chapter one: big bang

... how fortunate are you and i, whose home

is timelessness: we who have wandered down

from fragrant mountains of eternal now

to frolic in such mysteries as birth

and death a day (or maybe even less)

e.e. cummings

Ask me about my youth and I immediately think of soap. The faintly carbolic smell of Sunlight on a school shirt. The relentlessly cheerful Punch radio spots read by Esmé Euvrard on Springbok Radio. The fresh smelling bath soap in my Christmas stocking or clumsily wrapped together with a bottle of Aqua Velva in re-used ironed birthday paper. The slightly acrid smell of Colgate Apple shampoo on my hair.

Soap was the stuff of dreams. Soap was the bubbles I blew while I visualised living in lush, green English-speaking towns like Margate or Umhlanga Rocks. Soap was the creamy lather of Vinolia while I was washing my tiny little dick and feeling the first stirrings of desire.

Soap was what made *us* different from *them*. *We* washed with Lux. *They* used Lifeboy, at best. That's why they smelt funny. The smell of Lifeboy and smoke—well, somehow it wasn't quite as human as the fresh scent of Lux and Brylcream and the eau-de-cologne on my mother's hanky.

In later years, soap would get dangerous new connotations. Suddenly people would start slipping on cakes of soap on the tenth floor of apartheid cells and fall to their deaths. Suddenly soap-on-a-rope would become synonymous with hangings and suicides.

But way back then, while a poor little Russian dog called Laika was hurtling to her death in the sparkling white Milky Way above our town, we were steeped in soap.

Literally.

My father met my mother on the day after the night the soap lorry overturned on the bridge spanning the Vaal Dam outside our town and spilt its entire load of Omo into the water. This resulted in a bubble bath so enormous that it could be seen from outer space. If anyone in our town had known what the <ital>*Guinness Book of Records*<ital> was, it would definitely have been recorded in those august annals of the mundane as the biggest ever.

But what does all of this have to do with my story?

Let me explain.

Our town was a dusty little hamlet in the middle of the South African veld. It was called Schoonwater.

It's still there, of course. But now I only see it in the distance to the right on flights between Cape Town and Johannesburg, about twenty minutes before the plane lands at O.R. Tambo. It somehow seems disembodied and small and even more insignificant than it is in my memory. And because memory is made up of scenes from the past and this story is all about memory, I'll stick to past tense for now.

Schoonwater lay on a peninsula in the Vaal Dam, on the highway that links the vast industrial hub of the Witwatersrand with the port of Durban (Africa's busiest and most efficient port, my Geography teacher would assure me later. But for now I hadn't been born yet).

So it came that a never-ending stream of huge pantechnicons thundered through our little town night and day. Their clatter punctuated the

townsfolk's every waking hour, provided a baseline to the symphony of snores that rose nightly from the two hundred-odd houses and (although nobody ever mentioned it) even muffled the grunting rhythms of fucking that took place on beds and couches and—on sultry summer nights—rickety deck chairs next to the dam.

But none of these huge monsters *stopped* in Schoonwater. The townsfolk wouldn't have expected them to. They were well aware that, in the bigger scheme of things, they were far too insignificant.

But then a lorry actually *overturned* on the bridge.

***

The driver was Manuel de Gouveia, the twenty-three-year-old son of Mozambiçan greengrocers Jesus and Lydia de Gouveia. Manuel had started working as a driver at the Lever Brothers head office in Durban the month before. He had, however, neglected to mention on his application for employment that he was prone to severe attacks of epilepsy, prior to which a blinding light would descend from the sky and the Mother of God would float down to him, tears of blood dripping down her olive cheeks, chanting: "My son, my son, why hast thou forsaken me?"

How could he have mentioned his illness? His wife Lisa—the neighbours derisively called her "the Porra with the snorra" because of the soft black down above her upper lip—and their one-year-old baby boy were waiting helplessly for him in a dilapidated flat somewhere on Durban's Bluff. Besides, his naturalisation papers hadn't come through yet, so it wasn't that easy to get work.

That's why fate put Manuel on *that* road on *that* night in my pre-history. Let's zoom in on that year now and move to present tense as Manuel is approaching the bridge from the Durban side. He had driven through the

crisp cold night, with billions of brilliant white stars hanging over the Highveld and the hapless Russian dog spinning through space overhead while his puny headlights tried to penetrate the Stygian darkness.

