

Oudtshoorn – 29 November 1926

ALBERT VAN YSSEN was a man of few words and many profound thoughts, a man washed in carbolic soap, a scholar and a stamp collector no less; tall and dignified. He in his tailor-made brown pin stripe suit and his dutiful wife dressed in her summer floral Crêpe de Chine frock waited in the shade of their veranda for Mr Fourie, the taxi driver to arrive. The toecaps of his shoes shone. He had polished them himself. His South African College old-boys tie smelled of mothballs and his shirt of lye and sunlight and ironing. Their suitcase, the hatbox and the wicker picnic basket stood next to them. He glanced at his watch. It was three fifteen in the afternoon. He proudly observed his wife. She smiled affectionately at him. They were on their way to Cape Town, to the graduation ceremony at the University of Cape Town, to witness the culmination of their son's academic career. The occasion would reward van Yssen for all the material sacrifices he had made. He sighed with satisfaction for he was to see his son Douglas receive his Masters Degree in History, *Cum Laude*.

He patted the large, intricately fashioned front door key in his pocket to reassure himself that he had locked the door, and remembered that he had not forgotten to turn off the main switch. He turned and tried the brass front door knob to make sure that the door was locked.

Fourie arrived early, as van Yssen always expected of him. He stopped opposite the gate in the picket fence. The scent of the pittosporum hedge was heavy.

Summer had become resident in the town of Oudtshoorn early in October. From the way it spread its haze in the early mornings and reduced the clear pastel colours of the sky and the dusty olive greens of the landscape to paler shades, it promised to be a relentless one.

At the station a porter transferred the luggage onto his barrow. Van Yssen paid Fourie, made sure that he knew when to fetch them from the station and said goodbye. While the porter stood discreetly behind them the van Yssens waited for the train to arrive.

Towards the east, where there had been only shimmering railway tracks trembling in the heat, a large black charging steam locomotive suddenly presented itself and immediately began to slow down.

The conductor stepped running from the moving train, his blue serge uniform worn shiny, his cap pushed back to reveal a tender white sweating forehead, to be confronted by van Yssen. "I am Mr van Yssen. My wife and I are on our way to Cape Town. I reserved a coupé by mail through Port Elizabeth...."

The conductor knew the type. He had already taken his passenger list

from his inside pocket. He sighed, "Yes, Mr van Yssen, it is carriage 11094, compartment D. I wish you a pleasant journey." And with that he fled into the cafeteria, went around the back of the sweet counter past glass jars with angled throats filled with brightly coloured sweets, and dashed into the stationmaster's office.

Outside the heat was stifling. Water was let into the locomotives. A second locomotive had been coupled because of the mountain that lay ahead. Pepper trees stirred in the tepid movements of afternoon air. A heavily perspiring chef and his assistant, in grey check trousers, white tunics and chefs' hats, drooped their flaccid tattooed arms from the galley windows. Van Yssen led the way followed by his wife and the porter. The chef lifted his fat parboiled nicotine stained fingers, sucked on his cigarette, and turned to his assistant, "Funny old cunt to be dressed like that, and to keep his jacket and his waistcoat on, on a day like this."

Van Yssen courteously assisted his wife onto the train, and led the way to their compartment. He lifted the window off its catch and lowered it so that the porter could hand him the luggage. There was soot on the seat. Van Yssen found a two-shilling piece; a half-crown would have been too much. He pressed it into the porter's hand. The porter nodded without a word or a change in expression, turned his servile shoulders, and with a resigned stoop, pushed his barrow back through the heat towards the station entrance on the heels of his bad feet, wishing for the day to end.

Van Yssen put their suitcase under the seat. The hatbox went onto the rack above the upper bunk, to be out of harm's way. The picnic basket was consigned to the floor under the hand basin, next to the heater. He had planned what he would do the night before. He sighed heavily and smiled contentedly at his wife. Another job well done. He took a large handkerchief from his trouser pocket, unfolded it and dusted the soot from the seat. They sat down, he on the outside next to the window, she next to him. He gently took her hand and held it in his large dry warm padded palm. The sound of Pinkerton's concerned baritone escaped from His Master's Voice and rose in his head, and a wave of emotion and excitement expanded in him.

The conductor blew his rugby referee's whistle and the ice cream vendor moved away from the train disappointed. Holding on to a chromium-plated grab rail, the conductor leant from the steps of the guard's van with a frayed green flag in his free hand. The locomotive hooted and let out an enormous hiss of steam as the machine, in the Image of James Watt, exhaled to fill the clearing space of the locomotive's reciprocating cylinders with steam, first the one, and then the other, to drive the pistons out towards the wheels. Van Yssen's exhilaration cleared his mind, and he intoned to himself, as if in prayer, the words from his literature on steam locomotives, "The whole work done in the revolution, namely the integral force acting on the piston and the distance

through which it moves, is represented by the enclosed area of the indicator diagram, a b c d" Only his lips moved. He should have been an engineer not a land surveyor. The coaches shuddered and squealed at their couplings as the locomotion stretched the train. The platform and the station building began to move. The people on the platform pivoted towards the moving train as it gathered speed. Where the railway line crossed George Road, the warning bell began to clang. Cars and animal-drawn carts stopped. An obstinate donkey was hard to control. The locomotive moved across the road, its wheels screeching as the rails curved southwards towards the red steel bridge that spanned the Olifants River.

Air began to move through the compartment as the train gathered more speed. Abruptly the metallic clatter of the wheels on the tracks became hollow while the machine was suspended high over the dry riverbed by the red steel bridge. There would be many more bridges on the way to Cape Town. On they went, through the cuttings hewed out of cochineal-coloured hills, past lucerne fields, ever upwards towards the Outeniqua Mountains.

With some satisfaction van Yssen reminded himself how much he loved trains and railways. He looked out of the window as the train rounded a bend, exuberant at the sight of the two Seven Class Garrett locomotives: in railwayman's parlance the train was double-headed. Each locomotive had a tender at the back and a tank in front. What pleasure that two such magnificent pieces of engineering would take care of the great mountain that lay ahead.

"It is nice to be on our way. You must be happy, my dear," Mrs van Yssen observed. "The locomotives looked so clean, where have they come from?"

