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Opening Extract from...

My Friend the Mercenary

Written by James Brabazon

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

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MY FRIEND THE MERCENARY

James Brabazon



CANONGATE
Edinburgh · London · New York · Melbourne

Author's Note

The names and identifying characteristics of some individuals portrayed in this book have been changed to protect their privacy and safety. The author has reconstructed certain, mainly private, conversations to the best of his recollection where it has not been possible to refer to audio, video or written records.

Published by Canongate Books in 2010

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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Canongate Books Ltd,
14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.meetatthegate.com

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 439 5
Export ISBN 978 1 84767 440 1

Typeset in Sabon by Cluny Sheeler
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Mackays,
Chatham ME5 8TD



For Jacob

Name me someone that's not a parasite, and I'll go out and say a prayer for him.

Bob Dylan

A Note on Pronunciation

In Afrikaans, the ‘v’ in *vok* is soft, and pronounced like an English ‘f’; the ‘g’ in *ag* is guttural, and to the English ear sounds like the German ‘ach’ in ‘achtung’; the ‘j’ in *ja* is pronounced like the ‘y’ in ‘yes’.

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PROLOGUE

BLACK BEACH

A man is hanging naked from the ceiling by a meat hook. His feet are bound, but his mouth is open – screaming a confession. He is surrounded by half a dozen soldiers in ragged uniforms whose fists are caked in his blood. Unsatisfied with his answers, they taunt him in a language he doesn't understand and slam a rifle butt into his testicles. Nine days after the arrests, the most extreme bouts of punishment have begun. The air fills with the bitter-sweet tang of roasting meat. The flames spouting from the soldiers' cigarette lighters burn the fat on the soles of his feet until it spits and crackles like a Sunday joint. It is the last thing he will feel. Opened wide by pain, his eyes take in the horror of the blood-spattered chamber he's strung up in and then his heart gives out. His yellow corpse is cut down and stretched out in front of the other prisoners.

Further down the corridor, the interrogations continue. A dim light burns, illuminating a prisoner, half a dozen soldiers and a seated government minister sweating in a smart suit, nodding approval. Next to the minister, behind the soldiers, a man holds a video camera, capturing the scene in minute, digital detail. The pictures reveal the prisoner, silent, hog-tied to a pole, suspended face down. Electrodes are clamped to his genitals, wet rags stuffed into his mouth.

Next door, his comrades lie crying, broken and bleeding, crammed tight into a separate sixty-foot cell with two hundred other prisoners. Baked under a corrugated roof by the relentless sun, they are picked out one by one for interrogation, random beatings or public humiliation. One begs to be shot. Another has his fingers broken.

In the last cell a man is screaming on the floor. His hands have been cuffed tightly behind his back. His legs have been pinned at the ankles with shackles, which have been hammered shut by the soldiers. Skin and muscle split as metal bites down to bone. Boots stamp on his feet, ripping out toenails. The prisoner's name is Nick du Toit. He is South Africa's most notorious mercenary, and one of my best friends.

Nick confessed before this torture began – in public, at gunpoint, in accurate, extensive detail, a day after he was seized. Now he no longer knows, nor cares, what he confesses to. His story shifts to fit the fantasies of his jailers, but it is a desperate, pointless game. In this ramshackle collection of wooden huts and concrete cells fenced off from the sea and the world beyond by rolls of barbed wire, Nick's tormentors are not seeking the truth: they want revenge.

Nick is dragged up from the stone floor and forced to kneel. The commander enters the cell and puts a pistol to his head. He has come to execute him, but the gun is empty. Laughing, the guards knock him unconscious with their rifle butts. The same ritual is repeated over and over again.

Nick is left to the mercy of the rats in his tiny, five-by-seven cell. His hands and feet remain chained. Like an animal, he eats scraps of food from the floor, where he must also sleep and defecate. There is no daylight: he is kept in pitch darkness, and beaten daily. And then the septicaemia sets in. Pus oozes from his open wounds – sustaining the cockroaches that feast on his sores. By the time he is dragged outside his eyes have sealed shut. The

soldiers immerse his head in freezing water and then rip the scabs from his eyes.