And here it is now, his moment of fate. Here is the bridge that has carried so many people over the grey waters… and there, exploding in Manuel's vision, the blinding light… the Mother of God…

"My son, my son, why hast thou…"

and the huge fenders of the truck start to bend the railings. The unearthly screech of metal on metal rips through the night and Manuel is falling…

What goes through his head in the moment before death, just before ten tons of metal thud into the water and then come to rest on top of an unsuspecting carp in the thick Highveld mud at the bottom of the dam? Does the Mother of God fold him into her arms and tell him not to worry about Lisa and their baby boy? Does she take him by the hand and lead him to the stairway to heaven… or is death more mundane? Do the spasms of epilepsy cause him to lose consciousness even before the lazy fish of the Vaal start nibbling at the white foam around his mouth, before they notice that something is wrong and they themselves start blowing foam and are suffocated by South Africa's most famous washing powder? Who knows?

But you can rest now, Manuel, because tomorrow the police divers will retrieve your body. Old Mr van Jaarsveld from Avbob in Church Street will patch you up so that your darling Lisa can have one last look at you after the trip for which she borrowed money from her pensioner mother. Then she will tearfully say farewell to you at the grave that was dug for you next to Auntie Macassar, the one-eyed spinster who killed herself with a sheep shear.

Finally, your Lisa will disappear down the road, scuffed suitcase in hand, and get lost in the back streets of Durban where a Taiwanese sailor will stab her with a knife one rowdy Saturday night while your little son screams and screams on the sidewalk, as much for his dead mother as for the two-day-old shit lining his nappies. But you can't worry about that now, Manuel; it's all part of the great tapestry of fate that is being woven every minute of every day into the fabric of this beautiful and bloody country…

***

Meanwhile—back in past tense—the townsfolk were woken up, not so much by the noise of the crash as by the absence of sound *after* the crash. The accident had halted the steady stream of trucks and with them the background noise that had seeped into the town's very lifeblood.

The first light had just started appearing over the eastern horizon when, one by one, the people left their houses to find out for themselves what was wrong.

They were astounded: for the first time in history there was a traffic jam in Main Street. Long lines of lorries lined up past the church, past J.H. Breedt General Dealers and up to the butcher with the loud legend *"*Smul aan Worsie se Lekker Boerewors*"* screaming its message in gaudy purple lettering above the fly-proof doors.

Elsie Winterbach still had sleep caked in her eyes as she opened the door of the Sunshine Café, where she was confronted by an irate driver demanding cigarettes and Coke and *The Star* (Elsie had never heard of *The Star*, or any English newspaper, for that matter).

Burly blokes with hearts tattooed on their biceps wandered into the Grand Hotel. They demanded that the bar be opened, then ordered one

Brandy and Coke after another from Kobus Haasbroek, bartender and hairdresser.

Years later, Kobus would be murdered in the bath of a seedy hotel near Joubert Park in Jo'burg by a psychopathic rent boy, who would write *"Fuck queers then kill them"* on the bathroom mirror in Kobus's blood. But for now he simply lifted his slightly effete brow in Calvinistic horror at the sight of these ruffians.

The morning sun was peaking over the waters and throwing its warm yellow light over an incredible scene: an ocean of multi-coloured bubbles rising up from the grey surface of the dam.

Up into the sky they floated, reflecting a million rainbow colours into the dusty little town. By now there was a solid wall of bubbles insulating the people on three sides from the outside world. And a great sigh escaped their collective throats. Their existence on this immense plain was usually so given over to the elements that any shelter—even an illusory one—came as a great relief. So while all around them fish were dying, the people of Schoonwater had paradoxically never felt more alive.

***

It was in the midst of that surreal morning that my father first saw my mother. Picture the scene: a young farmer is on his way to the co-op. He drives down Main Street in his Ford bakkie when he is confronted by the first traffic jam in the history of Schoonwater. But he doesn't know that yet—all he knows is that he has to stop behind a huge Bedford truck.

Dolf de Villiers's parents had named him after their hero, Adolf Hitler, but the young man certainly did not take after his namesake. He was tall, for one thing, and well built, with a mop of curly black hair that hid a high forehead and a twinkle in his blue eyes that was quite irresistible to the opposite sex.

