

2002

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Recommended Citation

Du Plessis, P G., Our Mouth, *Kunapipi*, 24(1), 2002.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol24/iss1/12>

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Abstract

In the mornings when I lather my cheeks, my chin, my neck and in the end the areas around my lips — to soften a day's stubble for the shaving ritual — I have to take off my bifocals. I therefore look at my reflection with the unassisted, failing, naked eye. It doesn't matter. The whole process has become automatic anyway: forehand strokes when you go with the nap, backhand against it; leave the upper lip for last and contemplate the white, woolly moustache for a moment before deciding against growing a permanent one.

P.G. DU PLESSIS

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In the mornings when I lather my cheeks, my chin, my neck and in the end the areas around my lips — to soften a day's stubble for the shaving ritual — I have to take off my bifocals. I therefore look at my reflection with the unassisted, failing, naked eye. It doesn't matter. The whole process has become automatic anyway: forehand strokes when you go with the nap, backhand against it; leave the upper lip for last and contemplate the white, woolly moustache for a moment before deciding against growing a permanent one.

But every morning, nowadays, it is not my own mouth that emerges from the white foam, but my Grandfather Venter's. I cannot help but recognise the two grooves running down from the corners of the mouth towards the chin. Oh, I remember those! Even when I had shaved Grandpa with the Minora safety blade razor, I had to be very careful when crossing those twin folds. They had nicked easily, just like my modern razor with its pair of safety blades often nicks mine when I deviate from a precisely square-on shaving stroke — the only approach these folds tolerate. The lips I see in my morning mirror are exactly his; the white stubble I had shaved from him is now also mine.

Come to think of it, I never used the cut-throat Krupp to shave him. Those, a book from the forbidden section of the school library had told me, were also used to scar the cheeks of wayward whores — by nattily-dressed gangsters running far-off, exciting, unimaginable houses of ill fame. Our local barber dressed nattily and used a cut-throat. After he had click-click-clicked the hand-operated clipper up the sides of your head (pulling out hair as he went along) to achieve that shortest of short-back-and-sides demanded by your mother, he scraped off whatever traces of down he might have missed on the back and sides of your neck with a Krupp. And while doing that he twisted your head to expose the artery feeding your brain to the honed edge of German steel. He'll then, while looking via the mirror at someone else sitting in the back of his shop, discuss local politics. During his discussion he absentmindedly dry-scraped that blade across your precious artery until he was satisfied that little enough skin was left. Had his blade ever slipped? Had he ever slit?

I knew that twisting of the neck, that baring of arteries and veins, so well. Every fortnight when, in our still fridge-less world, we were down to salted meat, I was told which sheep to slaughter. I fetched it, Grandpa held its hind legs, and I forced back its head to expose the ultimate vulnerabilities of the helpless before a hostile blade: the defenceless throat, the jugular pathways of blood. I then had to

cut fast, and deeply, slicing desperately to sever as much as possible as quickly as possible — to reach the moment when the blade would find the bony joint between spine and skull. Only then could it be slid between the bones to disconnect the marrow-soft, feeling, spinal cord. It was the moment of mercy. The body could then relax into death; the stream of pain that had rushed through the spinal cord at last interrupted. And all that endless while, the warm blood would send its smell-of-life up my nose, would spurt and pulse over my hand, and the last jerks of please-I-want-to-live would shudder up my arms and into my own neck.

I hated it, and Grandpa had to tell me over and over again that there are times when duty and necessity demand that one must sever the stream of feelings from your heart to your head. That was the way he put it. I understood. There are times when one must stand away from your feelings and wants, and just do what has to be done.

Had he himself been able to manage that?

Probably.

At the funeral of one of his most beloved daughters I moved with him among the crowd of mourners, and during a quiet moment in our shuffling, sympathy-interrupted passage I asked him one of those questions only the very young dare ask:

‘Why aren’t you crying, Grandpa?’