"They would have been inspanned at Klipplaat, and will be changed at Voorbaai. The NCCR only operates between Mossel Bay and Worcester. They use the K Class Garretts from Mossel Bay." She was proud that he knew so much.

The dining car and the staff car had also been joined onto the train at Klipplaat. The staff car, a second-class coach, accommodated the catering staff as well as the conductor, and as many bags of coal as possible for the stoves in the galley of the dining car.

The conductor's master key rattled in the recessed metal handle of the sliding door. "Tickets please!"

The train moved rhythmically, in one piece; a great centipede. The steward arrived. The van Yssens ordered tea. Life was good. Van Yssen would have to find the bedding attendant before the tea arrived. "I should go and find the bedding attendant." His wife knew he would not rest until he had found the attendant.

When van Yssen returned the steward was lowering the hinged wooden table with his one hand while balancing the tray with their tea in his other hand. Mrs van Yssen sat timidly sideways, away from the possibility of a falling tray, with her stockinged legs pressed against the green leather upholstery to make room.

Mrs van Yssen poured tea from a well-worn silver-plated teapot into railway cups decorated with golden emblems of springbok heads. As the train

moved further up the Outeniqua Mountains the landscape changed: the aridness of the Little Karroo gave way to temperate air. The breathless heavy heaving puffing sounds of the steam locomotives were amplified in the cuttings. The train moved cautiously along ledges above the precipitous slopes of the railway pass, through tunnels filled with smoke until it emerged at last high above the coastal plain, an endless vista of green velvet rolling hills, lush with indigenous vegetation. Monkey ropes and creepers draped from tall yellowwood trees.

From the upper reaches of the mountain the coastal light was softer. The air was cooler. The regularly recurring alternating sounds of the wheels clattering across the joints of the railway line were subdued and more rhythmic as the couplings between the coaches relaxed and the train descended towards the sea.

In the late afternoon the sweating humid station at George gave back all the heat and filth it had absorbed during the day. Groups of desultory coloured people sat like withered veld flowers, with dejected and forlorn faces, on their luggage of cardboard boxes held together with string, against the ochre-yellow distempered walls of the public toilets for non-whites.

A youth with a drawn face of pasty complexion studded with ripe pimples, a white shirt and a black bowtie and hair shorn quite short, walked up and down next to the train with a shabby wooden tray protruding horizontally from his waist and held around his thin straining neck by a wide stained leather strap. Displayed on the tray was a variety of brightly coloured sweets, combs, pink and blue hair clips, a cheap pipe and some packets of cigarettes in tens, twenties and fifties - Cavalla, CTC, Springbok, and matches.

The conductor's whistle blew. He signalled with his green flag to the driver who rested with his forearms on the railing of the cab, his black cap awry, sweating through his black shirt and braces. An energetic thick column of dark grey smoke gushed from the locomotive. The whistle blew a witty, cheeky tune. The driver winked at the two plump girls who had come to meet him and the stoker. They would give them something to remember when they got back later that evening from Mossel Bay. The ugly one in the floral dress realised what the driver's expression was saying and could feel her heart beating in more than one place.

With the light already fading, the journey to Mossel Bay began. From there they would travel westward into the night. The train gathered speed. The steward fetched the tea tray. It was attractive countryside, pity it was such a poor farming area, van Yssen reflected. The *suurveld*. The train slowed down and hooted when it passed the small station of Schimmelkranz. Three small children waved from next to the track, the eldest was barely twelve and held her baby sister on a cocked hip. Red and blue and yellow and white washing stirred on a line next to the stationmaster's house. On towards Great Brak River,

parallel to the coastline, on a perfect, windless evening, the foaming milky surface of the sea made pink by the reflection of an orange firmament of cloud and the setting sun. Looking towards the setting sun, van Yssen observed the vast mists, released and set free from the sea, that swept ponderously over the land and up into the mountains. He could smell the organic elements of the ocean. His nose cleared. He turned to his wife. She had been looking intently at him. They looked into one another's eyes. There was no sound and no movement. She drew herself up against him. She put her left hand in under the flap of his jacket and into his warm trouser pocket, onto the intimacy of his athletic thigh and rested her head against his shoulder. And so they sat for a while.

While van Yssen mused and was lost in contemplation of the journey, and of Douglas' graduation, his wife's thoughts were assailed by the suggestions of the French Woman when she heard of their journey to Cape Town. She looked at the magnificent spectacle of the sea below them. "It is like an endless universe, like a great ocean, ever changing in its colours and its moods," Madame Jacquard had said.

Her first encounter with Madame Jacquard happened earlier in the year, in the late summer, in Church Street, opposite the sandstone Standard Bank on the shaded pavement under the veranda of Prince Vintcent Department Store. Mrs van Yssen had done her morning shopping. The French woman was ahead of her, walking in the same direction as she, her athletic legs and sturdy buttocks, emancipated from the constraints of a corset, moved in a loose kind of way. She carried a wickerwork basket containing a brown paper packet. Mrs van Yssen's instinct was to keep her distance. Since her inexplicable arrival in Oudtshoorn the year before, the French woman had been the subject of endless gossip. Mrs van Yssen had often encountered her, almost always on the same street corner, irrespective of the time of day, or the reason for going into town, as though they were destined to meet. She had seen the woman examining gloves in Bon Marche in her eccentric way. She was loud to a point of vulgarity, wore brightly coloured loose floral dresses, and invariably tied a silk scarf around her head. As she held up the gloves in the light coming through the shop window to see them better, she inhaled smoke from a thick cigarette with studious intensity and exhaled the smoke carelessly through her darkened nostrils. She saw her at the greengrocer as she disdainfully handled the cheese or the cuts of meat in the butcher shop. Better to keep even a greater distance. Mrs van Yssen took smaller steps and turned to look at the wares displayed in the shop window. She lent forward to open her umbrella before she left the shelter of the shop's veranda. When she looked up to resume her journey home, the French woman had turned and was approaching her. "I have the feeling that you are avoiding me." Mrs van Yssen was stunned. "I, I, I do not even know you," she stuttered and felt dizzy.

"The simple reason why you avoid me is because we are different. Or

perhaps you just think I am different. Maybe we are more alike than you think. Come let us walk together, since we live in the same street, after all we are both going home. My name is Madame Jacquard. I know what your name is."