And he was dark. Maybe a bit too dark to live in *that* time, at *that* place and on *that* side of the big South African divide. There had to be something wrong, people felt, when two perfectly blond people from good Dutch-Huguenot stock produced an almost coffee-coloured child.

They were right, of course. A hundred-and-twenty-two years earlier, young Meester Adrian de Villiers and a beautiful half-Malay, half-Xhosa slave named Ameena fell in love on the Great Trek North. One night near the present-day Brandfort—just as the Southern Cross tipped over the horizon—they crawled under an ox-wagon and gave their passionate young bodies to each other in a hot confusion of sweat and dust.

Nine months later, after Ameena had given birth to a dark-haired but blue-eyed boy and Adrian had tearfully confessed that his sinful lust was responsible for the baby, Adrian's father quietly led her out into the veld and shot her between the eyes, leaving the body to the lions.

But the old man couldn't bring himself to kill his own flesh and blood. The family eventually adopted the boy, and Adrian de Villiers Junior—who later settled in Schoonwater—became the patriarch of the De Villiers family.

A hundred-and-twenty odd years later, when Dolf had grown into a handsome (albeit *dark*) young man, the townsfolk felt even more justified in their mistrust of his genetic origins when they noticed how easily he talked to *them*. He even smiled when he was in their company. They felt that he would give them ideas instead of keeping them in their place.

Dolf would only smile when his parents told him about the stories doing the rounds. "Blacks are people too, Pa," his distant black genes whispered. Dolf's father (my future grandfather) could only shake his head. "Today's children have no respect…" he'd mutter and then walk away to tend to a sick cow or look at his mielies. And so the young man

stayed true to himself and his nickname slowly took root in the town: *Swart Dolf*.

***

Back in the present tense of that fateful day in my family's past, Dolf gets out of his bakkie and strides over to the truck. It is in his way. He is a direct, straightforward kind of a guy. He simply wants to find out what is going on.

That's when my father notices that something is, well, not wrong, exactly, but different. A gust of wind blows a wall of bubbles between him and the Bedford tuck and for a moment he can see nothing.

It would be interesting to know if he does a kind of reality adjustment in his own mind—something like "Santjie van Aardt is up early with the washing"—before his synaptic connections actually transmit to his brain the fact that fate had other plans for him that day.

For, when the bubbles begin to part like a gaudy Las Vegas curtain, Dolf sees descending down the steps to the Bedford's cabin a pair of beautifully shaped legs in skin-hugging white ski pants and red high heels. It's a pair of legs the likes of which has never trod the dusty streets of Schoonwater. The shape has just never occurred to the DNA patterns of either Sesotho or Afrikaans stock while they were lining up through countless generations to produce a Petra van Deventer here, a Basetsana Lekota there.

It's a pair of legs that would certainly not have been out of place in Hollywood, where it would proudly carry the tiny waists and enormous breasts so fashionable and so splendidly exemplified in beauties like Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe.

All this flashes through my father's mind as his gaze travels upwards while the wall of bubbles parts tantalizingly, almost too slowly, to

reveal… yes, full hips, a tiny waist… and then… disappointment! Where my mother's full bosom ought to be, there's nothing. But nothing. She is as flat-chested as Twiggy will be in a couple of years.

Dolf de Villiers's blue eyes and black lashes flutter resignedly for a split second—for such a short time that his brain doesn't register the faintest sense of disappointment at the lack of stimulation in the bosom department.

Then his eyes travel further upward and even before they finally come to rest on the heart-shaped face, black eyes and pouting red lips belonging to Magdalene Jones, currents of desire shoot through Dolf's body.

These are the beginnings of an earthquake that will run through their lives for four decades, the aftershocks still felt many years later in the lives of everyone who happens to share their space in time.

For now, Magdalene Jones simply unties her red headscarf and a mane of platinum blond hair falls down to her shoulders. Dyed, of course, but how can Dolf know that? Nothing in his few years on earth has prepared him for this impossibly beautiful creature.

And then my future mother smiles, flicks a soap bubble from the collar of Dolf's khaki shirt and says in a smoky, flat-vowelled Jo'burg growl:

"Who does a girl have to fuck round here to get a drink?"