He was holding my hand, and at the question he stopped short and looked at me for quite some time. Only after a while did he deem fit to warrant me a serious answer.

‘Grandpa had cried all the tears given to one man, my child ... after our war.’

I noticed that my question had somehow tensed him up, so I didn’t ask when and why he had used up all the tears that had been given to him. But his answer intrigued me. Some years later I remembered that moment and asked Dad about it. For some reason he avoided my eyes when he answered:

‘Someday, when Grandpa thinks you are old enough to understand, he’ll surely tell you himself.’ I had to wait.

In his old age he came to stay with us. It must have been in the forties — almost half a century since the war that had emptied him of tears. But by then I had forgotten about our moment at the funeral.

He turned his arrival that day into a formality. My mother welcomed him at the front door, telling him that she was certain he would have a happy stay with us. Before he entered the house, he insisted on making an announcement. He then made his formal declaration of intent:

‘Annie,’ he told my mother while he held onto her hand, ‘on this day I shall push my feet under your table. I will be a child in your house.’

And he kept his word, that man with the strong body. He was an obedient child in the house, although his hands bore the knuckles he had crushed against other people’s skulls during the wild days when he had earned a living by bringing

mining machinery to Johannesburg by ox-wagon. He never complained. The signs of the hardships he had to endure when he had been left almost destitute by the scorched earth policy of the English during the war could be seen in his gnarled fingers — and it was discernible in his total trust in God and his obstinate will-to-believe.

At the time of Grandpa's arrival, the Second World War was raging in Europe. Dad was a teacher, interested and meticulous. At night, when no unexpected visitors were liable to turn up any more, he secretly plotted the course of the war — sticking bead-headed, coloured pins into a map. The existence of the map, Ma told me almost daily, should never be mentioned to anyone. There were people from the Truth Legion everywhere and any whisper could reach their ears. If they found out that Dad listened to the German news he would be interned, and lose his teaching post. The map with the rows of pins moving across the middle of Europe fascinated me. When a line of pins moved to a new front, or over yet another bit of conquered territory, they left little holes in the map. I tried to picture what those little holes in the spots where the war had passed represented: blocks of neat crosses, or mass graves, or.... To get a true picture of what was happening in Europe, Dad listened to both the English and German news bulletins. It was exciting to wait until it was dark before stealthily threading the long aerial of the whistling, short-wave Arvin wireless through the mulberry trees. All that so that a certain Strauss, after the slow, ominous tolling of ship's bells, death knells, could announce in a cavernous voice: 'Today seven/ten/fifteen! Allied ships were sent to the bottom....'

After listening to that, my nights were filled with people floundering among debris and burning oil-slicks in the dark cold waters of the northern oceans I had read about. I tried to imagine what drowning like that would feel like. — Swimming, swimming, swimming and desperately hoping until the tired muscles of your shoulders would just give up from cold and exhaustion. And then you'll sink, incapable of fighting for air any longer and gulping the seawater into your lungs. Or the horror of the burning oil-slick enveloping you like a bad dream and how you dive under it, only to have to surface and singe your lungs when gasping for air. Do you then think of the distant dry land where you needn't fight for some precious air? For just one more breath? And, perhaps, when you surrender to the inevitable, you'll be filled by a sorrow — for yourself and for the things you'll never feel again. Like the warmth of people. It was at that time that the sadness of our brevity began to clog my hopes like lime quietly settling in kettles and pipes.

In the evenings — always winter in my memories — when the mealie-cob fire roared in the Ellis de Luxe stove and the next person's bath-water was being heated in the copper boiler, the light of the Miller lamp would highlight Grandpa's Jan Smuts goatee. It would move up and down when he told me of what had happened at Magersfontein, Rooiwal and between the enclosing lines of blockhouses and barbed wire.

To my young mind, these things had thankfully happened far back in the distant past. All those dead people were not like the corpses of those I had known — those who were at that very moment rotting and stinking in the pitch-dark hollows shut in by the coffins of my imagination; those who, please God, must get through their bloating and decay to become acceptably dry bones.

