

JUSTIN BRYANT

**SEASON
OF ASH**



ENC Press



excerpt

“Did I ever tell you about the crocodile made of stars?”
Bornwell said.

Chanda, who had been trying to sleep since the lorry driver had picked them up, did not open his eyes. “No.” He didn’t invite explanation, but Bornwell continued.

“I had a dream one night at Umhlaba. We’d seen a big crocodile that day, on a drive. In my dream it was night, and I was walking in the bush. I went down to the same dam, and the croc was there, only he was made out of stars.”

Chanda shifted uncomfortably. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you couldn’t see his skin, he was just covered in tiny little white stars, really bright. They were flickering, and he had small spiral galaxies moving around through the stars, too.”

Chanda shook his head. “I thought you didn’t smoke the weed?”

“I don’t, stupid, it was just a dream. Anyway, when I saw him I started to run, because I didn’t have my gun. But he talked to me.” Bornwell paused, but Chanda didn’t say

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anything, so he continued. "He said, 'Where are you going? I won't hurt you.'

"So I said, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'Who do you think? I'm God.' Well, I didn't believe that, and I said so. He said, 'Of course I'm God. In the daytime I carry the sun on my back across the sky. At night I walk alone.' Then he opened his mouth wide, and his teeth were giant and sharp, and they were like diamonds that had colored lights inside them. He coughed, and a cloud of fireflies came out, all blinking. They flew over and landed on me, and I felt this incredible calmness. So then," he said with emphasis, noticing that Chanda had settled back into a sleeping posture, "then this flat dog starts playing a flute—"

"A flute?"

"Yeah, and the animals start coming out of the bush, swaying to the music, and the trees and even the hills are swaying like that, to the little tune he was playing, and it was the most beautiful music I'd ever heard."

"It was just a flute. You don't even like music. You don't even like Lucky Dube."

Bornwell stared out the window at the setting sun. "But it was so pure and clean, that sound. And the notes dropped around me like falling leaves."

Chanda let him sit like that for a moment, then said, "Then what happened?"

Bornwell shrugged. "I woke up. Man, I was so sad when I realized it was just a dream. But the funny part was later that morning, on our drive. We took another group out to the same dam. I told my ranger about the dream on the way out there. When we got there, the same croc was lying on the bank. He must have killed an impala earlier, because there was a big hunk of torn, muddy skin hanging from his mouth, and there were pieces of intestine scattered around him. We drove close to him, and he turned and dove into the dam. His tail sprayed mud and impala guts all over us. You wouldn't believe the stink. 'There's your God,' the ranger said." Bornwell laughed.

Chanda laughed with him. "So God's not really a crocodile."

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“Maybe God’s a crocodile, he’s just not that crocodile.”

The lorry droned on through the night. Chanda slept for an hour, then twisted in his seat and woke. “I think I’m catching a cold,” he said.

“Don’t say it, you’ll make it happen.”

“Where are we?”

Bornwell peered into the darkness. “I can’t tell. I’ll ask the *oke*.¹” He leaned forward into the front of the cab. The driver was about fifty. To Bornwell he looked like most of the Afrikaners he’d known—ruddy skin, thick beard and mustache, reddish-brown hair that leapt in all directions at once from his head, sun-crinkled face with a network of tiny broken capillaries crisscrossing his bulbous nose. He’d heard somewhere that Afrikaners have one of the highest rates of heart disease in the world. He believed it. The Afrikaner rangers he knew ate nothing but animal fat, steaks, and pork loins and ribs, night after night, and bread drenched in butter, and salads cloaked in creamy dressings. And they drank. The rangers went through several cases of beer every week. One week they ran out, and the grocery van was a day late. They cursed and bitched and refused to work until one of the camp boys was dispatched to Nelspruit for an emergency supply.

Bornwell rarely drank, and though he knew he ate too much red meat when he was in the bush, he at least made sure to eat fresh vegetables every day, and he didn’t drown his bread in butter. He had an oddly intense intolerance for overweight people, probably in deference to all those who he knew went hungry back home.

The driver said, “Oh, you awake now?”

“Yeah, where are we?”

“Ag, who knows, probably getting near Durban. Long way to go still. Have a seat.”

Bornwell sat in the passenger seat. He surveyed the array of backlit dials and knobs on the dashboard. “There’s a lot to keep you busy,” he said.

¹ *Oke*—dude.

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"I don't worry about most of it. Oil pressure and water temperature are the only important ones. Well, and fuel." He pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "Can't remember if we did names or not. You boys went right to sleep. I'm Jan."

"I'm Bornwell. He's Chanda."

"He's the sleepy one, eh?"

"He's a professional sleeper. You'll see, he won't wake until we're there."

They came to a small village where the speed limit made it feel as if they were walking. There was a *shebeen*¹ at the only intersection. Bornwell could see inside as they drove past. One bare lightbulb hung from a wire, and under it, a dozen people danced happily to music he couldn't hear. Probably township jive, or reggae by Lucky Dube.

"That's it," Jan said as they pulled away from the town. "That's all there is to see for the next few hours. I just about go mad every time I make this run. Nothing to look at all day and night."