Mrs van Yssen was trapped. She felt the eyes of each critical inhabitant of Oudtshoorn. She had to flee from her heart's fluttering palpitations. She should not have had so much coffee that morning. She was so self-conscious that she could not feel her limbs. She trembled. "I still have to go to the bank."

"Then I shall come with you, and have a look at all those funny little men in there."

"Or perhaps we should rather go home."

"You are embarrassed by me, yes? I know that I am eccentric. Come let us go home then. Not all French persons are Catholic, you know."

They set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the suspension bridge. Although it was late summer the sun was still fierce. Mrs van Yssen resigned herself to her fate. The French Woman strode with self-assurance, her legs apart, her feet turned out like those of a ballet dancer. "You see, you are my first friend in all the time that I have been here. I have seen you in your garden. I have seen your son. It is a blessing to have a child. I had a child. You are the first friend I have in this place, but it is not all bad. My deprivation has inspired my work. It has made me more aware of what goes on inside my head, and for that matter, what happens in my heart. I did not know that there was so much inside me. It is like an endless universe, like a great ocean, ever changing in its colours and its moods, like a great canvas. I think you are a good person. You must come and have some tea with me tomorrow morning, we have much to talk about I am sure. I will expect you at exactly ten thirty tomorrow. You know where my house is."

"I thank you for your kind invitation."

Madame Jacquard had cast a spell over Mrs van Yssen.

Madame Jacquard's garden was overgrown, and neglected, perhaps Bohemian, Mrs van Yssen thought. She was nervous and relieved that her husband was away doing work in the Swellendam district. The house was set back from the road. The prospect that the French Woman could have forgotten about their arrangement, and gone out, brought a moment's hope of relief. Before Mrs van Yssen could knock, the door opened. Madame Jacquard stood at the entrance, holding out her arms, dressed in an artist's smock. "I am so utterly delighted that you have come. I have already made tea, and prepared some pastries for the two of us to have. We will take our tea in my studio."

The studio faced north to let in as much light as possible. It had two large sash windows. Mrs van Yssen had never been in an artist's studio before. There was an untidy red couch with a bright yellow throw over it, two easy chairs with a small round table between them upon which a teapot and cups had been arranged. A strong odour of oil paints and turpentine. Three easels stood together at odd angles like bored people at an exhibition. Several paintings

were in various stages of completion – landscapes and still lifes, in bright striking colours. There were paintings on the floor resting against the walls of the studio. Mrs van Yssen looked around, stooping earnestly: she wanted to appear interested, but was too unsure of herself in the unfamiliar circumstances to make any comment.

"We will first have tea, and then I shall show you some of my work. Please do not be afraid of me. I am so glad that you have decided to come. Do please sit down." The two women drank their tea in silence. Each wanted to examine the other, and they took turns to do so. While Mrs van Yssen looked about the French Woman observed her, and while the French woman poured more tea Mrs van Yssen took her turn.

"You must have something to eat," Madame Jacquard said as she handed Mrs van Yssen a hand-painted plate with pastries. "I had to make them myself. You cannot purchase them in this town. It is a pity."

"How did you come to be here in Oudtshoorn?" Mrs van Yssen blurted out in an uncharacteristically tactless way.

"You have asked much sooner than the other people, which is good because you will then know the truth much sooner. If you mean this particular town, the answer is because I once had an ostrich feather boa. I wanted to see where the feathers came from. Do I have a husband? The answer is in the affirmative. Where is he? The answer is, you will never guess. He is in what we call the *Regiments Etrangers*, what you popularly refer to as the Foreign Legion. Yes – you may think I say it because it sounds romantic – it is perfectly true. He is out there," she made a sweeping gesture with an open palm and wide fingers, "somewhere, North Africa, Indochina, somewhere in one of the colonies. It was not of his or my choice that he is there. Perhaps I will tell you the full reason one day. For the same reason that he is there it was better for me not to stay in France, and as I said, I had an ostrich feather boa once. *Voilà*. Such is life. One day when he has served his term of duty, and becomes free again, we shall reunite."

"I myself have tried some watercolours, in a very modest way."

"Oh that is wonderful to hear, it is a very difficult medium indeed. You have to grasp the mood and the composition of the subject quickly and then reproduce it almost instantly. You have to be very quick. It looks so simple but it is not. You cannot hide your mistakes. It is like playing one of Mozart's early piano sonatas. Every hesitation, every tiniest mistake can be heard because the music is so pure in its simplicity. Perhaps you will show me what you have done?"

"I would be much too embarrassed, I am sure you are very accomplished."

"How did you come to be in Oudtshoorn?"

"My husband is a land surveyor. There was a great deal of work in the district."

"Your son? What does he do?"

"He is at the university, in Cape Town."

"Is he a teacher there? He looks so handsome."

"No, no, he is still a student."

"What does he study?"

"History."

"How charming, or should I say interesting. And what will he do when he is finished there?"

"He is going to teach at the Boys High School."

"Here, at this school here? When?"

"Yes, next year, we are so pleased that he will be at home again, after five years."

"He should live on his own by now. Does he have any attachment, a girl?"

"He has a friend, she is charming. He has several friends. What are you busy painting?"

"Most recently I have been working alternatively on a landscape and a still life; come let me show you." Madame Jacquard's hands and fingernails, stained with paint, turned an easel towards Mrs van Yssen – a scene of the lucerne fields that bordered the river, some houses with bright red roofs in the distance, a dusty gravel road, two dark green cypress trees like sentinels, and an anaemic sky drained of colour by the heat of the day. She moved the other easel around to face them. A blue glazed earthenware bowl containing ripe pomegranates stood on a piece of multicoloured printed cloth on a table near the window.

"So much colour! It is quite exciting."

"Those of us who were students of art in Europe in my time could not help but be influenced by the new movements, especially Impressionism, and Expressionism. More recently there have been the Fauves. If you like colour, you should see their colour. I am sure you have heard of them?"

"No, I am afraid not."

