

EXPRESSIONS

SPRING 2002

PINELANDS WRITERS CIRCLE

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A Selection of Stories
Written and Selected by the Members of the
Pinelands Writers Circle

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FOREWARD

“From success you get lots of things, but not that great inside thing that love brings you.”

This from Samuel Goldwyn, famous bright light in the golden arc of US movie production. He knew all about success. And from a man like Samuel, the saying is somehow touching.

Our bouquet of short stories and poems from the 51-year-old Pinelands Writers Circle reflects another “great inside thing” that has a lot in common with Sam’s. It’s the feeling a writer gets when that nebulous initial idea for a story, after having plunged into gross depths of dullness, despair and disenchantment, suddenly springs to life, takes off, and becomes an exciting reality that the creator had never imagined.

Expressions are culled from the competitions that spike up the monthly meetings of the Circle. Assignments include themes like murder, war, sci-fi, the supernatural; topical features; poetry; and a popular but daunting job where each person draws three words — a person, a place and a thing — to use in a coherent story. Daunting? Well, try Vestal Virgin, Gatwick and Fishcake, or what about Pastrycook, Etosha and Koh-i-noor?

For *Expressions*, each author has chosen something from his or her best work, for readers to relish, and perhaps to feel for themselves a touch of that elusive inside magic that delights a writer.

Margaret Williamson
President

INTRODUCTION

On the first Monday of each month a small band of enthusiasts gather at the Pinelands Library. Their purpose? To share their love of creative writing — especially short stories.

At the meeting each member is encouraged to read aloud a given assignment he or she has written during the previous month.

These assignments are then handed, under pseudonyms, to an experienced adjudicator for assessment. These assessments are always constructive and helpful and usually delivered in person. They form a highlight of the meeting.

Each month the top three assignments carry a token cash prize. Some months various floating trophies are also awarded to the best offering of the month.

From time to time a selection of each member's choices is collected into a compilation such as this one.

Do you have a yearning to write? There are currently a few vacancies for members and you need no previous experience of creative writing.

There is no entrance fee but an annual subscription of R50 is currently levied to cover venue hire, postage and prizes.

Raie Rodwell

Holidays Spent
with Aunty Belle

My favourite relation when I was a child was my Aunty Belle. She understood children so well and enjoyed what she called “a jolly good laugh.” When Aunty Belle and I were together we had great fun.

She lived with my grannie until she married in her late thirties. My Uncle Nattie and my Aunty moved into a newly-built house in Lymington Terrace, below De Waal Drive. A few years later when Fawley Terrace was built they moved there.

When we visited my aunt, we travelled by bus along De Waal Drive. At that time there were no houses along The Drive, and, after we got off the bus, we scrambled down to The Terrace between huge boulders. In winter streams ran between the rocks, making clayey runnels. When houses were built along The Drive, the area between The Terraces and The Drive was a great place in which to play.

Among the happiest memories of my childhood are the school holidays spent with Aunty Belle. Her house was small with only two bedrooms, one of which my grannie occupied when she lived with Aunty Belle. I slept on the settee in the living-room which my aunt made up as a bed for me every night.

From the stoep there was a panoramic view of the city and Table Bay. In those days the docks were a busy place and I spent hours watching the activities there through Uncle Nattie’s powerful binoculars.

The early morning air was crisp and clean, pollution being unknown. And it smelt so good, the pine-filled air from Devil’s Peak blending with the air from the city and the sea.

And it was a special sensation to hear the early morning movement of the city below. It made me think of a great dragon, throwing off sleep and slowly, ever so slowly, stirring his great body and coming to life.

When the south-easter blew I wasn’t happy. It was the only blot on those happy holidays. Grit came flying down the mountainside, garbage bins were blown over and their lids went hurtling down the streets crashing into walls. It was difficult for people to keep their balance in those steep streets and they struggled along against the force of the wind. Aunty Belle and I stayed indoors on such days and played ludo and snakes and ladders. We missed our daily walking expeditions. Then the weather would change, and all would be well again.

And where did Aunty Belle take me walking? It was into District Six — not the District of the modern musicals, but the real place, the vibrant, bustling place that District Six was before its soul was ripped out of it.

I am truly indebted to my Aunty Belle for showing me a part of our city which embodied the great spirit of Cape Town. In spite of its shabbiness, its gutters running with scummy water from washing, piles of rubble and decaying buildings, it was a

wonderful place. Wonderful, did I say? Yes, and it was the people who lived there who gave it its vibrant character.

Down Constitution Street we would go to the shops in Hanover Street, between rows of tiny houses and tenement blocks with washing flapping on balconies, in alleyways, along electric pole supports, in fact wherever washing could dry.

Because the houses were small and overcrowded, people spilled into the streets. Women gossiped, laughing loudly, and men played cards, dominoes and even kerem on the pavements. And there were children everywhere. They shouted and laughed and enjoyed themselves. Girls played hopscotch and skipping games, and in season the boys played marbles, threw tops and played a game called kennetjie. We had to be careful that pieces of wood slogged in this game with terrific force did not fly into our faces.

We also had to be careful of homemade go-carts speeding down the streets. There weren't many cars about, but go-carts, horse-drawn carts and barrow boys were dangerous enough to manoeuvre between. But for me it was exciting. I thought of my own neighbourhood with its big houses and landscaped gardens and quiet streets. It was all very grand, but there wasn't the same happiness as here in District Six.

Many people knew my aunt and greeted her by name. The shopkeepers with wares from roomy bloomers and corsets with dangling suspenders to shoes and furniture all displayed on the pavements, knew my aunt.

"Such beautiful wool, I got today, Mrs Solomon," one of the shopkeepers would say, "come and have a look."

"Of wool I got enough," she sometimes said, but being a keen knitter she would mostly succumb to the temptation to buy more.

Vegetable and fruit barrows lined the streets. On the barrows were pyramids of shining fruit and the hawkers shouted humorous slogans like "try before you buy" which Aunty Belle certainly did.

We would go to the Fish Market, and with all the stall-holders shouting at once, it was difficult to make a choice. Some even shouted out recipes for the best gesmoorde snoek and pickled fish. And what persuasive ways they had if you showed interest in anything.

Not all the houses were unsightly. I liked to peep into the well-kept houses with pretty lace curtains at the front windows, highly-polished linoleum and beaded curtains in the passages. And there were often brass bowls or vases on hallstands (now collectors' items) in which there would be frilly ferns or colourful crepe paper flowers.

Often Aunty Belle would pause to admire the plants in tall paraffin tins which lined the stoeps of the houses. She was fond of geraniums and many of the plants in her tiny garden came from slips given to her by the people of The District, who were always happy to share whatever they could.

There were stables where hawkers kept their horses. It was a bonus for me if there were horses in them when we passed by. The men were friendly and pleased to take us into the stable-yards to pat the horses and give them carrots.

We went to the dairies where milk was sold by the jugful as well as bottled, and where Aunty Belle bought delicious unsalted butter, cream cheese made on the premises and fresh farm eggs. We often passed the house of old Mrs. Silverman who kept her own cow. It was a famous resident of The District and I was privileged to meet her.

On Fridays and religious holidays the Malay men wore red fezzes and what a touch of brilliant colour it gave to District Six. On festive days women wore colourful long dresses with matching head-scarves and many of the old women still wore the yashmak. It was like something out of the Arabian Nights and I was delighted to be walking among these people. The call of the muezzins from the mosques was a haunting sound which was especially eerie in the early morning when I was still in bed.

District Six with its steep streets and the wind (when it wasn't too violent) was a great kite flying place. Every man and boy could make wonderful kites with bamboo and tissue paper. Most of them came to grief on the overhead wires where they dangled at drunken angles, and many a child was hurt trying to rescue a kite.

I longed for a kite. One day my grannie gave me a penny (yes, a penny) and from our stoep showed me the house where Mr Arendse, an expert kite maker, lived. I was taken into the front room where there was a tempting array of kites. I chose one with a long many-coloured tail and was asked to put my penny into the shining brass bowl on the hall-stand.

I wasn't a good kite flyer and my beautiful kite did not last long. It was soon a casualty sadly swaying on an overhead wire, where it taunted me until the wind finally released it and carried it away.

Washerwomen with huge bundles on their heads formed a familiar scene. Early in the morning they made their way to the wash-houses on Table Mountain at the side of Platteklip Stream. In the evenings they returned, the linen having been washed in the sparkling mountain water and then sun-dried. Groups of chatting washerwomen going to and from the wash-houses added a special flavour to The District.

On one occasion I had a truly exciting outing with Aunty Belle. She took me to Woodstock beach and the swimming baths there. We walked through The District, over Castle Bridge onto Sir Lowry Road, from where we were at last, on our way to the beach.

What a fascinating place it was — with the docks nearby and Robben Island but a pebble's throw away. Huge ships from distant places sailed by and Aunty Belle and I waved to them. With difficulty she had managed to tuck her billowing skirt into the legs of her bloomers and we paddled in the freezing water.

It wasn't long before she said, "Let's go out now before our feet turn into blocks of ice." We sat on the beach and Aunty Belle unpacked the picnic basket. "Now we can have a good tuck in." And tuck in we did! There were her well-filled sandwiches (doorsteps Uncle Nattie called them), apples and generous slices of fruit cake. Those fruit cakes, into which she put virtually everything she could find in her pantry, were delicious. She uncorked a bottle of orange juice for me and poured tea from a flask for herself.

“Right now,” she said, “this is what I can really do with — a nice cup of tea.”

Woodstock beach and the swimming baths, where I enjoyed such a memorable outing with Aunty Belle, no longer exist. They were bulldozed away for extensions to the harbour.

Aunty Belle was a keen walker. She thought nothing of walking to Kloof Nek and back home, despite being what my mother called well-covered. On one of our walks along De Waal Drive she pointed out the area in District Six, near the Woodstock end, known as The Dry Dock which was notorious for the bad characters who frequented it. When the words, “You are now in Fairyland” joined the graffiti which peppered District Six, I think they adorned a wall in The Dry Dock.

What a sad day it was for me when spending holidays with Aunty Belle ended. As I grew older, my mother considered it not quite the right thing for me to be sleeping in Aunty Belle’s living-room.

My expeditions into District Six were over, and I was heartsore. And the final blow came when, at the age of fifty-six after suffering torturous pain my beloved Aunty Belle died. But she was spared seeing The District torn apart, stone by stone. That would have grieved her sorely. Whenever I travel along De Waal Drive and pass The Terrace, I see a small girl and a plump little lady carrying a red shopping bag walking hand-in-hand through the cobbled streets of The District, and my heart sings with joy at the memory of the happy times I shared with my Aunty Belle.

Jean de Kok

Pay Dirt

It was an edgy Saturday night. Definitely time to pick up a little work. Someone else's problems would be a change as mine were getting a little out of hand. The rent, for instance.

There was a knock at the door. Can't be anyone I owe. They all know the door doesn't even close properly. So I shoved the whiskey bottle into the top drawer and yelled, "Come in!"

Shouldn't have yelled because in walked an old girl clutching a handbag.

"Are you Mike Hammer?" she asked.

Dear God, she wants me to solve a TV murder.

"No, I am not Mike Hammer. I am Mike Hutch."

"Then I have come to the wrong place," she said slyly.

It is not my habit, especially under present circumstances, to turn away what might be an easy buck, so I said, "Mike Hammer is a little busy right now, but maybe I can help you."

I got the idea that she saw through this attempt to be funny but she sat down very firmly and now that she was closer I could see that she wasn't all that old.

"I need you to get my friend Joe Samson out of jail."

"What's he doing in jail?"

"Always bad goings on at Rosie's Place."

What was this duck doing at a flop house like Rosie's?

"Just take your time and tell me what's going on there. Perhaps a little drink would help settle you?"

She brightened at this suggestion and swallowed a healthy slug before you could say Jack Robinson.

"If you want me to get Joe released, you will have to tell me what he is in for."

"He is falsely accused of murdering a dope across the passage."

"Begin at the beginning please," I urged.

"Joe and I both live on the first floor. Me in 123 and him across the passage at 126. We sit in the evenings and check out the racing cards. Joe says I have a great nose for form. And don't turn YOUR nose up when I tell you that he goes around to bars and other places giving odds and placing bets himself at the races. It's a living."

"Does he do OK?"

I stepped back from the line I was taking. I knew his type was not likely to be a winner.

“But how come he gets nabbed for murder?”

She gathered herself together. I waited.

“We were sitting in my room earlier this evening having a few drinks and checking out the races for tomorrow when there was a hullabaloo in the passage. He went out to check what the rush was about. When I recognised police sounds, I chinked the door and saw them carrying a body out of 128, the room next to Joe’s.”

“Maybe it was just a drunk,” I suggested.

“Do they carry drunks out in black bags?” she asked.

”And so, where was Joe?”

“That’s the whole point,” she said angrily, “he was being dragged out of his room and taken away. By the police.”

“Well, the police will sort out what really happened.”

Not that I really believed this. But I wanted her out so that I could beat it to Rosie’s and dig the dirt.

She looked at me with contempt.

“Don’t think I can’t pay for your services,” she said proudly and opened her bag. It was stuffed with notes. It flashed through my mind that if I could get Joe off he could do the same for me on the track.

“You shouldn’t walk around with all that cash on you,” I warned.

“If I didn’t carry it on me, how could I pay you?”

She was getting the better of me again.

“So, Joe left you after he heard the hullabaloo. How long was he gone?”

“Maybe ten minutes.”

“Why didn’t you both lie low and wait for the shenanigans to blow over? And why would little Joe go out to investigate? He was not the kind to look for a fight was he? Did you suggest he go?”

Time for the jugular thrust. “And how did you come by all of those greenbacks?”

The old girl stood up, tipped the cash on my desk, and stormed at me.

“If you think I would have harmed Joe Samson in any way you deserve to lie here bleeding. Take your money and get him off the hook.”

With that she stomped out.

Time to check out Rosie’s but where to hide the money? My office is useless so I stuffed it all into my raincoat pockets, grabbed my hat and made for the door. Didn’t get far. Large slob lurking outside.

“The old dame spent a lot of time in here,” he growled.

“So? What’s it to you?” I growled back, feeling for my holster.

“If I was you, I wouldn’t believe anything she said.”

“Well, you are not me so shove off my doorstep.”

“But,” I added, “seeing as you’re such a know all, who polished off who at Rosie’s Place tonight?”

“Take a little advice,” this goon menaced, “stay out of this unless you want the old girl hurt.”

He slouched off. Not a promising character.

On to Rosie’s where nothing ever changes. Smelly passages. Closed doors. Onlookers have a way of disappearing when there’s been a murder.

Knocked at room 123. No answer so I just opened the door and there she was, lying on the floor definitely dead.

My gut feelings told me that this old girl and Joe Samson were either into or onto something big. I leant over the body. Then someone leant over me — leant heavily on me.

“Out of here!” a voice ordered and I recognised the slob who had been waiting outside my door.

“Out yourself,” I said standing up and giving the roughed-up room the once over.

“When I say out, we mean out!” growled another voice and I realised that we had company. Two more apes from the same jungle. Teaching these guys a lesson would have been a pleasure, but what if the cash fell out of my pockets?

So I made a dash for it, ran into the room across the passage, locked and bolted the door and did some speedy thinking. This room had also been turned upside down and unless I moved fast something similar was likely to happen to me.

Furious banging on the door. Time to jump. I stepped over the sill but noticed that the window of the next apartment was open, so I ducked in. It was pitch dark but my eyes soon organised themselves so that I could make a quick nosey around. Printing equipment, PC. A thick carpet with dark splotches on it. I felt a mark, still damp. Knelt down to smell it, Definitely blood.

Fresh too, but mixed up with another smell. What? The answer came in a flash. Ink! Pity about the carpet.

I would have stayed longer, but there was something unhealthy about this room so I stood at the window, checked if anyone was waiting for me down there and jumped. I made it to the sidewalk in one piece, dived into an alley and headed downtown.

It sure pays to have a friend or two in high places and the super at the 14th Street precinct was an old pal. Not that he was always glad to see me.

“Just don’t tell me what you are doing here at two in the morning Mike. I don’t want to hear a thing.”

“Nice to know that you’re still your disagreeable self,” I countered.

“Usual Saturday Night fever?” I asked. Rick was looking pretty worn out.

“Worse than usual,” he said. “But I can tell it’s going to get a lot worse.”

“Not this time Rick. I’ve been doing you a favour. Checking out the murder at Rosie’s Place.”

“You’ve what?” he exclaimed.

“Heard you booked someone from there,” I said.

“Mike, you are going to get in real trouble one of these days. How did you know we had booked someone?”

“Can’t reveal sources. What about the second murder?”

“What second murder?”

Rick needed some filling in.

“I was at Rosie’s about an hour ago following a lead from a friend.”

“You should find new friends, Mike.”

There was some truth in this, but I let it pass.

“While I was there, I heard that an old girl had been done in. In room 123. The room opposite the one Joe Samson was nabbed from.”

“Can I speak to Joe? Come on. You can be there. I know this is police business but I have a few leads.”

Rick moaned. “Where you lead, trouble follows.”

“Not this time,” I promised.

We sat in Joe’s cell. Looked just like she had said. Just a little guy.

“Can I go now?” he asked. “Edna will be real worried.”

So her name was Edna. Funny, I never thought of her having a name.

“A few questions first,” said Rick.

“Dragging me here for no reason at all,” said Joe bitterly.

“That remains to be seen,” said Rick. “Who is Edna?”

“You leave her out of this,” said Joe angrily, “she’s the lady I am going to marry.”

I didn’t want to look at him as he went on.

“She lives opposite me. We spend our evenings together.”

“What is it you do for a living, Mr Samson?” I asked.

“I’m a bit of a punter,” he said. Real proud of this he was.

“Do any betting for anyone else?”

“A bit — here and there.”

“Always pay your debts mister?” broke in Rick.

“Never owed anyone a cent. Mister.”

“Had any trouble with clients recently?”

“I can’t tell you anything about that,” Joe cried. “I’d get into serious trouble.”

“Mr Samson, you are already in serious trouble. We brought you in for murder. Can’t be anything more serious than that.”

“Murder! You guys are crazy! Why would I murder anyone? The Police,” he said bitterly, “they pin the job on the first person they see. Makes your life easy doesn’t it?”

I drew a deep breath.

“Mr Samson, listen to me. I have some bad news for you. Edna is dead. She was murdered a few hours ago.”

Joe seemed to grow inches that minute. His face contorted but there were tears in his eyes.

“Edna? Edna? They murdered her? I’ll get them for this.”

“Who are ‘they’ Joe? Help us and we will help you to get even. But you better be quick before they get away.”

“There are three loud-mouths living next door to me. Not my kind but every now and then they put a bit of business my way. Meet me in the passage and lay some bets. Large bets too. Always carried a wad of notes. Didn’t seem to mind losing which was often. Yesterday I knocked at the door to pass on some winnings for a change. No one answered so I just opened the door. Lying on the floor was the chap who seemed to work for them. He looked very dead. Wanted to get out of there quick but there were dollar bills all over the place. there was so much dough that you can’t blame me for scooping some up can you?”

“And then, Joe,” I queried.

“I went into Edna’s room and stuffed it all into her handbag.”

“And then?”

“I went back to my room to fetch the whiskey. We always had a drink together. One of the loud-mouths was watching me from his doorway. It made me nervous. So I waited in my room until Edna came by with the fish and chips then we went into her place.”

“Did you tell her about the money?” I asked.

“I didn’t mean to,” Joe sobbed, “but I knew it would make her happy if she thought I had made enough for us to get married and go someplace else.”

“So she thought you had made it?”

“Yes.”

I drew out all the money from my raincoat pockets.

Rick pounced on the pile.

“Where did you get these?”

So I had to tell him the whole story.

“These are forged notes. Lots of them in circulation at the moment. No trace of where they come from.”

The penny dropped. Room 128. The printing machine. The paper. The computer. The thickly carpeted floor.

“No Joe, this is important. Why did you leave Edna when you heard shenanigans going on in the passage?”

“I was scared because I thought I may have dropped a race card on the floor when I bent over the body. Thought I may be able to get back into that room while there was a fuss,” Joe said, tearfully.

“Could you?”

“No. There were too many people gathered around 128 so I went into my own room. Then in bust the cops waving my race card and nabbing me.”

Rick came alive.

“We had better work fast.”

The three of us dived into a police car and were followed by a whole squad. Just in time too. The three bully boys were loading stuff into a small truck at the entrance to Rosie’s. It was a clean sweep.