This is how Nick begins his 34-year sentence in Black Beach prison, Africa's most notorious jail. He was arrested on 8 March 2004 along with fifteen other men as he tried to overthrow the government of Equatorial Guinea, a tiny West African country fabulously rich in oil. But there is just one person missing from the scene. What Nick doesn't see when he opens his eyes that day is me. Had all gone according to plan, I could have been lying next to him: I was supposed to film the coup.

PART ONE

1
SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEVIL

Treading quickly on the halo of my noon shadow, I skirted the edge of the pool. I glanced at my watch. It was midday on 11 April 2002. I was exactly on time. At a table in the luxury hotel in Johannesburg two white men sat waiting. One, muscular with a ponytail, hid behind a pair of black sunglasses; the other, older and with a neat side-parting, stroked the end of his moustache, scrutinising the terrace and my arrival. I threw out my palm in a premature greeting, and they rose in unison to return it with a gruff 'Howzit?'

I'd met the ponytail in Sierra Leone the year before. A 37-year-old South African former paratrooper and one-time mercenary, Cobus Claassens had fought in the troubled West African state during the mid-nineties with a military company called Executive Outcomes, a private South African-run army which had been hired by the Sierra Leonean president to defeat rebels who threatened to overrun the capital, Freetown.

With the highly trained soldiers of EO on the ground, the rebels were quickly and comprehensively destroyed. Cobus stayed on after his contract wound up, carving out a living from the freelance security contracts that hovered like flies around the carcass of the country's diamond industry.

He was back in South Africa for a short holiday – a chance to see family and chase some business contacts. I'd met up with him a few days earlier when a chance conversation had planted an idea for a filming trip in West Africa. It was as preposterous as it was compelling: I would get access to a war in Liberia that no other journalist had filmed, and few even knew was happening. To do so I would need his help, and his man.

I stepped under the shade of the umbrella and saw them clearly.

Cobus spoke first.

'This is Nick du Toit. Nick – this is James.'

His Afrikaner accent bent itself awkwardly around English vowels. Nick, a plain, forgettable-looking man in his forties, reached over the table, and shook my hand. There was something awkward about him, as if his hands and ears were too big for his body, like a teenager waiting to grow into his skin. I wondered if this was really the soldier that Cobus had in mind. Nick's gaze was alarmingly direct, but not aggressive. He released my hand, sinking his six-foot frame back into the chair. Drinks arrived.

'Great to meet you,' I said to Nick. 'Thanks for coming along.'

I was struggling to disguise my unease. I was here to recruit a war hero to protect me while I filmed in Liberia. I thought I knew what I needed – what I had already been told I would require: a bodyguard; an experienced soldier; someone capable of defending me under fire – someone, frankly, extraordinary. Nick looked like none of these things: if anything, his white-and-blue checked shirt, freshly pressed chinos and neat row of pens in his breast pocket made him look profoundly ordinary, like an accountant or mild-mannered manager. Disappointment sagged into my shoulders.

Tilting our beer bottles inward, the three of us touched the necks lightly. The gentle double-click of glass on glass was swallowed by the rhythmic pumping of the hotel's infinity pool cascading gallons of crystal water beside us. There was no one in it. It was too hot to swim.

'Nick was a Recce, a Special Forces operator down here, in 5 Reconnaissance. He was about to be made a full colonel when he quit. He knows the type of area you're going to very well.' Here Cobus paused for effect. 'Nick was with me in Sierra Leone, actually.'

I liked Cobus, but he was a consummate hustler. I was beginning to wonder if he'd sold me a pup. Cobus was sure to take a generous commission from whatever I paid Nick to hold my hand in the jungle. Like a car salesman throwing in a full tank of petrol to sweeten the deal, he added: 'He's an experienced combat medic. Aren't you?'

