3

THIS CHILD'S LIFE

'That is a stupid idea!' my father had said. 'You'll starve to death. Go and get a real job!'

From an early age, I wanted to be a writer. I loved telling stories. It was a skill I had been honing from the moment I could read, a way of escaping into distant, imagined lands. My father always had a deep-seated distrust of stories. He was a man who built workshops, buildings, factories, who raised cattle and laid down new roads, but I had discovered the joy to be found in books when I was very young. It was something I inherited from my mother, whose passion for art found fertile ground in me, and slowly the pleasure of losing myself in the visions of my favourite writers – Rider Haggard, C. S. Forester, Ernest Hemingway and more – had transformed into the dream of one day standing alongside all the great writers

who had turned life's base metal into the gold of thrilling narrative.

Now, those dreams seemed to have come to nothing. In 1962 I was twenty-nine years old and, sitting in the bedroom of the bachelor's mess where I lived, I stared at the twentieth rejection letter I had received for the novel I considered was my masterwork, *The Gods First Make Mad*. As I screwed it in my fist and prepared to tell my agent to stop submitting the novel any more widely, I faced a troubling thought: my father might have been right.

I do not know where the urge to tell stories comes from. All I know is that it was in me from the time I could compose my first sentence. Books comforted me through the dreaded days of boarding school, when I would rather have been anywhere else. When I was twenty-five, I had to take a dead-end job for Her Majesty's Inland Revenue Service in Southern Rhodesia, and writing was my escape. I had moved to Salisbury to work for my father – who, upon retiring as a cattle rancher, had come here to found a new business, manufacturing and selling sheet metal. Business, however, had not been good – and, with Dad unable to keep me, I'd had to move on. I felt like an abject failure. By that point I was divorced, a single dad with two kids, and just about penniless.Working as a tax assessor was soul destroying, and the evenings were long and lonely. The only good aspect was that the job came with an almost unlimited supply of paper, albeit adorned with Her Majesty's crest, along with pens and plenty of spare time.

23

I turned to my first love that had got me through the darkest times in my life: my love for the written word. For a year, I had whiled away the nights, pen in hand, as my first attempt at a novel poured out of me. Characters and events seemed to spring fully-formed into my mind, the imagined world opening in front of me on the page. I had taken solace in my imagination, dispelled my loneliness by spending nights with the characters I created, enjoyed on paper what I couldn't do in real life – the adventuring, the carousing, the fighting. And, by the end of it, I was convinced of my abilities as an author.

As the pile of rejection letters, sent by telegram from London, grew taller in front of me, I began to realise what I had, until now, neglected to see. *The Gods First Make Mad* wasn't the landmark of fiction I thought it would be. It was an atrociously pretentious title for an even worse book. I had made all the mistakes of a first-time novelist, walked blindly into every narrative trap, thought myself more talented than I was – and now it was plain to see. In those pages, I had contrived more characters than in *War and Peace*. By attempting to confront the reality of modern Africa I had gone too far, pontificating on politics, racial tension and women as if I was an expert. Even by the standard of those days, *The Gods First Make Mad* was racist. The book was apologetic for the sins of the white man in Africa, making them all out to be heroes without giving voice to Africa's native inhabitants. The sex in it was coarsely written, the stuff

of a young man's crudely conceived fantasies, and it was cringeworthy to read. My life skills as far as women were concerned consisted of stolen sex on the tennis court, fumbles in the back of a Model T Ford, and one catastrophically failed marriage. My novel had not one redeeming feature, and I had been a fool to send it out.

It was a shock that bruised my confidence. Rejection is a harsh taskmaster and failure was becoming a nagging burden. I recommitted to the daily grind of life as a tax inspector. From now on, my only writing would be the endless reams of assessments I sent out.

And there this story might have ended: just one more man whose dreams had been sacrificed on the altar of real life; the drudgery of rent and bills to pay, of work that dismantles one's being, of ambition cast aside as impossible, unrealistic, no longer worth trying. Perhaps I would have gone on as a tax assessor for the decades to come – because, for a year, I heard nothing from London and London heard nothing from me.

When I was twenty-seven, a telegram arrived from London. It was from my agent, Ursula Winant, asking me where my new novel was. I stared at those words, sitting in the same stark bedroom where my dreams had been shattered. It seemed incredible that Ursula might have expected me to write another novel after my first attempt had been turned down by publishers from all over the world. And yet, here was a telegram encouraging me to try again. I should not give up, Ursula was saying.