By four am the three monkeys were behind bars. Their counterfeiting business was now an open secret. And confessions about the murders flew thick and fast as they tried to blame one another. But the truth came out after some persuasion. They had planned to kill their typesetter before they left town. Finding Joe’s race card on the floor was a gift and the police obliged by taking Joe in. But they had to find the missing five thousand dollars so they searched Joe’s room and were busy doing the same to Edna’s when she walked in. One hefty blow had finished her off.

Rick, Joe and I were emptying several bottles of whiskey. Joe would have to pick himself up. My pockets were empty and the rent not paid.

“Anything good in the fourth race tomorrow, Joe?”

Alwyne Todd

Inside Job

"THE LEANING TOWER OF LONDON!" announced the tabloid on Andrew's desk. He glanced casually at the report as he sat down to his first coffee of the day. It seemed that a fault had opened up beneath the foundations of the famous Tower, causing a dangerous subsidence. The venerable structure would have to be closed for at least a year while repairs were attempted.

The cup of coffee stopped halfway to his mouth as a sentence near the bottom of the page caught his eye.

"While the bulk of the Crown Jewels have been moved to the safety of a bank vault, a selection of the more famous items will soon be displayed in Windsor Castle."

Andrew knew that the Crown Jewels were insured by the august and ancient Royal City and Shipping Company - known throughout the financial world as "The Ship". As well he should. He had been on their staff for eighteen years, rising to be their star fraud investigator.

At the helm of The Ship stood Sir Frederick Hardcastle an ex-rugby-league forward who had shouldered his way to the top of the corporate ladder and a knighthood. He was known throughout the firm as "The Guv". Even the tea ladies called him "Guv". He liked that. It bolstered the shoulder-hugging, one-of-the-boys chumminess that masked the ruthless, vengeful tyrant revealed to anyone who got in his way. As Andrew had discovered when he had been fired for contradicting The Guv at a management meeting.

That was a year ago. Before his abrupt departure from The Ship, Andrew had fixed up a job in his department for an old school friend and ex-police detective, James Bolton. He was to meet Jimmy later in the day for a pub lunch - ostensibly for a friendly reunion. What he was really after was a return favour.

At 12.20 pm Andrew closed his office door behind him. Over his shoulder the sign read:

ANDREW LOVEMORE

Corporate Remedial Action

The confidential nature of the business Andrew had started after his dismissal from The Ship demanded a non-specific, low-profile title. He was in fact embroiled in industrial espionage. His latest client was a shipper who had faked the piracy of his own cargo of electronic equipment. He was insured with The Ship and was nervous about the way one of their investigators - coincidentally Jimmy Bolton - had been sniffing around. "Can you sort this out for me, Mr Lovemore?" he had said. "Money is no problem."

Two pints of beer into the lunch and halfway through the steak and kidney pie, Jimmy Bolton furtively slipped a fat envelope into his pocket. "Leave it to me, Andy," he said. "I'll get it sorted."

At 3.30 they were still in the pub.

"So how do you get on with The Guv?" asked Andrew.

"Lovely guy; one of the boys," said Jimmy in a slurred voice. "He must like me because he has roped me in on a big secret project."

Andrew knew that Jimmy Bolton could not hold his liquor - nor his tongue either when he'd had a few. But he was unprepared for the monumental indiscretion that then came from Jimmy's lips.

"For God's sake keep this to yourself," said Jimmy. "It's The Guv's pet project. He'll skin me alive if he finds out I've told you. It's the Crown Jewels move to Windsor Castle. He's going to send an armoured van with half a dozen motorcycle outriders on a high-profile trip through the city. But he's leaked it to the press. It's a decoy to get publicity. The stuff will be already have been transferred the day before in an unmarked bullet-proof Mercedes."

"I suppose they'll be going out along the Embankment," prompted Andrew, who then listened in astonishment as the drunken Jimmy gave him full details of the route. "But what about the traffic?" he probed.

"No problem; we're leaving at five am."

"We?"

"Yes, we. And guess who's driving? Yup, little old me - with three armed heavies for company."

"Jimmy, you've impressed me," flattered Andrew. "And The Guv too by the sound of it. Let's have one for the road."

On his way back to his office, Andrew bought a bunch of red roses and a large box of chocolates. It was the birthday of the current woman in his life. He got off at the floor below his and walked along the corridor to a door marked: MADAM ROSA - Clairvoyant. Rosie Bingham was an attractive, ambitious 35-year-old blonde, married to an older man she did not love. But there were compensations - like the glossy new Aston Martin coupe parked in the basement, her husband's idea of a birthday gift. He had also funded her little hobby as a clairvoyant.

In the six months since he had met her in the lift Andrew had become obsessed with Rosie. He visited her several times a week for a "reading" - which usually took place in the horizontal position on a couch in a softly-lit back room. But, to Andrew, a forty-something divorcee, these clandestine trysts were becoming increasingly tawdry.

He spoke to her of his love, and pleaded with her to leave her husband. But all she said was: "Andrew, you are a sweetie, but I am afraid you could never keep this lady in the manner to which she has become accustomed."

When she answered the door Andrew's pulse quickened at the swelling bosom revealed by Rosie's blue, full-length figure-hugging dress. She took the flowers with a smile, started to kiss him, then drew back, her smile darkening into a frown.

"Andrew, you've been drinking," she snapped. "You know I can't stand the smell."

"Just a quickie perhaps?" said Andrew hopefully.

"In your dreams," said Rosie, almost pushing him out of the door.

Back at his desk, Andrew sat staring at the ceiling.

Andrew had been a disappointment to his father - a successful hotelier.

"Think big, my boy," had been his repeated advice to his only son. But in his heart he could not see the mild-mannered, bespectacled Andrew causing much of a stir in the business world.

"See you tomorrow," said Andrew's secretary as she left for the day. But Andrew did not hear. He remained shrouded in thought. He shifted his gaze to the blank wall opposite as the rumble of homebound traffic slowly quietened. Suddenly he saw it was getting dark. He rose stiffly to his feet. The jewel transfer was due in just eight days. What was it his father had said? "Think big, my boy."

Fine. But how the hell did you get into a bullet-proof car containing three trigger happy thugs?

During his years with The Ship Andrew had encountered a number of shady characters. Over the next three days he enlisted the services of two of them: a car thief and a forger of driving documents. He paid them well - safe in the knowledge that they would keep their mouths shut. He then contacted a small engineering shop, a prop maker and a location scout in the film industry and a lawyer.

Another clandestine lunch with Jimmy Bolton followed on day four - at which he issued his now-willing recruit with certain driving instructions. "And, this time Jimmy," he promised, "you'll need more than an envelope to hold the loot."

That evening he lured Rosie out on their first public outing. Dinner at the Dorchester. Her husband was away on business in Japan. To start the meal he ordered Beluga caviar accompanied by a bottle of vintage Veuve Cliquot. Rosie was impressed.

"What are you up to Mr Lovemore?" she asked. "What are we celebrating?"

"Your next birthday present."

"And what might that be?"

"How about your own executive jet?"

They were interrupted by the waiter bearing Omelettes au Truffles accompanied by a superb twenty-year-old claret.

"You crazy man," said Rosie, leaning across the table and kissing the tip of his nose. "Have you suddenly found a rich uncle?"

"No," said Andrew, "we're going to steal the Crown Jewels."

"Oh sure," she said tucking into the truffles.

He waited until the coffee and cognac before revealing his plan.

"My God, you're serious," said Rosie. "I have to admit it is ingenious. But there's one little snag. How would you dispose of them? Surely they would be almost impossible to fence."

Andrew looked at her over the rim of his brandy glass. "That, my dear, is where Madam Rosa comes in."

Day eight dawned over the Tower with a sullen glow as Jimmy Bolton eased the long black Mercedes, headlights dipped, out under the portcullis. Two burly men sat behind him and a third in the front passenger seat. Each man had a loaded Uzi on his lap. Jimmy gripped the wheel with white knuckles as he steered the Merc, splashing, along the rain-drenched Embankment. Twelve minutes later they were speeding through Chelsea. They took a sharp bend to the left. The wet road stretched ahead empty - the neon street lamps still aglow against the brightening sky. Suddenly a light flatbed truck shot out from a side turning on the right some thirty yards ahead, blocking their path. A man in blue overalls and a black ski mask jumped from the truck's passenger door and sprinted towards them. He was carrying something in his hand. Jimmy stood on the brakes. He heard three click-clacks as the men cocked their weapons. He slammed the gears into reverse and . . . stalled the engine.

The man in the mask reached the car. He placed the object on the bonnet just behind the Mercedes insignia. From the metallic clang it made, it was obviously attached to a magnet. There was no mistaking its purpose. Two cherry pink sticks of dynamite were wired to a small black metal box. On its face was a small red light that was winking at them evilly. The man was halfway back to the shelter of the truck before anybody moved.

"It's a bomb. Run for it," yelled Jimmy as he flung himself out of the driver's door - leaving the key in the lock. In a second all four horrified occupants were rushing back down the King's Road on fear-winged legs. It was a good thirty seconds before, gasping for breath, they dared to stop and look back.

The truck was still there. The Merc had gone.

A kilometre from the scene the Merc turned into a quiet side street and stopped beside a gate in the high wall of a derelict factory. Rosie, now wearing dark glasses in place of the tell-tale ski mask, ran to open the gate. Andrew drove through. In the factory yard facing outwards stood a large pantehnicon. While Rosie closed the gate, Andrew swung the Merc round to face the rear of the big vehicle. He opened the doors, and with Rosie's help, lowered a pair of hinged wheel ramps.

"That engineer did a good job," said Andrew as he drove the heavy car up the ramps into the pantehnicon. They stuffed the blue overalls behind a pile of scrap iron standing against the factory wall. Within two minutes of entering the gate the big truck was threading its way across West London through a maze of minor roads to the sound of fading police sirens.

"You should have seen their faces," said Andrew. "That film guy made a superb job of that fake bomb. Now for phase two."

At Scotland Yard all hell had broken loose. The chief duty officer was on the phone to Sir Frederick Hardcastle. The rudely awakened, red-faced Guv was shouting into the phone. "Just stop all black Mercs. No, you fool, they could not switch

cars. That boot is made of 2 cm tungsten steel. It's like a built-in safe. It would take all day to open it."

At seven am, deep in the countryside, and seen only by a trio of cows, Andrew drove the pantechicon into a hanger on a disused airstrip which, like the derelict factory, had been found by the film location scout. With Rosie's help he removed the seats from the back of the car and wasted no time in getting to work on the armoured steel with a thermal lance supplied by his engineer contact.

Day twelve. The PA entered The Guv's office bearing a piece of paper. The old man was in a bad mood. He was not relishing the prospect of paying out the 15 million pounds for which the jewels had been insured.

"Sorry to disturb you, Guv," said the PA. "There's a woman downstairs who claims to know where the jewels are. She is a clairvoyant."

"For God's sake, George, don't waste my time with that sort of bollocks." "My sentiments exactly," said George, handing him the paper. "But I think you should see this."

"But this is just a crude drawing of some of the Crown Jewels. Look there's the Koh-i-noor and that big pear-shaped one is the Star of Africa. She could have copied these from a book."

"Indeed," said George. "But how did she know which ones to copy? These are the very pieces that are missing. And look at the numbers she's written across the bottom. These are the numbers on the strong boxes."

There was a silence, then: "Bloody hell," said the Guv. "Better send her up."

"One other thing, Guv," added George. "She's got a lawyer with her."

"You want how much!" roared The Guv five minutes later.

"Five million," repeated the lawyer in even tones.

"We'll go to fifty thou, no more," said The Guv.

The lawyer raised an enquiring eyebrow at Rosie. She shook her head.

"You're in no position to bargain, Sir" said the lawyer. "We know the arithmetic. I've drawn up a contract in which the Royal City and Shipping Company agrees to pay my client five million pounds on receipt of information leading to the recovery of the missing jewels. I'll leave you to study it."

"You're aiding and abetting a crime," shouted The Guv as they left.

The lawyer smiled thinly. "Madam Rosa enjoys a wide reputation as a clairvoyant. She assures me that a spirit guided her hand."

The Guv knew a shakedown when he saw it. But the document was watertight. The Ship was required to deposit the money in a trust account before Madam Rosa handed over the information. He turned to his PA. "Call an urgent board meeting for this evening."

The meeting was short. At the end of it the Financial Director said: "Sorry Guv. But she's got us by the short and curlies."
"All right, pay the bitch," growled The Guv. "But keep it out of the press."

After the meeting, The Guv took his PA aside. "Get hold of Max," he murmured. "Set up a meeting at my club tomorrow afternoon".

Max Skorinski was The Guv's secret weapon. He worked for The Ship on contract as a fraud investigator on certain specialised cases. It was rumoured that he had been a Mafia hit man - a rumour supported by his broad New York accent. He sat facing The Guv in a secluded corner of the club drawing thoughtfully on one of the old man's expensive Havanas.

"We're looking at an inside job," said the Guv, leaning close. "Get on to it Max. Start with the driver of the Merc."

A week later, Max got back to The Guv. It was a comprehensive verbal report.

"Well, done Maxie boy," said The Guv. "I knew Bolton was the key. I haven't seen him lately by the way. Where is he?"

"In intensive care. He'll be out in about six weeks. In a wheelchair."

"Excellent," said The Guv. "Now, Max, I don't want these bastards to get away with it. Understand?"

Andrew disentangled himself from a drowsy Rosie and strolled, naked, to the bedroom window. The view across the Indian Ocean from the five star Luxor Hotel, at Manakara on the east coast of Madagascar was superb. Across the palm-fringed, turquoise lagoon the rollers thundered onto the coral reef, sending up huge clouds of spray that lit up like flames in the rising sun. In the four months since the heist, a baffled Scotland Yard had run up against a stone wall. The flatbed truck turned out to be stolen and the pantechnicon, hired on a six-month lease, had not even been missed, let alone found. The loot was safely stashed in a Cayman Island bank account. His connection with Rosie remained unknown to the police - who had lost interest in the case when Sir Fred Hardcastle had announced the recovery of the jewels by The Ship's security branch.

He yawned and stretched, taking a deep breath of the jasmine-scented air. Rosie, warm from the bed, joined him at the window. She smiled as she rested her head on his shoulder.

The crossed hairs of the telescopic sight lingered for eight seconds on Rosie's naked breasts - then moved to the right onto the man's chest. The gunman in the disused lighthouse 200 metres away raised his aim for a head shot. His finger tightened on the trigger. Unexpectedly the woman reached up to kiss the man - who then lifted her up and exuberantly swung her round. The blonde curls at the back of her head moved into the crossed hairs.

Max could not resist it. Two with one bullet! He squeezed the trigger. Humming happily, he deftly dismantled the weapon and fitted it back into its case.

"The Guv will love it," he murmured.

Raie Rodwell

Spider Craft

Last night across my tool-shed door
You hung a shimmering curtain;
Silver filaments shine
Jewel-clear in the morning light.
With pristine precision
You wove your pattern
All through the giddy hours of night.
Now, replete you swing
In the eye of your web,
Relishing further feasts
In the form of tiny mites
Enmeshed in your treacherous trap.
Regretfully, spider, I must break
The strands of your fragile creation.

Skittering round from spoke to spoke
You produced a web of sheer perfection
To trap your prey.
So much skill for such a mean trick.
Some wayward threads would have
Ensnared just as good a feast,
Saving me the guilt of destroying
The fabric of a master craftsman —
A fabric at whose delicacy
And unmeasured accuracy

I stand and marvel.
But, there is work to be done
And tools to fetch.
Forgive me, spider.

Ray Hattingh

The Enigmatic Sea

I had been looking forward to this cruise with the same passion that a drowning man grabs the proffered lifebelt.

The past year had been a long litany of one bothersome relationship after another and I had a jolly great yearning to spend some time in a place where I would be free from my social circle. This cruise seemed to hold the promise of fulfilling all these hopes.

The Obsidian lay heaving gently against the quay-side in the afternoon sun. Small wisps of smoke twirled vertically upwards from her twin funnels, indicating the total absence of any breeze. She was literally brand-new having just completed her maiden voyage.

The Obsidian and the Carnarvon Castle were two of the first passenger motor ships, that is, they were powered by diesel engines instead of the old coal, or oil fired, boilers of the steamships, such as the ill-fated Titanic.

A porter lifted my bags from the Bentley's boot and trundled up the gangway with them.

I bid George a hurried farewell and swept up the walkway in as regal a manner as I could muster. Once on deck I stopped just long enough to give George a peremptory wave and then scampered off to find my digs for the next four weeks.

A cruise liner offers not only the sanctity of the sea but it promises that most private of pleasures, travel. I was relieved and delighted to be accompanying myself as all too often a pleasurable experience shared is a pleasure halved. A shared cabin at this stage would have been unendurable.

Ah, pleasure. The one emotion that really enhances pleasure is anticipation. Take a letter, for instance. The sheer pleasure of anticipating its arrival allows the imagination to conjure up the most exciting expectations, for the imagination is both creative and fulfilling. The imagined pleasures of eagerly drinking in its contents are heightened by the anticipation of its arrival. Alas, too frequently the pleasures of anticipation are dulled by the colder flood of fulfilment and to counteract this state a further letter must immediately be anticipated.

My cabin raised no such feelings of fulfilment, rather of anticipation. It would be both my springboard and my sanctuary during the coming weeks.

I left my bags unpacked and hurried back on deck knowing that George would have left, as was my requirement. I hate farewells. All I ever ask is that you put me on a train or a boat and go away as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. I can then sidle into my new space without the encumbrance of considering another's feelings.

I walked over to the sea side of the boat and found, to my delight, that the Sir John Hunt and the Sir Reginald Baxter were

already attached to the Obsidian, ready to pull her away from the dock.

Tugs are such honest vessels. They earn their keep every moment of the day by being of use and service to both the great liners and the raggedy tramps that venture into the world's harbours to disgorge their cargoes of merchandise, coal and people.

The band on the quayside struck up a tuneful note but I remained fixed to the spot. Soon the water behind the tugs would start churning and the smoke would billow from their funnels as they strained to pull the boat away from the quayside.

Suddenly, two quick blasts rang forth from both tugs and slowly they began pulling the Obsidian into the harbour.

An electric shock of delight ran through me knowing that we were no longer attached to the bollards.

Once in the middle of the harbour I felt a slight rumble as the big ship's propellers began biting into the water. Slowly, regally, she moved towards the roadstead and the open sea.

Once in the roadstead a peremptory blast of her whistle was met by the tugs as they turned to find their next charge.

I could feel her engines and her movement as she gently porpoised in the open sea. My hair was now blowing in the breeze caused by her motion, and I stood transfixed by the beauty and anticipation of it all.

The sky began to darken and the full moon, just above the horizon, was beginning to glow serenely.

"Ahem."

I turned to find a handsome steward standing behind me.

"Pardon me m'lady, I did not mean to disturb your reverie but I am duty bound to offer you a pre-dinner drink."

"Thank you," I said, "I could use a strong whiskey."

"Over here?"

"Yes thank you. It and the sun will go down well together."

He smiled, and was gone.

The whiskey turned my mood mellow and I was easily persuaded to present myself at the dinner table.

Should I ask for a single table? I thought not. Perhaps it would be interesting to observe what mix of fellow travellers I might be allied with.

The fare, as always, was scrumptious. But I must come back to my fellow diners.

Edith Samuels. Here was your classic spinster. She had been saving for forty years for this trip. I strongly suspected that any man that might show an interest in her would be clung to as a limpet does to a rock. She was a legal secretary and spoke in those same guarded terms that lawyers do when they are about to tell you that, though they may not solve your problem, they can, and will, considerably lighten your purse.

Mr and Mrs Anthony and Edith Harris. She was your classic, "Yes Dear," Victorian wife who appeared at a cursory glance to be the ideal puppy dog in the marriage, pandering to her husband's every whim. However, on closer inspection I

sensed a seething, boiling something or other just waiting to get out — or perhaps, even!

Anthony Harris was the answer to the world's every prayer. He knew how to solve every problem from war to water pollution. And he made darn sure that you knew it.

“Good God,” I thought, “I would have throttled the man years ago if I had to see him every day, or even every week, for that matter.”

Captain James Koch was a striking man! Eight years ago he was severely wounded during one of the last battles of the Great War. This had left him with a painful limp but with an unchecked spirit. We were later to learn that his wounds were obtained in such an heroic manner that they had earned him the Victoria Cross.

Eileen Pillington was a slip of a girl, barely out of her teens. Daddy had not approved of her latest suitor's attentions and had whisked her on to this cruise to douse the flames of that romance. She looked as though she needed no more dousing — her fire was certainly not apparent.

The last two making up the eight at our table were a young couple who had left their children with Mum and Dad and embarked on this trip to try and save, or rekindle, their dying romance.

“Good God, yes,” I found myself blurting out, “Children really do place an inordinate strain on any marriage, The fact that so many marriages survive children, without serious wounds to either party, is a miracle.”