Jan then narrated the complete history of his life, how he'd been one of the youngest supervisors in the gold mines until he was fired for coming to work drunk—"It was the day after the Springboks beat the All Blacks, you understand"—and a friend got him into the lorry-driving business. "When I first started, I was doing the Joburg-Windhoek run. I was living in a little house in the northern suburbs—not the nice part, like it all is today. We were in the middle of nowhere. It was me and Lucy, my wife, and her brother came to stay with us because he broke his arm in a fight—he told Lucy it was a car accident, but he told me it was a fight—and he'd lost his job. Every day when I got home he would just be lying there on my couch, drinking my Castle, and his friends used to come over at night to keep him company . . ." He trailed away into silence, then after a moment said, "Where did you say you boys need to go?"

¹ *Shebeen*—beer hall.

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"Phalaborwa, right next to the Kruger. So what happened?"

"What happened when?"

"With the fellow, your brother-in-law."

"Ag, that. I forget the rest of it. It doesn't matter anyway. He's gone, Lucy's gone. I got a new girl now." He smiled and lovingly patted the dashboard. "She takes all my time."

Outside, the lorry's headlight pushed back the darkness in two cones, and the wind blew hard from the west, across Umfolozi and Hluhluwe and the wild tangles of Natal, and in the cab, Jan braced his shoulders and said, "Nothing to look at, nothing to see." He'd picked up two boys, and one was asleep and the other wasn't very talkative, and as far as he knew they could be criminals on the run, but the road was long and empty, and he was glad for the company.



As Bornwell and Chanda crossed the country, Franz struggled to keep control of his lodge. The coming elections divided his staff along clear and increasingly hostile lines. The lodge reopened to guests after the midsummer shutdown, and although most of his staff came from the rural, politically apathetic towns of the Eastern Transvaal, the extensive media coverage of the elections fanned curiosity into passion throughout his multiracial staff.

Franz wasn't concerned about his three guides. All of them were mature men in their fifties, who had spent almost all of their lives in the bush. Two were from Mozambique and had no real stake in the elections anyway. It was the kitchen staff and grounds crew, mostly teenage boys, who reveled in the impending moment of history. Most of the boys were ANC supporters, but a few were Inkatha, and angry words between them threatened to escalate into

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something more violent. Some of their arguments had been seen and heard by guests in the intimate camp.

One evening, Franz brought all the employees together and explained that if they couldn't work out their differences peacefully and privately, he would sack the lot of them. His word was respected for a few days, but emotions ran high and tempers proved irrepressible. Franz had to fire two dishwashers who exchanged punches in the middle of the dinnertime rush. Fortunately, none of the guests saw the fight, but Franz knew the camp would be crackling with tensions for weeks. Even after the elections there were bound to be hard feelings.

Pollen Ndlanya, Franz's longtime cook, drove the terminated dishwashers to Nelspruit and dropped them off in the middle of town. When he returned, he went to Franz's office.

"I'm back. It's done."

"Thanks, Pollen."

"I got you some cigarettes, too."

"Ag man! I'm trying to quit!"

"But you told Hennie this morning you wanted cigarettes."

"I just meant I wish I *could* smoke, not that I wanted to. Ag, forget it. Give them to me."

Pollen handed the carton to Franz. "This is bound to happen again."

"No, no. No matter what I say later, don't ever buy them for me again."

"Not the cigarettes. The fighting."

Franz leaned back in his chair and scanned Pollen's face. "Why do you say that?"

Pollen shrugged. "There's no hiding from it. Even in the bush."

"Ja, I know."

The two men stood looking at each other. Pollen smiled wanly. "I've got to get back." He walked to the door, then paused. "Do you want to know what I think is going to happen?"

"Happen when?" Franz said.

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"After the elections."

"Ja, what?"

"Mandela will win," Pollen said.

"I know that," Franz said, laughing. "But what then?"

Pollen tilted his head at Franz's rock posters. In a distracted manner he said, "Some of the staff might quit, thinking maybe there's better jobs for them in the cities."

"That's all?"

"Here, yes. That's all. Everywhere else, I can't say. Except that maybe it will look good on the news, but won't really be so good."

Franz sat forward. "I hope it is good. I hope things do get better. Not all us Dutchies supported everything about apartheid. I'd almost vote for Mandela myself, you know. He seems like a good man. But F.W. has proved he can change with the times, and he has the experience of being a president."

Pollen shrugged. "We don't have to agree. You don't have to try to convince me of anything."

Franz nodded. He rose from his desk. "I'll go with you. I've got to get lunch."

They walked across the lodge together. It was cloudy for once, and Pollen said, "It might actually rain, God forbid!"

"Ja, imagine that?" Franz kicked at the dry ground, scattering pebbles and dust.

"My father was a farmer, you know," Pollen said. "He used to say rain was a present from God, and when there wasn't rain, God was punishing him."

Franz ran a finger across a camelthorn leaf and showed the dust to Pollen. "God has been punishing me for five years. What did your father do to make God happy again, so it would rain?"

"Nothing. He wasn't a very good Christian. He had hoses."