I had shown potential and I was – or so she said – at the start of a very long road.

For a while, I tried to put it out of my mind. I remembered my father's words of discouragement: life, he had said, is not to be lived in the pages of a book. But I had a rebellious streak, and maybe it was time to show my father what I was made of. Disappointment can be an incredible spur, if it doesn't kill you. I'd never backed down when faced with a challenge and I wasn't going to start now. My father had encountered numerous knockdowns in his life and he'd risen to fight again another day. Slowly, over the next days and weeks, ideas began to unfold inside me, story and character leading me on.

This time, I knew, had to be different. If this did not work, it would surely be my last attempt; bouncing back from failure is exhilarating and validating, but persisting in doing something for which you are not made is foolish beyond measure. I began to look around me for material, within myself and back in time, searching for the shreds of potential that *The Gods First Make Mad* had shown.

The Gods First Make Mad was not my first work of fiction – and I had already, fleetingly, had a taste of success. I knew, on some rational level, that I was not without talent. Sometime before embarking on that ill-fated novel, I had made my debut with a piece of writing called 'On Flinders' Face'. In those days, there were more magazines which concentrated on publishing new fiction – magazines like the *New Yorker* and *Argosy*, both based in America

– and, beyond all my expectations, *Argosy* had chosen to run one of my earliest attempts at a short story.

Seeing my work in print for the first time was one of the most uplifting experiences of my life. It wasn't published under the name 'Wilbur Smith' – I was convinced that Smith was a common and unromantic name that would scupper my bid before it had even begun. I'd submitted it under the pseudonym 'Steven Lawrence', after my mother's maiden name and because I'd just finished reading T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* for the third time. Acceptance lit me up in ways I could not describe. *Argosy* paid me £70 for the story which was an incredible sum of money at the time, twice my monthly salary, and even more important for someone forced to depend on his parents for hand-outs to get through each month. But what mattered more was the effect it had on my confidence. My story was published alongside S. J. Perelman, Lawrence Durrell and the American science fiction genius Ray Bradbury, and the magazine had featured my hero C. S. Forester, and even printed some of Edgar Rice Burroughs' first instalments of *Tarzan*. *Argosy* also published one of my great literary heroes, Graham Greene.

I was proud of 'On Flinders' Face' in a way I could never be about *The Gods First Make Mad*. What I needed to do was recapture that moment, the joy of a successful creation, the essence that had made 'On Flinders' Face' come alive while *The Gods First Make Mad* had not.

27

'On Flinders' Face' was the tale of a man going mountain-climbing with two friends, one of whom had been cuckolding the other by sleeping with his wife. In the months before writing it, I had myself discovered rock climbing with a group of friends. On the weekends, we would head out into the veld around Salisbury and scale the granite koppies which are so typical of the landscape there. I had had my share of close scrapes on the ranch where I had grown up, but this was a different challenge – and a daunting introduction to a world of terror-infused adrenaline that I had not quite anticipated. The cliff faces of Rhodesia's heartland were sheer and smooth, offering few handholds, even for a seasoned climber, but I had given myself to them with gusto, displaying a confidence to which I had no real claim. Soon, my confidence got the better of me – I reached too far, committed myself too early, and the granite slipped out of my grasp. One petrified instant later, I was plunging downwards, the cliff face rushing into the sky, the whole world a blur of colour and churning air. I fell for what seemed like an age but it could only have been seconds, and suddenly I was swinging helplessly from the end of my rope, several hundred feet above the ground.

As I dangled there, reflecting on how easily lives could end, the plot of 'On Flinders' Face' flowed into my mind. It was a moment of pure inspiration in which story and characters simply materialised in front of my eyes. I knew that, if I survived, I would have to write it down. This was

a story and world that I understood. I was living it, every heartbeat of the moment, after all. I knew about the terror and thrill of rock climbing from personal experience. I knew how the hard granite felt beneath a climber's fingers, how the challenge of pitting yourself against a mountain could come to dominate the mind. And now I had first-hand knowledge of the fear all mountaineers, professional or amateur, will one day come to know: the sensation of freefall, as the mountain betrays you at last.

I was lucky. My good friend Colin Butler was belaying me; a bull of a man, with the strength of ten, he dragged me single-handedly back to the ledge from which I had just slipped. Later that week, once the shakes had worn off, I sat down in the Salisbury office and, ignoring the pressing demands of income tax assessments, began to write the story in longhand, because I couldn't type. A young secretary in the office offered to help and even though I didn't have a cent to pay her, she helped me anyway. Perhaps she could see how desperate I was to capture the moment, to hone my craft.

