

The sun. I didn't notice it at first, but when I did, it completely overwhelmed me. I had staggered in darkness, the occasional flicker of lamplight, reflected light, animal luminescence, illusion, breaking the monotony, the crazed fear of sudden plunges, walking into walls, the nests of unseen and unexpected spiders, insects that buzzed, whizzed and smacked into my face. Fortunately the path had been smooth, even and provided hints of changes. A ripple diagonally across the path indicated a turn, the direction being across the ripples. High, straight ripples at right angles to my path indicated t-junctions whereas parallel ripples that ran along my path indicated a fall. The first few times I had been saved by the fact that the parallel grooves were difficult to walk on and I was feeling my way when an up-draft warned me of a hole in the ground, there was no warning of vertical shafts above me, but the gentle filtered light from above was warning enough. That and the raucous flapping of birds wings.

It had been mostly silent on my journey. My foot falls muffled by soft dust. At one junction, I heard the soft moaning of a woman in pain or ecstasy and I turned away from it. Fleeing human contact in case it was a trick, a joke, an ambush. Deception that might lead me to hope and then crushing despair. So I turned away from the sounds of humanity, or should I say, from human sounding activities. I heard footsteps, behind me, sometimes before me, sometimes massed, sometimes a single hesitant tread, but overall the silence crowded in on me, pressed down, enfolded me. Entombed in silence, I clung to it as a child will cling to a well loved blanket or soft toy, no matter how tattered, meaningless, worn, disgusting, it carries dreams, memories, safety.

Then I tripped over something, soft, yielding. It grunted as I did and I, in a rage of fear, rolled hard and fast away from it only to find myself rolling uncontrollably down a slope that seemed never ending. I checked my roll, but ended up sliding, helplessly downwards until I dropped over an edge and fell for what felt like hours. The air turned soft, spongy, restricting my fall, I could feel the resistance to my fall increasing and as it did, the enfolding air became opaque. The darkness became material and I could feel it with my hands, but not grasp it. I could breathe it, taste it, feel it and, it seemed to me be one with it.

Suddenly there was stillness, pause, as if for reflection, decision and then the warm dark enfolding darkness was gone and I found myself lying face down, eyes squeezed shut, hands grasping soft spongy material. Gravity had returned and was pressing me gently onto the soft ground. Smells assailed me. I tasted rather than smelled the air and felt its movement around me like a concerned parent checking a child from breaks, bruises and injuries. My eye lids flickered, weakening from the pressure of holding them tight closed and, instead of dark, I saw glimmers of light. I could see red pulsing light through my eyelids and a great fear took hold of me.

The driving passion of movement that had driven me thus far, started to become overwhelming, and eventually, I could resist no longer, I got to my hands and knees, and fearfully slit my eyes open and was swamped by sensory overload, instead of shades of grey and silver, there were other colours, shades, tints, hues, sparkling and blurred through the tears in my eyes. I knelt there, head hanging, gasping, drawing in lungfuls of air that was familiar yet unfamiliar. No dust. That was what it was. Moisture. I had passed waterfalls sometimes during my flight and the air had temporarily been moist and I had found nourishment from things that had grown at the edge of the water. The moisture spoke of nourishment, water to slake my thirst. I had to move, I didn't know how exposed I was. I could see a dark area in my blurred sight and I crawled toward it for the shelter and safety that darkness had always provided. It was dark, moist and safely tucked away.

I slept, soundly and well. The ground was soft and water was close, I felt safe and I drifted in a dreamy state, avoiding wakefulness and the horrors and challenges of the situation I found myself in.

My gentle dreaming state is shattered by a huge intrusion. Darkness is shattered by a surge of red light, piercing my eyelids, my dreams, flooding my head with colour. I scream, curl up and try to hide from the raging red. Nothing helps, in fact it gets worse, it changes to bright yellow, heat hammers down on me. I feel it pummelling at me and I cannot hide. I open my eyes a fraction, the walls of my hideaway are now clearly illuminated, I can see the grains of the rocks, the spores on the leaves of the fern that and my brain screams with overload, jibbering and dodging, trying to block, ignore, escape the tsunami of information. I hear a harsh panting noise, and I cringe even more, eventually realising that the sound I hear is my own breath rasping in and out which calms me slightly. I hold my breath for a few seconds. Silence. No other sound. I

appear to be alone. Slowly, I open my eyes allowing more and more light in till my eyes are wide open and adapted to the light and for the first time in what seems like a life time I see proper colour, not leached, greyed colour, but vibrant colours, yellows, pinks, oranges, reds, blues, purples, colours that have no names. The air is clear, no dust, no mustiness, moisture. As it should be.

