, Mary, what do you think?’

‘Ah, Guy, now, to be sure, we can’t hang around here. I have things to do at home.’

‘So we should go?’

'I don't see why not. We're not far behind. In all our time, nothing's ever happened. On a prayer, I say. It's too long a wait for the next convoy. We're both back at work tomorrow.'

We raced to catch up at the Fort Vic mustering point, driving unaccompanied through guerrilla-invested bush. After thirty years, the memory still has the power to conjure that same level of anxiety.

The second memory embodied the Rhodesian 'new normal' way of life.

As we sped along on the Fort Vic to Salisbury stretch at the prescribed seventy miles per hour, a bump, rip and slap to our immediate rear resounded in our ears.

'Get down!'

Clutching at our hearts, we ducked beneath window-level as the car bobbed, careened and whined. Dad fought to right the wheel. With fluid movements, he engaged a lower gear, de-clutched, and sped up. The Audi jerked, surged and regained its balance amidst howls of tyre rubber, bumping the vehicle to our front. I lay shaken and horizontal on the floorboards behind the front seats until we wobbled into the safety of Borrowdale.

Later, our neighbour interpreted what had happened. He and Dad, known as *The Wombles*, were our suburb's home-grown version of the Neighbourhood Watch.

'Man, look at that. A lacerated tyre,' he said, pointing at our left rear wheel. 'Talk about luck. How'd you make it home?'

'I'll be damned. So it wasn't gunfire!' Dad declared. 'Shredded rubber... and a buckled wheel rim! How did we avoid a puncture? *Deo gratias*.'

I don't think anyone would have disagreed with him.

Apart from confidence with firearms and a rudimentary set of self-defence skills, each of us knew the intricacies of changing a car tyre. We practised and drilled at home, Dad timing us on a stopwatch.

He was relentless.

'Not good enough. Again!' he would say until, sweaty, grimy and out-of-breath, we broke the four-minute barrier.

He was fastidious and (dare I say it?) anal about car and tool maintenance. In retrospect, I understand why. It was a life-and-death difference. A flat tyre meant being abandoned in the bush. The convoy waited for no one.

I would forgive any outsider for wondering why we Rhodesians even bothered going on holiday. There was nothing peaceful about our travel anywhere inside the country's borders.

It was, as I understood it, a matter of Rhodesian nous, an unambiguous message to the many who would thwart our lifestyle, that we would not go gentle into that good night.

Too late, I learned it was a conduit to Rhodesian hubris.

Apart from providing opportunities to escape the pressures of a country at war with itself, going south on holiday also made economic sense. Exchange controls allowed Rhodesian citizens limited cash withdrawals as a holiday allowance. As the political status quo unravelled with the apotheosis of Robert Mugabe, our trips were opportunities to move capital to banking safe havens in South Africa.

Just before Uhuru, my parents converted what wealth they had into Krugerrands, concealed them in my biology school research project sample-sachets, and smuggled the gold coins out of the country through the Beit Bridge border checkpoint.



Despite these circumstances, or because of them, Blaise showed no overt interest in the Bush War. He never spoke about it, opting instead to project an image of *Mr Cool*. It may have been his way of dealing with the reality in which we lived.

Many Rhodesians did the same, learning to live with danger as a constant companion. A few found it stimulating, an adrenaline rush. I, for one, was not one of these *adrenal-junkies*.

Blaise was a different proposition. He could well fit that epithet.
‘Baron, are you sure there’s nothing else bugging you?’
‘Apart from you, not much...’ I said, letting the words loiter.
We eyeballed each other and laughed out loud.

We were like the two sides of a gold Krugerrand.

Blaise was only five minutes younger than I was, but he was the extrovert – far more interested in playing rugby and cricket and chatting up the ladies. And he was, I had to admit, a very gifted sportsman. I was the pensive one who, not unlike Atlas, carried the weight of the world on my shoulders.

He was Gawain to my Percival.

Ouma had a less flattering way of describing us: Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dummer.

Blaise shrugged. ‘I’m not convinced you’re telling me everything, *Bru*, but it’s your call. Happy to listen if you change your mind.’

With a nod, he snatched up his bag and headed towards the bedroom door. ‘Um... catch you downstairs, Bar. Get a wriggle on.’ He ambled out and went down the staircase.

My voice followed him. ‘I’ll join you soon. Just a few items to add.’

‘Cheers, Big Ears!’ he called. ‘Don’t bring too much, you hear? And no schoolbooks, okay?’

I smiled, shook my head. ‘That’s never gonna happen.’

I seized my pack and thrust it on the bed, then added a slim folder of essential texts and slipped in two bottles of water along with a few apples.

Padkos. Food for the road.

And the soul.