'Ja,' Nick agreed, 'we were all trained to a certain standard, but the medical side became a bit of a speciality of mine. We did a lot of long-range stuff in Angola. I had to patch myself up once. We trained in civilian hospitals, too. They had all sorts of injuries, a bit more interesting than just the ones you got in the army.'

Nick looked down at the table, almost self-conscious. His voice was quiet, matter-of-fact. There was no hyperbole, apparently no bullshit.

I knew almost nothing about the 'Recces', other than what I'd learned hanging out with Cobus. South Africa's equivalent of the British SAS, they were highly trained killers and survivors who fought both conventionally and controversially in the service of the apartheid state during the bush wars and insurgencies that had torn Southern Africa apart for a quarter of a century. They were dedicated, arguably fanatical professionals – but unlike the SAS, they had not, ultimately, been under the control of a democratic government. In fact, the South African Army closely resembled everything I had been taught to despise when I was growing up: it was hard to shake the feeling that the Recces must have been more Waffen-SS than Special Air Service.

'A colonel? Have you worked with journalists before?'

I just couldn't see how Nick was going to rub along with the media, however well he might know the jungle.

Nick's gaze, set by a pair of profoundly blue eyes which reflected the turquoise pool beside us, fixed on me again. His expression was open, but unreadable. Somewhere below us, the bizarre but unmistakable toot of an elephant filtered through the hum of the city. Nick was studying me intently, like a farmer weighing up the price of a steer at auction.

'No, but from what Cobus tells me it sounds like it could be a lot of fun.'

Fun? I thought. *Is that really what people who kill other people for money think is fun?*

'A colonel?' I repeated to him.

Disbelief crept into my voice. He looked away for a moment, as if embarrassed at the mention of his former rank, and then nodded.

'It was a desk job at the end. I went private – Sierra Leone with EO and then mining in Angola. EO was quite an adventure. We ran a mobile Fire Force team; Cobus was my second-in-command.'

He must have seen my head jerk in surprise. I knew very well what Cobus's unit had got up to in Sierra Leone – and Nick had just outed himself as his commanding officer. That meant that men under Nick's command had killed a great number of rebels at close quarters, and then routed them. It was disturbing to think how much blood they'd seen shed between them. I changed the subject.

'I don't know how much you know, but Cobus thinks I need someone to hold my hand in Liberia. I'm planning a three-week trip into rebel-held territory.'

I paused and looked at him, trying to judge his reaction. His face was still impassive. I realised that I was trying to sound convincing and knowledgeable about Africa in front of two

Africans who had been fighting here while I'd still been in school. Suddenly I felt lost. I bluffed my way onwards.

'No one has any real idea what's going on there. The main thing I want to do is meet the leadership and hopefully film some fighting – to prove a war is really happening. You're very highly recommended.'

This last line was addressed to Cobus, who now seemed equally impassive. My confidence was ebbing fast. I had never attempted anything remotely like the trip I was suggesting – I didn't even know if it was feasible.

I turned back to Nick. His demeanour might have been underwhelming, but his experience was – apparently – compelling.

'Are you interested?'

A thick, conspiratorial smile spread across his face and we all shifted our chairs closer. Cobus reached and took Nick's notepad, turning over a fresh page. My gut tightened a little more. Cobus folded away his shades.

'Here's the plan.'

Wrapped up in a comfortable bubble blown out of my own hubris, by the time I met Nick I thought I knew who I was: someone who had already plumbed the depths of human suffering. In the eight years since I had left university – an ivory tower that encouraged boyhood curiosities for the scandals and scrambles of African history – I had worked mainly as a stills photographer in some of the world's worst trouble spots, or so I'd thought. I'd taken pictures in Kosovo, Afghanistan and the occupied Palestinian territories, and spent long periods of time working in Zimbabwe. I'd photographed artillery barrages at 12,000 feet in Kashmir, and taken photographs in Eritrea where corpses littered the battlefield, but I'd never seen close-quarter combat.