I stretch, and cautiously emerge from the small cave I had taken refuge in and look around. The view stirs vague tendrils of memory which start to drift through the chaotic mess of my mind. Voices, smell, feelings. One particular smell dominates, a burnt smell. A smell of richness, it engenders feelings of huge pleasure, joy and strangely enough, control. "Cappuccino?" the strange, meaningless word drifts across my consciousness and I drift with it, feeling, tasting, experiencing. Memory dances, taunting, twisting away, just out of reach. I am wrapped up in the chase, tensing muscles, clenching teeth, breathing hard. I feel that if I let go I will lose my life, my sanity.

Suddenly, shockingly something moves on my leg. It vibrates and I freeze, hold my breath, scrunch up my eyes. Fear pours adrenalin into my body, overwhelming the remembered taste with the harsh metallic taste of blood, fear and emotion. The silence is shattered by a loud beep and I jump, swallowing a scream. It unfreezes my hand and I punch at the vibrating attacker. It is under my clothing. It buzzes again and then the noise again and I cringe away, gasping for air. My hand connects with the thing and I find that it is tangled in my clothing; it buzzes in my hand this time and I try futilely to rip it of its hiding place but it is tangled, caught up.

"Damned phone." The phrase comes from the depths of my psyche. Recognition of a concept and a modicum of understanding brings my hysterical thrashing under control and I reach into the pocket, extracting a battered, scratched silvery thing and I stare at it in total confusion. It as it buzzes again and I nearly drop it.

The buzz and the name seem to open a crack in the previously impermeable wall of amnesia. I realise that the thing in my hand is a ruggedized cell phone, given to me by Sam before the trip.

"Who is Sam? What trip?"

I push the question down, irrelevant. The noise is a give away, people will hear and come to recapture me. I must silence it and quickly. The urge to smash it on the rocks is overwhelming and I am aiming for a pointed rock when I realize that the thing is a communicator and a way of telling people I am alive. My paranoia tells me that it may also tell the wrong people I am alive. "Switched on" it says to me, "It is a beacon, screaming here I am."

"Tell Sam." Recommends another voice.

How to operate the thing? It is still strange in my hand, I know I should be able to make it do things, but that knowledge is buried below piles of fear, anger, and something else. I close my eyes, open them again and then look at the thing. A screen and it is demanding a password. What password? I search for a clue. Nothing comes to mind. The words of the karate instructor at that terrible team building exercise come to mind. "Rely on your body memory." I had given him a rough time over that, but he had been adamant. "Clear your mind and allow your body to do what you need it to do."

"Yeah, right. Balls."

Necessity makes me desperate. I close my eyes and attempt to clear my mind. Tiredness and fear have stilled the flow of consciousness that normally inhabits my skull and I open my eyes and punch in a number. The password fails. "Shit! Stupid idea."

"This is Sams cell phone, he changed the password to something you would remember." Says the soft voice. I close my eyes and think of Sam, whoever he might be. I once again open my eyes, punch in a number and the password works. I stare at it for a moment. "Huh?"

"Your birthday."

"Shurrup." I mutter to the voice. "Smart ass."

Lots of Whatsapp messages summarized as: "Where are you? Are you safe?" and degenerating into desperation, "Please talk to us."

Sam's name and picture. Stupid picture, some avatar from some geeky movie. Still don't know who Sam is, but he is a good guy. Dunno how I know that, but he is.

I punch in a response. "Alive just lost" and hit the Send button

I remember that any response will result in another loud sound so I must silence the phone. Panic. How do I do that?

Clear mind. Close eyes, open them. Finger sweeps down the screen and page scrolls down. Profiles open. Silence selected. No thinking. All autopilot.

The phone buzzes but without sound. I nearly drop it again.

Sam's response: "Who you?"

"Jen!"

"No, Jen is dead. Who are you?"

The body takes charge again, finds the camera function on the phone, swaps the screen around for a selfie, hits the shutter release button, grabs the photo and sends it as an mms. Follows that up with "I am Jen fukkit." I notice that autocorrect is quite happy with "Fukkit".

My waking overloaded mind doesn't understand what is going on and watches like a gawker at an accident. It reacts only after the selfie has gone. "No, not like that. I look terrible."