Frowns met this little outburst of mine. I smiled inwardly. I felt in a frame of mind to shock my co-diners for I had not been outspoken enough during the past year.

“Sex appears to be inordinately important in most marriages,” I said.

This was greeted with lowered eyes, cleared throats and uncomfortable movements in chairs.

“This being the case, the fact that the frequency of sex drops dramatically after the arrival of children must really strain most marriages to the limit.”

I looked gleefully around the table, silent except for one or two choking on their tea.

With that I excused myself and wandered back up onto the deck.

It was a magnificent moonlight night and some stars valiantly tried to put in an appearance besides the radiant moon. Certainly Jupiter and Saturn were the pride of the planets and there was no dousing the light of the dog star.

“Hello Sally.”

I looked up. “Duncan, whatever are you doing here?” I blurted out.

“Gosh. I did not think that you would feel that strongly about my presence. If I knew, I would not have bothered you.”

“Sorry,” I said smiling and touching his arm. “It's just that I want to get away from all the people I know after the hectic, harrowing year I've had.”

“I understand,” he said.

We agreed to keep our distance.

The next evening I looked forward to dinner as I had not seen my seven companions since the previous night. I always breakfast in my cabin and have a lunchtime snack on deck.

There they were — no doubt wary of me!

“What outlandish, imprudent statements would she come out with tonight?” all but the Captain’s face seemed to say.

I was more at peace with myself and spoke little — but observed my fellow diners.

As the days passed, I noticed little changes in some behavioural patterns.

Every evening Anthony Harris would prop himself up against the bar and regale all and sundry within earshot as to how the world should be run and how foolish those were who actually tried, unsuccessfully, to run it.

Edith Harris began the voyage by sitting in the lounge on her own, obviously thankful for a brief respite from Anthony.

Soon I noticed that James Koch began joining her and that her demeanour changed markedly — her face became alive.

“She really is a striking woman when she lets her dislike of Anthony go,” I thought to myself.

These two became inseparable in the evenings when Anthony was spouting forth and too drunk to notice anything at all.

One night, as I slipped into bed I thought that Edith and James had seemed rather subdued. “Perhaps they both had an off day,” I thought.

That evening I awoke from a dream that I was bouncing on a trampoline. The ship had, in fact, turned into a trampoline. We were experiencing an almighty windstorm and I lay there in the dark relishing the experience and watching the stars flashing to and fro through my cabin’s widely gyrating porthole.

The next morning I found the ship to be like a morgue. Apparently, during the night, two passengers were washed overboard during the strong winds and heavy seas.

I caught Edith sitting on a deck chair staring out to sea.

“Oh Edith,” I said, “What can I say?” for apparently both Anthony and James had been washed overboard.

She looked straight in front of her and started talking. “After thirty years with that rascal I had just begun to realise that I am a woman again — James made me feel alive. Then yesterday I discovered he was gay.”

“Oh no!” I groaned.

“Well, this led to a slanging match and I demanded to know why he had not told me from the outset. As luck would have it, in the middle of this rumpus drunk Anthony appeared on the scene. By this time the wind had reached gale force and had whipped up huge waves on the sea. There we were, just the three of us, alone on the wildly pitching deck.”

“For reasons known only to the male species, James and Anthony got into a huge argument and an almighty scuffle

ensued, right against the railings. Before I knew it the ship lurched heavily and they both pitched overboard.”

“I deliberately called no-one and just sat there watching the sea.”

Gently I took her hands and looked her straight in the eye, “So you got rid of two burdens in one fell swoop,” I smiled.

Her face crinkled into a grin. “Why, yes,” she smiled!

“Sweet, lucky Edith, your secret is quite safe with me — shall we go and have some tea?”

“Oh yes,” she sparkled and off we set, arm in arm — both deliciously free of our burdens — to find the tea trolley.

Denise Bell

The Day Death Fell
from the Sky

Paul giggled as his Dad winked at him and ruffled his hair. No eight-year-old wanted his Dad kissing him in front of his schoolmates, but secretly Paul missed the warm manly smell, the comfortable safe feel of the hug and kiss they had agreed to abandon when he started school.

“See you later alligator!” they both called in unison as each raced off in different directions. Paul’s heart sang as he ran into the noise and colour of his classroom. He loved Tuesdays because it was their night to cook. He and his Dad would make pizza, Paul’s favourite meal, while his Mom sat at the kitchen table and enjoyed her night off. There was always much laughter and chat while his Dad sang Italian songs (very badly) and they talked about their day. This they called their midweek celebration, because once you got to Wednesday, the week was nearly over.

Mohamed Aqa Abdul had been up for hours as he walked a few paces behind his father in the early morning sunrise. The tall thin man in front of him moved with grace and bearing. Aqa, the middle name by which his family called him, tried to emulate his father’s walk. It was his way of showing him how much he loved and respected this hard, silent man. For he knew that behind the dark brooding eyes, this was a man who would give his life for his God and his eight-year-old son.

The sun beat down on the hard dry, dusty earth as they moved along the hostile terrain. He knew it would not be long before they reached their place of work. They were the lucky ones, carrying bundles on their backs like pack mules, enabling them to earn money to buy flour to make bread. Hunger was an unspoken word, everyone had it in varying degrees, but to have a regular income to provide one basic meal a day made them very rich indeed. Aqa let his mind drift to the meal his mother would take most of the day to prepare, in the clay earth oven that was their only cooking facility.

Lindy hummed to herself in the car as her cell phone rang. “Hello” she spoke into the mouthpiece of the hands free device.

“Lindy! Lindy!” Dave’s voice choked out her name and then an awful silence.

“Dave?” “Dave?” she called back as she frantically looked for a place to park the car.

“Lindy there’s been a huge explosion below our floor. The tower’s on fire. I’m trapped on the stair well and don’t know what’s going to happen. The smoke is bad! Lindy get Paul — please take care of Paul...” His voice was anguished and controlled as he spoke. “Darling you are both everything to me. But I think this is bad. If anything happens Richards will know what to do.”

“Dave” she screamed into the phone. “Don’t talk like this I’m coming there now.”

“No Lindy” he screamed back. “Oh my God!Lindy! I don’t believe it. I’ve just seen a plane crash into the other tower!”

The phone went dead and Lindy felt a coldness invade her body. She started the car and turned it around and headed back towards Lower Manhattan and Paul’s school, which was just a few blocks away from the towers where Dave worked.

Paul jerked his head up to search for what had made the muffled booming sound. He turned to the window and saw a huge ball of black smoke balloon out of the tower where his dad worked a few blocks away.

“Oh! My goodness!” his teacher’s voice sobbed out a sound that reached down deep into Paul and planted the first icy cold sliver of fear that he had ever experienced. She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him to her. “Children line up at the door and keep as calm and quiet as you can.”

Aqa leaned forward as his father lifted the smaller of the two loads and placed it on his back. He could feel by the weight that he would be carrying the heaviest one yet and that the walk up the mountain to the Taliban training camp would be a little harder than normal.

“Aqa you are a man.” His father spoke softly with so much pride and love that the warmth of the tone lifted his spirit. “The Taliban will reward us well and we will celebrate with a little extra bread this week. Your mother will also find us a little honey maybe to sweeten our meal.”

His father smiled and Aqa felt his heart leap with joy. He could already taste the sweetness in his mouth.

Everything happened in slow motion. Paul held onto Farieb, his little Muslim friend’s belt, as they were led out into the playground and told to sit down in neat orderly rows. Sirens wailed in the strange silence that invaded the orderly controlled movement of teachers and children as they moved to evacuate the building. Suddenly, a second massive explosion, less muted this time, made them all jump as the second tower exploded into smoke and flames.

“Miss! Miss! ... my Dad works there.” Paul pointed towards the distant black cloud that was rising from the towers that were visible from their position on the playground. “I want to go and find my Dad please Miss.” Paul’s eyes were wide and imploring as he held onto the strange cold emotion that was growing inside him.

“Sit down honey.” Miss replied, her face barely able to conceal her own terror and shock at what was happening all around her. “We have phoned your Mom and she will be here very soon to take you home.”

Aqa listened to the talk as he sat in the background. The adults were very excited as they discussed the events of the last few days. Aqa understood the simple facts about his country’s politics, and the relationship of those politics to the religion that controlled his life.

“Aqa, bring the coffee and serve our friends.” His father’s voice interrupted his thoughts and Aqa jumped up and pulled

the big pot off the fire and moved around pouring the thick black liquid into the cups extended out to him. His father looked up at him as he stooped to serve him and Aqa saw the concern etched deeply into those dark brooding eyes, as he continued to speak.

“The patriots await our answer. The Americans will attack and we must decide if we are ready to assist with the downfall of the Taliban.” His father’s grave tones sent a shiver down his spine.

He had always felt safe with his father, no matter what they faced in the harshness of their lives. They feared and served the Taliban who were both brother and oppressor in the contradictions of their country. His father had told him of the long war with the Soviets, the strange relationship with the infidels whose own beliefs challenged their religious beliefs and way of life. Aqa tried hard to understand all the implications but it was a huge burden on his young shoulders. Only one thing was crystal clear in his life at this time and that was his love for his father, his protector and teacher.

Paul woke up with a start and stared with eyes wide open into the black oppressive night. He tried for a moment to fight off the feeling that he knew would overcome him, no matter how hard he pushed the memory away. But in waves, the unbearable pain invaded his mind and body. He had no concept of grief, no way to understand the emotional and physical emptiness and loss that pressed down on him, with a suffocating weight. A sob, soft and anguished, escaped his lips as a hand reached out and his mother drew him into the warm folds of her body.

“It’s OK baby.” Her voice brushed against his ear as she started to rock him in her arms. “You see it will be OK.”

There were things going around in Paul’s mind that he needed to ask that he needed to know. But he was afraid to ask. He had seen the traumatic footage on TV of the plane flying directly into the Tower. He had seen the Tower where his Dad worked, burning and collapsing in a horrific cloud of smoke and dust. He had been near the Towers when all this had happened and experienced the panic and urgency to escape the catastrophic events around him. He could still remember the taste and smell of the dust and smoke that burned into his lungs, still hear the eerie sounds of the sirens and the winds whipped up by the fires, wailing through the streets. But he could not put the two events together, could not bear to think of his Dad falling in that huge cloud of fire and masonry to his death. So whenever he could, he would sneak off to his dad’s cupboard and sit beneath the clothes still hanging there, and breathe in the smell of his father. And for a short time he could cope as he rocked back and forth and sang and talked to his Dad as if he were there.

Aqa ran doubled over with the sack of bread clutched to his body, so that the Taliban snipers would not see him as he delivered provisions to the rebels hiding in the craggy outcrops in the steep slope of the mountains. He was so proud to be a part of the small guerrilla group his father was leading in this section of the offensive against the Taliban regime. They had listened to the Americans’ bombing throughout the night. Heard the whistle of the missiles as they flew overhead towards their targets. But now it was quiet as the mid-day sun beat down on them sending out heat shimmers that sometimes played tricks on

one's vision, specially when you were very tired from being up most of the night.

"Father I bring you bread." Aqa whispered close to his father's ear as he dropped the sack on the floor and opened it.

"Thank you my little Afghan patriot." His father smiled a rare smile and bowed his head towards his son in a symbolic show of high regard and respect. Aqa felt his heart would burst with pride as he responded with clasped hand and a reciprocal bow.

The exchange between father and son had been a few fleeting seconds but out in the stillness of the terrain, the bobbing of the little boy's head had extended a few centimetres above the rock and disturbed the air. The Taliban sniper saw the flash of movement through half closed eyes and in a dazed state of fatigue reacted by letting off a volley of shots. Suddenly the whole area below erupted in gunfire as the Taliban began their offensive. The patriots, greatly outnumbered, silently melted back into the mountain to send off messages for assistance.

Relief came during the night when American planes came in waves and bombed known locations of the Taliban hiding in the mountains. Aqa lay in a cave with other young boys, guarding the supplies as their fathers and brothers watched from vantage points. The ground shuddered beneath him as an explosion ripped through an area close to where they were. Aqa worried a little as he knew the danger the men outside were in. After what seemed like a long time the bombing stopped and the silence became deafening. His ears hurt from the noise and the smell of dust and smoke invaded the dark cave, as he waited for his father to return.

The movement as the men shuffled into the cave carrying the bundle told Aqa something was not right. His eyes squinted against the torchlight as they laid their burden gently down on the floor of the cave. Aqa saw the serene face of his father, his eyes closed as if in sleep. The cloak wrapped around his body was black with the congealed blood that had flowed from his wounds.

His father had died from an American bomb that had rained out of the sky and meant for the Taliban. All the harshness of his life, the toil, the teachings, the suffering he had endured, had not prepared him for this moment. He reached out and touched the face growing cool beneath his hand, and clutched at his own heart as it froze into a pain so intense that he thought he might not be able to breath, as a sound that he did not recognise, escaped his lips.

Paul held the warm squiggling animal close to his face and breathed in the puppy smell. "I think I will call him Rover, Mom." He smiled for the first time in three weeks as he looked at her.

"Would you like to take Rover over to Farieb and show him your new puppy?"

Paul's face clouded over and he looked away. Farieb was Muslim and the Muslims had killed his Dad. He felt the anger bubble up inside him as he battled to understand what had happened. "No!" he shouted and ran outside with the puppy clutched to his chest.

The sadness invaded him again as he played with the puppy and he turned away as his mother sat down beside him.

“Paul we have to talk, honey.” She brushed her hand through his hair. “What happened will always be a sadness inside us and we will always miss Daddy. But Farieb did not do this awful thing. His religion did not do it. Bad people that share his religion did these terrible things.”

He sat and stroked the puppy as he tried to put together all the things that had changed his life forever. War on TV was not like this. Soldiers in uniforms with guns and jeeps fought other soldiers in different uniforms and the good soldiers always won. How did his best friend suddenly become his enemy? He did not understand any of it except he knew that the Muslims had killed his Dad and Farieb was a Muslim.

“Mom will the sore in here,” Paul placed his hand over his heart “go away?”

“Yes honey, the sore will go away and you will understand better one day what happened but until then, you have to trust me and go to Farieb and share your happiness at having a new puppy with him.”

Aqa moved out of the tent where his mother lay rolled up in her black burka, the long garment all Afghan women are forced to wear, as she softly rocked and moaned in her grief. He looked up at the sky as British and American planes flew over, releasing a rain of parachutes that floated down to earth with parcels attached. He understood his duty, knew that as the eldest son, he would assume the role of head of the home. The shared burden of helping his father work would now fall fully on his shoulders. It was as if his thin, strong straight back had been specially built to carry more and more load. His agony and grief became the rod of strength that he needed to survive, to carry on. His icon, his focus, his mentor, his warmth was no more. There were no more steps to emulate and follow, only an awful emptiness and loss that cast a grey shadow over all his thoughts and feelings.

His hollow empty eyes followed the men and children, as they ran towards the first of the parcels as they crashed to the ground. Aqa knew in his heart that he should do the same, so that he and his family would get their share of the gifts sent by the very people who had killed his father. But he remained rooted to the spot as the white-hot anger surged through his body as he started to purge his internalised pain. For the first time, since the anguished cry had left his body when they had brought in his dead father and laid him before him, Aqa started to scream. “Kill the Americans, kill the Americans!” Tears streamed down his face as he ran forward brandishing the gun that was now his, the only legacy left to him by his father.

Two of the men from his father’s command caught him in mid-stride and carried him off screaming. They took him beyond the camp and set him down and waited for him to stop sobbing.

“Aqa — you are the son of a brave fighter. Your father was killed by the Americans in error. The Americans are not our enemy today. Today it is the Taliban who keep us as prisoners in our own country. They make rules that lead us back into the dark ages. Your father would want you to take the gifts they send. But we must go now before the Taliban come as they will

take all the food and medicine and keep it for themselves. They will shoot us if they see us take it. So we must hurry. Trust us Aqa, you are an Afghan patriot, you are one of us and from us you will learn the strange ways of this world and about war and how it is fought. Come, brave young man, you have a family to feed.”

Nick Trevor

Rosalie

On the shaded stoep the women stopped discussing the Peace and the return of their menfolk when Rosalie Jantzen walked by, her long dark hair brilliant in the sunshine, her footsteps quick and light with the vitality of youth. Her father's cartage waggon rumbled past, raising a cloud of dust, hiding the girl from view, and the women gossiped.

"No better than her mother before her," one remarked.

"Ja, and her grandma," said one of the older women, "took up with a travelling man, one of those smouses that come up from the Cape by train with their suitcases full of fancy notions."

"And then there is her brother," said another of the women, as Rosalie waved at them and smiled, her teeth an even gash of white against her dark skin. She was going to meet her friends at the railway station and wait for the train with the English soldiers.

Usually she made a short detour past the sawmill in the hope of seeing Ben, teasing him, raising his jealousy when the other men stared at her with hungry eyes. Ben thought that they had an understanding but she was not so sure. She was only eighteen, and did not want to get caught in the endless cycle of child rearing — there was Mary Prew, already expecting her fourth, and Anna Koen, a war widow at nineteen. No, she thought as she tripped along, Ben was all right, but he must just keep his ardour at bay for another two or three years. She relented slightly; at least until the war is over, which can't be more than a few months.

News of the English soldiers' arrival had been rumoured for several days, and there was a large crowd of curious onlookers at the station. Rosalie joined a group of her friends; like most of them, she had never met an actual Englishman. There were a few English-speaking families in town, but they had been here for years and usually spoke the Taal anyway.

Ellie Jooste had worked in the cholera hospitals in Bloemfontein and said that the Englishmen she had met were mostly quiet decent men who would rather be back in England with their families. One of the other girls was about to add her circumstantial tale when there was a surge of excitement in the crowd. Mr Buys the stationmaster strode along the platform, puffed up inside his blue uniform, blowing his whistle importantly and motioning the crowd to stand well clear of the tracks. A couple of urchins followed, mimicking his importance.

The engine fussed to a standstill next to the water tower. There were eight waggons and three cabooses at the rear. Rosalie squeezed through the crowd until she would be close enough to see the Englishmen's faces. Several men dressed in shabby khaki alighted. They were plainly exhausted. Their stubbled faces grey with soot and fatigue, their eyes red and

listless. A small ginger-haired man with sergeant stripes shouted them into some kind of order. They stood, kitbags at their feet, rifles at ease by their sides. An officer stepped off the caboose and onto the dusty station. His boots, Rosalie noticed, were scuffed, and his trousers had been inexpertly patched at the knees. The men shuffled to attention, and shouldered their rifles. Rosalie looked at the officer's epaulettes, and realised he was a captain. He looked wearily at the crowd, as though he was expecting someone.

Their eyes met. Rosalie felt a hammer blow in her chest, and her lips parted slightly as her breath forced out. She saw blood rush to his pale cheeks; his eyes widen as if in recognition.

The moment passed. There was a mutter in the crowd as the burgomeester pushed his way through to where the officer was standing. He made a speech of platitudes welcoming the garrison. Rosalie did not listen. There was nothing in her world except for the English officer. Time stood still. The officer started his reply to the burgomeester; his voice scratchy with exhaustion. His name was Captain Carstairs. He faltered, his eyes seeking Rosalie's as though to draw strength from them. He had come as part of the Reparation and Compensation Committee to hear claims. He read a prepared speech about the honour of doing one's duty for your country, and that duty being done, of going home.

It was a formula speech, but Rosalie drank in every word.

The captain saluted the burgomeester, and the men marched off. Rosalie did not take part in the excited chatter of her friends, and when she passed the group of women on her way home, one of them remarked that it looked as though the girl had seen a ghost.

The soldiers were housed in the school. For several days Rosalie dreamed and stood at the fence watching the soldiers as they strutted and wheeled under the watchful eye of the sergeant. There was no sign of Captain Carstairs. She practised her English at home and after a week felt confident enough to ask the sergeant what had happened to the captain. He looked at her, his gingery hair a-bristle, and his eyes protuberant blue.

"Well," he said in a peculiar singsong accent, "the Captain is billeted elsewhere, isn't he, just up the road at the house of Dr Veldsman."

Rosalie's heart lurched. Dr Veldsman lived in a huge house in the best part of town and, more importantly, had three daughters, all beautiful and of marriageable age. Their mother, it was rumoured, was waiting for the right man, a professional, well educated, wealthy man. An English officer, thought Rosalie, her face a puff of dejection, would suit that requirement perfectly.