Now, faced with the idea of beginning a new novel, I sat down with my copy of *Argosy* and stared at 'On Flinders' Face'. There was magic in my hands. There was alchemy. And, suddenly, I realised why. I had been writing about what I knew. I had recreated the sensations of being on that mountainside, translated it to the page, captured the real feelings of that dreadful moment. 'On Flinders' Face' had been true.

I was determined to do the same again. I had my life to draw on. I had vivid memories of my childhood, living half-feral on my father's cattle ranch. I would write about my adventures on that ranch. I would write about the people I had known, the black and the white, about hunting and gold mining and carousing and women. I would write about love and being loved, about hate and being hated. I would leave out all the immature philosophy, radical politics and rebellious posturing that had been the backbone of my past work, and only write about the subjects and people I knew.

At the age of 29 in 1962, I picked up my pen to begin, and an old memory returned. It was a story I had thought of often over many years, one that made me marvel even to this day. It was the memory of the time I had woken in the night and, crawling out of my tent, watched my father shoot three man-eating lions without breaking a sweat.

I looked down. My pen was already moving over the page. *When the Lion Feeds* were the words I had written. I had a title. At last, I was on my way to eternal freedom.

• • •

I was born on 9 January 1933, in what is today Zambia in Central Africa. In those days independence was still thirty-one years away, and Northern Rhodesia, as the country was then known, was a protectorate of the British

Empire. The first air I breathed was the air of the Copperbelt, in a tiny maternity ward in Ndola. Eighteen months later I was fighting for my life, after contracting cerebral malaria. The doctors warned my parents that it might be better if I died. They worried that if I came through, I could be brain damaged. I survived of course, and it probably helped me because I think you have to be slightly crazy to try to earn a living from writing.

My father had been drawn to this remote country as a journeyman metal-sheet worker, having completed his apprenticeship in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and it was here he had made his first fortune. The Kafue River, a tributary of the great Zambezi, had long ago drawn investors to the rich copper deposits along its banks, and for a time a thriving mining industry had existed – but, by the time I was born, the Great Depression had taken its toll, reaching even this remote place in the heart of Africa, and the mines sat stagnant, an underworld museum waiting for a new beginning.

When the mines were closed, most of the workers had been sent back to England with just enough money to give them a chance of finding their feet when the ship made port. My father, however, was not a man to make that bargain, and stayed on in Rhodesia determined to find a way to survive. He was resourceful, he could see opportunities. I was born the son of a hunter and trader, a man who built and sold what he could.

Life was hard and my father used his wits and sometimes

his rifle to provide for his family. He set up a chain of fourteen stores, simple corrugated tin huts perched precariously on the edges of Rhodesia's roads, from which local men in his pay would sell whatever wares he could provide. Mostly, it was day-to-day goods – blankets and tools, animal skins and clothes – but sometimes he would disappear deep into the bush, coming back with buffalo hides and butchered meat to sell. My sister, two years younger than me, and I lived like natives as, little by little, he built his empire. By the time the effects of the Depression began to ebb away, my father had decided he did not want to live his life working for somebody else. There was a visceral thrill in pitting yourself against the world, in relying on nobody but you. It was a lesson I would one day learn for myself, though in a very different sphere to my father.

When the mines were reopened in the late 1930s, my father was contacted by the authorities running the Copperbelt, and asked to repurpose the dilapidated houses so that the miners could return. Sensing the chance to find some stability for his family, he led us back to the mines – but soon he had decided to break free and, in 1938, we finally moved into a ranch of our own.

My father's ranch was 25,000 acres of forest, hills and savannah near the town of Mazabuka, nestled in the banks of the Kafue River, which ran for more than a thousand kilometres, down from the Copperbelt to join the mighty Zambezi. The land had once been a succession of separate

farms, each allotted to returning soldiers after the First World War, but my father had painstakingly bought them all – and now everything I could see, from the miombo woodlands in the north, to the lush grasses of the Kafue flood plain, was ours.

At the age of twenty-eight, in 1961, I stood outside the traditional thatched Rhodesian farmhouse my father had built, a polished red veranda running all the way round its white-washed walls, and watched him approach. I had always thought of my father as the master of all he surveyed, a semi-mythical figure hewn out of the wilderness and bending the world to his own shape. He was not a huge man, but sun-burnished and fair, with forearms grown immense by his years of working with sheet metal and ventilation pipes, and a head that had been bald since his early twenties. His eyes were piercing blue, his nose misaligned from the time it was broken in a boxing match – and, as he veered off to talk to his foreman, I took my chance. This was time for some secret reading.