The Scots who died at Magersfontein, for example, had already reached a state of skeletal acceptability. Later on, Grandpa accompanied me to the battlefield at Magersfontein and showed me the spot where he and his brother Tjaart had spent that violent day. With them was an unlucky neighbour who got shot through the head early that morning. Nobody could find the time to remove the corpse and it lay in the hot sun the whole day. Late that afternoon the steadily bloating body turned over by itself and in doing so one of its hands ‘tapped me on the back’.

Right up to the end, Grandpa vainly tried to understand why his startled reaction had given rise to such mirth:

‘How could we, with the smell of death and the din of battle all around us, and with our heads aching from the lyddite fumes coming from the bombs the British showered on the hill behind us ... how could we have laughed so much? I’m still ashamed about that. ... But by that time I had already put so many rounds through the Mauser, and I had seen so many people fall ... and I had seen a neighbour, a man I knew well, jerk like a shot ox when the bullet hit his head. Our shoulders were black and blue for weeks after that and the barrels of our rifles became so hot that we didn’t dare load a full magazine — we had to shove the cartridges into the breech one by one. The magazines could explode, the breeches were that hot. They were so hot that when one spat on them the spittle would run along the steel in a small ball — like on a heated stove. Perhaps that was why we lost our dignity.’

Those evenings, after having stayed with Grandpa in front of the stove as long as I was allowed, I could go to bed with ease. Bones were all that were left of those Scots. I could snuggle into the soft eiderdown surrounded by harmless dead Scotsmen — abstract corpses with red, sunburnt legs. I could savour the bravery of the Hoopstad commando holding off the terrible Lancers with the butts of their rifles in fierce hand-to-hand encounters. I could slip through the blockhouse lines during the long nights of flight when sleeping burghers had fallen from their horses without waking so that they had to be kicked to wake up. I could imagine prisoner-of-war camps where ‘... a louse would go for you at such a pace that it kicked up a small cloud of dust...’

In all the things Grandpa told me, there was one certainty: he had done the right thing. Right through.

‘Aren’t you afraid of death, Grandpa?’ I once asked him.

‘I made my peace with the Lord at the time the English sentenced me to death. So why ask, Pietman?’ Grandpa did not fear death — he had made his peace with the Lord.

Confirmation of his unshakeable convictions hung on the wall above his bed — an embossed slogan in an old brown frame:

EBEN HAËZER

UP TO HERE THE LORD HAS HELPED US.

Late in the afternoons of those days I strolled with Dad across the commonage of our town, talking about Tennyson whom he was teaching me to read properly. Some of the lines he quoted from the *Morte d'Arthur* on one of those afternoons, obviously disturbed him. After having sent Sir Bedivere many times, Arthur finally embarks for his voyage to the other world. On that boat he is destined to drift further and further away from this life's shores until he will become a mere speck on the far-off horizon of the lake.

And King Arthur said to me in Dad's voice, with Dad's understanding and in Dad's heavy Afrikaans accent:

*But now farewell. I am going a long way
With these thou seëst — if indeed I go —
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)
To the island-valley of Avilion...*

off to the green fields of the hereafter

Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.

And Dad added, for we had earlier also spoken about Grandpa:

*...Long stood Sir Bedivere
Revolving many memories...*

And about the history of sorrow and remembrance:

And on the mere the wailing died away.

The repeated parentheses of doubts were for Dad, on that afternoon, suddenly more than just another small problem of interpretation. He was disturbed, perhaps moved, by the multiplying meanings emanating from the *if indeed I go* and the *clouded with a doubt*.

'Dad, are you afraid of death?' I asked him.

