

Blackie Swart sells the farm

Elanza Swart awoke from a dream, the same dream as usual, the dream about the day everything changed. She felt that she had been watching a play with herself acting a part.

Her father ‘Old Blackie’ Swart and Koos Snyman had been standing outside the farmhouse looking over green prairie. Elanza couldn’t remember when other people had started calling her father ‘Old Blackie’ but thought it only recently. She had known him look old for a long time, since mother had died, the only surprise that it had taken everyone else so long to realise.

A hot day, hot even for the Transvaal, scorched the bare roads hard and brown but the farmland around them stayed green, not lush but growing, irrigated. Through the open front door Elanza could see a vehicle approaching, a four-by-four once white but now brown and soiled. It made puffs of dust as it dropped into dry ruts in the track, like a steam train working hard up an incline. As it stopped Elanza could make out a logo on the door, a block drawing like a child’s, of a factory with a row of triangular roofs and a tall chimney, a symbol of industry, technology, progress, with a company name written underneath. The men in the pickup didn’t get out immediately but continued having a discussion, looking at Blackie in front of the farmhouse.

A grizzled older man inside the vehicle looked like the leader. She suspected that he would do the talking. Elanza could see that the other man, younger and dressed in a smart suit, didn’t have the look of an Afrikaans speaker. He seemed more like a city accountant and uncomfortable outside of the office. She imagined that in a boardroom he would control events, provide data to prove his argument, use numbers like bullets and win the fight. Here, outside, the enormity of empty space around him made him look too small to have any influence.

Elanza watched them approach the house. The older one, heavy and slow like an ox, made some introductions. The younger one fanned himself with a clip board. He spoke in English.

“Shall we go inside?” he said.

Her father ignored him. He spoke Afrikaans.

“We’ll talk here.”

The older man threw a ‘shut up’ glance at his younger colleague.

“We all know why we are here. I won’t waste any time Mr Swart.”

Blackie looked down on them from the veranda that ran on three sides around the farmhouse like the bridge of a ship.

“Good.”

“This is a big investment. A strategic investment for the good of South Africa. A multibillion-dollar investment.”

“And how much of that are you proposing to pay me?”

“A lot of it Blackie, a lot.”

“Write me a number.”

The man looked around and picked up a stick. He wrote a number in the dust.

“That’s dollars. US. A hectare.”

“Double it,” Blackie said in English and glowered at the young accountant.

The younger man moved backwards, retreating, looking anxiously at his colleague.

“I’m sorry. I need a moment.”

The two groups separated like rugby teams after a whistle.

The man standing beside her father nervously folded and creased his own business card, ready to draw and fire it into someone’s hand. Koos Snyman LLB, Pretorius Venter Kruger, Johannesburg and Cape Town, representing Blackie Swart in the sale of the farm they all stood on. Elanza’s father had told her that Snyman loved only money and she guessed that although his life had been privileged the wealth he and his wife craved had so far eluded them. Blackie said that Snyman hadn’t money when he met Danelle and her father had no idea why an attractive woman thirteen years younger had married him. He had laughed then. Snyman had been like a horse in The Metropolitan at Kenilworth, he’d said. Danelle had bet on him, probably after a third glass of wine. Snyman had been a long time out of Stellenbosch

University and recently promoted, slightly better than evens. The odds on Snyman, already forty-five, became longer every year.

“Hold your water,” she heard Blackie say to Snyman. “It has to be here. They have no choice.”

With the safety of the vehicle between them it appeared to Elanza that the young accountant felt more in control. She ran through the kitchen to the back of the house, listening to them through the window while hiding by the wall.

“Are you mad?” the accountant asked.

“Look we need this land,” his older colleague said. “The coal is here, the water is here,” he jerked his head towards Blackie, “And Mr Swart over there has friends in very high places. Right up to the Minister of Defence who, let’s face it, is ultimately paying for this whole show.”

The young accountant stayed quiet. Elanza thought he regretted not being better prepared. He probably should have had more figures, clean and comforting numbers to move around the table. Instead he stood in the dust, dirty, with his shirt sticking uncomfortably to his back.

They walked back to Blackie at the front of the house.

“Have your man write it up.”

“Payable offshore,” said Snyman quickly. “US dollars in Cayman. Or British Virgin Islands.”

“Spoken like a true patriot,” said the younger man.

Blackie glowered at him.

“I’ve given you my land. That’s as patriotic as I can be. There’s nothing else.”

Elanza could tell that Blackie wanted the two men to leave. They reminded him of what he’d agreed. She felt like he had betrayed someone, but she didn’t know who.

The men went to the truck and Elanza ran back through the house to listen to them. They saw her standing at the kitchen window.

“The daughter.”

“Beautiful,” she heard the accountant say. “And now one very rich little girl.”

“*Wensvolle*,” the older man said.

“What?”

“*Wensvolle*. Wishful. The name of the land you’ve just bought. Blackie Swart’s land.”

“I meant to ask you about that,” said the accountant.

He looked as though back in an office now, more confident, in control, and he’d found an error in someone’s work.

“He’s as white as the rest of us.”

The older man stared at him.

“So why is he called Blackie?”

“Swart means black,” the older man said and looked ahead at the dirt track, hands tightening on the wheel, angry that a South African company would employ someone that couldn’t speak Afrikaans. He felt sure there was a law about it.

Elanza had come out of Roodhuis, the old Cape Dutch farm house, looking as wholesomely fit and pretty as only an eighteen-year-old farm girl can, and joined her father on the veranda. Her life then had few complications, just a space which should have been filled by a mother, like a black hole twisting and sucking things in but too far away to comprehend. She waved to the farm hand leading a horse towards her.

“What did they want *Pappa*?”

“To talk.”

“Would *Mummie* have been happy?”

Elanza knew that Blackie often thought of his wife, her mother. Blackie’s father had told him years ago what to look for in a woman, good teeth, tits, and toes, like a sheep. Elanza’s mother had all three but she had been hard, like the land they lived on. Together they had channelled water from a distant reservoir, softened the ground and brought life. She had softened herself and brought Elanza. She had always been wishful like the farm, and happy.

“Yes,” he hesitated. “But there’ll be some changes.”

Elanza thought about change, an unfamiliar concept to her. She’d lived at Wensvolle all her life. She had been born there, in Roodhuis, the house she had just walked out of, the same house her mother had died in. She looked at the farmhand holding her horse.

“Ok. But I guess I can keep the pony.”

“Yes. You can keep the pony.”

Snyman sat down on the steps to the house, stunned by the numbers looking at him from his note pad, elated by his calculations.

“Six thousand four hundred hectares at ten thousand. That’s sixty-four million dollars.”

Blackie wasn’t interested.

“Patriotism. They talk to me about patriotism. I’ve given them everything. I’ve nothing else to give.”

Across the fields Elanza watched the vehicle hit the paved road and with a final belch accelerate away. She awoke choking on its dust.

Elanza lay still remembering the dream and then moved across the bed, her mouth sticky and dry. A man sprawled beside her and grunted as she leant over him to look for something to drink. She would have apologised but she couldn’t remember his name. She knocked over a glass of water and swore. Pouring a handful of pills from a plastic bag into her hand she swallowed them with warm, cheap, Chardonnay.