She walked past the sawmill, oblivious of the good-natured chaff of the men and of Ben's sheepish grin. Down the street and past the Veldsman house. Across the shadow-sprinkled lawns Rosalie heard the tinkle of laughter. The Captain and the girls were idly lobbing a tennis ball back and forth. The Captain stopped and stared across at the street. In answer to his

enquiry, Rosalie heard herself dismissed as the carrier's daughter. There were some muttered remarks and then quite distinctly, "Really, Charity, that is not a nice thing to say!" Once again the tinkle of laughter, but with none of the deeper undertones from the Captain. A dog barked at the Veldsmans' gate and Rosalie, realising she had no excuse to offer, turned and walked back. She heard footsteps behind her and an insistent voice saying "Miss, please stop — I'm sure they didn't mean to be rude!"

Rosalie turned. Captain Carstairs stood behind her, a gentle self-deprecating grin on his face. Rosalie felt the blush almost from her shoulders. She felt herself sway slightly and wished that the ground was soft enough to swoon gracefully. She gazed at the Captain and their eyes locked. An eternity seemed to pass, broken by one of the Veldsman girls calling out crossly that it was teatime.

"You must go," said Rosalie, "back to your world."

"I can't," said the Captain, "without knowing when I can see you again."

"Behind the English church," Rosalie's voice was a husky murmur, "after matins — there's a bench under the jacaranda trees." She longed to touch him, hold him, and keep him by her forever. She turned and ran, light as a spirit whilst he turned back to the garden filled with the heady scent of wisteria and flirtatious young women.

On Sunday morning the English church had never been so crowded, Reverend Berry thought, and it was not to hear him, but rather to see the English soldiers who were sitting in carbolic shiny embarrassment near the front. There seemed to be a preponderance of young women in the pews, some like the Veldsman girls, visitors from other churches, and others, like the pretty dark girl in the aisle pew, he had not seen before. Reverend Berry had taken the precaution of choosing well-known hymns and was pleased with the loud albeit discordant enthusiasm of the singing.

After the service, he stood at the door, greeting the townspeople as they trooped out into the harsh sunlight. The burgomeester with his chains of office, several of the leading shopkeepers and businessmen, the attorney with his family, the Veldsmans. After them queued the more humble townsfolk. The pretty girl shook his hand with a touch as dry and gentle as a butterfly's wing. She was last in line before the soldiers.

"I hope to see you again, Miss -?" he said, already glancing at the officer standing behind her.

"Jantzen, Sir, Rosalie Jantzen," she said. Her voice surprisingly firm and bold.

She passed on, watching the Veldsman girls settle in their carriage.

Reverend Berry spoke to the soldiers; Captain Carstairs watched Rosalie as she sauntered down the path past the small cemetery.

"Good looking girl, Sir," muttered Sergeant Blunt, "touch of the tarbrush, though, I wouldn't wonder." The Captain appeared to ignore the remark, and ordered the sergeant to take the men back to barracks, adding that he would walk to the Veldsmans' house.

Rosalie was sitting in the deep shade of the jacarandas. She turned towards him, her face dappled in the purple shadow. "Miss Jantzen, " he said, in a husky whisper.

She smiled up at him and moved, making space for him on the narrow bench.

He wanted to tell her so much, about how his thoughts were filled with the brief image he carried from the railway station, and all that he had read into their brief conversation outside the Veldsman house. He longed to touch her, even to remark on the faint sheen of perspiration on her upper lip. He looked so young, she thought, so dashing in his crisp uniform. She reached out and touched his hand. "Rosalie," she whispered.

The following week the ordnance for the small garrison arrived. Captain Carstairs took the opportunity to tell the Veldsmans that he would have to move to a permanent billet. The girls were disappointed. They had all, to varying degrees and to each other, decided to seduce the young man. He was flattered by the attention but unable to keep the image of Rosalie Jantzen from his mind. Sergeant Blunt arranged the removal of the goods from the station to the school. He mentioned to James Jantzen, the carter, that the Captain would be looking for officers' quarters, nothing fancy, just a small cottage for the two officers, quite close to the school.

"I know just the house, Sir," said Jantzen, "nice little place, with an orchard at the back, and furrow water; happens it is not far from my own house."

The Captain approved the choice. It was, as Jantzen said, an unpretentious, pretty place, the sort of house that the head gardener on the family estate would occupy. There were two bedrooms, an office, and a larger room for the mess. A forlorn stable stood in the orchard. Captain Carstairs supervised the off-loading of his gear, a fold-up canvas bed, a canvas basin and kit box in his room, and in the mess some campaign chairs and the large table that he had carted all over the country.

"I'll send one of my girls, Rosalie, over later on," said Jantzen, "you just tell her if there is anything you need, and I'll get it for you. She can clean the place up as well, Sir," he added.

"He's a good man, Captain Carstairs," said Sergeant Blunt, not unkindly, to Rosalie when they next met. "He won the Victoria Cross, you know; bravery beyond the call of duty. You can't ask for better than that in a man."

"He's never told me anything about the war, " said Rosalie. They had not spoken much about the past or the future — the present was too precious.

"It's over now," said the sergeant, "best not to talk about it."

They had the cottage to themselves as Lieutenant Morrison was out in the district examining possible claims. Rosalie had her dreams of a future that encompassed the cottage and Captain Carstairs, but she never spoke of it. The house became known as the Captain's Cottage, although there were those who walked past with almost averted eyes and whispered about the goings-on in That Place

One day Sergeant Blunt appeared at the door and held a muttered conversation with the Captain. He saluted and left, and Captain Carstairs turned to Rosalie.

"Wonderful news — we're being sent home," he exclaimed.

She stared dry-eyed as he spoke of his duty to the regiment, and of Home, a place in which dark-skinned girls, no matter how loving and pretty, had no place. Then he turned his attention to packing his kit. She did not tell him of her own momentous news, news that the gossips who sat in their shadowed stoeps had already divined.

One of her father's waggons rumbled up the street. Sergeant Blunt clomped into the house and stood awkwardly at the door of the bedroom. "Transport's waiting, Sir," he said. He looked with compassion at the small figure on the bed, "Goodbye, miss, and good luck!"

The Captain was silent. He walked slowly over to Rosalie and grasped her shoulder in farewell. At the door he turned and looked round the little room. "Oh, I won't need the table, it's too big — you might as well keep it."

From the shadows the women watched in silence as the Captain rode along the dusty street. "Poor girl," said one eventually, with the sympathy of unnumbered generations of women behind her. "She had best marry young Ben, and we'll say no more about the English officer."

As the dust settled behind the waggon there was a twitter of agreement. "What English officer?" asked one, and then they turned their attention to the forthcoming marriage.

Stewart Finney

Andrew

The first time I saw Andrew he was sitting on the pavement with his feet in the gutter, munching a thick slice of bread and peanut butter which he had just dipped into a jam tin of steaming hot tea. It was outside our local church which ran a charity outlet to help those in distress and provide what little they could to soften life's hardships. It was a cold morning and I was on my way to work. I continued on my way when a thought came to mind. My wife had asked me to ask around our friends if they knew of a man who could help us with the gardening once a week. It was not a very large garden and was already established, but it needed fairly consistent work to keep it in shape. Work commitments meant that neither of us had the time we would like to have spent to keep the garden tolerable.

This man seemed at first sight to be someone who might fill the need. I retraced my steps and asked him if he needed work but that it would be only for one day a week. He stood up, took off his hat and nodded tiredly. "Yes master, I want work." I asked him for his papers and he showed me a scruffy piece of paper. It was an official document naming him and saying that he was Rhodesian but had permission to work in South Africa.

He told me he had been doing gardening work in the area but the people had moved away. He dug out of another of his pockets a second page of paper which turned out to be a reference written by his previous employer. It stated that Andrew had been in his service for three years, had proved to be a conscientious worker, was utterly honest and that he was sorry that he had had to be discharged due to his moving to Natal. The writing was an educated hand and the telephone number of the person was included.

I asked him how old he was and he shook his head and said that he didn't know. I put him down at about thirty but it was hard to tell. "Can you be here at five o'clock today when I come home?" I asked.

He nodded, Yes master. "Fife o'clock, here, today. Thank you master." Having had previous dealings with some of the itinerant workers I wondered if I would ever see him again.

But there he was as I passed the charity kitchen on my way home. He had managed to smarten up as far as his threadbare clothes would allow and he half smiled as I approached. I think that he too had wondered if he would ever see *me* again. I had telephoned my wife from the office and told what I had done. She was sceptical of my action, having also experienced fly-by-nights in the past but was willing to meet Andrew.

We walked home together and I probed a bit into his past. He came from near Plumtree, not far over the Limpopo River, our border with Southern Rhodesia, where he had a smallholding and a couple of cows. Times were hard there, no work and

very little food. He had come south to try to find work so that he could send some of his pay home to his wife and two children.

On arriving home I introduced him to my wife who shook his hand gravely. “Would you like some tea and a sandwich?” she asked. “Yes madam, please.” It arrived so quickly that I knew that it had all been prepared. As he was eating, she quizzed him, for she would be the one to make the final decision. She asked about his family, his current lodgings, his previous employer and work. At the end of it she looked over to me and nodded. “I don’t think there’s any need to wait for one of our friends to come up with someone. What do you think?” I just nodded too.

Andrew seemed pleased with the salary offered and smiled gravely when she said, “If we are both happy in two months, I’ll increase your pay.”

The next morning he arrived in an old suit of overalls and little did we know at the time that thirty years later he would still be with us. And what a blessing he turned out to be. Very early on we realised his worth and recommended him to our friends who snapped him up, only cutting the ties if they moved too far away.

He had green fingers and quite often shook his head when either of us suggested a particular plant, patiently explaining why. In the early stages his hesitant English left a lot to be desired but over time he became quite articulate. We arranged for him to join a literacy course run by the church but he dropped out after a few lessons, preferring to get along as he was.

He had his own brand of the English language. A friend had borrowed my spade and the only other I had had been worn down to a heart-shaped six inches. He was digging a hole for a rose and after a while stopped, wiped his forehead and said, holding it up, “Hau, master — Teaspoon!”

In many ways he was a long-suffering man. On one occasion the Manager of the company for which I worked and his wife were coming to dinner. For this occasion we asked Andrew to serve at table. He was extremely reluctant but, after some cajoling, and egged on by our domestic science trained maid, he eventually agreed so we had a rehearsal the evening before. He was bemused at many of the “mlungu’s” ways and was more than put out at having to wear a white jacket and white gloves, and putting the plate onto the table from the sitter’s left and removing it from the right side, a point discussed at some length and shaking of head. On the night he visibly had the jitters but came through with flying colours, only becoming embarrassed when complimented by the Manager’s wife. I subsequently discovered that the two wives had got together prior to the evening and were covering for each other!

There were times when the children grazed their arms and knees and would go sobbing to Andrew, who would stop what he was doing, pick them up and carry them to a tap where he could wash away the dirt and blood. He also was arbiter in the little squabbles that arose from time to time between the children.

However there came the time when we, too, moved away from Johannesburg and we had to release Andrew. It was a sad

day for us all because, although we had found work for him, it was like parting from a good friend. One could see from the children's faces and the way they clung to him as they said goodbye that they too were going to miss him. Andrew was on the verge of tears.

We exchanged addresses and would telephone periodically to friends on the day he worked for them and so kept in touch.

After about five years I was transferred back. We bought a house a few miles from our original house and then of course had to find a gardener, because Andrew was fully employed. On occasions he would pop in on the way to work and surreptitiously advise us on the rights and wrongs of our current gardener, sometimes with a disparaging remark in his broken English, but also to give credit where credit was due.

Then one day a friend contacted us to let us know that the family was emigrating and that Andrew was available. Great was our joy.

The second time around was almost a carbon copy of the first. When we moved house again several years later it was within his circuit area and he stayed on.

It had always been accepted that he took off a month over Christmas and New Year to return to his home in Zimbabwe, as it became. One year, however, he informed us that his wife and children were going to her folks in Malawi for the festive season. As we were going on holiday we offered him the choice of joining us. He confessed that he had never been to the seaside and was a little frightened of the sea as, he said, "My friends they say the sea it is big," opening his arms wide, "and can get very cross sometimes." We assured him that we would take care of him and he said he would like to come.

The great day arrived and he helped pack the stationwagon, his own belongings hardly taking any space. His travels to and from Zimbabwe by car and rail had made him a seasoned traveller so there was little to point out to him on our journey. However, the children delved into the bag of games we kept for travelling and Andrew was included in those which were within his capability, such as snakes and ladders.

On our arrival at the hired cottage late in the afternoon we all unpacked and he investigated his room in the outbuildings. Only one thing worried him and he routed around for some bricks to raise his bed higher — for the "nyoka", the snakes — which he had been told were still around.

The next morning, bright and early we drove along to the beach and his eyes grew wider and wider as we dropped down into the parking area. "Hau, madam, too much water," as his eyes went to the horizon. "Where does it go to?" One of the children said "To Australia" but that was beyond his understanding.

We had bought a pair of swimming trunks for him and he was somewhat embarrassed wearing them until the children told him he looked great. He went with them to the water's edge but retreated smartly when the waves lapped towards his feet.

Again it was the children who helped him over this hurdle and he remained paddling while they swam.

“The water it is salt,” he said. “The other master used to bring for me the sea water in a bottle when he came from holiday. It was good muti — for my stomach. I take some home as well.”

He helped to build sand castles and chased after the freebies but was happiest up on one of the rocks just staring at the sea and its constantly changing waves, his eyes roving around restlessly.

The children each had a small fishing rod and would go off to the lagoon to try their luck. One of them lent Andrew his and showed him how to cast the line. There was great excitement when, at his second attempt, he hooked a fish. With the shock of the strike and the vibration of the rod Andrew became more and more terrified, which wasn't helped by the different advice each of the children was offering. “Keep the line tight!” “Wind it in.” “Lift the front of the rod” “No. basie, you take it, please!” “Aikona!” “Please!” By sheer fluke a few moments later a one pound mullet lay flapping upon the sand and Andrew was as exhausted as if he had fought a sailfish for several hours. “Hau, master,” he confided to me later, “I am too fright!” but his eyes were shining brightly and he gave one of his rare grins. For him it was one of the highlights of the holiday. Of course he had to be photographed and we still have a copy on a table together with our family photographs.

The holiday came to an end and shortly thereafter our association with Andrew did too for we were leaving for Cape Town for good. It was a sad parting from so special a friend who had become a very real part of our family. We saw him comfortably settled with a good pension and in work with another of our friends. We still keep contact but it was the end of a wonderful era.

Stewart Finney

Let Us Spray

This whole issue came about after I was sent some comments by a friend of mine, one of which intrigued me.

“Why do we wash bath towels? Aren’t we clean when we use them?”

I was watching TV at the time I read his e-mail note and what was on the screen at that moment led my thoughts towards something rather more basic than bath towels — toilets.

I have often asked myself, has anybody actually died or become ill as a result of not using a toilet cleaner, spray, cake, what-have-you, in the lavatory bowl? No, I’m quite serious. I am no trouble maker but the thought has crossed my mind on occasion and I was simply wondering whether anyone else out there in the wide blue yonder had ever been troubled with the same thought.

The ads on TV and over the radio and staring one full-face on the advertising hoardings all lead me to think that I am in imminent danger of contracting some horrible disease which will end up in my certain demise after a prolonged period of excruciating agony.

I think of the long drops still in use in many places today — and not a thousand miles away from here either. I can’t recall seeing any statistics as to fatalities arising from being that sort of squatter. They were never mentioned during any of the Parliamentary debates or even in Hansard. Deaths from Aids, malaria, TB — Yes. These are all meticulously recorded by diligent officials. But from long drops? Nary a word. Utter hush.

How on earth could one use a spray on one of them, anyway? It would take lots of scaffolding and safety net in place before starting. And then at least a dozen canisters for the timber throne alone. And from what I know about long drops, one of the central ideas is to have certain bugs proliferate in order for them to function properly.

Just imagine the effect on these bugs of the newfangled killer squirts, as quoted by one squirter, “Kill them stone dead!” I envisage little heaps developing, then hillocks, then full-fledged hills and, eventually, mountains of you know what resulting from the AARRRGHH of the mortally poisoned noo-noos. It absolutely beggars description.

In the dim and distant past the so-called bucket shift toured the lanes of the suburbs in the dark of night and in my mind I can still hear the shouts “BUCKET! BUCKET!” as they thumped at closed back gates and corrugated iron fences. Underground at the mines I think it was the prerogative of members of the Shangaan nation. The last thing either would have thought of was a squirter or spray as they trundled their nocturnal way past backyards or through underground caverns.

It has been said, and I have found it to be true in my case, that the sense that can evoke memories more than any other is

that of smell. Once while walking along a street in our largest city there wafted to me a particular odour and immediately I was transported back into the kitchen of my grandmother in Ireland. It was the smell of peat, used for her fire. I was six years of age at the time and sixty, seventy years later, there it was and there I was too.

To continue. There was a special, cloying smell around these nocturnal activities which resulted from the use of a particular fluid which by some quirk of chemistry could also be used most successfully for the cleaning of motor car engines. I know this for a fact, for I have used it to good effect (applied neat and later hosed down with water) on innumerable occasions. Again I have not heard of any casualties resulting from the aforementioned night-shift job. From scraped hands and legs perhaps but not from the innards of said buckets. However, always aiming to be magnanimous in the interests of free and fair discussion, I am prepared to concede that it could have been this fluid which went a long way to warding off the spectre of sickness and death.

One powder, certainly (which found its advertising catch phrase being adopted by the Allied forces of WW II to refer to someone who was mentally unstable) when appropriately spread about and left to do its stuff for about twelve hours, fulfilled the task of returning the toilet bowl to its pristine glory while temporarily sterilising the innards thereof. However, after a few flushes this was no more. I am still firmly of the conviction that it is used by most people only to make the whole shebang appear pretty to the eye rather than on the grounds of twenty-four-hour-a-day, three-hundred-and-sixty-five-days-a-year hygiene.

I pose the question. Suppose you never used any of the advertised unguents. Would your personal illness and/or mortality rate increase? I have very seldom used anything to make the bowl free from germs and then usually as a line of least resistance from some visiting character who has been astounded that I have lived so long without it, or when I have been given it as a rather pointed birthday gift from a brainwashed mind, yet I have survived this battle for ten years over my allotted three score years and ten. Will it all suddenly gang up on me in my declining years?

Now that I really come to think of it, in all my years of going to doctors, be it for investigation or periodical medical check-ups, general as well as for sixty years of flying as a pilot, never once has he/she EVER said to me, "HOW'S YOUR TOILET? IT CAN KILL YOU, YOU KNOW!" Followed by, "To be quite safe I'll give you a prescription. Spray three times a day after meals before going. If you get no better I'll refer you to the specialist I consider one of the best in his field. Wonderful credentials he has. F.R.C.W.C. — Fellow of the Royal College of Water Closets."

There must be a lesson in here somewhere.

I wonder if the whole thing is not a gigantic conspiracy, frightening in its very thought and size. Perhaps the number of casualties from loos is so huge as to force Government and Health Authorities to lay down a smoke screen to hide the awful truth from ordinary citizens like me. As in Science-fiction movies where the baddies cover their faults or intentions by brain-

washing the entire population using radio, television and newspaper advertising.

Perhaps they have made use of that forbidden technique, that of subliminal messages on TV. Those are the ones where the words flash past so quickly that the eye doesn't register it but the brain does. Like "Drink Dassist's Dop." It doesn't register except that you suddenly have this craving and an urge to nip out and buy a case of Dassist's.

Of course, in all the considerations I have mentioned above, I have been looking only at the South African scene. I hasten to draw to your attention the fact that this scourge of toilet trouble is, of course, a world-wide phenomenon.

A certain exception would be large areas of the African continent where a toilet bowl has never been part and parcel of millions of homes. The open veld, or whatever it is called in the local area concerned, meets the basic needs of this type of toiletry. In fact the term squatter as applied in South Africa has a vastly different meaning for many parts of the Dark Continent. Generally speaking, I should think that the air gap between the person's one end and the end product itself is enough to absolve the participant of the necessity for a spray.

Putting aside this aspect, the South African state of affairs is, in a sense, but a microcosm of the international whole. In which case the conspiracy of silence must mean that we are already in the Sci-Fi realm. **BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.** And we don't even know it!

Or am I just being naive?

Nick Trevor

Goodbye Dolly Gray

For the last half-hour of the Sunday afternoon entertainment, the band of the 75th played songs adapted from the verses of Bloemfontein's most celebrated civilian visitor, Mr Rudyard Kipling. The concert started with *The Road to Mandalay* and progressed with *Boots* and *Danny Deever*. For the finale, however, the crowd insisted on the tune that the troops had made their own, *Goodbye Dolly Gray*.

The ornate cast iron of the bandstand was painted green, and the woodwork was oiled teak. The afternoon sun glinted on the tubas in the back row of the band and caught the attention of a dark-haired young woman dressed in black save for her white pinafore with its large red cross. It was the end of April 1900, and six weeks earlier Field Marshal Lord Roberts had accepted the surrender of the capital of the Orange Free State without a shot being fired.