He evaded my question, and I realise now that he must have known what he wanted to say, but decided against saying it. I was too young to handle his gnawing doubts. So he only quoted in answer:

'(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)'

But shortly after that, and for the first time, he voiced another doubt:

'I am more concerned about the *grievous wound*... and about how long my people are going to persist in what they're doing. You must try to understand how far the simplest of words can reach. Tennyson puts it very simply: *And on the mere the wailing died away*. If you read it well enough, you'll find a stack of meanings. Pick yours.'

He was silent for the rest of our stroll. I nagged a bit, but he stonewalled me with evasions, if that is possible. He did, however, provide a clue that evening.

He turned up where I was doing my homework and put an opened book before me, indicating a line with his finger. It read:

'The leprosy of unreality disfigured every human creature...'

'Us,' was the only word he said.

In 1948 the National Party, preaching apartheid, came to power. I now realise how strikingly near the middle of the century that fateful year came along. Our lives — those of Grandpa, Dad and my own — had been destined to span the 20th century with an overlapping succession of generations. Grandpa's watershed war against the British lasted from 1899 to 1902. It was there that he exhausted the full measure of whatever tears his trusted God had shared out to him. Queen Victoria and colonialism left the stage then. Dad was born seven days after the first shots had been fired. I made it to the end of the century, coping with a new South Africa and guilt.

In 1948 — it was ten at night — Jan Smuts, Prime Minister at the time, who had been a Boer general but had ended up a Field-Marshal for the British, lost his parliamentary seat. Standerton it was. It was quite a moment for all around, but certainly not for me. It was my job to see to it that the batteries stayed charged, so that the adults could listen without interruption to the election results coming from the battery-driven Arvin radio. I had to charge those batteries with a small, red-painted, hateful and exceptionally headstrong little petrol engine called a Tiny Tim. The garage owner, Uncle Lucas, had by then already announced that this particular Tiny Tim had reached the final stages of inner decay: 'This damn charger's tappets can't be adjusted anymore. Tell your Dad.' Dad found a way to do just that — temporarily, that is. Step one: open up the engine. Two: put a spent .22 cartridge case over the foot of the valve's stem. Three: reassemble. Four: try to start it until your pulling arm aches and your hand grabbing the starter-rope blisters. Then, perhaps, Tiny Tim would find the tappet-gap, adjusted by an all too soft .22 cap, to its liking and clatter into life. Charge until the soft copper has given up and the engine sighs to a standstill. Take the battery in, bring the other one back to the engine. Repeat.

Every time I delivered my inadequately charged battery I could feel the tension rising. Three sets of ears were glued to the radio: those of Grandpa, Dad and Reverend Potgieter. They could sense that the National Party was moving towards an election victory. Their very souls wanted that to happen.

Between announcements — I once overheard during one of my brief visits to the group — Grandpa was telling what President Kruger had to say about Smuts, his youthful State Attorney at the time. And how, in Grandpa's opinion, Smuts had curried the enemy's favour and had 'renegaded' himself towards a Field-Marshal's baton.

'How Smuts could crawl like some bitch before his conquerors, I'll never understand. After the camps! God! After what happened in those camps!'

He had never spoken to me about those concentration camps. Whatever I knew about them I had gathered from books and from the stories of a great-aunt who had survived them. But I can remember how the photographs of emaciated children, and dead children, and children about to die, had turned my stomach, and how I had tried to picture the 26,000 bodies of women and children arranged against a hill. How many schools could all those children fill? On the mantelpiece of that great-aunt there used to be a small bottle with pieces of metal and some crystals — things she said the British had put into the inmates' food rations. After her death it vanished. I never asked whether they had buried it with her. She had lost three children in the concentration camps. Perhaps someone found it appropriate to bury her little bottle of anger with her other sad memories.