Dolf de Villiers instantly feels his spit drying up. All that is left in his mouth is the faint taste of metal. He tries to swallow but can't. And somewhere in his nether regions a faint throbbing starts, which grows and grows until he has a monstrous hard-on and has to adjust his pants to relieve the tension on his pecker.

"Slut!" Whispers his Calvinist upbringing. "Shut the fuck up!" Mutters his cock. For point three of a second, a mini civil war rages in Dolf de

Villiers's head. But he is only twenty-two, so the hormones win hands down and, with the Calvinist upbringing safely relegated to a tiny prison just in front of his medulla oblongata, Dolf boldly steps forward and takes Magdalene's hand.

"It's too early for a drink," he says gruffly, his cracked tongue sticking to his dry palate. "But what about koeksisters and tea?"

***

The farm Om-die-Draai had belonged to the De Villiers family for more than a hundred years. In 1845, Adrian de Villiers Junior settled there with his young bride Dina Kruger, a cousin of Paul Kruger, who would later become president of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* and then die in exile in Italy in the early years of the twentieth century, an embittered man out of step with his time.

By all accounts, Dina shared the dour Old Testament morality of her cousin. It was she who named the farm Om-die-Draai—as much for the fact that it was situated on a bend in the river as for her longing to be dead and buried and safely ensconced in the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence Om-die-Draai also expressed her fervent wish that death would be just around the corner for her. Cynics would later say that the more colloquial English translation—*Round the Bend*—would have been more appropriate, because that is what she was.

But the God of John Calvin is mysterious and strange in His ways. He never granted Dina's wish. In fact, He made her live to the ripe old age of a hundred-and-two, give birth to seven children and become the matriarch of our family. Talk about spiteful.

Yet her death wish would stay alive from generation to generation, expressed sometimes in an uncle committing suicide, an aunt with a drinking problem or a cousin with an inability to settle down. And in

me… well, for now, let's just say that the De Villiers family is cursed with some very peculiar genes.

Freud would probably have had a field day with the suppressed desires and subconscious cop-outs of generation upon generation of my family. But fuck Freud—what did he know about the difficulties of life on the African plains? Could Freud catch a carp with a pitchfork? Could Freud create firebreaks to prevent raging winter fires from blackening the man-high yellow grass and destroying everything in their wake? Could Freud watch his crops wither and die as a relentless sun beat down week after week with not a trace of cloud? And when the clouds did come, could Freud watch his whole life being washed away by torrents of angry brown water? Did Freud build his house brick by brick only to watch it being destroyed by Kitchener's Scorched Earth campaign? *Hmmm?*

Anyway, after that little tirade—and a hundred-and-fourteen years after Dina de Villiers (née Kruger) had named the farm—Dolf de Villiers's Ford bakkie turned right at the sign on the highway that read:

… and drove down the dusty road past the rondavels that his parents built ten years before on the edge of the dam. The idea was to rent them out to white working class families from Jo'burg and Germiston who

liked to spend their holidays fishing, Klipdrift and Coke in one hand and braai fork in the other to turn over the fat, juicy boerewors pieces sizzling over the coals.

But on the day in question an altogether different scene greeted Dolf and Magdalene (of course she had accepted Dolf's invitation) as they sped towards their fate. The bubbles had started turning into foam, as bubbles do when Newton's Law of Gravity pulls them back to earth and reality after their brief romantic flight.

The whole surface of the dam was now covered in white foam and this layer was growing thicker by the moment. In the water, dying fish were floundering around desperately, collectively creating a massive washing machine that would have proven Omo's foam-making properties to any Doubting Thomas in the marketing department at Lever Brothers. "I have to admit, Friedman in research knows his oats," they'd have said—inadvertently mixing their metaphors. And the next day, a brief would have gone out to their ad agency claiming a brand new Unique Selling Point: "Omo makes more foam in your washing tub than any other washing powder on earth…"

So it was that, by the time my future father and mother drove past the rondavels on the road to their destiny, only the thatched roofs were visible above the foam. Here and there, the heads of holiday makers who had climbed onto the roofs of their cars could be seen. Some of them held screaming toddlers above their heads, others had saved their pieces of boerewors from the onslaught of foam, while yet others held bottles of brandy up in the air. Above them, the morning sun cast its tranquil light over the surreal scene. And far in the distance the silver smoke from a thousand township fires curled upward into the indigo blue sky.

"Fuck me, George!" exclaimed my mother.

