I must have dozed off for a while, because at some point she was no longer next to me and the living room was dark, but when I went in there, an almost burnt-out candle was smouldering on the table and there were a blanket and a pillow on the couch. She was lying curled up in her little hollow single bed, her fists balled in front of her face.

That was at two o'clock in the morning. There were still voices around the hospital – querulous children, people calling out to each other. I sat with her on the bed for a while and later went to sleep on the couch. When I woke up, she was gone.

She was not at the clinic either. Vukile wanted to know from me where she was. I went to look outside. There were visibly more people in the yard than on the previous afternoon.

It was only after sunrise, by which time everybody was searching for her, that I found her in the church, on her knees by one of the back pews. I was sure she was asleep; her chest and cheek were resting on her folded arms. But when I touched her – I wanted to make sure, because I wanted to say goodbye before leaving – her hand was ready, as if she'd been expecting me, tired but poised to reject me.

Something of this seemed familiar. As if I'd seen her like this before. Only days later did I recall the story of her father and P.W. Botha. It had ended with just as much anger and grief before the altar.

I misled myself, that morning, when I struggled in my maltreated bakkie over the smooth grey shingle of the river, on my way home at last, when I thought: she deserves her solitude.

THREE

1

The mousy little girl that I used to take to church on Sunday evenings in my first term at university said that Brand de la Rey sounded like some hero from a storybook. I always remembered it because even then I thought it was bloody ironic. I was not cast in the heroic mould. At no stage of my life was I in any respect anything exceptional. From childhood I was a loner who consorted more comfortably with books than with people. My father's little study was filled with books on South African history and anthropology, travelogues, handwritten diaries of ancestors, photo albums and framed portraits of staunch uncles and aunts who united my family and history in a single narrative. It was understandable that my interest should be piqued. I'd read and reread all the diaries as early as in primary school, and in almost every one of the history books on the Boer War and the Rebellion and the National Party there were marginalia in my father's neat slanting handwriting, saying this was Grandpa Piet here and Ma's Uncle Ferdinand there and Aunt Lilly's brother Gert and Great-grandfather Andries's cousin Willem that was written about here. I got the feeling sometimes, when reading the diaries and history books, that I was in a sense the outcome of all those histories. If the story of the Afrikaners was one very long sentence full of commas and dashes, full of redundant adjectives and parentheses and ambiguous word choices, then I was the full stop at the end of that sentence. The full stop or the question mark.