Later on, when the politics of Malan, Strijdom and Verwoerd had developed into a working system — Grandpa had by then already been a speck on the horizon of the mere for quite some while — Dad visited me in my study. He browsed through my books and on reaching his beloved Dickens, he took *A Tale of Two Cities* from the shelf. He found the passage he was looking for almost immediately and read out loud the words he had pointed out to me when I had been so much younger: '*The leprosy of unreality disfigured every human creature...*' And in our moment of privacy he added:

'(For all my mind is clouded...) What are we doing, my son? What grievous wound are we inflicting on ourselves at this very moment? ... while hurting others? How many years and generations will it take before your great-great-grandchildren dare say: And on the mere the wailing died away. (Sorry, I should have quoted that in the past perfect....) Your Grandfather had such a wound. And it cried out for a lifetime. ... Marcus Antonius's image, not mine.'

He had mentioned Grandpa's death, so I returned to that other paradox we had analysed together when I was young:

'I am going a long way/ With these thou seest... Had Grandpa actually seen what he said he had seen? What do you really think?'

'Your mother believes he did.' It was not an answer and I think he wanted it that way.

During holidays when I returned home from university — where I played around more than I studied — I used to shave Grandpa. That was when I saw his mouth emerging from the thick lather I had whipped up in his shaving mug and applied with his old-fashioned shaving brush. Mother had asked me to do it: 'Your Grandpa is constantly nicking himself. He doesn't shave himself properly anymore.'

I liked shaving him. So much so that I prolonged the process, because I found that while shaving him I could discover an intimacy very rare among the men of my family.

So close to his skin, I allowed myself to ask him about the origins of the marks, blemishes, spots and lines which, now that he was getting old, were

appearing on his otherwise remarkably smooth skin. Skin's memory, I thought it should be called. All the hurts of the past will eventually present themselves like browned memories in what my mother called 'grave marks'. (She never used those words in the presence of older people.) The pain that had caused the blemishes of old age is forgotten, but the memory of it will belatedly emerge — surely, brownly and indelibly. 'Forgiveness without forgetting,' as they say in the peacemaking business. Shaving him was like those nights in front of the stove when the stories of war poured from him. He remembered the origin of every grave mark, and he told each one's story in detail:

About how he had crushed one knuckle on the scull of a crooked shopkeeper who had kept on and on miscounting the eggs Grandpa was selling him; about how the barbs of the farm fence got at him when a stubborn mare went wild. Every brown spot had a story. I loved listening to his tales about the days when he had been young and strong — the days when a something wild must have stirred his blood.

'Revolving memories...?' Dad remarked with a smile. 'Or are you counting genes again?'

Dad was teasing me, I knew. He was alluding to something that had happened between us in my final year at school. I was minding my own business in my room when the door flew open and Dad tossed a book onto my bed. Tossing the book is putting it too mildly. He made the book flutter through the air like only an experienced teacher can — on giving vent to the frustration which is part of the job. But at that moment Dad was not to be trifled with. He was furious and there was no gainsaying his command: 'Read that book from cover to cover! I am sick and tired of Calvinists who haven't read Calvin and then go into the world and ascribe a lot of theological garbage to him.'

Dad hated blatant stupidity, especially stupidity backed up by misplaced self-confidence. For the best part of forty years he had been an elder in the Dutch Reformed Church and therefore a member of the local church council. He came home from such a church council meeting in a fury one day. He was an old man by then and he had already retired after having spent almost half a century of his life trying to teach reluctant, anti-English pupils the rudiments of the enemy's language. Those reluctants were by then his colleagues in the church council.

'I can't take it any longer!' he raged. 'To sit there among them, knowing I've tried to teach every one of them at least something ... knowing each one's IQ, knowing exactly what each of them never could understand... ' He had run out of sentence, but he eventually made his point: ' Long before any honourable individual brother in that council gets onto his hind-legs to have his say, I know exactly what kind of bullshit he's going to spout!'

He used that kind of language sparingly. I took it that they must have upset him no end.

