

Sample Chapter

Chapter 1 – Execution in the Morning

The clinking of milk bottles being placed in neighbourhood doorways filtered through the cool pre-dawn darkness.

Within the room a light breeze from the open window gave no hint of the heat promised for the coming day. He lay staring at the nothingness of the ceiling and could just make out the light fitting, swaying gently in the movement of air: his girlfriend's soft breathing, just a half-tone below a light snore, was the other sound he absorbed, the only other sound he was interested in. Clinking milk bottles and her breathing...nothing felt more peaceful, more secure, more starkly in contrast to what he had to do in the next 24 hours.

Could he do the same thing this time tomorrow...? And the day after...or the day after that? Would he be the same person? The whirring of the electric milk cart, nearing his own front door disturbed his thoughts, brought him back to reality. By now he could see the crimson tinge of day as the sun edged its way up to the eastern horizon. From his bedroom window high on the Berea he could see the Indian Ocean; on a clear day – and with a good pair of binoculars – he could even watch surfers riding the big breakers which made Durban an internationally sought-after surfing venue.

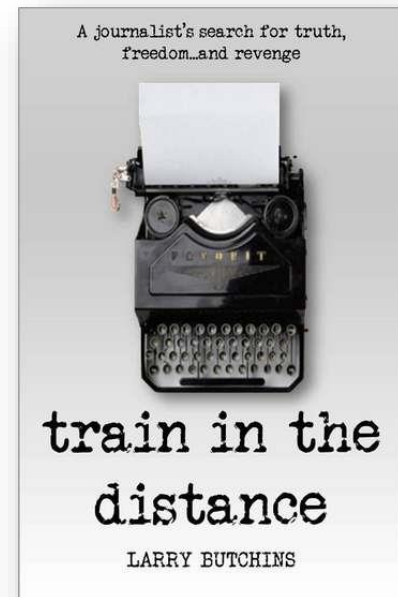
But today was not a day to lie in bed, savouring the early morning sounds, milk bottles, electric milk carts, a dog barking, a train in the distance. Sounds which had been a part of his early mornings ever since he could remember. Sounds of tranquillity, sounds of safety...sounds of innocence. Sounds he would listen to, then turn over and let them lull him back to sleep for another few short hours.

Leaning over he clicked off the alarm button: no point in waking her as well, and it was only another 10 minutes until he was due to get up anyway. Early enough to get in a quick spin on his exercise bike; then shower, get dressed, grab a cup of coffee and head for the airport for the early morning special to Johannesburg.

Downstairs in the lounge he flipped the light switch, started towards his exercise bike in the corner, then changed his mind.

“Not today. I need to think a little more, to get my head together...to compose what I'm going to say and how I'm going to say it...to plan every action, every word, every gesture...”

He put on the kettle and went to the front door to fetch the morning paper. The water boiled as he unfurled the newspaper and scanned the front page. There it was, just below the fold:



“Van Staden’s last day”

It wasn’t his story, nor was it his newspaper. He worked on the opposition weekly, although the morning Natal Mercury was his “*alma mater*”. It was where the now familiar “*by Adam Marks*” credit on a story had first appeared. Working the shipping beat, the beaches, the hospitals, kittens up trees and sinkholes appearing in West Street — his first by-lined story. He had graduated from a cub reporter’s routine to a more senior position and then left to join the Sunday Tribune as a senior reporter. Now he was covering politics, business corruption and human interest: the “*sturm und drang*” of daily life. The suicides, the family killings, sordid divorces, drug scandals and – for the first time – an execution...the execution for which he was leaving within the hour. Flying to Johannesburg, meeting the condemned man’s lawyer, and then an hour’s drive to Pretoria, to meet Van Staden’s family and to spend the night with them; a Death Watch; recording this tragic, pathetic human drama so that the readership could drool over their Sunday morning bacon and eggs lapping up every column inch of this family’s agony — “*Story and Pictures by Adam Marks*”.

Hannes van Staden: a 22-year-old farm boy from the far Northern Transvaal condemned to hang by the neck until dead for his part in the murder of his lover’s husband. She wasn’t even really his lover; just an older woman who had taken him to bed one night as a dalliance, a diversion, to give her something new and different and out of the ordinary. To take her out of the obtuse monotony of a 12-year marriage characterized by boredom and poverty, occasionally livened up with beatings, abuse and drunkenness.