"When their work was first shown as part of a big exhibition in Paris, about twenty years ago, at the Grand Palais, the public was shocked. One woman critic even resorted to quoting Ruskin, and said, 'A pot of paint has been thrown over the public's head.' Why she bothered with poor old Ruskin one does not know; he was like a cross between a snarling dog and Don Quixote. The public was outraged at the work. But so it is with public opinion. The masses never understand a new language, especially when it is the language of the artist. And yet their work is accepted now. Oh! I hope I am not offending you with my ideas, they can be a bit avant-garde at times."

"No, not at all. How are the Impressionists different from the Expressionists?"

"It can be a very huge subject, and there can be many opinions about the subject. Expressionism comes from fantasy. We all have our fantasies, so we can understand where it comes from. Unfortunately it has a dark side – a contribution by the philosophers, miserable people like Nietzsche. As much as

a fantasy can employ the imagination to distort things, the paintings of the Expressionists often contain distortions or exaggerations that are meant to demonstrate the artist's inner reaction to the reality around him. They have special ideas about colour. To them colour is more than colour, it has symbolic meaning. Remember what Goethe had to say about the meaning of colour? Now the Impressionists are very different. By the way, it was a painting by Monet that he called *Impression: Soleil Levant*, meaning Impression: Sunrise that started the use of the word. The people who were exhibiting with him at that time, as a result, became known as Impressionists. They painted outside, in nature, instead of in studios, but most important of all, it was how they began to understand the way in which light and colour worked, how even shadows are coloured, how nature revealed and presented itself to our perceptions, that was important. Their approach is very different from the academic tradition that went before. Their colours are gentle; light is broken up into its parts and assembled again in the form of tiny bits of paint on the canvas. There are things that I like in both movements, and as I said, I like the Fauves, but I especially like the Impressionists because they make no social comment. Their work is easy to like. There is no turbulence, or perhaps I should say disturbance, inside them. Your visit has inspired me so that I talk too much."

"What was Van Gogh?"

"I must compliment you on a very clever question. Perhaps you know more than you give yourself credit. Some say Expressionist, some say Post Impressionist. One wonders what he himself would have said. I think he just painted because he could not help himself."

Mrs van Yssen had crossed over into another world. She had dreamt of Europe; she had romanticised her Huguenot origins. Now here in her own street was a creature so different, so exotic, so intellectual, and at the same time so sensual and feminine, and accomplished, that she became intoxicated. "I must get going," she said.

"We must not try to resist what is planned for us," Madame Jacquard said.

Mrs van Yssen's departure was arrested for a moment by a feeling of discomfort. "I would like to visit you again. I have enjoyed meeting you, perhaps more than I am able to express now. Thank you very much for the tea, and the lovely pastries."

"If it is easier to come when your husband is away, I understand, or if you would like to say that I am giving you painting, or French, lessons."

Mrs van Yssen smiled demurely, and began the walk back to her house. She was uncomfortable: there had been too much intimacy.

"You are far away, what are you thinking about?" van Yssen asked.

"Ag, about all sorts of things."

When van Yssen went off on his next country visit three weeks later, Mrs van Yssen decided to pick a small bunch of white roses for the French woman.

She had not seen or heard of her since her first visit. It was ten in the morning and yet the house seemed asleep. There was no reply when she knocked. Perhaps she had knocked too gently. She would not knock a second time. She was being rescued from her indiscretion. It was fate that Madame Jacquard was out. As she turned to leave, the door opened. Madame Jacquard was in her dressing gown, she held a small handkerchief over her mouth, her eyes were red as though she had been crying, her cheeks were flushed, her greasy hair straggled over her head and her shoulders; where the silk scarf usually was, grey was visible. A string necklace of garlic cloves hung limp around her neck. "I have been very ill. First I thought it was just a summer cold then I realised it was the *grippe*. I have lost much weight. I could not even cook properly."

"I am so sorry to hear that you have not been well. I shall go home immediately and prepare some soup for you. As soon as it is ready I shall bring it to you. I picked these for you this morning." She pushed the bunch of roses towards Madame Jacquard who tried to smell them.

"That would be so kind of you. I cannot smell a thing, and I lose my breath so easily. It is quite strange. I must go and lie down again now, I feel a bit light-headed."

"Can I make you some tea before I go?"

"Yes but do not come too near me. You will get sick yourself."

The kitchen was in disarray. There was no clean crockery. Mrs van Yssen had to wash a cup and clean the teapot. An open tin of condensed milk stood on the window sill.

"Here is your tea," Mrs van Yssen said as she entered Madame Jacquard's bedroom. The air in the room was stale: odours of illness, urine, perfume, old food, rancid body, herbal infusions and the bed in which the woman had sweated. "I think we should open the window just a little. There is no bread. I shall bring some when I return. We must get your strength back. I will do some shopping for you. Betta can come and clean up. We cannot leave you here like this. I should have realised that something was wrong."

Madame Jacquard raised herself on her elbow, "Could I have a little more of the preserved milk, please? Thank you for your concern. I would like to protest and say that I can help myself, but this time I cannot refuse help. Thank you very much. I feel better, not so alone. A few nights ago I was delirious. I thought I was going to die. I saw my child."

Nursing Madame Jacquard back to health created a bond between the two women. When they had tea in the studio one sunny warm morning, Madame Jacquard had tears in her eyes. "I owe you a great debt," she said looking at Mrs van Yssen.

"I have told my husband about you. He would like to meet you. He has very high principles and a deep sense of right and wrong. My son says that he is like one of the old Roman jurists. He will not allow public opinion to sway him."

"Sometimes one's principles can be too rigid and lead to one's destruction, but I know what you mean."

"Why do you say that?"

"My husband is like that. But, we will not talk about that now. I would like to meet your husband. It will be nice to have a man in my house. I think you should come and have dinner with me one evening. I will make you real French food."

"I am looking forward to our meal tonight in the dining-car," van Yssen said and startled his wife.

"Strange that you should mention that now, I was just thinking about that first meal we had with Guillemette."

"What an experience that was," he reflected.

Madame Jacquard invited the van Yssens to dinner one evening in July. They walked the short distance to her house, white vapours swirled ahead of them as they exhaled. The distant Swartberg Mountains were covered in snow. The clear night sky was filled with stars. The Milky Way was so dense that it looked like a girdle of cloud. She had made a coal fire and laid the table for three. The crisp cold of the night was on their faces.