"My name is Dolf," said my father.

And then my mother laughed. And laughed and laughed.

It was a laugh not only of surprise at the sight of the foamy white landscape in front of them, nor of delight at having found this handsome man with his dry sense of humour, but also of relief.

Hitherto, her life had not been easy. But now, in an instant, my mother saw the possibility of another kind of life—the kind of life that did not entail the misery and deprivation she had known while she was growing up in the slums of Johannesburg.

***

Magdalene Jones's father was a Welsh coal miner named Llewellyn who had come to seek his fortunes on the South African gold mines in the 1920s. What he found instead was the country's first communist uprising.

Being a dedicated Marxist, which was not surprising given his place and time and the conditions that prevailed in the Welsh mining industry, Llewellyn—or Lue, as he soon came to be known—threw himself heart and soul into organising the protest.

Came the fateful day and Lue Jones was marching in the front ranks. "Down with Capitalist Oppression," screamed his banner—echoing the slogans of sixty years later, except those would read, "Down with Racist Oppression". But in 1922 the word "racism" didn't appear on any of the banners, simply because theirs was, at least partly, a racist march. In a weird precursor to Affirmative Action, the white working class was already running scared of the potential might of African workers and was trying to prevent blacks from being promoted to positions that, at the time, were reserved for whites.

Opposite the marchers, Jan Smuts's burgher commandos were gathering. They had orders to stop the protest by any means possible.

Then it arrived, the moment the commando men had been waiting for with their hearts beating wildly, cold sweat of excitement running down their backs and the thrill of the hunt lurking in their bellies.

The marchers were drawing nearer and nearer. The melodic strains of the *Internationale* rose from a thousand throats and rang through the streets of Fordsburg.

The first gunshots rang out. Sjamboks whirred through the air, people screamed—and Lue Jones was lying on the ground, a bullet through his leg.

He never lived that fateful day down, my grandpa. When he was released from prison two years later, he learned the real meaning of hardship. Employer after employer looked at his record and shook their heads: a jailbird Welshman and a commie to boot? Never!

And so the ramifications of that day lived on in my family, just as Great-great-great-grandmother Dina's death wish would be with us through generation after generation of De Villiers children.

Lue Jones stumbled from day job to day job, cursing under his breath, rueing the day that he boarded the Union Castle in Liverpool and set sail for Africa. He drank more and more and the years became a blur of headaches and vomit and desperate scrambles for rent money. And sometimes, very rarely, a street girl in his bed to warm his lonely soul.

Fast forward to 1938. Grandmother Jones was an Afrikaans girl from the Eastern Cape. Her name was Leana de Waal and she had just arrived in Johannesburg after stowing away on a train from Port Elizabeth. Back home, her alcoholic father was still cursing the ungrateful girl to whom he had given his life, his money and his dick.

A drunken man wasn't a strange phenomenon in Leana de Waal's life—on the contrary, it would have surprised her to meet a sober one. So it

must have seemed quite normal to her—that cold July night while she was walking down Commissioner Street with her suitcase in her hand and nowhere to go—that a middle-aged fellow with red hair lurched up to her and whispered in her ear: “Come home with me,” the hot smell of whisky lingering on his sour breath.

She did, and never moved out. The room he rented in the dilapidated old boarding house in Sophiatown became their home for the twelve months before Leana died giving birth to Magdalene.

It was the happiest twelve months of Lue’s life. Leana used whatever she could to beautify their bleak room. Pot plants in old tins appeared on the windowsill. She sewed, she cooked and she cleaned, happy to be away from her obese father and his sweaty demands. And Lue drank less and less. He even found a permanent job at the Welsh butchery around the corner. Life was looking up. He had a wife and a job and a child on the way.

The day before Leana went into labour, Lue Jones bought himself the first suit of his life. Things were going to change, he promised her. In two months they’d move into a real flat and then they’d buy a lounge suite and a fridge and then—well, the sky was the limit…

Leana smiled weakly and nodded. The next day she lay dead in the cooler room at Jo’burg Gen and Lue Jones stared blankly through the glass at the baby girl in the incubator. It was the last time anybody ever saw him sober.

So the little girl grew up without a mother and with a father whom she learned very early could not be depended upon.