My father didn't hate books. In a lot of ways, he too was a bookish man – and, late at night, he could often be found under the lantern light of the ranch house, poring through his mechanical books and manuals, absorbing all the factual, technical knowledge he could find. My father did not distrust books; it was *stories* he was highly suspicious of. He was convinced stories could infect a young mind. Stories were flights of fancy, ways of escape, imaginative confections that took you away

from the real world of taming and conquering the wild, laying roads and raising empires out of the dust. To my father, stories represented a distraction from the proper business of life, they were unmanly. He had no love for them and would have preferred it if I had none either.

In my early teens, while back at the ranch for long summer holidays, when I was sure he wasn't looking, I scrambled around the side of the ranch house and crossed the scrub land. There, by a koppie of brown stone – on which sat the vast water tank that fed into the ranch house – I made my way down to the outhouse. Inside lay the long-drop latrine. Once I had made certain the bolt was dropped, I unearthed my secret cache from the hiding place I had burrowed out many months before. Here were the prized possessions of my young life: *Biggles in the Baltic*, *The Black Peril*, *Just William* – and, my current favourite, *King Solomon's Mines*. Certain that I would not be discovered for a while, I settled down in my hiding place to read. I used to spend so long in the outhouse latrine reading books that my father was convinced I had a stomach problem and ordered my mother to force me to swallow copious doses of castor oil. It was a small price to pay.

At other times my father would send me to collect wood for heating and cooking and I'd head off with the tractor and trailer and a gang of workers. Before we set off I'd sneak a book down the front of my shirt. As our men worked up a sweat chopping wood, I'd be perched

on the tractor, reading my book out in the open with this big sun hat on. My father never caught me because I could hear his car coming. And when the car did come tearing down the road spitting dust, I'd leap off the tractor, shove the book back up my shirt and pretend to make myself useful. The men didn't mind; I was too small to wield an axe and they made sure to keep my secret. Sometimes they'd point to their head and make a small circle with their index finger to indicate that I was a smart, brainy chap because I read books, but more likely they thought I was a bit mad.

It was my mother who had introduced me to the magic of the written word. Her love of reading touched me deeply. She was ten years younger than my father, and she had met and fallen in love with him on the Copperbelt, at one of the dances to which the locals from many miles around would descend every month. If my father was my god, my mother was my guardian angel. She shielded me from my father's rage, until it cooled. She ignited my interest in the wonders of nature, trees, plants, species of flower and their exotic classifications. Together they made me who I am. Her name was Elfreda, and she balanced my father in a way that made them perfectly matched. Where my father was headstrong and single-minded, my mother was gentle and artistic. With dark hair and almond eyes, she was English by birth but embraced the wilds of Africa without breaking her stride. When she wasn't sitting at her easel with her watercolours, painting this

dramatic landscape, she was cantering across the veld on horseback, equally at home under the endless African sky as she had ever been in an English city or town.

For as long as I could remember, my mother had led me into the fantastic worlds lying inside the pages of her books. After a long day following my father around the ranch, bedtime would bring adventures of its own. I would curl up in bed and listen to my mother reading from books just like the ones I now had hidden in the long-drop latrine. One room in the ranch house was dominated by her library, with shelves of books lining every wall. I could never understand why this was not an object of awe to my father. There may have been a real life out there offering its own unique experiences, but in my mother's library there were hundreds of other worlds as well, all of them waiting to be explored. The hour before I went to sleep was the greatest pleasure I could remember. As I lay in my bed, letting her words wash over me and staring at the book in her hands, every night I would think, 'She's not making it up! It's all coming from those pages. That book . . .' Those were the first moments I knew books would always play a central part in my life.

As soon as I was able, I started to read books myself, starting with *Biggles* and *Just William*, and no longer was it a pleasure reserved for night times alone. Soon I was lost in the worlds of C. S. Forester, with his exquisite Horatio Hornblower tales of adventure on the high seas, or John Buchan and his thrillers set in the wild places of

the distant north. My mother struck up a friendship with a public librarian in Bulawayo, almost eight hundred miles to the south, and every month a package of new adventures would arrive on the freighter trains that were then spreading across the continent. From that moment onwards I always had a well-thumbed novel in my pocket. I could dive into books where I found gripping tales of death and danger, the heroism and savagery of this continent we called home. I loved the romance of Africa, the mysticism of its lost tribe and the sorceress, She Who Must Be Obeyed. H. Rider Haggard, one of my favourite authors at the time, showed me that Africa was a vast repository of stories – and, better yet, that I was close to those stories. Hidden in the long-drop latrine, I got to thinking that Haggard's hero, Allan Quatermain, was in some way a reflection of my father and his own African adventures. Quatermain was English-born, the same as my father – and, like my father, he too was a professional game hunter and trader. Haggard's love for Africa and its people was so deep he too learned the languages of the natives and supported their affairs. It was from these men that I learned to look at Africa as a continent filled with heroes and heroines, a place of infinite adventure.