Van Staden hadn’t even killed Rebecca de Villiers’ husband. She had actually swung the pick-axe at his head, but Hannes hadn’t tried to stop her and he was accused and convicted of being the prime accomplice: the only sentence, death by hanging. Rebecca de Villiers, by virtue of her gender and a plea bargain in which she testified that poor Hannes had actually encouraged her to do it, was given a life sentence. She would probably be out in about 15 years – but by the mid-eighties, Hannes would be long dead, hardly even remembered.

This was the story that Marks had been assigned to cover for the next 24 hours. Mainly because he knew the Transvaal, having worked in the Tribune’s Johannesburg office for three years: he knew the people, he spoke fluent Afrikaans...and he had covered the trial in the Pretoria Supreme Court.

Shortly after sentencing, the prison authorities grudgingly granted him an interview with Hannes on death row. He emerged from Pretoria Central Prison’s “visitors’ room” sick to his stomach, resolutely convinced that his journalistic mission was to expose the cruelty and inhumanity of the death penalty. But while Van Staden was the first White to be sentenced to death in more than three years, at least 25 Blacks had been executed this year already. Many of the cases were spurious to say the least.

Black-on-white rape with the alleged victim the only witness – statutory sentence, death by hanging.
Assault with a deadly weapon, even if a self-defence plea was entered – punishment, death by hanging.
Armed robbery, even if gun went off accidentally – sentence, death by hanging.

And there were dozens of other similar cases, not one of which, he was convinced, would stand up to a Supreme Court appeal. But the condemned men populating Pretoria Central Prison's Black block were either too poor or too ignorant to mount an appeal.

Adam Marks believed that the media should expose the barbarism of this form of human vengeance and he was determined to do something...even if that only meant raising public awareness.

Thus he hoped it would be with Hannes van Staden. IQ tests performed on him prior to his trial showed that he was somewhat below average in cognitive skills and in the determination of right and wrong. This evidence was deemed inadmissible in the court on a technicality. So this simple-minded, pussy-whipped farm boy was to die for something he didn't even do. The injustice of it burned. For the past five months, since the sentence was handed down and appeal after appeal had failed, Adam had written stories about the death penalty, its effect on the condemned, on families, on society. He attended anti-death penalty rallies – recognizing plain-clothes special branch detectives in the audience – and had been called in time and again for “a chat” with the local police commissioner after his articles appeared in print.

“That wasn't just about the death penalty man,” Brigadier Christian van Blerk would admonish him in his thick Afrikaner-accented English. “That was a bunch of blerry communists trying to undermine this country...jus' watch what you write hey! By the way isn't that a communis' name...Marks?” and he would discharge a sinister, throaty chuckle.

“Yes Brigadier, no Brigadier...three bags bloody full Brigadier!” He was under strict orders from the Editor-in-Chief, Alex Welsh, not to antagonize the police. They were too a good a source of information and leads to rub up the wrong way. Besides, it could be dangerous.

“Just eat shit man...hold your tongue and say you're sorry,” his immediate boss, news editor Brian Forbes advised him in his languid Yorkshire tones. “I can' nay afford to have thee sitting in jail, Adam, tha'art me star reporter.”

“One day...by Christ, one day...” he would swear. One day what? One day he would get something on Van Blerk? One day he would write the ultimate story which would convince the “intelligent” public that the death penalty was wrong. Or one day he would live in a country which had no death penalty; which was humane, caring, concerned *for* its citizens, rather than just being concerned *about* its citizens – and what they were doing. One day...

But today was not that day: today was just another day on the path towards that distant dream. And now he had to get that day moving...

Before switching off the front porch light, he picked up the two pints of milk and half a pint of orange juice in their dumpy glass bottles with the metal foil caps and put them in the refrigerator. Then he locked the front door behind him, took a deep breath of early morning Durban summer air, still redolent with the heady scent of Queen of the Night from the neighbour's garden, and climbed into their ancient white Beetle. Its engine rattled into life as he rolled out of the short driveway and headed south along undulating Ridge Road towards the airport and Hannes van Staden's last day on earth.