"Let me take your coats," she said. "It is good to have your company. Tonight I would like to show you my cooking. It was not easy to get all the things, the ingredients that I wanted, but I have tried. But first we must have a little bit of wine while we sit in front of the fire; it is very nice, I get it from the merchant in Cape Town; they bring it from Bordeaux. Everything is prepared so we can be comfortable.

Van Yssen sipped reluctantly at his wine. "I do not drink very much."

"It is not how much you drink, but rather how you drink. You must get your tongue around the wine. Caress it with your mouth, smell it with your nose right inside the glass. Look for its mystery and you will find more and more flavours, like solving a mystery. The wine is alive: as the evening goes on it will change its personality, like us it will become different. Come along Anneke, you must also try some. The wine is meant to clear the mouth and the palate between mouthfuls of food, so that the same food becomes a lot of new experiences. I believe that we should make the effort to develop our senses as much as we can; otherwise we go through life half asleep.

"First we are going to have soup: good traditional onion soup. The weather is perfect for nice hot soup. I hope you will enjoy it."

Madame Jacquard disappeared into the kitchen and returned with three soup plates on a tray. Van Yssen stared at the floating island in the middle of his plate. He hesitated, his spoon was poised.

"It must of course have cheese in it. I would have preferred to use my favourite, Fourme D'Ambert, it is so special, but I cannot obtain it here. I was able to get some Roquefort. It is a good substitute. Soup is one of the most favourite foods in France. In the past we even used to have soup for

breakfast – my father often had soup for breakfast with some bread and wine and cheese."

A stew of meat and vegetables followed. Van Yssen was incredulous. "Without offending my good wife, I have never tasted anything like this, the variety of flavours. What magic have you performed?"

"You flatter me, but then, a French woman will always enjoy that! I am glad you have asked, because gastronomy should really be like a dialogue. We should discuss what we eat; we should describe what we experience. To me food must have excitement, how would you say, sensuality, and it must be made to give the guests their pleasure. It must contain surprises, like the theatre.

"I have used beef, some fresh vegetables – not easy to get in the winter – and if you look closely, I have put in some smoked sausages, a few cloves, and just a tiny bit of fresh garlic and red wine. I brought some garlic with me from France, and I have grown it here. It is the purple kind. I am able to make sure that the strength is just right."

"How do you do that?" Mrs van Yssen asked.

"My father showed me how. He was such a clever man. It depends on where you grow it and when. The season must be right. My father used to compare meals to the opera. He liked very much to cook."

"I would like to learn to cook some French food," Mrs van Yssen said with girlish enthusiasm.

"Then I will send to France for a copy of Escoffier's book as a gift for you, and teach you how to use it."

Madame Jacquard made to put some more coal onto the fire. Van Yssen intervened and did it for her. "You are so chivalrous, thank you, Albert." The wine and the food had created an atmosphere of conviviality. The new pieces of coal caught alight. The fire played on the walls of the room. Madame Jacquard and her two guests sat replete, and stared into the fire. Van Yssen said afterwards that he felt as though he was in some other country. When Mrs van Yssen went to thank Madame Jacquard the following week and told her how complimentary van Yssen had been and that he had said it was like being away in another land, Madame Jacquard replied, "When next you go away, you must make love properly to your husband. You must awaken the beast, the *fauve*, in him."

The van Yssens were woken from their reverie in front of the fire by Madame Jacquard's announcement, "And now for my *piece de resistance*!"

"Surely, we cannot eat any more," Mrs van Yssen sighed, with a hand on her stomach and her head apologetically to one side.

"The meal would not be complete without my *crème brûlée*, my burnt cream. When I want to indulge myself I make one for myself. I even brought my own vanilla pods from home. They provide a more subtle taste than the essence. I have made each one of us a small one. It is so much more intimate."

Mrs van Yssen was pleased. Albert had a sweet tooth. The more the French woman impressed him the easier it would be for their relationship to flourish. She was pleased that she had discovered the French woman.

"She is an interesting person," van Yssen said on the way home while they walked arm in arm, close together, wrapped in their woollen coats, "And much more respectable than I had initially thought; quite worldly though, I would say, quite unusual."

Mrs van Yssen began to visit Madame Jacquard regularly.

One morning in the spring when the fruit trees filled the back garden with scented white and pink blossoms, the two women sat outside, having tea. Madame Jacquard looked up from under her large white straw hat, a red and green silk scarf tied around the bowl, "The coming of the summer months has aroused the trees. Are they not beautiful? They have so much love. Smell their thick perfume. They are so innocent, so unlike us. Our guilt steals away our innocence. We are so guilty about the most innocent things that we are prevented from living life fully."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, consider physical love. It should be the most beautiful, natural thing in the world. It is how we make other people; how we make our own wonderful precious children, and yet the act of making love is considered an act of sin. Children are born in sin. How ridiculous! The trees and their blossoms do not think of that."

"Yes it is strange. But it depends on how we were brought up. My mother never explained anything to me. I was married when I was barely more than eighteen, and I had Douglas a year later. I am not sure how I managed that. It frightened me, but at least my husband is a gentle man. I am so clumsy. Even now we do not undress in front of each other. The only naked man I have seen is Douglas, as a boy."

Madame Jacquard sat back in her chair so that she could have a better look at Mrs van Yssen. "Oh my dear, how terrible, what a waste. But perhaps you are fortunate after all."

"How can I be?"

"You have a sense of transgression, and so does your husband."

Mrs van Yssen looked puzzled, "A sense of transgression?"

"The reason why you do not undress in front of one another is because you have a sense of transgression. When you consider your physical relationship with your husband, you perceive there to be certain barriers, barriers that you should not, or may not, cross. To do so would be wrong: a transgression. It is like the forbidden fruit. You may not pick it. You may not eat it. What is important to know is that it is not really forbidden, otherwise it would not have been created. We have in our own minds created the forbidden territory. It does not exist in an absolute sense. It is not part of a fundamental order of things; it belongs to the relative world. Now if you could bring yourself to go beyond what you regard as forbidden, the act of transgression would become an adventure in itself, and when you get to the other side of the barrier you will experience excitement and freedom of an entirely new dimension."