I was reading about the jungles of Africa's dark heart, journeying in my imagination with Quatermain, when I heard my father bellowing my name from the back of the ranch. Fumbling to hide the books, I emerged from the outhouse in time to see him descending from the veranda.

He looked at me with the same scrutinising expression I can still remember, even though he has been gone from this world for over thirty years. It was a look that said: *What were you doing in there, boy?* He wanted me to be like him, and in many ways, I was. I just had another facet to my personality, a love for imaginative invention that maybe he thought was some kind of affliction. My father was not an unimaginative man; he simply never had time to indulge in solitary abstract pursuits. There was constant physical work to be done.

'Wood,' my father said, and I nodded. It was time for my chores to begin.

Once, when I was hurling firewood into the tractor's trailer, the book I'd hidden up my shirt bounced out into the dust. As luck would have it my father had joined us to keep an eye on the workmen as they cut down the bush. I hastily rammed the book back up into my shirt and continued as if nothing had happened. I heard the crunch of footsteps as my father came up behind me and put his big hand on my shoulder. I turned around. I don't know if it was the sun glancing off his face, but I'm sure I saw the briefest of winks in his eye. Nothing more was said.

• • •

I was so proud when I held my grandfather's rifle for the first time. My father handed it to me without a word, and of course I knew what it meant to him and to me. I had

marvelled at this rifle on many occasions, known its long and storied history. The old Remington was cared for and in perfect condition, and I ran my fingers along the notches and tried to breathe in the hunts, each one a story in my mind which I loved to hear again and again.

The sportsman's code that my father taught me was an order that brought decency to killing, an unspoken line across which a true hunter never stepped. Hunting, for my father and grandfather, had never been an indiscriminate practice, done for joy. Hunting was a way of life, a skill by which you provided for your people or helped the natural world retain its balance. Those were lessons to which I would stay true throughout my life, but in that moment, I could think of nothing but the legendary rifle in my hands.

The fact that my father had trusted me with this rifle was a privilege and an honour. We did not see my grandfather often, only when we took long journeys south to his home in Natal. He lived alone in a twenty-acre plot outside town, surrounded by the guns, spears and fishing rods of his life, a pack of dogs his only company. If my father was a god to me, then Grandpa Courtney was a god to my father. To me he was Methuselah, an ancient man from a different age. With his dazzling blue eyes and a pair of magnificent moustaches lightened by tobacco juice, he could hit a spittoon at five paces without spilling a drop. He appeared like some vision from the storybooks I loved – and was himself a fountain of stories. I used his

name for the hero of my first novel *When the Lion Feeds* but in truth he inspired both Sean Courtney, and Sean's father, Waite.

I remember the day he told me the story of the sjambok, which is a long, stiff whip originally made of rhinoceros hide. Grandpa Courtney must have been 55 or 60 years old, but to my mind he was ancient, mythological, an icon carved out of stone but still animate. He had been an inspector of roads in what was then Zululand, riding the highways, and then a lieutenant in the Natal Mounted Rifles, one of the finest cavalry units in African history. Our trips to Natal were lit up by tales from him which stunned me; they left me breathless and gave me bad dreams for about a week afterwards.

'My boy, let me tell you the story of the Black Mamba!' he said one day.

'It was after the war,' he began, 'when I came to the Witwatersrand. Those were the days of the gold rush, when there were fortunes to be made . . .' He spat into the spittoon emphatically. 'But the gold fields weren't for me. For ten years, I was a transport rider along the Delagoa Bay route, all the way from the coast to the Witwatersrand goldfields. It would take three months for the wagons to ride that route, ferrying everything from blankets to champagne and dynamite to ore crushers, a 1200-mile round trip. And I'd be riding out ahead of the ox-wagon train, hunting and bartering with the African native tribes as we went . . .'