When I'd started taking pictures at school I'd been mesmerised by the work of Robert Capa and Don McCullin. I thought that a camera and the right attitude were all I'd need to follow in their footsteps. I was wrong. I hadn't been prepared for the competition. In London it seemed that every other person I met was a photographer and all of them were scrambling for a piece of the action. I was barely scraping a living and couldn't see how to break through to the life of a professional photographer I'd imagined for myself.

I met Cobus in Sierra Leone during my first trip to West Africa in 2001. I arrived as the violent, decade-old civil war in Sierra Leone was finally drawing to a close. With a box of film and a couple of battered cameras I found myself en route to the capital, Freetown – a 29-year-old photographer on assignment, shooting a magazine feature about the deployment of British troops. I was accompanied by Robert, an American writer who promised an interesting footnote to my story: we would be staying with a former mercenary.

After clearing customs we were bundled into a helicopter transfer to the city, and then whisked away by Land Rover at the other end. Eventually, we ended up at a pleasant bungalow on the outskirts of the capital. It was stiflingly hot. A smiling, muscle-bound South African opened the door. I stepped over the threshold into Cobus's home. I may as well have stepped through the Looking Glass.

Robert had arranged to stay with him for a fortnight. He assured me I'd be welcomed, too, but, in fact, he'd never met Cobus, either. He'd only hooked up with him through the notice-board of a private military website. In a fit of largesse, Cobus had invited 'us' to stay. He handed us a set of keys, and told us that there would be a Mercedes and driver sent along for our use in due course. If we had any problems, we just had to call.

I had no idea who Cobus was, nor, indeed, what 'problems' I might need to call him about. No one mentioned the word 'mercenary', but with his military bearing and house full of khaki equipment, he clearly had a story to tell.

I came and went from the house, finishing the magazine assignment – grateful for the car, and the meals cooked up by his housekeeper, which stretched my meagre budget. The magazine piece practically wrote itself: everyone had something to say about the war they'd narrowly survived. A double amputee described how he'd had his hands severed by rebels from the Revolutionary United Front; others spoke of soldiers in their early teens holding them down while their eyes were gouged out, and the sockets filled with molten plastic from burning carrier bags.

The RUF was infamous for its extreme atrocities. The mutilation of civilians was a favourite tactic. Their fighting units went by the names of Blood Shed Squad, Burn House Unit and Kill Man No Blood Unit – this latter group prided itself on beating people to death without a drop of blood being spilled. The Born Naked Squad stripped their victims naked before killing them. So it went on. Their military campaigns were known by a series of cruelly honest code names, too, including Operation Burn House, Operation Pay Yourself and the brutally self-explanatory Operation No Living Thing.

In my second week in the country I flew with the United Nations to the Parrot's Beak – dangerously insecure bandit territory to the east of the country. While Freetown had been effectively disarmed a few weeks earlier, and now lay under the control of the British and UN, not a single round of ammunition had been surrendered in the Parrot's Beak. As we landed, sixty or so children limped their way out of the thick undergrowth and made their way to the edge of the clearing. Held as slaves by the RUF, they had been forced into combat as child-soldiers, raped or confiscated as 'wives'.

I felt lucky to witness the moment of their freedom, but also felt a sense of shock at my own ignorance. I had no experience of the actual events that shaped these people's lives, and yet here I was, taking photos and gathering stories like a tourist collects souvenirs.

Back in Freetown, Robert left in a hurry to get to his daughter's graduation in the US, and I found myself alone with Cobus on his couch, staring at storm clouds piling up beyond the window.

'So who are you?' he asked, pouring another glass of Red Heart rum. He sounded genuinely interested, his Afrikaner accent only mildly inflected with irony. I was perplexed. After two weeks of sleeping on his couch – an occupational speciality of mine – he knew exactly who I was.