"Did they march all the way from De Aar blowing those?" she enquired of the young man in the wicker wheelchair. Her English, thought Trooper Will Harriman, was almost faultless, but her accent was as flat and broad as the country she lived in. He smiled up at her.

"It's only five hundred miles," he said, with an exaggerated shrug, "little more than an afternoon stroll."

"Trooper Harriman, you are teasing me!" She smiled down at the young man. It was difficult to regard these Tommies as the enemies — most of them were no more than boys, lonely, frightened and homesick. When the dysentery had first appeared in Bloemfontein, Hester had been angry with the English for taking Bertus from her, but then she recognised the soldiers as hardly older than schoolboys who knew that they would die ignominiously far from home. She volunteered and had been assigned to No 10 field hospital. Four men had died on her first day, messy, smelly deaths that had made her retch. It had been a terrible introduction for her and it did not take her long to realise that she would not be able to develop the tough but compassionate skin that the professional medical staff insisted be worn when dealing with patients.

She looked down at her charge; he was so thin and pale, and hardly older than Bertus. They had both been casualties at Paardeberg. They could have sighted each other down their rifle barrels.

"Are you all right?" she asked, bending over him. He smelt the starch of her pinafore, and the warm, clean scent of eucalyptus soap. He looked up at her. Her eyes were grey beneath heavy eyebrows and her face was freckled and full. A nice, comfy young woman, he thought, so different from the porcelain fragility of Megan Evans. He felt tears of self-pity well up and film his eyes.

Estelle looked down at him with concern. He reached out from under the light blanket and touched her hand briefly. "It's

nothing," he said.

She knelt on the grass next to the wheelchair, so that her face was on a level with his. "You're not with the regiment now, Trooper Harriman." Her voice was low, almost a whisper in the singing crowd. "I won't tell anyone if you cry." He held her hand, tightly, until his moment of weakness passed. He looked past her at the bandstand and the antiquated cannon mounted nearby. A couple of boys were balancing precariously on the barrel, as they marched to the beat of the drum.

"Thank you, Nurse van Waardhuizen."

"Estelle, please — I've told you before my surname is too Dutch for musical Welsh tongues." A month ago she had never heard of Wales; its dark valleys sinister with smoke, and the chapels where men sang with the voice of angels. He was such a boy, this Harriman, his ginger moustache little more than a paint lick across his lip.

"Well, then, you must stop with this Trooper Harriman. Call me Will, like they do at home."

A shadow fell across them and Estelle looked up at an officer, a dark, dapper man whose uniform, although sun faded was freshly laundered and pressed, the trouser seams knife-edged and shiny with starch.

"Ah, trooper, fraternising with the locals, are you — good — good. Afternoon, miss, allow me." He held out his hand for Estelle to steady herself as she stood up.

"Good afternoon, Sir." Will's voice was sharp, with none of his usual lilt. He tried to rise, but the pain in his chest was too great.

The captain gazed at Estelle, his protuberant eyes stripping her of her clothing with the ease of peeling a banana.

"Recovering well, are you, with the help of the ministering angel?" He smiled toothily. "Leg was it?"

"No, Sir. My chest."

"Clean wound? Lucky. Some of these beggars use soft nosed bullets; makes the exit point look like a bloodied cauliflower. Well, must get on — looks like it could be coming on to rain." He nodded to Harriman, bowed slightly at Estelle and was lost in the crowd.

He was not the only one who had noticed the dark clouds blow up from the south. The bandmaster tapped the podium and the band stood for the final chorus:

Goodbye Dolly I must leave you

And I must sail away

You'll be in my heart forever

Goodbye Dolly Gray.

The crowd dispersed quickly, mindful of the suddenness of the autumn downpours. The bandsmen packed their instruments with practised ease and marched off to their next appointment at the Town Hall.

Estelle fussed with Will's blanket.

"Look," said Harriman. He nodded, pointing with his chin. A small grey man on a large white horse watched the departing troops from the edge of the Town Square.

"That's Bobs," said the young man, awe-struck.

Estelle glanced across as the horseman wheeled away. "I know; Field Marshal Lord Roberts, I saw him lead his army into town. He looked so tired and so sad; I felt sorry for him when I should have been sorry for our own people. Oh, goodness, we must hurry."

The rain blew across the square in a gusty squall. The nearest shelter was the bandstand, and it was towards this that Estelle pushed the wheelchair, turning it deftly at the steps and bouncing it up into the deserted shelter.

"These storms don't last long," she said, pulling off her bonnet and shaking her long dark hair loose. The rain blew in around them, beating at the wooden roof and making the duckboarding of the floor slick. Estelle pulled the wheelchair to the centre of the bandstand. She picked up a sheet of music dropped by a departing bandsman.

"Do you have your own Dolly Gray?" she asked, smiling, and immediately regretted her question. The young man's lips worked and his eyes filled with tears. She knelt next to him, oblivious of the cold planks wetting her pinafore. "Oh, Will, I am sorry," she said, producing a handkerchief and wiping his tears.

Will held her hand — it was so warm and soft, and so far away from the heat and fatigue of the march and the nagging doubt that he might never recover.

"In my tunic pocket," he muttered with the ghost of a smile, "left side, behind the cigarette tin that protects my heart and Her Majesty's property, as the sergeant-major says."

The letter was written in a round looped scrawl that meandered across the page. The message was clear; Megan Evans was walking out with the grocer's lad, and Will's ring and other things were returned to his parents' house.

"Poor Will," said Estelle, "did you love her very much?"

"We were going to get wed as soon as this little lot is over. We'd been going together for almost two years." Harriman was silent, then looked across at Estelle. A ray of late sunshine, breaking through the clouds, turned her normally cheerful round face into a shadowed mask. "Here, miss, you're shivering. Take my blanket."

"No, Will, I'm not cold. Like you, I'm just trying to put my memories behind me. Come, the rain is letting up and I must take you back to the hospital." She was about to stand up when he gripped her arms. "Tell me, Estelle, if it will ease you."

She leant forward, burying her face in his shoulder, and the wheelchair shook with the intensity of her sobs. She told this stranger things she longed to share; how Bertus proposed to her whilst they were standing on the steps of the bandstand, of the antagonism of her parents; but mostly she spoke of Bertus himself, a big, clumsy, gentle boy. They were married two weeks

before he rode out on his first, and last, commando.

"He was like a small boy," she sobbed, "so energetic and enthusiastic about, well, everything."

Will said nothing, listening to this simple, foreign girl. They looked at one another, each seeing someone else as slowly, imperceptibly, they found themselves in a position that they swore they would undertake with none other than their beloveds.

The rain eased to drizzle, the light faded, casting the shadow of the bandstand past the cannon and across the trampled grass of the town square. Sitting upright on his horse in the gathering dusk the old General stared into the gloom of the bandstand. He was thinking of his only son, killed less than six months ago in a meaningless skirmish and already no more than a statistic of war. A slight cry broke the soft sibilance of the rain, and the old warrior grinned, realising for the first time the drama that was being enacted not ten yards from where he sat.

He clicked his horse into a trot. He had seen so much pain and death, he thought, and yet this was the first time he had witnessed union. At the entrance to the square he paused for the corporal of the watch to open the gates.

"There's a wounded man with his nurse at the bandstand," he said, returning the salute, "sheltering from the rain, I suppose. Don't lock 'em in, there's a good man." He smiled briefly at the corporal, and then turned his thoughts from the bandstand to the Town Hall and the speech that he was to deliver in an hour's time.

*The author has been unable to determine the origin of the song **Goodbye Dolly Gray**, other than it was one of the songs that was played when the troopships left England for the South African War.*

Syd Burgess

Déjà Vu

He paused to admire the artistry in the wrought-iron gates which guarded the entrance to the park. It was spring and while there was a nip in the air, it didn't detract from the flowering profusion that surrounded him. Colour was combined with the scents and feel of the season. He wandered slowly along the path and was rewarded with what he had come for. A large, open, well grassed area.

The bandstand was offset and slightly back from the centre. This wasn't the view he knew. Deliberately he recalled the dream. What had been nightmares when he was a child, making him seek the comfort and safety of his parents' bed and later, during his teen years, had become a recurring dream he half expected when he retired. Later still, at university, it became an amusing story to tell his friends over a pint of bitter.

He followed the path as it skirted the grass. At the furthest point from the Band Stand he found the view he knew so well. Framed against the backdrop of a tall hedge and the houses beyond, it was unmistakable. He turned round and took in the roofs of the houses as they fell away to the lower town and harbour.

He stepped onto the grass and sat down on a bench. He closed his eyes and recalled the nightmare of his childhood. A young man, in a naval uniform, was sitting on this same bench with an attractive woman. They were listening to an Army band as it belted out Gilbert and Sullivan melodies. He had an arm around her shoulders and her head rested against him.

The drone of an approaching aircraft began to drown out the band and over the houses behind the park a Heinkel suddenly appeared. Its engines were screaming and it couldn't have been much more than two hundred feet above them. Behind was a Hurricane, its engine noise a higher pitch. The bomb bay doors opened suddenly and the young man threw the woman to the ground and lay on top of her. He turned his head to watch the Heinkel. It dropped its load as it passed over the lower town. The rear gunner was shooting at the Hurricane as it closed. Then the pilot opened his own guns and sprayed the Heinkel. The right wing exploded as the incendiaries found the fuel tank. The bomber cartwheeled violently and crashed into the outer wall of the harbour. The rising dust from the bombs then obscured the scene.

The man helped the woman up and held her close. Both were shaking. The band and its audience were rapidly leaving.

With a start he realised someone was speaking to him. He opened his eyes. An elderly lady repeated her request. "May I share this seat with you?"

"Of course." He apologised. "I was a very long way from here. I'm sorry I didn't hear you."

She smiled at him and amusement coloured her voice. "I know what you mean. This park lends itself to dreams. I come

here often. I remember the bands and what they played during those dreadful war years. Did you know that in summer bands still come here?"

He shook his head. "First time I've been here." He hesitated, then prompted by some factor, he continued, "I saw a picture of this park and the bandstand on one of those tourist postcards and I had to come here and see it for myself." He coloured in embarrassment.

She ignored it. "Here I am rattling on and I don't even know your name."

"It's Henry."

"I knew a Henry once." She sat and smoothed her dress around her. "His full name was William Henry Collins. I married him. Ada Collins, that's me."

She smiled to herself as she remembered. Her eyes lost their focus as she slid back in years. "It was during the time that historians now call the year of deep war. The Germans were bombing us continually. I was an ambulance driver and met my Henry when the harbour was almost destroyed and he'd been injured in the explosions. There was no doubt in our minds and we were married three weeks later. I was nineteen and he was twenty-two."

"His commander, he was in MTBs, you know, Motor Torpedo Boats. His commander gave him five days' leave so we could be together. We used to come here whenever there was music. It was late summer, and we'd been married for only two months when he was killed. The last time I saw him was in this park. An Army band was playing when a German bomber suddenly flew over us going towards the harbour. It dropped its bombs over the lower town before the fighter which was chasing it shot it down. I still remember how frightened I was when the bomber opened its doors and I thought the bombs would fall on us. Henry pushed me to the ground and covered me with his own body."

"He took me to the ambulance depot and reported back to his unit. He got a note to me later that they were confined to base for the next seventy-two hours and he'd see me after that. I knew what that meant. I'd seen it before. His squadron were under orders to attack the Germans across the Channel. Every time this happened a part of me died and only came back to life when I knew he was safe. He never came back, and I never learned how he died."

Henry watched her, his mind in turmoil, as she slowly returned to the present. To his surprise she took his hand and with a sad smile said, "I haven't told that story in the last forty years and I don't know why I should tell it to you now."

The interval allowed Henry to calm his mind somewhat. He put his free hand over hers. "Then I feel privileged. You never remarried?"

"Oh no. I never met another man like my Henry. When the war ended I learned to type and spent the rest of my life working in an office."

Henry heard himself ask, “You are comfortable now?”

She laughed at this. “If you mean am I short of money, the answer is no. I inherited my parents’ house and some money and, with my own savings and my pension, I live comfortably, thank you.”

This eased a tension in him he hadn’t known was there. “I’m glad” was all he said.

They sat in silence while Henry wrestled with himself. Should he relate his dreams to her? Especially the second part. He knew how her Henry had died. She was reconciled to the past and if he told her what he knew, he might cause the wounds of 1942 to re-open. Did he have that right? He found himself remembering the dream.

When her Henry reported back they were put on standby alert. At 20,00 hours the crews were summonsed to a briefing. At 22,00 hours three MTBs left harbour to patrol the enemy coast. Their orders were to destroy any enemy ships they found. They settled to alert status as they crossed the Channel. Line astern the three boats patrolled two miles off Dieppe. The lead boat spotted a small vessel leaving the harbour and they moved to intercept. As they got closer another joined the first. The commander identified them as E-boats and gave the order to attack. They went in with engines at full throttle and all guns blazing. The two E-boats reversed course, zig zagging to safety and drawing them closer to the harbour.

Abruptly, all hell broke loose. Four E-boats screamed out of the harbour and the two they were chasing broke off their retreat and turned to attack. Outnumbered, the three MTBs were no match for the E-boats. Henry died when his boat exploded under him while he was still firing the machine gun and watching the tracer as it raked the nearest enemy vessel.

He became aware of the present as Ada Collins put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re a strange young man. You were far away again. Come and have tea with me and you can tell me why a picture postcard would make you come here.”

Henry battled with the desire to get to know this woman and the fear he might harm her. He understood his dreams now and knew the need to investigate was gone. In some inexplicable way her Henry had used him to satisfy his need to know if she had survived the war and how she had fared subsequently.

Ada insisted, and over tea he told her of his repeated dreams about the bandstand. He never revealed those parts about the bomber or MTBs. The two became friends, the one in his twenties and the other in her seventies. When Ada died seven years later, Henry felt genuine grief for the first time in his life.

After the funeral Henry drove to the park and sat on the bench they had shared. He looked at the bandstand as if seeing it for the first time. It stood mute witness to the decades that had passed. In the first Henry it had seen young love in full flower, and in the second it had begun another, equally, deep love. With a feeling of peace, Henry stood and with a last look at the bandstand, returned to his car.

Raie Rodwell

Joseph and Mary

Joseph and Mary live in a room in the yard of Mr Abrahams's shop. They are luckier than the other homeless people who wander around our Observatory neighbourhood. At night they huddle under mounds of blankets, old coats and newspapers in alleys and shop doorways, or curl up among cardboard boxes and plastic covers where, during the day, vendors sell fruit and cook boerewors and chips. Their warmth comes from the liquor they consume.

Mr Abrahams is kind to Joseph and Mary, giving them food from the deli section of his superette in return for odd jobs which they do for him. Mary also scours the neighbourhood for recyclable things and Joseph collects empty bottles, tins and newspapers. Often on her way to her hunting grounds between the shops on the Main Road, Mary passes my house in Scott Road. If I am outside, she stops to chat.

Recently I was sitting on my stoep enjoying my midmorning cup of coffee. Like many of the Victorian houses in old Observatory, mine has a wide verandah with four steps leading up from the garden path, and it provides a wonderful place from which to watch the passers-by.

“Morning, Miesies Rosa,” said Mary. “You all right today?”

“Yes, thank you. I'm OK. Well, I could complain, but who would listen?”

“Pour out your heart and I'll listen,” she said. She sat down on the stoep at the heavy cast-iron gate, and eased off her ill-fitting sandals.

“Bless you,” I said, “but isn't there anything you'd like to tell me today?”

She hesitated, then smiling broadly, she announced, “I want to marry Joseph, you know, I want to be his real wife. I love him lots and he's a good man. So OK, he drinks a bit, but he never hurts me, and I really want him for my husband. Ag well, it's also nice to dream. It makes me forget sometimes that life is sommer very hard.”

The banner I've always carried for the needy began to flutter gently and, as I looked at Mary with her skinny body and ragbag clothes, the fluttering began to gain momentum.

“You know, Mary, I think that's a wonderful idea, and so romantic. And I'll try to help you to make it more than just a dream — something that will really come true.”

“You not joking with me Miesies Rosa, are you?”

“Mary, I'm dead serious. From this very moment I'm going to see that before long you'll be the lawfully wedded wife of Joseph. Come and see me in a couple of days, and I'll tell you what I've been able to do.”

“Thank you, thank you, Miesies Rosa. Wait till I tell Joseph about this.”

I watched her trundling her supermarket trolley up the road and before she turned the corner, she waved happily to me. Now, Rosa, I said to myself, I hope this time you haven’t bitten off more than you can chew.

I went inside to prepare lunch for Bernard. He works in an office nearby and comes home for lunch. While we were eating, I told him Mary’s story.

“Good grief, Rosa,” he said, “another of your unreal campaigns. Forget it my girl, before you get too heavily involved. And you don’t want to be giving this vagrant high hopes that suddenly crash down.”

“Mary is not a vagrant, and, as far as I’m concerned, I’m going to see that she and Joseph have a real nice wedding.”

“My God, Rosa, things are getting crazier and crazier — so now it’s a wedding.” He snorted rudely. “What next? A banquet I suppose.”

“Well, just you wait and see.”

Early next morning I went to my neighbour Anna Dembrovsky, who Bernard says is as crazy as me. When I told her about Mary and Joseph, she clapped her hands with pleasure.

“It’s such a lovely thing to do, Rosa, and I’m going to help you.”

“I knew that I could rely on you, Anna. So, what’s to do first?”

“Pity we’re not churchgoers which would make it easier to arrange, but I suggest that you go to that nice minister who has that small church in Polo Road, and tell him what you’ve told me. He’s a good man and I’m sure he’ll marry them.”

“I’ll do that and then we can go ahead with wedding plans, like a nice dress for Mary to wear, and something decent for Joseph, and a sort of party which we can have in my back garden. The weather is so nice now and the garden is so pretty with all the pansies and Impatiens in bloom. I’ll get Frikkie to arrange some of my potted palms along the edges of the stoep.”

The Reverend Basil Franke was so delighted with the idea of marrying Mary and Joseph that, for a moment, I felt as if he wanted to hug me. All I had to do, he said, was to let him know what date we decided on, and he would conduct the ceremony with every blessing God could bestow on the happy couple. He would like to meet them soon to talk the matter over.

I scuttled back to Anna with the news. Then I went to Mr Abrahams’s shop and asked for Mary.

“She’s out right now,” he said, “but I’ll tell her to call on you when she returns.”

Mary turned up about half an hour later and when I told her what I had done she put her skinny arms around me — rather smelly I must admit — and hugged me.

“When you see the minister, you must tell him when you would like the wedding to take place.”

She was thinking, and then I said,

“In two weeks it’s St Valentine’s Day, so how about that day?”

“Ag Miesies Rosa, you think of such wonderful tings to make me happy.”

“And, we must dress you up nicely. Come to me on Friday and I’ll see what I can find among my things.”

I scratched around and in the process found garments I had completely forgotten about. Then, to my delight, I found a pretty white lace dress which had belonged to my mother. She was a petite lady like Mary, not well covered like me, and I could just picture Mary in it. And, joy of joys, I found a pair of white satin shoes complete with diamante clips which I knew would be just right for Mary.

I rushed over to Anna.

“I’ve got the wedding outfit all ready,” I announced.

“And now I have news for you.”

I followed her to her bedroom.

“Just have a look at this,” she said, holding up a smart navy-blue blazer, grey trousers, and a good leather belt as well. “How do you think the groom will look in this?”

“Perfect,” I said, and couldn’t help giggling.

The following day there was a soft knock on my door, and there stood Mary.

“I have told Joseph what we are doing. At first he made out like he wasn’t pleased because he said he didn’t want to be tied down all the time. He said he likes to come and go when he wants. But when I cried, he said OK. So, now we can be married.”

“Come and see the wedding outfits,” I said, and took her to my bedroom.

She stood and just stared. Then big tears filled her eyes and trickled down her shiny cheeks.

“Come on, Mary, no crying now. You are happy, aren’t you?”

“That’s why I’m crying — it’s from all the happiness.”

The following morning I took Mary and Joseph to see Reverend Franke. He was pleased to marry them on the following Sunday, which was St Valentine’s Day. When I told Bernard how far things had progressed he just guffawed and said, “My wife, the philanthropist, and her flock of stray lambs.”

“Really, Bernard,” I said, “you’re hopeless, but I’ve got news for you, my boy, you’re going to give the bride away.”

He almost hit the ceiling. “Not on your life, Rosa. You may be crazy, but somehow so far I’ve managed to retain my sanity, and no ways am I going to change now.”