But the upshot of all this came down rather heavily on my Dad's son. It was I who had to struggle through a shortened, Dutch version of Calvin's *Institutes*. But in a way, my forced incursions into Calvin's thoughts did have some worthwhile spin-offs. It got me onto the gene counting my dad had mentioned. Calvin brought a further theme to my heated arguments during my late afternoon walks with Dad: predestination it's called and it boils down to a rather unsettling concept. Long before any soul is sent into this earthly life, it says, its ultimate fate has been decided. Hell or Heaven, there's no way of evading God's binding decisions on what you are going to do, sin, enjoy, achieve, and what-not. That's putting it a bit crudely, but there it was. Highly unfair, I decided. We went up and down the paths of argument and simply had to stumble onto another rather dicey subject: original sin. Highly unfair, I argued once more. How can a child be held responsible for the shortcomings and transgressions of his parents and grandparents? And guilt, the story goes, reaches back four or five generations to get at some totally innocent soul who didn't even have the pleasure of meeting the original sinner. I just didn't buy it, nor did the lost paradise make any sense.

A cloud of disturbing thoughts haunted me for months. And then I found the answer and argued my point with a persistency given only to the adolescent philosopher. I argued: When conception takes place you have two cells joining up. Right? Sperm and ovum become one. Fine? They swap genes and join chromosomes and things and then the first division takes place. Still with me? Now let's see what had happened: the ovum had been a physical part of the mother, the sperm came, physically, from the father. So, and that's the point, in the new life you have the physical continuance of the biological father and mother — their physical features, their quirks and such things. Children *are* their parents. Physically. Mixed, yes, but still. So now to get to the problem of crime and punishment ... if one has a combination of...

Calvin, Eve and biology turned me into an argumentative bore for months. Poor Dad, he had to hear all this. Ad nauseam. At some of my statements he could only smile: 'If I am then half my mother and half my father, and they are half their mothers and fathers, then one half of me fought in the Boer war — the one quarter getting caught, the other sticking it out to the bitter end. And my one female quarter survived the camps and still another quarter stayed out of British hands by fleeing to Bechuanaland.' Heavy!

That was why, when he saw me shaving Grandpa, Dad remarked:

'Now take care with that razor! You don't want to nick your forequarter...'

But carefully dragging the razor through the lather to expose Grandpa's facial grave marks one by one brought me an uncanny sense of identification — and a togetherness and nearness.

So I puzzled with him about the one he couldn't place. The one he couldn't explain. It was very clearly an old abrasion or cut. It was elongated — a brown line running from just beneath his right eye down to the middle of his cheek. It

must have some origin, he mused, but he just couldn't remember where that one had come from.

'It's almost as if my head doesn't want to remember this one,' he told me.

About a month before his death he suddenly remembered.

He couldn't wait to tell me:

'Pietman, I now remember the incident as if it had happened yesterday.'

'What are you talking about, Grandpa?'

'The long one that runs down my cheek.'

'And...?'

'The day I had to leave for commando duty, my youngest little daughter insisted on getting onto the horse with me for a hug and a kiss. Her mother picked her up and handed her to me. We always did that when I had to go somewhere. It was our way of saying goodbye. But that day she didn't want to let go of me and in the end they had to tear her away. It was one of her nails that left a thin scratch-mark on my cheek. It was a slight little wound, but it didn't heal quickly. I remember it was still open when we fought at Magersfontein.'

His explanation left me furious and I confronted my mother about it that night:

'I thought I knew everything that there is to know about my Grandpa! Why have you never told me that he had a wife and children before he married Grandma?'

Mom's answer was soft, almost hesitant:

'My child, why has Grandpa not told you himself?'

My mother was good at answers like that one. But in the end she did give me the gist of Grandpa's life before the war and before Grandma came into his life.

What had happened to him was almost everyday during the war: people losing people, wives losing husbands, mothers losing sons — and so on and on right through all the cruel permutations of loss that war brings in its wake. Before the war, Grandpa had been married to a young woman called Lettie and they had had two little daughters. All three of them died in the concentration camps. After the war the young widower married Grandma Venter. They had seven children, with Mom the eldest. My grandmother's name was Nettie. The young wife who had died in the war was called Lettie.