Mrs van Yssen sat silently.

"I know that what I am suggesting, it is not an easy thing to do. You must wait patiently for the right opportunity. The best time is when you go on holiday by yourselves. Or perhaps, when you go on your journey to Cape Town to see Douglas graduate. When you go to Cape Town it is to witness the climax of his studies. You will have to take the initiative, Albert won't. He fears passion because he thinks that he will lose it forever if he releases it. He does not understand that the more passion he releases the more it will grow. You must show yourself to him in the daylight. Let him see what he has touched but never seen. To men visual experiences are very strong, very important. Your courage must not fail you. Wear no underwear under your skirt."

Mrs van Yssen trembled. She blushed. "I do not know whether I will be able to do what I think you are suggesting."

"Oh you must, you must. Otherwise you would be committing a sin, and I would not have fulfilled my duty towards you. You must, otherwise it would be for me like having a great inspiration to paint my greatest work ever and to say to myself I do not know whether I will be able to, and then to do nothing; and what a sad tragic waste that would be."

Mrs van Yssen looked at her husband, his head turned, looking out of the window. The large ears with hair in them, the creases of his tanned neck from days in the sun, the straight nose, the intelligent blue eyes. He had become magnified by her emotions. She felt sorry for him. He toiled assiduously to sublimate his desire only to be defeated when his desire conquered his restraint and she surrendered to him dutifully and without movement and let him kiss her in the climax of his passion with a slack dry open mouth. Guillemette was right: if she did not seize the moment their relationship would remain fallow.

With one hand she turned his head towards her and kissed him on his temple. "It is good that we can be alone together. I want to be very close to you, Albert, closer than ever before."

He stammered, "How do you mean? Aren't we sitting right next to one another?"

"In a different way. Please don't think badly of me, I want to touch you and I want you to touch me. I want to kiss you now." His heart thumped. Blood surged into his head. She took her hand out of his pocket and wrapped both her arms tightly around his right arm. She let go of his arm, and pulled the skirt of her dress and petticoat up above her hips. In the soft rose coloured evening light he saw her suspenders and her smooth white thighs above her stockings. For a moment he was confused because he had expected to see her pants. Instead he saw what he had never seen before. He kissed her. Her face was flushed. He could feel himself caught in his pubic hairs leaking inside his loose underwear. He was nearly out of control.

A master key rattled in the unlocked door. His throat was dry. "No, wait, one moment I shall open it now," he squeaked. But it was too late. Even as Mrs

van Yssen frantically rearranged her dress, the door slid open to reveal the steward who had come to take the dinner bookings. He got a sly look and winked at van Yssen, "I shall return later." He shut the door with a grin. "Well, well, well, what will the chef say when I tell him the old boy was trying to fuck the old lady!"

Van Yssen looked at his wife whose eyes filled with tears. Their first moment of real intimacy had been destroyed. She took his head in her hands and pulled it towards her face and kissed his eyes. He felt her tears on his forehead. She released herself from him, and sat down. He sat down next to her. She held his hand and in a girlish way leant her head against the rough cloth of his shoulder pad.

The train started to slow down to enter Great Brak River Station. The steward's key rattled in the door. "Come inside," called van Yssen.

"I have come to take your order for dinner, sir." He still wore his grin.

"We have decided to have dinner in the dining-saloon."

Mrs van Yssen looked at her husband. There was still all the food in the picnic basket. The steward left.

"I shall go and make the booking," van Yssen said, and left the compartment.

When the door shut behind him, Anneke van Yssen pushed her head back against the green leather of her seat. She shut her eyes, and let all her limbs loosen with satisfaction. She drew in her breath, full of sea air, and sighed with such power that her nostrils tingled. When the train was stationary in Great Brak River Station, van Yssen made his way past passengers in the corridor, past open compartment doors and other people's ways of travelling.

There was frantic activity in the galley of the dining-car. The overweight chef strode back and forth in the confined space, giving instructions to his staff. His sweating face had been made grey-white pastry by years in the steamy cauldron. Stubble grew like poisoned fungus. He was puffed up from tasting food and never ate a meal. He had a headache and was in a terrible mood because the chief steward had criticised him, and on top of that he had badly burnt the inside of his thumb with his cigarette when he fell asleep during his afternoon rest.

Van Yssen made a booking for two. Dinner would be at eight. They would be at Voorbaai then. It was a short haul to Mossel Bay. Van Yssen and his wife sat close together. Charles Nel had lent him a small blue-grey paperback volume entitled *The Battle of the Somme – Second Phase* by John Buchan, complete "With Official Illustrations and Maps." The word "Somme" was printed in large orange letters. The price: one shilling. Stamped on the cover were the words 'With the compliments of the Over-Seas Club, London W.C.' He wondered whether the old militarist had had an ulterior motive. In the back of the book was a foldout map. He briefly examined the map, and folded it again. Together

they looked at the illustrations – photographs of battle scenes. The first showed a dark silhouetted, melancholy head of a horse peering from the left, an army truck and a horse and cart on a shiny muddy road against the setting sun under a cold threatening European sky. The caption read, ‘Evening behind the line.’ Other captions: ‘A heavy gun in action’, ‘A German gun destroyed by our artillery’, ‘Final instructions before going into battle’ showing an officer standing in front of perhaps a hundred soldiers in tin hats lying or sitting around him somewhere in an open field which had not so much as a leaf of vegetation. It went on, illustration after illustration of destruction and death, except for a photograph showing a Scottish pipe band led by a Pipe Major who followed a small white mongrel with black ears. The caption said, ‘The victory of Martinpuich.’

And so they sat, intimately close together, he with his thoughts and she with hers, devoted, yet now excitingly unfamiliar. She was warm and soft. He was hard and tweed-rough. He thought of the bedding attendant. Almost imperceptibly, and then gradually louder, a melody from a six note hand-held xylophone came towards them, announcing dinner. The sound passed and faded away. Van Yssen’s salivary glands gave little squirts. As they got up she put her arms under her husband’s jacket. She kissed him with a warm moist mouth. The train stopped. They walked through the staff car, and past the galley. The chief steward welcomed them by name and showed them to their table. Dusk was approaching. To the left was the sea, darker now, slithering swirling silver. They saw their reflections in the windows of the dining-car.