“Oh, all right then, I’ll ask Mr Abrahams.” Which I did, and that dear man was only too happy to be part of our exciting event.

Anna is a great cook and offered to prepare tasty snacks for the wedding party and a large fruit cake which she would ice.

I would add the extra bits and the table decorations. When nice old Mr Solomons who lives in Number Three heard what was going on, he did a remarkable thing. He offered to bring six bottles of champagne.

Now things were really beginning to hot up and we were all excited at realising that our plan was coming to a head. All, I mean, except Bernard, who always finds it hard to get into the swing of things. Especially when he views them with an air of disapproval. Anyway, I wasn't going to allow him to damp my enthusiasm.

On the Friday I went down to Lower Main Road and asked about twenty so-called street people to come to the church and then to the wedding party. They were delighted. And then I asked some of my neighbours and they all agreed to come and offered to bring something for the party.

I was getting so excited that it was almost as if it was going to be my own wedding. And, as for Mary, if I was excited, she was so ecstatic she was beginning to look skinnier than ever. She was so nervous she told me that she couldn't eat. That, I told her was pre-wedding jitters.

It was Saturday night and I was satisfied that everything was ready for the wedding. My last task was to fold up the red serviettes into attractive shapes and fill small baskets with sweets, for the guests to take home. I also filled large bowls with fruit. Looking around at everything and feeling very pleased with what I saw, I went to the bathroom to fill the bath and have a good long soak.

I was startled by a loud banging on the front door. I hurried to see who was there. To my amazement there seemed to be whole deputation of street people. There was Frikkie and his girl friend Sybil, Jessie and her friend Oom Piet, who was white and quite a bit older than her, and Mary herself shivering uncontrollably although wrapped in a blanket.

"For goodness sake, Mary, what's the matter?" I asked.

"It's Joseph, Miesies Rosa, he's missing. We've looked all over for him, but we can't find him."

I hurried indoors, grabbed a coat and joined the group in search of Joseph.

The news spread like a veld fire and within minutes all the street people were out in search of the missing bridegroom. They spread out in different directions.

I was searching in Lower Main Road when I heard shouts from a long way off. Other people joined me and we headed towards a small park from where the shouts were coming. The municipal official whose duty it was to lock the gate of the park often didn't turn up to do so. We went through the gate to the toilet (which should also have been locked) and there we found Joseph, cowering in a corner and surrounded by a triumphant crowd.

The stench in the toilet was nauseating.

"Good grief," I said, holding my nose to block out the smell, "doesn't this place ever get cleaned?"

"It's only us what comes here," said Jessie. "No other peoples come to this park anymore. The guy who must clean here,

doesn't care."

Joseph was shivering like a shrivelled-up leaf in the corner.

"The ou skelm," said Sybil, "he was trying to let Mary down. Foeitog. He's just a bergie from Cape Town, not like us peoples. We behave proper."

"Ek is nie 'n bergie," muttered Joseph, cowering further into the corner.

"Jy is, jy is," shouted Sybil, not too steady on her feet and, lurching forward, she tried to hit Joseph on his head.

Mary grabbed Sybil.

"Leave him alone — he means no harm."

"Will you two stop it," I shouted, "Now tell me Joseph, why did you run away?"

"I didn't want to let Mary down, Miesies Rosa, I jus' got scared."

I was furious. "Scared of what?" I shouted at him.

"Ag, Miesies Rosa, all that dressing up and being in that church with all those peoples looking at me, like making a fool of myself."

"Don't talk a lot of nonsense. Remember you're going to make Mary very happy when you marry her."

"Miesies Rosa," said Frikkie "you can trust me to take him home, and I promise you we'll see that he doesn't get away again."

The group moved off and Jessie offered to walk home with me.

"Sometimes there's funny peoples around here. We don't want you to get hurt. You are always so very kind to us."

At the gate when I thanked Jessie, she said,

"Now Miesies Rosa, don't worry. Everything's going to be jus' OK. We'll all see that nothing goes wrong before tomorrow's wedding."

When I went indoors, Bernard called out, "What the hell's going on at this time of night?"

"Joseph did a bunk and hid in the park toilet."

"Well let's hope we don't have any more drama before this bloody wedding is finally settled."

"All right, all right, no need to be nasty. I'm going to have a nice long bath and please don't disturb me."

"That's a joke! It's not me who's likely to disturb you. It's those street pals of yours."

Early on Sunday morning Mary arrived at my house, tears brimming in her eyes.

"Now what's the matter?" I asked, apprehensive that some more drama had developed.

"No Miesies Rosa, there's nothing wrong. It's jus' I'm so happy, I can't stop crying."

We went through to the bathroom where I helped her to untangle all the knots and tiny plaits in her hair. It proved to be

quite a painful process, but at last I could get a comb through it. I'm afraid her hair was badly in need of a good wash. After I shampooed her hair, I put it into rollers. Then Mary had a hot bath with fragrant bubbles up to the brim.

"Oh Miesies Rosa, I wish I could have a bath like this every day. You are so lucky."

Meanwhile Anna was busy setting out the tables on the stoep. The food had been prepared and was now filling every corner of my kitchen which, thank goodness, with its high ceiling is cool and airy.

Then we both dressed Mary and she looked beautiful in my mother's lace dress and satin court shoes. Anna had brought some frangipani flowers from her garden which she arranged in Mary's now shining hair.

I caught a glimpse of a smart-looking Joseph being escorted out by none other than my Bernard. When he saw the look of surprise on my face he mumbled, "Well, with all this craziness going on, how could I remain an outsider?"

Mrs Androwzki, who has a florist shop, brought a dainty posy for Mary and corsages for Anna and me. And Flora Adams from Number Nine presented a pretty wedding band which she said was one too many in her collection of rings. It's strange how people downplay their generosity.

Mr Abrahams took Mary in his posh red car to the church. When we arrived there, I was surprised to see how many street people had turned up. I did a quick calculation. Yes, we would have enough food. And guess who drove Joseph to the church? Bernard himself, looking very pleased with himself, although our old jalopy was nowhere as smart as the bride's car.

After the ceremony, while we were buzzing around outside the church and posing for photos, including the street people, young Andy Phillips who is a reporter and lives in Number Nine passed by.

"What's going on here, Mrs de Gruchy?" he asked, and, whipping out a pen and notepad, he wrote down what I told him.

To our surprise, on the front page of the newspaper the following morning there was a picture of Mary, a radiant bride, and Joseph at her side with a wide grin on his well-weathered face. The caption read: "Romantic Valentine's Day wedding of street people Mary and Joseph Baatjies, arranged for them by a group of caring Observatory residents."

The party was a great success and Joseph with his liking for his "dop" behaved admirably. This was a good sign for his married life with Mary.

Before the party ended Joseph came up to me and, holding both my hands in his, said, "Please Miesies Rosa, I want to say many thanks for all you and these peoples done for me and Mary, my very beautiful wife."

"It's been a pleasure for us to do this, Joseph," I said, and as he responded with a big happy smile, I knew that all was going to go well for Mr and Mrs Baatjies.

Mike Wollenschlaeger

The Cats

One night I was returning to the El Greco Nite Club from a trip that had taken me to the South Arm, which is a quay in the old Victoria Basin. Fishing boats of all nationalities get docked there. My passenger had been a Japanese fisherman from a tunny trawler.

On impulse, as I turned into Bree Street, I decided to do something that I didn't normally do. That was to stop at the Catacombs, a night club, known by the people of the night as The Cats. Why I didn't stop there as a rule, is because we taxi drivers have our beats and mine was the El Greco in Loop Street.

Anyway, I slowed down and stopped when I checked that it was a buddy of mine parked by the door. I was busy asking him about how his night was going so far. This was about three o'clock in the morning. Just then a roar came erupting up the stair well and out of the door and following it was a screaming hoard of crazy sailors and, of course, the girls prancing in noisy, drunken triumph behind.

I checked the happening and shouted, "Hey, Errol, let's go man, come on, move!" I pulled out real quick with Errol hard on my heels. We are very adept at pulling out of parking bays. We have to be. In the tension of new moon nights quick action can save a life.

At that point Bree Street is a kind of double road for a few blocks. I made a U-turn at the corner and parked on the other side of the central island, which is about three metres wide at that point. I kept the engine running, just in case, and observed the fight taking place in the road. It was all about women of course. It always is. This time it was Filipinos and Chinese. A volatile mixture at any time. The Chinese were regular patrons, seeing as their stint at sea was quite short, and they had a proprietary air and resented these Filipinos who were merchantmen and might never return. The dollars flashing around had aroused the girls' interest, which incensed the fishermen, and this is how the night was ending. In a wild brawl with knives flashing and women screaming.

Every time I saw a fight I always wondered at this primal urge to fight over a woman. It gets really heavy sometimes. Broken bottles, knives, feet and anything dangerous is the order of things. Sometimes the easiest way to obtain a jagged bottle neck in these situations is to break the bottle over somebody's head. And, quite often, it is us, the taxi drivers, who take the wounded to hospital. First finding out from other drivers which nationality is going to which one. Have to keep the walking wounded separate.

As I was watching, a Filipino broke away from the melee and raced across the road. All I remember is that he was quite

tall, had a moustache, and his white shirt was streaked with blood from the slash on his forearm. He was through the back door and over into the front seat real quick. Nothing like danger to make you move quickly.

“Go! Go!” he said loudly but not shouting. As I was pulling off he pointed at his arm and made a bandaging movement.

“Hospital?” I enquired, perking up.

“No, no, shop,” he said.

Best place, I decided was Dock Road Café. Its real name is the Imperial Café, but nobody calls it that. It stands in Dock Road next to the Queen’s Hotel. The special coffee is to be recommended as is the Milo. We pulled up outside the Café and there were the usual derelicts hanging around. Winos who occasionally got casual work in the docks, they didn’t hassle anybody. Hanging around with them were a few old hags, also drunk. You’d have to be blind to pick one of them up. I motioned my passenger to follow, which he did with alacrity. It is quite a place once you are inside. You can buy just about anything there and most of it is displayed in long, old fashioned, glass topped display cases, which form an L-shaped corner separate from the take-away section.

I asked for some bandages and a thick roll of gauze bandage was produced. While I was explaining what had happened, the Filipino was gazing around and his eyes came to rest on the card of cheap Okapi pocket knives hanging behind the counter. “Two,” he said, pointing. I felt a bit uneasy as I watched him examining the four-inch (one hundred millimetres) blades.

Back in the taxi he asked to be taken back to the club. Now I knew that there was going to be trouble. He had finished the rough wrapping of his arm and was honing the blades against each other. He indicated that I should park in the same place where he had found me and then sat for a while and watched what was happening.

There was a taxi full of Filipinos and the driver was trying to get away, but the Chinese were surrounding the cab and the back doors were open as they tried to grab the occupants. There was a lot of noise. At this stage my passenger got out and stood next to the tree. There was a knife glittering in each hand. Then he marched across the road just as the cab managed to break away, leaving men sprawling. One was still standing on the boot lid; Valiants are as big as a table top. Then he broke the back window with a kick that left him halfway into the car. He was pulled in and thrown out, a bloody mess from all the broken glass.

It was as the glass broke that my man made his move. He just went berserk. Nobody had seen him approach and he started stabbing with both hands. Before anybody could react, he was halfway back to my cab. With a pack of Chinese starting to follow he got into the car with a few metres to spare. Engine racing, I really gunned it at one helluva speed away from there. Shoo, made it. I had no desire to be too involved, and to make sure that we’d be safe from pursuit I went through a few alleys and back streets with the lights off. Had to provide the other driver, whoever was trying to follow, with a good excuse as to why he lost me. I took my man to his ship, which was lying in H berth, via Paarden Eiland. This was another safety precaution,

after all, who knows, the blood thirsty Chinese could have been waiting in taxis at other gates.

The ship was leaving that morning and the bunkering crew was still busy on the quayside. Everything looked safe. He paid my fare, plus a good tip, then he shook my hand. He started to walk away but stopped when I started the engine. Turning back he opened the passenger door and gestured that I wait. Then he put his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a small bundle of tightly rolled notes, which he thrust into my hand. He once again said goodbye, shook my hand again and stepped back to the gangplank where he waved in a half salute before starting up.

When I counted the money later, under a dim interior light, I found that all in all he had given me one hundred and fifty dollars which I could exchange, on the black market, for the equivalent in rands. (The exchange rate at that stage was sixty cents to the dollar.) Not bad for a night's work. Back in town I drove past The Cats and there was a real hullabaloo going on. Blue lights were flashing. Taxis were parked all over the road with drivers making the most of the confusion to tout for business. The car with broken windows was towed away by Mr Tearaway, to make the whole happening appear more serious when negotiations took place with the shipping agents.

Nobody even noticed me when I drifted past en route to the El Greco.

Mike Wollenschlaeger

Ten O'clock Tale

All taxi drivers, world wide, when desperate for money will overcharge the unwary. So it happened to me one day when I was still a rookie driver. I'd started earlier than usual that evening to try and get in some extra trips before the people of the night started phoning for me. It was that time of the month when rent was due the next day.

It was late in the afternoon when I picked up a sailor and on arriving at the ship charged him the unofficial night time rate which was three rand more than I should have. I had to go on board with him to collect the money.

I followed him up the gangplank and through the doorway which can be sealed by a large cover. It was standing open at the time and the ship's guard was leaning against it. I followed him down the metal stairs to the narrow-passaged crew quarters. It was quite noisy with the off-duty crewmen drinking and playing cards or backgammon. I got my money.

As I stepped off the plank the freshening south-easter forced me to duck my head. Staggering towards the car I noticed something shiny on the ground. Thinking it a piece of tin or the crown off a champagne cork I thought of skimming it into the wind, just for fun.

To my surprise I found that it was a watch, a good one, without the strap. I pocketed it and drove off, thinking that it was the bit of luck for the day. Working at night takes some getting used to. Evening is morning and we have lunch at midnight.

The customs man was searching the taxi and I happily let him get on with it. Then he held up a gold cigarette lighter that he'd found under the seat. I claimed it as my own, why not? He would have kept it too.

A few days later, as pleased as Punch, I sat on the lower rank wearing the watch which had a new strap. The rank is next to the Trust Bank Building, opposite the station in Adderley Street. It was a quiet, chilly night in June with a strong wind blowing straight down the street. Certainly no night for walking. Very quiet, not even a squawk from the radio. I had to click the microphone to check if it was on or not. There I sat, waiting, watching. Patience is the key to being a taxi driver. You can sometimes sit for hours and then suddenly one trip will make everything right as you fly into an activity where time stands still once again.

It was there in the quietness, in the still moment, with the wind rocking the car as it rushed past that a thought came to me. A very strange thought indeed. I thought that I was going to be robbed. Up to this point, nearly a year on the night scene, I'd not been robbed or attacked in any way, so I didn't understand where the thought had sprung from. One thing though, after a while, you learn to accept and act upon stray thoughts and obey your intuition, which I did forthwith.

In my pocket I knew I had thirty-three rand. Three one rand notes from a trip and three ten-rand notes belonging to a

friend for some parcels. Just to be safe and also to assuage my thoughts I decided to put the three ten- rand notes into the pocket of my T-shirt which was under my shirt, jersey and jacket. It gets cold out there on the streets at night. Feeling better for having obeyed my instincts, I settled back to wait for fate.

The clock on the corner, through blurred eyes, read nine o'clock. Must've dozed off. A knock on the window drew my attention and woke me up. That is what had disturbed me. I saw three men standing there, coloured men, neatly dressed in jackets and scarves. I opened the window and one fellow asked me where they could find the non-white taxis. This was still in those apartheid times, and taxis had to display on their roof signs whether they could carry whites or non-whites. We all hated the laws, not very cool at all. I got out and pointed.

"Go up to the robots, turn left, then at the next street turn right, that is Plein Street. You'll find the taxis there."

They thanked me and started walking away. It was quite a far way that they had to walk and against a strong wind. So it didn't surprise me when one of them turned back and asked me if I couldn't take them to Kensington.

I said, "Yes of course, I will take the chance."

My friends and I have little sympathy with these laws and feel that we should have the discretion as to whom we ride. With a loud whistle he called his friends. As they got into the car I got a feeling and I knew, don't ask me how, that these men were going to rob me. As I said earlier, I'd never entertained such weird thoughts before, but rather than just shrug them off I decided to get in touch with control and report the trip. That was just to let my passengers know that I was in touch with the outside world.

I kept expecting to be told to pull off as we rode along the N1 freeway, and then through Maitland to our destination. But nothing happened. I felt foolish as they talked amongst themselves, giving directions when necessary. Then we travelled into a very rough looking section and with a slight shudder I wondered if now is the time. Still, nothing happened. I was tense, trying to memorise the route. Then we were clear of the slums and into an area of new housing. Some finished, others half done and many just piles of bricks. I stopped where they indicated, this is where our Bosun lives, they told me.

The story was that as it was his birthday they had decided to give him a surprise party. They were going to meet the rest of the crew at a club and drink the night away. Meanwhile one guy had got out, spoken at the door, come back and asked if I could wait. Oh boy, on a quiet night like this I could wait for hours.

"No problem," I said.

We waited about half an hour and then they started to fidget. I was feeling safe though, only sailors going to give their Bosun a party, get drunk and have a good time. Even those who got involved in fights. Eventually one guy got out to go and check what was taking so long. I was relaxed, letting the lazy thoughts roll, as my door was suddenly yanked open and before I could fall out I was pushed to the middle of the long bench seat.

Immediately an arm curled around my neck and pulled me backwards over the seat. Struggling for breath, my arms were held as strong eager fingers searched through my pockets. They found my Public Driving Permit and the Gideon's Pocket Bible that I always carried. There were a few receipts from book jobs and some scraps of paper. There was also a packet of cigarettes, cigarette lighter, watch and three rand.

The man on my left, who I felt was the leader, was squeezing about my jacket and over the jersey. Feeling and grasping, demanding to know where it was.

“Where's the money?”

I knew that he could sense that there must be more money. They were letting me breathe properly now that this other fellow behind the wheel was asking me why the car wouldn't start. I thought that I was going to die when everything went black and red behind my eyes. The car was a Valiant automatic and I reckoned that he had jiggled the gear lever. I didn't tell him that, just croaked that sometimes it didn't start.

It seemed like forever but eventually they got out, the leader taking my watch, lighter and three rand. He stood there in the drizzle with a hand in his pocket. He looked in at me and said,

“I should shoot you now but I also believe in the Holy Spirit.”

Then they were gone, into the shadows. I was amazed, dazed by these events, and as I drove straining my eyes through the fine rain that smudged the windscreen I saw that I was in Tenth Avenue.

Feeling quite traumatised and in need of a good smoke I went to a friend's place in Observatory. They were in bed but Budgie quickly jumped up and invited me in. We were old buddies and had shared a lot of acid trips together. We settled down on the big couch in front of the fireplace. His wife brought the matches to light the fire and also the gas for heating tea water.

We smoked a couple of pipes and I told them what had happened to me.

They reckoned it was quite bizarre. The kettle started to boil and Jo went to the bedroom to fetch a couple of cups. She came back in rather a hurry

“Budgie, did you wind the clock?”

“Of course I did,” says he.

“Well it has stopped at ten,” holding it out for us to see.

I felt a shiver run up and down my spine, and I murmured that I hadn't really felt happy about having the watch which had had a new strap fitted, or the cigarette lighter. I knew that I didn't deserve them and that is exactly what was taken back from me, plus the three rand to balance the scales of karma.

Sitting drinking the tea, I wondered, rhetorically, if they were Angels who came that night on the tenth of June in Tenth Avenue at ten o'clock.

Isabelle Goodson

The Fountain

Erica stood on the cracked concrete step outside the kitchen, her hands folded across her stomach. She looked down at her splayed feet in the worn sandals and then up across the brown flat earth that stretched to the corrugated iron fence. The two fig trees, leaves rust-edged and crackly, occupied one corner of the yard, while the chicken run ran down the left side.

Her glance moved. Her fountain, she always held her breath at this point, her fountain, when she acquired it, would go in the right-hand corner. She sighed deeply. Unfortunately that day was still some vague day in the future.

Her eyes glazed over. Her fountain . . . silver sequins in the sun. Her smile faded as she remembered other priorities. Their small sheep farm, never highly profitable at the best of times, waited for the drought to break properly. Some rain had fallen, raising hopes and then, perversely, the clouds had veered off in another direction.

For over twenty years Erica had been waiting for the fountain. She believed, no she knew, that it would ease her arid surroundings — the strength of the summer sun sucked every last thing dry — and moisten her parched spirit.

She concealed her longings with fair success, she hoped, but sometimes the desire to own a fountain burned like a passion. It wasn't as if she wanted to change her life, severe as it was, but merely to add a little luxury and beauty. She loved her husband, Walter. He was a good man. But that didn't stop her longing for the sight, the sound and the motion of water, water that would bring her a tiny step nearer to the seaside where she had been born.