It was just like *Jock of the Bushveld*, the book by James Percy Fitzpatrick which told the story of an ox-wagon transport rider and his dog in the Transvaal of the 1880s.

'One time, before we set out from Delagoa Bay, I won a dog in a game of poker. It was the biggest, dumbest boarhound you ever saw. Four foot high at the shoulder, a big jowly brute. That dog was the most stupid dog I ever owned in my life. It was totally untrainable . . . I called him Brainless. So Brainless rode the trail with us. Along the way, I tried to train him – but it never did take. All that dog did was hang around the camp, or lope after my horse with this dopey expression on its face. One night, we were camped in the Lowveld; it was dark that night, though the stars were out. I was laid out to sleep in the cot in the back of one of the wagons – but that dog, that dog just kept barking, on and on, keeping us all awake. I groped around beside the cot and I found my sjambok, and I slipped from the wagon, the sjambok in my hand, and strode out of the camp, into the darkness where he was standing. I clobbered that dog until, suddenly, on the fourth or fifth strike, the dog started acting in a different way. It made a new sound, a sound it never made before. I was a bit taken aback. I reached into my pocket, struck one of my matches and held up the light. Right where Brainless the boarhound should have been was a fully grown male lion, its eyes mad with fury, its mane matted with blood. It had eaten my dog! I froze. Because there I was, giving this beast the hiding of

its life with the sjambok . . . I turned and ran back to the cabin, jumped inside, closed the curtains and stood there panting with horror and relief. And then I felt the sjambok twitching in my hand! I lit another match . . . It was no sjambok I was holding. It was a snake. I'd been beating that lion with a Black Mamba!'

It wasn't only the story that thrilled me. It was the way Grandpa Courtney hollered with laughter, his guffaws echoing around the room. Man versus beast; he'd survived this close encounter with death.

The Black Mamba has a reputation for being the most dangerous snake in the world. Its bite is known as the 'kiss of death'. It can exceed two metres in length and it likes to live on the ground, waiting to ambush its prey. When under threat it rears up high with its black mouth open, spreading its neck flap and hissing. It strikes faster than the human eye can see and from long distance, often biting many times very quickly. Its poison is highly toxic and will incapacitate a man in less than twenty minutes with a single bite. Many myths surround the snake, such as its ability to bite its tail and roll down a hill then straighten out like a spear to attack at great speed, or that it can ambush a car by coiling itself around a wheel to spring at the driver when he stops and gets out. It is a killer but I always found in it a sinister beauty with its sleek, slender olive-brown or grey body and gun metal eyes. Despite its cold scaliness, it's not hard to imagine how Grandpa Courtney could have mistaken its long, whippy, dark length for his sjambok.

I'd had my own run-ins with the black mamba. Sometime before Grandpa told me that story, I'd taken to climbing the koppie behind the ranch house to the reservoir that lay on top, a big tank filled with water pumped up from a bore-hole. The water attracted flocks of doves and pigeons every evening, and I used to go up the hill with my pellet gun and bring back some birds for the barbecue. One evening, when I'd reached the water tank, there were no doves or pigeons to be seen at all. The place was deserted. It should have been a warning, but I paid it no mind. Instead, I started walking up to take a closer look in the reservoir – and suddenly, out of the knee-high grass in front of me, appeared this horror: grey-black, glistening in the sunlight, with two beady eyes! It was a Black Mamba, known by the locals as the 'lights-out snake', because if it taps you, your lights go out pretty quickly. It was an enormous snake, as thick as my wrist around the neck, and its head was a whispering menace, its little black tongue slipping in and out. Its eyes mesmerised me, shiny black, as pitch as coal, as hard as death. It rose, and kept on rising until it was at my eye level, and then beyond. The snake was over the top of me, staring down. Slowly, I raised my pellet gun and took aim at its head. As my finger hovered over the trigger a small voice whispered to me: *Don't be a damn fool, Smith. Get the hell out of there!* With meticulous precision, I lowered the gun. I knew better than to run, the Black Mamba is a fast mover, so I took two short steps backwards

and the snake dropped down a couple of inches. I backed off two further steps and the snake bobbed down two more inches. It was following my every move, its eyes on me all the time as if it was trying to hypnotise its victim before striking. By now it was all or nothing, I turned tail and ran down the hill like a terrified gazelle, jumping and kicking my heels, panting and squealing as the air burst out of my lungs with sprinting. By the time I reached home I was a trembling mass of giggles and nervous laughter. I had lost my appetite for barbecued doves and pigeons. That was the last time I ever went hunting at the reservoir.

• • •