'How do you mean?'

'I mean, who *are* you?' he repeated, stretching and swallowing his vowels in turn.

It suddenly struck me that my arrival may have been more of a shock than he had let on.

'Hang on, you did know I was coming to stay, didn't you?'

He smiled and shook his head, and handed me the glass of rum.

'Oh God, I am so sorry.' Humiliated, I put the glass down. 'I thought you'd invited us both. I'm sorry, I should have asked. I'll find a hotel, it's . . .'

As I stood up and moved towards my bags, pulling my camera over my shoulder, a motorbike pulled up outside. A few seconds later the screen door slammed and a stout, slightly comic-looking man with a Mediterranean tan bustled into the room.

'Yossi, this is James. He's a journalist, a friend of mine. He's been staying with me.'

I put my hand out and said hello. Yossi looked me level in the eye, and spoke in a thick Israeli accent.

'If you take my photograph, I will kill you.'

Suddenly, Yossi didn't look so comic. I looked at Cobus, whose eyes were flashing me a smile.

'I've got a brilliant idea,' I said.

Yossi hadn't taken his eyes off me, or my camera.

'How about I don't take your photo?'

Yossi and Cobus laughed.

'Yossi and I have some business to sort out,' Cobus explained. 'James, why don't you, er, make yourself even more at home? I'll be back later.'

The screen door banged to and the motorbike coughed. I was alone. I could either take the Israeli's threat at face value, and leave – or accept Cobus's generosity and make the most of my final few days before my flight home. I fidgeted, and finished the rum.

Over the next six days, Cobus showed me his Freetown. It was a city haunted by the recently departed war, but a city, nonetheless, where you could still enjoy yourself. We went to a casino, and gambled away the last of my field budget; we drove out to an ape sanctuary, where I took the most profitable single picture of my career – a portrait of a unique albino chimpanzee called Pinky. Along the way I was introduced to the rogues' gallery of mercenaries, soldiers and businessmen that Cobus called friends.

Yossi turned out to be a sniper, who had commanded an elite undercover squad in the Israeli Defence Force. During the Lebanon war in the '80s, his unit had fired fifteen shots, and killed fourteen enemy commanders. Settling in Freetown as a businessman in 1990, Yossi started his own security company. Shortly before I left, he came and asked me a favour. Almost shy, he wondered if, possibly, I might take some photos of his children. As I snapped away, I saw him at the edge of the frame, scrutinising my lens.

Other characters popped up at house parties and in beachside bars. I met Neall Ellis, Nellis as everyone called him, on the beach with Cobus. A legendary helicopter gunship pilot, Nellis

had flown for the South African Air Force before joining EO. Already a legend in the air force, he had quickly become a local hero in Freetown after almost single-handedly holding off a fresh rebel advance on the capital in 2000 when Sierra Leone had been abandoned to its fate, and most of the professional soldiers were long gone. He had flown dozens of sorties in his Russian HIND gunship until, finally, the British managed to secure the city.

Cobus and Nellis were fascinating to me. I had been brought up to revere the black liberation movements that South Africa tried to eliminate in the '70s and '80s; but they told the other side of their war, the politically incorrect accounts that were never taught in school. I felt like a priest in the company of whores. Their banter was infectious, their honesty disarming and the beer flowed into the night. Their stories of courage and friendship were all too easy to get carried away with.

At night, feeling less priestly, Cobus and I stuffed his Mercedes full of pretty girls, taking them from one bar to another as curfew approached. Then, back at his house, ensconced on his sofa with an apparently endless supply of rum and Coke, we talked about his twin obsessions of diamonds and history. I put my earlier nervousness to one side and asked him about his time with Executive Outcomes.

Cobus handed me a photograph from across the table. He stood, centre-frame, unrecognisable in combat fatigues, his face blacked with camouflage paint. A dozen or so other mercenaries clustered around him. It was impossible to tell if most of them were even white or black – so completely had their identities been obscured by the trappings of war.