They had the small dam, for so long now a dun cracked mat. Just a few centimetres of water rippled like melted chocolate across the bottom. But even when the dam was full it was a necessary utility, not a thing of beauty.

In a magazine she had once come across the picture of a fountain. From the wide bowl at the base, two other bowls, diminishing in size, rose. In the middle an angelic nymph clung to the supporting pole, its chubby hand curved in welcome.

“Agh,” she sighed. “It’s just what I want.”

Overcome by its loveliness she pressed the picture to her breast.

She'd cut the picture out and put it in the kitchen dresser drawer. Hidden really. Every now and then, when she thought no one would see, her heart fluttering like a wing, she would take it out and look at it, imagine it in the yard.

Hot and sticky in her polyester overall, she would steal a break and let the fantasy roam. Cocking her head, she heard the soft splash of water, blinked at the glitter in the gossamer spray. And as the minute drops fell on her, her happy expression turned to one of ecstasy.

Walter, coming on her unawares, looked at her in a puzzled manner.

“Not again. Tell me, Erica, what would we be doing with such a thing in our bare old yard, hey?”

“It would make it less bare. Anyway . . . I just like it.”

She spoke quietly just as she did on other occasions, not blushing as she had done the first time.

Walter began changing his boots.

“One day maybe, you’ll get your fountain, but don’t ask me when.”

He paused to rub his red-rimmed eyes.

“The cost of replacing the sheep is so high, not to mention the feed.” He rolled his head with his eyes closed. “We’ll be lucky if we keep a roof over our heads. I’ve noticed a couple of holes in it.”

“I understand, Walter. I was just looking.”

He worked so hard she could not bear to nag him. And, hopeless as the dream seemed of ever being realised, she hung onto it without bitterness because she believed in miracles.

She had been a primary school teacher for ten years. A long time ago she had read many books, studied poetry. A fountain, she thought, would be the answer to her drought, something pretty, promising, permanent. Besides, everyone needed something to look forward to.

She couldn’t confess her innermost feelings to Walter. They were beyond his comprehension, the words as well as the concept, but that wasn’t to say he was unfeeling. Sensible and practical as he was, he didn’t dismiss her fantasies. He accommodated them by saying, “After the tractor has been overhauled,” or, “When we’ve bought the children’s school uniforms”

The shimmering mirage dissolved. There wasn’t time to brood. Having little help in the house now, she swept, scrubbed, dusted, polished, cooked, cared for the hens and the vegetable patch. She also preserved fruit from the fig trees and from other fruit the neighbours gave or sold to her. Before she had the children to look after. Her day was as long as Walter’s.

That night, after they had sat down to eat their stew in the kitchen, Erica’s knife and fork clattered to the table. She put her fingers between her breasts.

“I — I feel — strange.” Her eyes, light blue, darkened. She looked bewildered. “Perhaps ... it’s the heat.”

Walter scraped back his chair. “What is it, Erica?” He stood, his knees bent, leaning over her.

“I’ve got a pain right here.” She pressed her fingers on the spot.

His shock mirrored hers. She had never been ill before and neither had he, except for minor ailments. He sat down with a thump. Neither spoke for a couple of minutes.

“Oh, my dear,” Walter murmured.

“It’s gone now.” At first her voice wavered. Then with more assurance she said, “Eat your food now or it will get cold.”

“Yes.” He felt for his knife and fork while he kept his eyes on her. “But you gave me a terrible fright.” He took a mouthful. “Maybe ... you should see a doctor.”

“No, it’s nothing. Like you, I just got a big fright.”

“All right,” he scratched the back of his neck, “but if it comes again — you must go.”

The pain did come again. The doctor in the dorp made an appointment for Erica to see a specialist in town. “Just to be on the safe side,” he said.

“Should we tell the children?” Walter wondered aloud as they left the doctor’s surgery.

The children. She took a sharp breath. Dirk, twenty-one years old was far away. Annette, three years older, was married to a farm manager and lived not far off.

They weren’t children any more, only memories of children, reminders of the fast passing of time. And now that her health threatened to break down, a sudden sense of urgency clutched her. She should be more conscious of life’s shortness. She mustn’t let life slip by until that “ever-rolling stream” carried her away too early. She cleared her throat. Walter was waiting for a reply.

“The children,” she repeated, hunching her shoulders. Why did Dirkie have to be a dancer instead of a farmer or, or a helicopter pilot? She recognised that they were a bit oldfashioned, she and Walter, but still ...

People in the area asked politely about Dirkie but she could detect their concealed disapproval, mixed with sympathy. But he was her son, she loved him. He was a compassionate boy. Poor Walter, he was the disappointed one. She gave his arm a quick squeeze.

She reminded herself again that everyone should have something to look forward to, big or small, concrete or abstract. *She* still had something to look forward to, her fountain. If only she could convince Walter that water, like time, cleansed everything. She had faith that the fountain could wash away disappointments, tears and fears.

“No use trying to contact Dirkie.” She smiled up at him, the thought of the fountain still trailing in her mind. “He’s on tour. It’s not so important, Walter.” Anyway, she didn’t want to worry Dirkie unnecessarily.

The specialist’s diagnosis hadn’t been too alarming. She had angina. She must rest more, take the tablets, lose a little weight. Report back to her own doctor. In a few weeks she should be much better. He ended up by saying, “right as rain.”

Right as rain. Rain, she laughed to herself. What did rain mean to him, except that he mustn’t forget his umbrella?

Before going home they drove to a big new shopping complex. While Walter poked among the spades and rakes, Erica wandered about the basement which, with its variety of treasures, represented an Aladdin’s cave.

And then she found it. To her utter enchantment she discovered a fountain very like her picture. Only, this one was working. The find, preordained, or the result of serendipity, she didn’t stop to consider.

Delight shone from her eyes. Her heart beat steadily but faster. Slowly the fountain, in all its Italianate glory, drew her nearer. The lower basin, shallow-fluted, had been mottled and instantly aged. The water whispered and gurgled from the upper bowl to the basins below. It was as if the water spoke.

“Be happy, stay cool, be calm. Peace and beauty.” The nymph entwined around the centre support, beckoned. Enraptured, Erica ran her rough fingers over the fountain’s edge, her light touch as nothing to the deep longing filling her. She let her fingers play in the miniature waves. If only she could have this splendour in her dry yard.

“Well, look at that. I must say it looks very nice. Hey, Erica, you must stop staring like that.”

She hardly heard him. He nudged her again, pushing his arm against her.

“Like a country bumpkin,” he joked, trying to break her trance. She spoke without turning her head. “It’s ... it’s beautiful, Walter ... I wish ... so much ... for a fountain.”

He sighed. “One day. I told you, one day you’ll get your fountain. Come, it’s time we started back.”

Taking a last lingering look at the fountain, she detached herself from it and followed him out of the store.

“You’re very quiet,” he commented as they drove along. “What are you thinking about? We got good news from the doctor, didn’t we?”

She nodded, her face placid, her body limp.

“It’s the fountain, isn’t it? You know it would be a big waste of money, I mean expense at this time.”

“It’s only the cost of the fountain. The same water pumps over and over.”

“Erica, wife, -” he banged the wheel — “it’s not like you. You have always been so understanding.” He had never known her to be so persistent, even in her gentle way. “Besides we can always use a new pump on the windmill.”

She placed her hand, the skin parched as a eucalyptus leaf past its prime, on his forearm. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t matter. It’s just that — well life is so short.”

“Later, perhaps. Don’t look so sad, man. Say in a couple of years. I know,” his voice rose, “on your sixtieth birthday. But I promise you, true as I’m sitting here,” he pressed the hooter, “you’ll get your fountain one day. Now give us a smile.”

She smiled but the smile didn’t completely smooth the faint lines between her eyebrows.

“I know, Walter. I believe you.” Then she turned to him and repeated with emphasis, “I’ll know.”

As they turned into the dirt road, churning up the dust, she glimpsed the green corrugated iron roof, the paint peeling, of their home. Shadows from the eucalyptus trees threw dark patterns on the whitewashed walls. Her eyes travelled from the baked ground to the feathery leaves of the pepper trees, their movement and colour softening the starkness. In the distance the cracked dam mocked her. But she was glad to be home.

Walter rode off at once to inspect his meagre stock and speak to Jacob the farmhand. Foraging hens encircled Erica in the

back yard.

“Come, come.” She scattered the corn after measuring it off in an old tin. Suddenly she threw up her arms as if in supplication, the tin clonking to the earth.

“Agh, if only it would rain.”

She walked through the long bare passage of the house and out onto the front stoep. Sandy bursts along the road leading to the homestead, heralded the arrival of a car. Annette in her stationwagon braked hard. Erica put her handkerchief to her nose. Mother and daughter kissed on the lips.

“How did it go, Ma? What did the doctor say?”

Annette hitched her jeans and tucked in her shirt, scrutinising her mother all the time. Erica told her.

“So you can see you can bring the children around. It’s nothing catching.”

“Oh, Ma, you and your jokes. Still. I’m so glad.”

“But Annette, I must tell you about something wonderful I saw in that big store in town.” Animation rushed colour to Erica’s face.

“Well, come on, tell me.” Annette put her hands on her hips, as if ready to indulge her mother.

“I saw a fountain ... a real one, with water streaming out and, and sparkling under the lights.” She clasped her hands. “Honestly, you’ve never seen anything like it. Wouldn’t it be marvellous to have a real fountain here?”

She lowered herself, a slack bundle, onto the wooden bench. “I’m so tired of looking at dryness, breathing in the dust, suffocating in the heat — tired, tired, tired.”

“But, Ma, water is for dams, or irrigation or boreholes and windpumps. You know.” She laughed, putting her arm around her mother. “It would look, well, sort of silly here. You’re just dreaming again. Come, I’ll make you a cup of coffee and you’ll soon feel better.”

“I wish Dirkie would come home.”

Annette hid her alarm. It wasn’t like her mother to go all soft about that. Dirkie belonged to another world now. That was one of the things she admired about her mother, her willingness, her ability to accept what came along.

“You think he’ll approve of a fountain, hey? But New York’s a long way.”

She tried to cheer her mother up, but her wistfulness made Annette uneasy.

“A man needs to do what he has to do,” Erica said eventually. “We are all prisoners of something or someone, or even ourselves sometimes.”

“Ma, what a way to speak in riddles. You must rest. You are not yourself. I’ll send Annie over to help you.”

Erica pushed herself from the bench. “No. Don’t. Thank you but I can manage. I’m all right, Annette, really.”

After Annette had gone, Erica prepared the meat and vegetables and started the cooking. She leaned over the sink to look out of the kitchen window, focusing on the corner where the fountain would go. She thought she heard the swish of water. She blew through her lips making a whistling sound. The sound of water was only Walter washing at the outside tap.

Drops dripped from his fingers as he put his hand on her shoulder. There was a tremor in his voice.

“Feel the air? And the smell?”

She trembled at his touch. She did indeed feel a chill but by the expression on her face. It was only partly due to the weather.

“I think the rain is coming.” He pointed, “over there.”

Above the horizon, like grey warships, clouds began to approach, moving ponderously in their direction. She shivered again. “I’m so happy for you — and for all of us.”

“Soon we’ll be out of debt and I’ll get you your fountain.”

As she had done many times before, she pointed to the corner where the fences met. “Thank you Walter. You have been so patient. You know where it will go.”

He nodded, smoothed her still-dark hair. “I think the dinner’s burning.”

“Oh, my,” she hurried, stumbling towards the stove.

All night the clouds assembled until they formed a mighty bulk, lowering the ceiling of the sky. The temperature fell. A fog-like damp, seeking openings, seeped in. Erica put out extra blankets but her body became colder and colder. She never heard the rain that began with a patter and increased to thundering hoof beats on the iron roof. She died in her sleep in the big bed with an exhausted Walter at her side.

The day he put in the fountain, Annette, wearing a black dress, stood watching him.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, Pa. It’s too late now.”

But instead of looking grim, Walter wore an intent expression on his face, at times almost a calm one.

“It’s better than a tombstone. And it’s what she wanted.”

“Still, if you don’t mind me saying so, it seems a bit stupid now.” She blew her nose, then dabbed her eyes. He looked up, his sorrow now apparent.

“Leave me now, Annette.”

“I’m sorry.” She kissed him on his tanned, lined cheek. “All right.”

He checked that the cement had set. He did everything with much care. He was goaded by the guilt that gripped him when he had come across the magazine picture of the fountain. Perhaps he should have made a greater effort before. But how was he to know that ... Erica ...? He wiped his eyes.

He had promised the fountain to Erica. He still owed it to her. It wasn't for his daughter's ears that he knew Erica could see and hear the fountain.

"I'll know," she had said. "I'll *know*."

At last he could totally share the dream with her. She would always be close to him. He looked at the ornate fountain and then at the drab surroundings. It didn't look strange there at all. It looked lovely. The blue sky hung like an umbrella over it. His boots squelched in the mud as he went to turn on the tap. The fountain flowed.

Alwyne Todd

The Season of the Year

“Your usual Bert?” said Peggy, the innkeeper’s wife, as she reached up to the shelf where the personal tankards of the regular customers were kept. Her muscular barmaid’s arm pulled the black handle of the pump as the golden stream of best bitter surged into the glass. The brass nozzle burred deep in the tankard as the foam spilt over the brim. She wiped the glass and set it down before him. Bert always liked a good head on his beer.

“Are you feeling all right love?” she asked. “You look awfully tired.” Then, looking over his shoulder, she said: “There’s your mate, Fred, just coming in the door. Shall I pull you another pint?”

“Sure,” said Albert as he turned to wave Fred Perkins to an empty table in the far corner.

Peggy noted that, although it was only half an hour after the noon opening time, the pub was gratifyingly full - a sign of the times in those prosperous, early years of the Roaring Twenties.

She stared wistfully at Albert Bateman’s back as he strode to the corner with a pint in each hand. At twenty years old he was a strapping lad. Not for the first time her mind filled with unwifely thoughts as she took in those broad shoulders and that delectably tight little bottom. And he had the good looks to go with it. Hair black as coal, blue-grey eyes and a swarthy complexion that was popularly attributed to his mother, a beautiful gypsy girl whom his father had married when she was sixteen. She had tragically died giving birth to Albert.

Albert’s father, George, an unrivalled master poacher, had outfoxed two generations of gamekeepers on the nearby estate of the Duke of Bellington. The Duke was known as a tyrannical and heartless employer - a fact that earned George a good deal of popular support for his nefarious activities.

Albert, who still lived with his father, had been introduced to the poacher’s craft at the age of twelve. Although he now had a regular job as a farm labourer, he was out with his dad on many a moonlit night checking their expertly-laid traps. Albert had recently acquired a motor bike and side car, an innovation which enabled him to extend his customer base among butchers and hoteliers farther afield.

“Cheers,” said Albert.

“Down the hatch,” said Fred. And, taking a deep draught: “Are you all right, Bert? You look as if you’ve been up all night.”

“As a matter of fact, Fred, you’re spot on. Pin back your ears and I’ll tell you about it.”

“Late yesterday afternoon I takes a drive up to Top Wood to check some traps my old man had laid. And what do I find?

Two of the finest hares I ever laid eyes on. Now rabbits is one thing, and pheasants is another. But hares is something special. The nobs go crazy about them - which when you think how tough they are, is surprising. They like to _ang _em up until they are half rotten. The point is they fetch a pretty penny - if you can find the right customer. I needed some quick money and it was getting late. So I puts the old grey matter to work and comes up with a sharp idea: Ted Coles the timber merchant.”

“I wouldn’t have thought he was the type,” said Fred.

“You’re right he aint. But think of that French wife of his, Charmaine. She’d know what to do with a hare.”

Ted Coles’s divorce and his marriage to the family housemaid, a French girl twenty years his junior, had been the talk of the village some ten years before.

Albert continued: “So, just as it is starting to get dark, I find myself at Ted Coles’s front door holding a whopping great hare in each hand. His bird comes to the door, takes one look at them and says: ‘Mon dew, zey are beautiful’ and, squeezing a hind leg, ‘and so plump.’_

“Would you like to buy them?” I says.

Ow much you ask?

“Half a quid,” I says.

She gives me a long look. “Won’t you come inside for a moment?_

I follows her into the house.

Bring them through to the kitchen.

I lays the hares on the table.

Please sit down while I fetch my purse, she says. _Make yourself at _ome Albert. Zat is your name isn’t it? Wouldn’t you like a little glass of wine while you are waiting?_

“Now wine is a bit on the fancy side for me. But I didn’t want to be rude so I takes the large glassful she pours for me. I find it a bit sharp so I downs it in one go while she is out of the room. She seemed to take ages to find her purse and, when she comes back, I realise why. She has changed into a red silk dressing gown.”

I stand up to face her. _Albert,_ she says, _I _ave a little problem. I have no money in my purse. But I _ave an idea._

“What would that be, Miss?”

Well, she says coming very close. _Could I not pay you in a different way?_

“How do you mean?” says I.

__Like this,_ she says. And, no kidding Fred, she does no more than slips her hand between my legs and gets a good grip on the old John Thomas. And then, before I know what’s _appening she’s got her other arm around my neck and her tongue

halfway down my throat.

“Wouldn’t you like to come upstairs, Big Boy?” she says. Then she draws back to arm’s length and undoes the sash of her gown. I swear to you, Fred, all she had on underneath was a pair of stockings. And she’s got a pair of knockers on her that almost had me believing in God.

“What about your husband?” I says.

“Don’t worry, mon cher. E’s gone up to his London office for a conference. E won’t be back until eleven tomorrow morning.”

“I ask you, Fred, what would *you* do?”

Without waiting for an answer to this superfluous question Albert continued: I follows her upstairs and, before you could say Bobs your uncle, were both starkers on the bed. And, I tell you Fred, that woman knows more tricks than a cartload of monkeys.

Fred listened, goggle-eyed, as Albert described Charmaine’s sexual repertoire in minute detail. At one point the hand lifting his drink to his open mouth froze for almost two minutes. Then, remembering his beer, he downed it in one go.

“Hold on Bert,” he said. “This deserves another round.”

Returning with two brimming pints, he set them down, spilling some in his excitement. “So, what happened next?”

“We falls asleep,” said Albert. “When I wake up the full moon is shining into my eyes. I goes to the window and looks out. It’s as bright as day and there, standing by the gate like a neon advert, is my bike. If anybody saw it, the story would be all round the village quicker than a ferret down a rabbit hole. I get as far as pulling on my socks and trousers when a voice behind me says: ‘Where are you going, Big Boy?, She pats the bed beside her. Come ere, mon cher,’ she says. We’ve still got lots of time.”

“Stretching out for my hand she pulls me on to the bed. Well, I must tell you Fred, apart from anything else, I was completely shagged out. ‘Sorry love,’ I tells her. I’ve got to go.”

“She pouts all sulky like, and then smiles at me like a sly little schoolgirl. “Listen Albert,” she says. “I make, ow you say, a deal with you. If you make love to me one more time, I will give you back your ‘ares.’”

“Well, Fred, that was quite a proposition. I needed the money and, looking at that cracking pair of knockers in the moonlight, I begins to feel the rumblings of a returning appetite.”

“It must have been an hour later when the sound of a crowing cock tells me its time to scarper. Out in the street I tucks the hares into the sidecar and pushes the bike about two hundred yards up the road and round the corner before starting her up.”

“You lucky bugger,” said Fred, draining his glass. “And, by the way it’s your round.”

Albert fought his way back through the noisy throng to the bar. "Same again, Peggy love he said." And then, looking over her shoulder at the serving hatch to the pub's tiny bar parlour, he saw, waiting to be served, the last man in the world he wanted to encounter. Their eyes met.

"Albert," bellowed Ted Coles over the noise. "I want a word with you lad. Wait there. I'm coming round."

This was bad news. Ted Coles, although over fifty, was a big bastard and had been the Royal Navy heavyweight boxing champion in his day. Albert carried the drinks back to Fred and set them down on the table. "Shit!" he swore.

"What's up, Bert?" said Fred. "You've gone all pale."

As Albert started to tell him, the door swung open to admit Ted Coles who jerked his head at Albert indicating that he wanted him outside. Shaking in his shoes, Albert followed the burly timber merchant.

But, out in the street, Ted Coles merely smiled, came conspiratorially close, and said: "Albert, lad, I hope you can help me. I'm a bit late getting home. The wife's going to chew my head off. Unless I can give her a little sweetener. I thought something nice for the table would do the trick. You wouldn't by any chance . . ."

"Say no more Mr Coles," Albert interrupted. "I've got just the thing in my side car - two of them in fact. And they'll only set you back half a quid."