The selfie stares back from the phone, confirming the correctness of my waking mind's reaction. The woman in the picture isn't me. Her hair is plastered down on her scalp with chunks of grey mud, a jagged scratch runs across her cheek, misses her eye by a fraction, slices through one of her perfectly plucked eyebrow. It crosses her forehead and ends its journey above her hairline not before taking a small chunk of scalp with it. The resultant bleeding has left a black rivulet across her forehead and past her other eye. The rest of her face is bruised, mud spattered and disfigured by an emotion that I can only put down to absolute fury, mixed with desperation. If I met this person in real life I would turn and flee.

The phone has been silent for a long time, then it buzzes.

"Ok. Stay where you are."

"I can't. Being followed. If I stay, I'll be caught."

"Ok. Keep moving. We are on our way. We will find you."

I read the message twice and take two steps and then collapse on the ground weeping. Anger, relief, exhaustion. All there, all asking for attention, immobilizing me until fear forces me to my feet. I look around assessing the situation. The sun is off to my left and the river flows away behind me. The cliff faces look hard and steep, the top of the hills hot and exposed making the river look extremely tempting; "Follow it till I find a place to climb out." I trudge slowly, carefully down river.

I haven't gone more than a dozen steps when the soft voice that has driven me this far whispers: "Down river is obvious. Go upriver. More difficult, less predictable and it will get you up onto the top of the ridge." Warily, unwilling to make another decision, delay the flight, I stop, think slowly, carefully and realise that the plan is a good one. I retrace my steps and realise that I have started a false trail down river. Wet footsteps show on the rocks. All to the good. Must remember not to leave wet footprints on dry rocks up river. I start on up the river, walking mainly in the water, avoiding leaving foot prints on dry ground.

I am still congratulating myself on my rapid progress having taken the correct decision when things start getting difficult. The river which at first had small rapids, now has small waterfalls with pools below them. The walls of the valley get steeper and more vertical. I have to swim in places and in some places the sky disappears as the rock faces lean over threateningly. The going just seems to get more and more difficult.

I am considering turning back when I hear voices, voices I recognise and fear. Voices associated with darkness and pain and confinement. I lower myself into an icy pool under a fallen tree, clench my teeth and wait. The voices get closer, become hesitant and then retreat. I wait patiently and watch the sun light creep up the wall of the valley.

Finally when I can no longer stand the cold I emerge, shivering and know that there is only one direction I can go now and that is upwards. Fortunately the air is warm and the effort of climbing each successive waterfall warms me. The fear of falling, of detection, of dying in this lonely canyon frightens me, but not as much as going back to the darkness of the caves. Dying of hypothermia is far more preferable, but that thought makes me angry and I find my will to live grows with every breath I take.

I move on, hands scraping, finger nails splitting but still I climb. My mind is a grey, misty place where voices and memories chase each other across distant plains. At times I hear voices but they fade and disappear. Probably hallucinations. I think or dream of a snake drinking water but hurries away into the bush. Small animals quiver and hide from my intrusion in their world. I come face to face with the broken skeleton of some largish animal that has fallen in the valley from above. I push it aside, muttering pointless apologies and keep moving.

Then I realise that the sun is near set. "Check the cell phone!" I haul it out, push the On button. Nothing happens. I shake it and a dribble of water emerges. The back is cracked. I must have fallen on it at sometime during the ascent. No access to Sam. I am on my own again.

Somehow it doesn't matter. Nothing matters except putting one hand in front of the other, one foot above the previous as I slowly ascend. I start to drift into a dream world and my body goes onto auto pilot. I am no longer present. Then the world explodes with noise and light. A huge animal grabs me its jaws and pulls me to the ground. I try to fight back but the animal is just too strong for me, irresistible, but at the same time incredibly gentle. I collapse, too scared to move and too tired to care any more and the blackness of exhaustion claims me.

Schalk Slabbert sighs contentedly and shifts slightly to ease the pain from a stone that just won't let up digging into his back. Oubaas the boerboel looks up at him and thumps his tail, drops his head on his paws and also sighs contentedly.

It has been a long time since they have been out at night together. Too old, he has been told. Stay at home and rest. The younger guys will watch for poachers, rustlers, and all the ungodly in the hills. But tonight is different. Tonight Sanie, his wife had insisted he go and watch for the lost woman. She had packed him some sandwiches, his thermos and his warm jersey. Made sure he had everything he needed before seeing him off with Oubaas in the truck. He knows that the search is down river from his farm and that this is more of a token than anything else, but he is happy to be out in the cooling air. He watches the sunset paint the land in reds and golds and then the first stars twinkle in the deep blue of the evening sky. Life is good.