'I was hired from friends amongst the senior Executive Outcomes people. I signed up in May '95. I was offered three times what I was making in the army, so I quit and became a mercenary.' Several of his friends joined up as well. 'We didn't even know which country we were being sent to fight in. They told us

on the plane flying up there from South Africa that we were going to Sierra Leone, the worst place in the world.'

He smiled at the irony of having made it his home, and re-filled his glass.

For Cobus, the fight became personal. Wiping out the rebels was more than simply a job to be done for money – in the face of their legendary cruelty he felt increasingly obliged to 'cleanse' the rebels from the forest. He styled himself an Angel of Death, with justice, he believed, firmly on his side. His mobile force, commanded by Nick du Toit, went and smoked them out. On one occasion they received a report of an attack on a village, and arrived to find women with sticks thrust into their vaginas, and old men with their throats slit. Eventually the rebels were found twelve miles away, terrorising another village.

Cobus and his men fanned out through every hut and hunted them down. There were no surviving rebels; no prisoners; no mercy. Cobus's face hardened.

'At a certain point a human being becomes less of a human being, and more of an animal, and then he should just be culled and got rid of as quickly as possible so the rest of humanity can go on with their lives.'

I had no such stories to share. Cobus's uncompromising attitude to summary justice was hard to digest, too far outside my own experience to judge properly. Cobus bade me goodnight. I cleared away the cigarette ends and empty Coke bottles, and pulled a mosquito net over the couch where I'd slept for the last three weeks.

My time in Sierra Leone was up. Cobus took me to the airport by speedboat, and urged me to stay in touch. As the boat sliced through the clear blue water, I asked him if he had any regrets.

'We did something that gave some hope to these people,' he answered. 'But yes,' he said, 'yes.' The beach loomed up, and the engines idled. 'I regret not having killed more of the rebels.'

Like his stories from the nights before, his comments did not invite discussion. He set his stall out: whether you bought into it or not was irrelevant to him.

I did as Cobus asked, and stayed in touch. Eight months later, in February 2002, I'd hung up my stills cameras and taken my first steps towards a career as a television producer. I went to Zimbabwe with a Kenyan production company on behalf of the BBC – who were banned from entering the country. I knew the country well from working there as a photographer, and the job was a surprise success. Using a mixed British, South African and Zimbabwean crew, we managed to keep images and analysis flowing to the BBC producers cutting the nightly news reports that documented Robert Mugabe's descent into criminality. When the job was done, we decamped to South Africa and the company set up an office in a trendy area of Johannesburg to try and capitalise on the reputation we thought we'd earned. I flew down to George, on the Garden Route, to see Cobus, home on leave from the claustrophobia of Freetown.

Slipping a .45 into the back of his trousers ('You never know in this fokken country'), we drove out to an oyster bar in Knysna to shuck the day's catch with his wife and children. He was as candid as ever. After EO's contract had been wound up, Cobus, it transpired, had been sought after by other masters – including the United States Government.

Not long after my visit to Sierra Leone in June 2001, he'd gone to neighbouring Guinea to visit a friend who worked for US Intelligence in the region. On Kassa Island, off the coast, American Special Forces were training Guinean soldiers. Cobus had gone along for the hell of it to test-fire the US military's M4 carbine. In gun-heaven, he'd noticed that several of the 'Guinean' soldiers

spoke English with thick Liberian accents – and not French, the local language.

I didn't understand why the American Army would be training Liberians.

'A new war has broken out in Liberia,' Cobus told me. 'Details are very hard to verify, but it looks like a rebel army has sprung up on the border between Guinea and Liberia. There are a lot of guys in the east, the area around Macenta, from the different factions that fought against Taylor in the old war.'

The old war, he explained, was another West African tragedy that unfolded alongside – and helped precipitate – the war he'd fought in Sierra Leone. Between 1989 and 1997 Charles Taylor and other warlords waged a vicious civil war against the Liberian Government – and between themselves. It was a war that Taylor finally won when he was elected president in 1997.