While shaving Grandpa the next morning, I asked him about his first marriage.

He didn't tell me about their courtship or about their early married life or about the birth of their children. He suddenly, passionately, began to tell me about the day he stepped off the prisoner-of-war train — about the high hopes he had had in his heart when they had approached the last station; about his expectations and the excitement that had pulsed through his body; about the desolation of a burnt farm with no living creature left on it; about searching for his family. He went to Bloemfontein's concentration camp. They gave him lists to scan — lists of names naming the living and the dead. He followed all trails, and someone told him that he had seen a young woman and two little girls in Aliwal Noord's

concentration camp. He hired a horse with his last money and almost killed the animal in his haste to get there. They were not there. Their names were not on the lists of the living and the dead. He went to Kimberley by train, pleading with the guard to ignore him.

He found the three names in Kimberley's lists, but only two graves. It was there that he wept the full quota of tears given to one man. For them, and for the futility of it all.

'I did all the crying I had in me there. I could never cry after that,' he said.

But for the first time since I've known him, I saw a tear slowly finding its way through the shaving lather on his cheeks.

I didn't ask any more questions and I didn't have much of an opportunity either, for the next time I returned home it was because Grandpa had had a stroke and had asked for me.

I went directly to his room on my arrival. From the doorway I saw that he had his precious Book of Psalms in his hands. I stopped short because I didn't want to disturb him. He had always prepared for communion in his church (Reformed, not Dutch Reformed like my parents') by first reading from the Bible (not very fluently) then singing a Psalm all on his own (slightly off key) and then saying a prayer in broken Dutch (with all the beauty of absolute belief sounding in his words).

But the stroke had impaired his reading. I had to greet him by taking his left hand, and for the first time since I had been accepted as an adult male among the males of my family who just didn't do such things, I bent over him and kissed his forehead.

It was the following morning that Mom, after she had washed him — I had to shave him, he insisted — emerged from his room with the story.

'Frikkie,' she said to Dad, 'it seems to me the stroke has affected a larger part of the brain than we first thought.'

They must have had previous discussions on the matter and she filled me in:

'This is now the third morning that your Grandfather says the strangest things. He almost begs me not to blame him after his death for something he doesn't want to name. Not only me, but also my brothers and sisters — the children he had with your Grandma Venter. I cannot get him to say anything more. Something about us is bothering him.'

On the fourth morning Grandpa went slightly further with his strange request.

'Annie,' he said to Mom, 'you — and your brothers and sisters — must not think that I loved your mother and her children less than I had loved Lettie and her two little daughters who died in the camps. You must remember that after I have gone.'

Mom said she hadn't quite known what to say to that, so she replied:

'But Father, we all know you and our mother had a beautiful relationship and you have always been a good father to us. Why does it bother you...?'

'I just want you all to know.'

On the fifth morning Mom came out of his room in tears. She repeated Grandpa's words to us:

'Annie, I know my time is near. But I don't want you to think that your late mother and you children meant less to me than Lettie and the two little girls. But Annie, you must understand ... it is now four days that I know I'm going. And I shall go gladly, because each morning when I wake up I see Lettie and my two little girls standing in that corner — waiting for me to come.'

The romantic streak in Mom made her cry. She clung to Dad's hand and spoke of the one great love in every life. His grip tightened on her hand in recognition of their own, but to me he said:

'That was his *grievous wound*. In actual fact he's only saying *I am going a long way/ With these thou seest...* But it will take generations before the horrifying wails coming from the wounds of this land will die away on the mere of time. The leprosy of unreality saw to that.'

On that morning, for the very last time, I saw how that particular mouth of ours emerged from the lather. I did not need a mirror to see it, I saw it with the naked eye. Clearly.

But in the mornings, nowadays, in front of my own mirror, I am shaving grave marks from the foam. I know now that there's a quota to a man's tears, and I can see how myopic the naked eye can become. Our mouth is but a wound, and dying away means what it says.