"I am so looking forward to seeing Douglas tomorrow. The fellow has done so well. So bright," van Yssen mused.

"Just like his father."

"Come on now, my darling, a Masters degree *Cum Laude*, it is simply brilliant. Exceptional dedication. Our child who has become a man."

"He takes after you. He has your noble features: the broad forehead, the strong chin. The smile of his kind deep grey eyes. Our child."

"I have often wondered why he chose Roman history. Possibly his Latin?"

They had pea soup, and then fried fish. When the main dish of roast beef and vegetables arrived, the train began to move. For dessert they had red jelly with custard, followed by railway coffee, thick with milk and sugar.

They left the dining-car. As the train gathered speed rapidly they moved cautiously along the passages of the swaying coaches. The sound of the locomotives was different now. Darkness concealed the landscape, and all that was visible outside were patterns made by light from the windows. Inside were the reflected contents of the coaches: shiny wood panels, chromium plated fittings, and the panes of the windows that gave an additional dimension. They could smell the smoke from the locomotives, and the *boegoe* – the NCCR smell – unique to that trajectory.

When they reached their coupe the bedding attendant was leaving. The

top bunk had been lowered and their beds made. Van Yssen found a shilling, "Thank you very much, we appreciate your attentiveness."

"Good night."

The van Yssens were alone in the sterilised odour of aseptic railway bedding. He shut the window, pulled up the shutter. There was soot on the bottom end of the navy blue blanket. The new conductor would be there soon.

"Shall we go to bed then?" Anneke asked.

"It is still early, let us read for a while. The new conductor has still to examine our tickets."

It was awkward to sit when the top bunk was down. The Battle of the Somme lay on the lid of the washbasin. The locomotives gathered speed and thrust themselves into the night with rhythmic determination. Van Yssen took the book. He put his head back and shut his eyes. How he loved his wife, and how he loved Douglas. He opened his eyes and looked at the photographs but saw nothing.

"Albert, when do you expect the conductor?"

"It won't be long, nevertheless before the bridge."

Van Yssen thought nervously about the bridge across the Gouritz River – about twenty-six miles from Mossel Bay. Although they had travelled across it many times he never said anything about it to his wife. It was originally designed for road traffic and the railway line was put across it some time after its completion. Traversing it by train was harrowing. The procedure was for the first of the two Garretts to be uncoupled and to make its way over the bridge by itself. Even the weight of one locomotive was enough to cause the bridge to sway. Before the second locomotive with the carriages could proceed, it had to wait for the oscillations of the bridge to stop. The passengers and railwaymen who knew the danger, waited in bated silence when the haul of the second locomotive began.

The van Yssens sat side by side and looked at the little pocket book. They listened for the conductor to appear from the metallic vibrations of the bogies. They were halfway to the bridge.

Van Yssen thought of his wife's passion, and wondered whether the moment could be recreated. He revived the image of the perfume-filled instant when her thighs were framed in suspenders and lace, and the division that was just visible through her pubic hairs. He bent over and kissed the nape of her neck. The conductor's key clattered in the door of the next compartment. When their door opened, van Yssen rose and took his wallet from his pocket. He handed their tickets to the conductor. The new conductor was stocky, ruddy round face, freshly dressed in the blue serge uniform of the NCCR, complete with a bushy orange moustache that looked as though it was part of his fancy dress.

"Good evening."

"The bridge is not too far now," van Yssen ventured.

"Not far," came the laconic reply. Humourless porcine fellow this, and diligent.

They were alone again. Van Yssen locked the door. The door was equipped with a catch that could be fastened from inside the compartment to prevent unwelcome entry. He hooked the arm of the catch into the bracket on the door while she watched. No one could enter now, except that the door could still be opened a few inches. At least the opening end was away from the bunks.

When van Yssen turned around, she was lying on the lower bunk. She held her arms out towards him. He sat down next to her, and leant over to kiss her. She was like a young girl. She lifted her hips and pulled up her dress. Where her stockings ended, the insides of her thighs were damp. He felt pressure in his head. He should have eaten less. He touched her. She made a delicate gasp. She began to undo his trousers. He was shaking. He took his jacket off. "Shall I turn the light off?" he asked.

"No, we must see everything."

He looked at her face, beautiful in her floral dress, her hair pinned back. She lay with her knees pulled up, her legs apart, her dress and petticoat around her waist. He looked down at the stockings, the suspenders, the thighs, and the place between her legs. He looked at her face to see her reaction. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"I love you so much, my dearest Albert."

He sat on the edge of the bunk and pushed his trousers down, together with his underwear. He forced his still-tied shoes off, socks and all, pushed his trousers off and left them on the floor. Except for his waistcoat, shirt and tie, he was naked.

"May I see, Albert?"

His mouth was dry; he had no reply, and leant back. She examined him lovingly. She pressed her face against him and held her arms around his buttocks.

"I love you so, Albert."

She lay back. He crawled heavily onto her. As she drew him in, he felt a quivering that quickened, first from the end of his spine, convulsing, pumping. She shuddered. He saw the subliminal pink sky beyond Great Brak River, and was carried along by the warm creamy froth of the surf. He heard the exquisite voice of Madame Butterfly, tragic with emotion.

They lay joined together until he became aware of his nakedness.

"I am so sorry," he said.

"I understand, my love. I am so very glad."

He took her head in his hands. He felt her amber earrings inside his palms; there was perspiration on the nape of her neck. He smelt the French perfume he had given her for her birthday. She kissed him. The Garretts were quieter. The train seemed to be free-wheeling. They were approaching the bridge.

"Let us put our pyjamas on," he said.

"Yes."

The train slowed rapidly. It stopped short of the bridge. After the front

locomotive had been uncoupled, it proceeded in a cloud of steam across the vast gorge of the Gouritz River. The bridge swayed. Far below a thin shallow stream of water shimmered. The hissing second locomotive waited uneasily to deliver its string of appendages. While the train stood, they undressed. She took her dress off over her head, then her petticoat, while he watched. She removed her brassière, and stood only in her suspender belt and stockings, and the amber beads around her neck. She sat down next to him and unclipped her stockings, then undid her suspender belt from behind. Her clothing was on her pillow. She held her arms out to him. He took off his remaining clothes, and for the first time in their lives they were naked together in the light. They embraced and kissed. The train lurched and they nearly fell over. She giggled playfully. Van Yssen bent down and dragged their leather suitcase from under the bottom bunk. He put it onto the bunk, and opened it.