Suddenly Oubaas makes a peculiar noise. Not the growl of warning that there are strangers approaching, not the whine of good friends coming through the gate, something else. It is a sound Schalk has heard the dog make only once before. One of the grandchildren had been running hard toward the edge of a river bank and Oubaas had positioned himself between the river and the child and had made that peculiar noise. Schalk trusting Oubaas implicitly stills the dog, stands up and lifts the shot gun to his shoulder. "Just to be certain." he tells the dog and himself.

A figure suddenly appears on the path not twenty metres away, swaying, staggering, but moving none the less. As he is about to greet the figure a second figure appears running after the staggering figure.

"Down!" He shouts. Oubaas knows that command, launches himself at the staggering figure and brings it to the ground. Schalk fires a warning shot at the running figure. There is a huge blast as the shot gun goes off and a wild scream as some bird shot hits the running figure. Accuracy was never Schalk's strong point and anyway the guy looked bad. The figure turns and disappears down the slope.

Schalk makes to follow then the old aphorism from army days comes to mind.

"There are old soldiers and there are bold soldiers but there are no old and bold soldiers."

The farm watch office is dark, people are sitting in the darkness, not willing to switch on the lights which would acknowledge that the woman had not come back on line and is probably not going to be found tonight. Sam's laptop provides the only real light, the red dot showing where the last contact with the cell phone had happened. The various search parties are returning in drips and drabs and empty handed. No sign of the woman.

The watch officer stirs, looks at Sam, "Tell us how this cell phone of yours doesn't run out of battery. My phone runs out of battery real fast. Hers still had power after how long? Over a week?"

"The phone is a prototype, a test model. Your phone continually looks for connectivity, for a cell to talk to and that uses battery. The one that Jen is carrying doesn't do that. If it doesn't find a cell, it switches itself off for an hour, tries again twice then switches off again. It doesn't use much battery that way. It can last for over a month if it doesn't find a cell to connect to. We stuck it in a microwave oven for a month and it still had charge when we took it out. It is also a finder beacon for someone who cannot shout for help themselves. When it finds a cell it connects to the network and one of the first things it does is to broadcast its gps co-ordinates." He gestures at the red dot on the laptop screen.

"Microwave oven?"

"The oven shields the phone from the cells."

The officer is about to respond when the radio crackles into life.

"Watch control. This is Schalk."

The officer grins. "Schalk is getting bored, he knew that the woman would not come his way, the Waterfall path is difficult enough for someone who is fresh, impossible for a tired woman. He knows she went down river and is now thinking of his bed."

"Watch control? This is urgent. Come in."

"Watch control, what is it Schalk."

The officer starts to reach for his coffee cup grinning at the others in the office, then freezes as Schalk continues.

"I have the woman. She came up the Waterfall path. She was being followed. I am on my way down. Please secure Vergenoeg, Sanie is there alone and I don't know how many people are on this mountain."

I was dreaming that I had been staggering in darkness for a life time but then light beckons to me and I struggle toward it. Slowly things resolve, the light is the sun shining on a brilliantly polished wooden floor only interrupted by a colourful mat. I stared at the floor and the mat for some time before I realised that part of the pattern is a dog's head. Then I realise it is a real dog, big enough to be the one that attacked me on the mountain. Fear floods back and I try to sit up, flight reaction they called it in varsity, but I can't. I am tangled in the blankets, unable to move. I gasp, a harsh grating sound. A hand touches my forehead and instinctively I jerk away.

"Rest child, you are safe." and I find myself looking into a pair of pale blue eyes set in a face that has seen many years of life lived in the sun.

No threat, just concern.

"Where am I?"

"Vergenoeg Farm. A pretty fitting name for the state you were in when Schalk found you."

"Schalk?"

"My husband, who is behaving like a dog with two tails. He will be impossible to live with for months to come." She chuckles indulgently, "But soon I must tell them you are awake. You have a lot of people wanting to talk to you. Especially one called Sam. Can you face an invasion of large, noisy men?"

The door creaks softly open and I look at the face peering in, "Sam?"

He grins like the wild, incorrigible school boy that he is and literally bounds into the room and my fear is banished for the moment at least. Sam seems in awe of me, but not enough to prevent him from grabbing my hand and looking enormously pleased.