'Taylor took his revenge on the other warlords after his election, and most of their fighters fled to Guinea. In '98 the shit really hit the fan. They started fighting it out in Monrovia again and the fighters loyal to the warlord the Yanks had been supporting just fokken ran to the US embassy. Then the Americans put together a rescue mission before Taylor could massacre them.'

Cobus had been part of the rescue mission and wore a stars and stripes patch on his uniform. In the four years that had followed, Taylor's enemies had slowly re-grouped, and the president himself had become an international pariah. Accused by the United Nations of funding, arming and training the limb-hacking RUF rebels in neighbouring Sierra Leone, his regime had military and commercial sanctions slapped on it.

9/11 changed the picture. Fed up with Taylor's government, and incensed at reports that he may have allowed al-Qaeda operatives safe passage through his country, the Americans were

now keen to help their old friends again. Taylor, it was decided, had to go.

'There's a long history to this,' Cobus informed me. 'In '96, the US Government had given weapons to ULIMO-J fighters – those are the same guys that they later helped in '98 – through a private contractor when it looked like Taylor was going to fuck them up. Now proper battles are being fought a hundred miles away from the largest UN deployment in history, and no one knows a fokken thing about it.'

He spat the initials of the UN, who, despite maintaining a massive peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone, had done nothing to intervene in Liberia.

'They are incredibly fokken useless.'

His rolled 'r's hammered the point home. No one, apparently, outside Guinea and Liberia (and US Intelligence) really knew what was happening.

Our oyster shells had piled up into a grey, crenulated mountain. We climbed into his car and headed back to his house. I thought about what Cobus had told me. If I could get access to a rebel army in this unknown, unreported war it would be a genuine scoop – in fact, it could make my name as a journalist.

'This American friend of yours,' I asked, trying to sound off-hand, 'can he get me in? I mean, would it be possible to film?'

The sun was dropping towards the sea. Cobus adjusted his sunglasses as he drove.

'I'll have to ask him. I'm not exactly sure what the situation is at the moment, how much territory they control. The Americans are, you know, trying to help them with some small arms and logistics – nothing heavy, just enough to keep them going, to see if they can hit Taylor, to see if they're any good.'

We rounded the hill, and swung back on ourselves for a sweeping view of the ocean. Cobus killed the engine, and we dropped the windows. The truck filled with the scent and sound of the sea.

'I'll let you know.'

Two days later my phone rang. I stepped away from the bar I was propping up in Johannesburg, extricating myself from the din of lunchtime banter. I'd half-forgotten that I was waiting for Cobus to call me. In the cold light of day, it seemed unlikely that US Intelligence (who- or whatever that might be) were going to broker introductions between a rebel group (that may or may not exist) and a journalist. It seemed even more unlikely that the rebels would want any part of it.

'James, it looks like those jokers are going to play ball. You're in.'

'I'm what?'

'You're in. I spoke to the Yanks and told them they can trust you, that you're not interested in fucking them or anything, that you just want to get the story of the rebels out. As long as you agree not to broadcast anything about the Americans, I don't think it will be a problem.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. For a moment my mind went blank. What was I supposed to say? I imagined myself surrounded by gun-toting rebels in an anonymous jungle clearing and felt a rush of nervous excitement.

'You need someone who can look after you, run an evacuation. Someone to watch your back.'

I glanced back into the restaurant, and then at my feet.

'Cobus, I don't even have a budget for this. It's going to be very tight.'

Getting the Americans on board was just the beginning of the process, not the end. In order to film anything, I would need equipment, personnel – and money.

'I hear you, I hear you. Look, don't worry, we'll sort something out. All the payments will be run through me. I'll help manage it from Freetown. I'll be in Jo'burg at the end of the week. There's a guy I have in mind. Let's meet at the Westcliff Hotel on the eleventh . . .'