Sophiatown in those years was a vibrant place where cultures met and intermingled in a heady cocktail of sights, smells and sounds. Magdalene knew all the people who worked and lived in the neighbourhood.

Across the road from the boarding house were Mr and Mrs Naidoo who sold red and yellow curry and masala powders in their dark aromatic shop and often gave her a fiery mutton salomi when they saw the hungry look in her eyes.

Round the corner was a transport company that belonged to an old man called Harvey Feinstein. He would give the girl a warm bed and a bagel on many a night when her father's drunken rages would send her running into the street, her small body quivering with fear and cold.

The years passed and Magdalene grew into a beauty, hard drinking and streetwise and mature beyond her years. Her body filled out and took on the curves that would cause Dolf's massive hard-on some years later. Everything started appearing in the perfect places—everything, of course, except her breasts. And for the rest of my mother's life, her flat chest would remind her of her deprived childhood, of the lack of a mother's milk and a father's guiding hand that would later lead to her addictions and her chronic bouts of insecurity. It would also cause her sporadically to lash out at everyone near her.

Somewhere during the course of her seventeenth year, a steely glint appeared in Magdalene's eyes. She would make a better life for herself away from the squalor and dirt of Sophiatown and, most of all, away from the father in whose bloodshot eyes she could clearly read the accusation that somehow she was responsible for the death of his wife.

On her eighteenth birthday, Magdalene made her move. She marched into old man Feinstein's office, sat down on his polished mahogany desk and said: "Uncle Harvey, I want you to give me a job as a truck driver."

"Oy Gevalt," sighed the old man, a bead of sweat trickling down his forehead. "You know as vell as I do, young lady, that it's not a job for girls."

But Harvey Feinstein's reasoning stood not a snowball's chance in hell against the fixed determination of my future mother, and an hour later she was on her way to her first driving lesson.

That's how Magdalene Jones became the first female truck driver in South Africa. She travelled the length and breadth of the country in Harvey Feinstein's Bedford truck, elated to experience the freedom of the open road and ecstatic to be away from her father's accusatory glances.

And that's how the great highway of fate brought her down *that* road at *that* time on *that* day to land up in the back of *that* traffic jam just as a young farmer was on his way to the co-op in his Ford bakkie.

***

When Magdalene Jones had dried the tears of mirth from her black eyes, her gaze returned to my father. He was as red as a beet and desperately trying to hide the ever-growing bulge in his pants.

But his dick would have none of it: ever upwards it pressed, through the feeble layer of his underpants it strained until it formed a rock-hard shaft that pushed the khaki fabric into a circus tent on top of his crotch.

"Huh!" When her eyes fell on the outcropping in my father's lap, an involuntary exclamation escaped my mother's lips.

"Sorry," said my father, his lips quivering.

"Fuck sorry," whispered my mother when she got her breath back.

"In fact, stop the car now and fuck *me*."

It was as simple as that. Time and desire had conspired to bring them together on *that* day on the side of *that* road—who were they to kick against the machinations of fate?

My father turned the truck off the road and parked under a bluegum tree. With a sea of foam as protection around them, the two young people peeled off their clothes. My mother's legs opened and my father's cock penetrated her warm, moist vagina.

You're right, the word 'cunt' did cross my mind. But somehow it doesn't seem right to call the slit between one's mother's legs a 'cunt'. It just seems disrespectful. Whereas it's a badge of honour to call one's father's penis a *cock*. A penis just sounds so wussy. Well, doesn't it? Strange how our prejudices reach every corner of our subconscious and how they suddenly land on paper. As if some chemical process takes place in our fingertips to alter their fundamental structure into black ink. And then, of course, they're absorbed through our readers' eyes and the whole process is reversed.

Cut to exterior shot of the Ford rocking gently at first. Then faster, faster, more and more violently until a scream of utter abandonment penetrates the foam and causes the starlings in the bluegum tree above to flutter up into the air, confused and frightened, yet chattering excitedly to each other about this strange and primal noise.

Cross-fade to a tiny little sperm cell swimming through the primordial soup of that fateful day in my pre-history to attach itself to an egg that would eventually form a human being who would carry within him the sum total of all the histories that crossed paths on *that* day, at the centre of *that* plain, in the middle of *that* sea of foam whose only witness in outer space was a poor little Russian dog who had maybe five minutes of oxygen left.

Talk about a *Big Bang*!