"No wait, Albert, you'll untidy the suitcase."

She had put his pyjamas and her nightdress as well as their dressing gowns on top of the other clothing. The train slowly made its perilous journey across the bridge. She put her nightdress on while he got into his pyjamas. She produced their cosmetic bag, washed her face in the basin filled with cold water, and dried herself with a towel she had brought along for the journey. With a bottle of tooth powder in one hand he brushed his teeth laboriously and thoroughly. The train seemed unsteady under them. She thought of finding her small Bible; she also had to go to the toilet. She valued her privacy, so it would not be easy. He also had to go. While she was brushing her teeth he put on his gown and his slippers, and said, "I need to go to the toilet, will be back now."

The bridge moved, like a heart beating irregularly. In the distance the first locomotive waited patiently while the driver and the stoker stood with their backs against the tender, watching the stealthily approaching train traversing the chasm. The moon was bright. A breeze moved from the land towards the sea. The grasses of the veld and the fynbos quivered. While the two locomotives were coupled, they got into her bunk, in between the stiff steam laundered railway sheets, clad in their nightclothes that smelt of Karoo sun and hot ironing in the kitchen at Oudtshoorn.

The train fled hastily from the bridge and raced across flat countryside. The moon had not yet come up.

"I wonder what Douglas is doing now?"

"He is bound to be with his friends," she replied.

"He is so intelligent. I am glad he chose teaching. It is a good career in these uncertain times."

"What do you mean by 'uncertain'? The war is over. Things have returned to normal."

Their sexual experience had altered Albert's mood; made him more serious, more formal. "After a slaughter of such proportions things will not be normal for a long time. There are large and deep wounds in Europe. They will take a long time to heal. Europe is the crucible of our civilisation. The political

differences there come from the depths of the different psyches. There is an imbalance now. The world seeks equilibrium. There are problems in Russia; the socialistic experiment of a gang of thugs has become nothing less than a tyranny of the proletariat. Woodrow Wilson with his well-meant yet misplaced statesmanship is wandering among celestial bodies. The artificial way in which Europe was carved up at Versailles cannot endure."

She loved the intellectual Albert. The train gathered more speed. The tapping of the wheels had an easy cadence. Albert was satisfied. His head was clear. His body felt strong. He loved his wife. He was conscious of the clarity of his thought. She sensed the energy. She felt it in the tissues that were pressed against her and kissed him on his temple, then next to his ear and ran her lips across the soft smooth skin and the stubble of his beard that had grown since the morning. She felt secure. She pulled her nightdress up above her waist. He kissed her breasts through her nightdress. She felt the warmth of his body between the insides of her thighs. He removed his pyjama trousers.

They made love with such intensity that she was at last transported by her pleasure into a field of bright colours. He tasted her tears before he felt them. The train drove on into the night, through clouds of its own smoke. They heard the sounds of stations in the night, voices that lived in different places, picnic baskets that creaked, and felt the cold air of the night. When they reached Worcester in the early hours of the morning, van Yssen got onto the top bunk.

The steward brought coffee and fetched hot water so that van Yssen could shave. They kept a distance from each other until they had brushed their teeth, then washed and dressed. They sat close together before she said grace and in the silence of reflecting on the discovery of a new intimacy, began to eat the sandwiches and boiled eggs that she had prepared. She looked so familiar to him. The fair hair, bright green eyes, tiny freckles across her nose, the regular strong white teeth, the flowing feminine body in a tweed skirt and stockings. It was not long now before they would see their son. Down through the Du Toit's Kloof mountains, and on into the soft leafy green early summer vineyards of the Paarl Valley lying in the sun of the new day, until they reached the Woltemade Cemeteries to be reminded of their own mortality and the 1918 'flu.

The train moved stealthily through Woodstock and Salt River, and cautiously crept into Cape Town Station. Van Yssen opened the door of their coupé, and stepped into the passageway to lower a window. He looked out towards the front of the train, for Douglas and a porter. There were not many people on the platform. He saw Douglas standing with his back towards them; the strong body of the young man and his good bearing, the dark crew cut hair, and large ears. He was always so cheerful, relaxed, and full of buoyant good humour and energy, a fine confident man. Their eyes met. A surge of emotion brought tears to van Yssen's eyes.

Mrs van Yssen held her arms out to Douglas. He walked towards the window. He held his arms out to his mother as he approached and smiled enthusiastically. The chromium-plated window rail was in their way and the

frame of the window covered in soot. He groped to embrace his mother. She kissed him on his forehead and tasted and smelled her son. She looked so beautiful. Her eyes were large from fulfilment. Van Yssen took Douglas' head in his hands and pressed his own head hard against his son's. They were indeed blessed.

"You do look beautiful, Ma!" he exclaimed.

Van Yssen gathered their things, and passed them to Douglas who handed them to the porter. Mrs van Yssen wore her tailored tweed suit and small hat, her brown leather handbag tucked under her arm.

"Great day tomorrow; second one, Douglas."

Douglas smiled and nodded.

"To stand again before the chancellor, and again *Cum Laude*?"

"What was your journey like, Ma?" Douglas asked.

"Lovely, I mean, wonderful, especially pleasant. Gosh, why am I muttering so. I love it so; I mean I'm so glad to be with you my child."

Douglas walked ahead of his parents

Anneke continued, "Do tell all, I can't wait."

Douglas did not reply. Van Yssen said, "Douglas?" Still there was no reply. In a louder voice, "Douglas?"

"Tell us all your news," she insisted.

"There's not much to tell. Things just continue. Recently my work has taken all my time. I don't even know what's happening in town. I must be utterly boring. What's happening in Oudtshoorn?"

"Garnett sends his best regards. He is working very hard. It is not easy to start a practice. He says he is so pleased that you are coming to Oudtshoorn. To think that you are going to be a teacher at your old school. He was saying that with your intellect you will be a great asset to the town."