Not ten minutes later, Peggy noticed Albert's return. His swarthy face was creased in a broad grin. He rejoined Fred Perkins. For a few moments their heads came together and then they burst into uproarious laughter that continued for several minutes.

"That must have been a good one," said a customer to Peggy.

She watched them clink their glasses together. Then Fred, soon to be joined by Albert, launched into the chorus from *The Lincolnshire Poacher*: *O. . .h, _tis my delight on a shining night in the season of the year.*

"Cheers," said Fred.

"Cheers," said Albert draining his glass. "And it's your round."

Alwyne Todd

Murder in Eden

The injured young chimp cowered under a bush, whimpering in pain and humiliation. The blood from his wounds mingled with the rain dribbling down from the forest canopy to form a dark patch on the wet leaves under his body. He was deeply regretting his foolhardiness in dallying with Layla, the favourite wife of the old dominant male who led the troop. Not that she had not encouraged him. He was, after all, a handsome specimen, powerfully built. With the impetuosity of a virile male on the brink of adulthood, he had responded recklessly to her inviting grimaces. After glancing furtively around and seeing no sign of the old leader he had allowed her to groom his back with gentle fingers. Grunting with pleasure he had closed his eyes. That was his first mistake.

From a low branch above his head the old male, who had been fully aware of what was going on, had crashed down on the interloper with his full weight. The youngster managed to roll clear and, with fear in his eyes, turned to face his adversary.

As the biggest and strongest of the young males, he was a good match, pound for pound, for the old warrior. And fleet of foot. Which is why he should have turned and fled. He should have been warned by the old fighting scars that crisscrossed the veteran's face and body. He stood his ground. That was his second mistake.

The leader feinted to his right and then, uttering a terrifying screech, launched himself at the youngster. In a flash he had the young chimp's right ear tightly clamped between his teeth. Using his powerful neck muscles, he shook his opponent like a rag doll. Unprepared for the ferocity of the attack, the youngster tried to fight back. After several desperate seconds, and at the cost of half an ear, he broke free. Using his considerable strength, he forced the leader on to his back but the older animal soon had him again - this time by the side of the neck. Over and over they rolled, raising a cloud of dust, amid loud screeches from the throats of the fighters and from the rest of the troop, who were dancing up and down with excitement. Desperately the young chimp thrust his fingers into the eyes and nostrils of his opponent, forcing him to let go. But again the wily old warrior got him in his jaws — this time by the left forearm. By seizing his own left paw in his right and twisting, the youngster broke the vice-like grip - levering his adversary off balance and throwing him to the ground. At that moment a bolt of agony shot up to his shoulder, extinguishing what little fight was left in him. He turned and dashed to the nearest tree.

The leader was soon up and after him, swinging from branch to branch in pursuit. In spite of the pain in his arm, the more agile youngster gained on the older animal and, when the terrain permitted a faster form of locomotion on the ground, soon left him far behind. After almost a kilometre the leader, gasping for breath, gave up the chase. Before turning back to the troop he emitted a loud screech of triumph which echoed down the gorge and curdled the blood of the young renegade.

Now the canopied darkness of the tropical forest enfolded him like a black velvet glove as he lay shivering on the blood-stained leaves. He shivered with the shock of his injuries which included a cracked radial bone in his left arm. He shivered with the cold induced by copious blood loss. And he shivered with fear. His now-badly-swollen arm was useless for climbing. He would be easy meat for any roaming predator. But, despite his pricked ears and anxiously-twitching nose, exhaustion overwhelmed him. He slept.

He awoke as long tendrils of mist were drifting up through the forest canopy to self-immolate in the heat of the risen sun. He had a raging thirst. The river bubbled nearby at the foot of a steep slope. He loped painfully down to a small sandy beach where he slaked his thirst in the clear, fast-flowing water.

Too weak to climb back to his former hiding place the young chimp forced his way to the middle of a dense clump of undergrowth not too far from the water. There he found a patch of sand that afforded him a degree of comfort.

He slept through most of the day, waking occasionally to stumble down to the water for a drink. By mid-afternoon he was hungry. But, to his dismay, he realised that the troop, in their progress upriver, had stripped the area of anything edible. The forested river banks were no more than thirty metres wide and hemmed in by sheer cliffs. On the ground there was nothing to be had save for a few grubs. By the second morning he was in bad shape. The bite wounds, especially the deep one on his neck, were festering. He awoke shivering. This time from fever. Once more his insatiable thirst drove him down to the water's edge, where the sight of a pair of crocodiles on a nearby sand bank had him warily raising his head between mouthfuls. Turning away from the river his first thought was food. After two days without eating he was ravenous. He had just enough strength to regain his hiding place in the thicket. The day passed and then the night. On the third day the chimp awoke, still burning with fever. His potentially lethal loss of blood had so weakened him that he could barely raise his head. But his thirst drove him down to the river again.

As he bent his face to the water he caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his left eye. Turning his head, he beheld an extraordinary sight. Perched atop a nearby boulder was a large, yellow pawpaw and a handful of his favourite, soft-shelled mbani nuts. He crawled across and sank his teeth gratefully into the crimson flesh of the yellow fruit.

Next morning there was more fruit, accompanied by a branch of the furry grey leaves that the chimps instinctively ate when they were sick.

For nine more days the chimp fed daily on the mysterious breakfast. By the tenth his fever had gone - and, though still weak, he could feel the first stirrings of renewed vigour in his veins.

On the eleventh day he awoke to the clamour of a tropical storm. Torrential rain poured down through the wildly swaying canopy. He slithered down through mud and leaves to find that the little beach had disappeared under the roaring brown torrent that the river had become. The boulder, half immersed in the water, was to his dismay devoid of food.

He crept back up into his sanctuary. Despite the rain it was hot. Wisps of steam rose from his saturated fur. By noon the rain had stopped. Again he clambered down to the river. The water had retreated but the boulder was still bare. He jumped up and sniffed the surface of the rock. A faint smell hovered, barely detectable, but enough to tantalise his nostrils with a pleasant sense of familiarity that he found hard to pin down.

The absence of food placed the chimp in a dilemma. His immediate surroundings had been denuded of forage. Despite his instinctive yearning, rejoining the troop was an option his fear of the old leader forbade. To satisfy his hunger he would have to retreat even further back down the gorge - where, at best, he could eke out a lonely and hazardous existence. He raised his face to the sky and screeched his distress.

A gentle breeze began to waft down the gorge towards him. His lamentation stopped abruptly as he caught a another whiff of the same tantalising odour that he had detected on the boulder. This time he recognized it and his heart turned a somersault. It was Layla's smell. He looked up the gorge and there she was about fifty metres away, crouched down holding a pair of succulent paw-paws. When she saw that she had gained his attention she placed one of the fruits on the ground and bounded away out of sight up through the thick undergrowth.

The chimp scampered across to the fruit which he soon dispatched with relish. He raised his eyes and there was Layla waiting for him. She placed the remaining fruit on the ground and again disappeared further up the gorge as he moved forward to eat it. Layla stayed within sight — indicating through her capering and grunts that she wanted him to follow her. Increasingly fearful, he followed her for almost two kilometres. Always, the lighter and fitter female kept a short distance ahead.

Suddenly his nostrils caught a scent that stopped him dead in his tracks. They were getting close to the troop. He crouched low, hiding his face behind his paws as he whimpered his fear. Layla backtracked until she was almost close enough to touch him. She made a soft keening sound and gave excited little jumps. Timorously he crept after her, stopping at the edge of a large clearing by the river. Concealed by the foliage he peeped cautiously through the leaves. His eyes widened. The harsh midday sun beat down on an astonishing sight. Three quarters of the troop were lying on their backs, fast asleep. The remainder were staggering about and occasionally falling over. This was the troop's first encounter with the bwala bwala tree, whose fruit is a potent narcotic when overripe.

Layla had gone out into the clearing and was gesturing next to one of the unconscious chimps. He saw that it was the old leader. With thumping heart he crept cautiously forward until he found himself looking down at the snoring warrior - his open mouth stained purple by the intoxicating fruit - and whose slightest move would have sent him scuttling back to safety. But the old chimp lay still.

Near to his head lay a large rounded stone weighing about five kilograms. The youngster stared at it for several seconds.

His gaze travelled from the stone to the sleeping chimp and back to the stone. Suddenly his simian brain was flooded by an inspiration that was totally un-simian. For several more seconds his eyes swivelled back and forth between the sleeper and the stone. Scarcely daring to breathe he bent down, got a good grip on the stone with both forepaws and raised it high above his head. Then, with a scream of hatred, he smashed it down on the leader's upturned face. As his victim tried to sit up he delivered another terrible blow. The old warrior, dazed and fighting for his life, turned over onto all fours, exposing the back of his head to the savage *coup de grace* which spilled his brains onto the sand.

Hannes van Wyk stood up in the bow of the leading raft. The river was still flowing swiftly after yesterday's rain. Just ahead the gorge widened to admit a broad shaft of sunlight. As they swept round the bend a beach came into view on the right. The professor called over his shoulder to the helmsman.

Head for that beach, George. It looks like a good spot for tonight.

George canted the tiller to the left, throttling down to mute the roar of the little outboard motor. The party behind followed suit and the two inflatables nudged the sunlit sand within seconds of each other. Hannes, Professor of Zoology at Wits University, Johannesburg, was the expedition's leader. He was accompanied in the leading raft by three of his students — two male and one female. His colleague in the second raft was John Kirby, a senior lecturer in geology from the same university who had, in tow, two of his students, both young men. The expedition had been formed to catalogue the fauna and to assess the extent of certain valuable mineral deposits in this hitherto inaccessible stretch of a tributary of the Libquombo River in Gabon. The expedition had been sponsored by a large mining company represented by the eighth member of the group, Edward Sanders, an engineer. The fifty-kilometre stretch of river they were exploring was totally uninhabited. Steep and dangerous rapids guarded both exit and entrance. For much of its length it was enclosed between towering rock walls. Now, after five days on the river, they were glad to emerge from the gloomy chasm to stop early in the day for a break.

While the students were drawing the rafts safely up the beach and starting to unload stores, Hannes and John discussed the possibility of a three-day working stopover at the pleasant little beach, backed by its sunny clearing.

John, I'll explore a little downstream, said Hannes. _Why don't you take a stroll upriver towards that interesting-looking rock outcrop?"

As John approached the rocks he became aware of a steady buzzing sound. As he climbed the few steps to the crest of the rocks, the buzzing became louder and looking down the other side he saw that it was caused by a large cloud of flies. The object of their attention was a big dead animal. So many of them were crawling over it that it was hard to identify. He looked back downriver and cupped his hand to his mouth:

Hannes, come and look at this.

The rest of the party, catching the urgency in John's voice, quickly joined him at his vantage point. As they stood in a semicircle looking down, they were joined by a slightly breathless Hannes. The zoologist turned to one of his students:

Identify that for us, Temba.

Pan troglodytes he replied without hesitation. _Or, to our rock-chipping friends here, the common chimpanzee._

And a fine specimen too, added the professor. _Probably the dominant male in the troop._

Ted, the mining engineer, turned to the professor: _I've heard that we share over 90% of our genes with chimps. Is that true?_

Sure is, replied Hannes. _98.3% to be exact._

But that must mean that they are almost like us, said one of the young geologists.

It does indeed, said the professor, thoughtfully eyeing the bloodied stone that lay inches from the animal's death-glazed eyes.

It does indeed.

Ray Hattingh

Chameleons

Colour the idealistic chameleons non-racist
When they are not subject to oppression,
When they act from a position of privilege.
Colour them “Justice for all”.

But when they themselves become victims,
When they suffer, colour them new racists.
Recolour those police-stoning chameleons,
Colour them “Order before justice”.

Colour them also bewildered, angry, hurt,
Resentful of the crime-ridden disorder they left.
(How easy to be non-racist when privileged.)
Now colour them “Disillusioned — emigrated”.

Ray Hattingh

Ouma and Miena

Ouma Hattingh was born in Cradock in the nineteenth century, in a different time. Oupa came from Tarkastad, to where his forefathers had trekked from the Cape of Good Hope. They were married early in the twentieth century and set up house in Cradock.

Setting up house was a serious business in those days. There were no supermarkets around the corner with frozen chickens and such like conveniences. No, you had to slaughter the livestock, gut them and skin them yourself. This was hard work and a servant in a household was not a luxury but a necessity. So it was, that soon after their betrothal, young Miena Visage joined the household beginning a liaison that would outlive Oupa and nearly outlive Ouma. Both of whom would eventually be buried from that house.

In those halcyon days necessary victuals were bought from the local shops by sending Miena with a note. Later on the luxury of a telephone would ease Miena's burden somewhat. Even in the days of the note the required goods were not always immediately available and frequently had to be sent later, by bicycle.

When it came to cooking Ouma was a past master. She used to make pancakes on a primus stove. She would sprinkle them with sugar and cinnamon and get the sugar to melt. And koeksisters! What a treat! I used to watch her plait the dough into the traditional shape. This would then be plonked into a four-gallon paraffin tin, full of oil, on the primus stove. Next to the primus stood another four-gallon paraffin tin with ice cold syrup made from sugar and water. Once the koeksisters were cooked, they were immediately plopped into the syrup and left there till the syrup had permeated the whole koeksister. While this cooking was going on, dear Miena was washing dishes as though her life depended on it. Hot water had to be boiled for this, there were no electric geysers. I remember sitting at the eight seater table that held pride of place in the kitchen while Ouma cooked and Miena cleaned. On cold mornings I was given the warm tea cosy to put my cold hands in after the tea was poured. A tin of samp was mine to make patterns with on the table while I watched. Occasionally Ouma would cut some of the fat off the mutton and fry it to a crisp into 'kaaings', delicious bits of crispy fat. Which reminds me that the mutton fat from a roast leg would be collected and put in the fridge. Used, with salt and pepper, in place of butter on fresh bread it made a most delicious treat.

Sunday lunches were something else. I always wondered where the army was that Ouma was going to feed but she steadfastly maintained that you never know when visitors might arrive and they must be fed. I remember one night when this happened and unusually Miena was asked to stay and help with the washing up. She finished late so my father's

brother and I drove her home to the location. I remember well how impressed I was with her humble shack, it was spotless inside and incredibly ordered. I wondered if this was Ouma's influence. But I digress. There were no such things as starters or even wine. The main fare was usually a leg of lamb and a fowl - the size of which make supermarket fare look like day old chickens, Then came the 'bykos' which consisted of rice, roast potatoes, boere beans, cabbage, pumpkin, squash, a beetroot salad, a carrot salad and my favourite, peaches and dumplings. These were boiled dried peaches on top of which dumplings were done. With lamb and potatoes this was an absolute delight of mine. Then there was desert. Ideal milk, canned peaches, canned pears, blancmange or jelly, and on special days my favourite, 'nationale' pudding. I cannot quite remember the ingredients but there were raisins and apricot jam, a chewy crust and lots of lovely sauce. Miena, and her neighbours, lived well off the plentiful leftovers.

In later years Ouma had acquired a cat which was called Optel, a name which gave a clue as to its manner of arrival at Cawood Street. Occasionally Optel's meals would get out of sync with the family's and this would necessitate a call to the local butcher for a penny's cat meat. Now let me tell you that the stuff they call goulash that you buy in a modern supermarket is rubbish compared with a penny's cat meat from a Cradock butcher in those days. The unfortunate delivery boy would have to stand and wait while Ouma unwrapped the rather substantial parcel of meat and inspected each bit for sinew or fat. Miena sniggered quietly in the background, hand over mouth. Woe betide the poor wretch if there were traces of either on the cat's meat. She would wrap up the parcel in a huff, throw it into the holder on the delivery bicycle and tell the delivery boy to tell his boss that, "My kat eet nie kak nie!" I remember the sad day when after nineteen good years poor old Miena set off to the local pharmacist with the cat in a grain sack. There was no vet and the pharmacist was the angel of death, or is that mercy, for a cat whose body no longer wanted to cooperate with the life force.

Miena was naturally around when all three children were born. In fact all four - but 'oorele boetie' died in the 'flu epidemic of 1918. My father was the eldest. Cleaning the house, which included sweeping the pavement in front of the house and making sure that the gutter was clear of pine needles, was a daily task. Once the house had been cleaned, the front door was out of bounds for all but the dominee. Woe betide any of the children, or grandchildren who dared to try and violate this law. Miena would chastise them and tell them to go around the back and the grown men and women would acquiesce meekly. I seemed to be the only one exempt from this rule but then I was the eldest grandchild, something quite special. I was unashamedly the favourite; after all I was the prime carrier of the bloodline. I never did find out what Ouma thought of the fact that my name broke with tradition.

Miena's life was one of order and routine. Monday was washing day. In the back yard there was a huge stone slab mounted on two short concrete walls, this was the 'wastafel'. With the aid of an enormous tin bath and this slab of stone, Miena brought the washing to a whiteness every Monday morning that would make Omo blush. The rule was that all

washing must be done and hanging on the line before the sun peeped over the horizon for the first time. If any of you have ever experienced a Karoo winter's morning, you will appreciate the sacrifice involved in keeping up this routine. On Tuesday morning the washing would be dampened which meant Miena sprinkling every article with water, rolling it tightly and placing it in the tin bath. Once the water had more or less evenly dampened the various articles of washing Ouma would set about ironing them. Everything was ironed to perfection, underpants, sheets, hankies - everything. I suppose that the act of ironing was also a sort of disinfectant and the hot iron would kill any goggas that might have sneaked into the washing.

I cannot remember Oupa's parents and I think they must have died, and been buried in, Tarkastad. But Ouma's parents were buried in Cradock and the Sunday routine included a visit to the graveyard to put fresh flowers on their graves. I was sent to the English Sunday School. My father had taken English higher (as well as Afrikaans higher) and English literature at school. I think he decided that English is the universal language - after all when he was born a quarter of the world's surface was ruled by Britannia. Oupa had an Oldsmobile which he had bought just before the war. This car was taken out on Sundays to charge the battery. After Sunday school I would be fetched in the Olds and we would go for a short drive on one of the roads that led into the interior. Ouma would have one of her cupcakes for me. These were huge and liberally covered in hundreds and thousands. I remember them well.

The car was garaged at someone else's house, very few people owned cars. Ouma's garage had been turned into a storeroom and a bathroom. Hot water for bathing was provided by a wood burning geyser. You placed the bits of wood in the geyser which had double walls containing the water. The bits of wood were chopped into kindling by faithful old Miena. Once lit the water heated very quickly. When your ablutions were complete Ouma passed you on the way out and went into that bathroom and wiped up every solitary bit of water. Within five minutes of your leaving it looked as though that bathroom had never, ever been touched by a human hand. The sitting room appeared to be the domain of the dominee and the photographer. I once remember being assembled around the couch for a family portrait but cannot recall another time that I was in the lounge. Miena, courtesy of her cleaning duties spent more time in the lounge than anyone else. Serves the Dominee right for not visiting more frequently.

Ouma was careful with money and a stickler for meeting commitments. I remember an entry in her diary on the 1st of a month, 'Jo -account rendered - 3d', when her daughter had neglected to meet a debt on the last day of the previous month. Ouma carefully guarded her possessions. Money was not easily come by and things had to last. There were treasures which were seldom used. Genuine Irish linen sheets, I can still remember their feel - what quality. Sheets for daily use eventually began to wear in the middle. Once this happened they were cut in half and the original edges sewn together, the frayed edges turned and sewn and you had a serviceable sheet, albeit with a slight ridge down the middle.

Blankets were also subject to wear. Once they began to show signs of wear they were covered with material to hide the worn bits. These covered blankets were delightfully warm and one of them remained a treasured possession of mine until it literally fell apart with use.

My father's only sister used to walk around the house saying that she wanted to 'erf' this and 'erf' that when Ouma died. When Oupa died my father and I met Miena on her way to work to apprise her of the situation. Never before, nor since, have I seen tears like that - she loved those two old people. Dear old Miena also died before Ouma.

Ouma was fond of saying that possessions were just 'wêreld's goed' but nevertheless she looked after and treasured hers'. Tragically, when Ouma died they literally just threw away as 'useless' all the treasures that she had so carefully garnered. I think Ouma would have preferred Miena to have them, for like Ouma, Miena knew all about appreciating the little you have.

Shirley Pearce

An Easy Victory

Midshipman Mr Charles Adam stood by the signal halliard, feeling somewhat breathless as he always did with the prospect of action, but working hard at keeping his face devoid of expression.

From his position on the quarterdeck he could see the lone Dutch frigate and the two Dutch merchant ships anchored with their yards crossed. There was an almost insignificant line of buildings on the fringe of Simon's Bay, and two small batteries on the mountainside. He turned to watch the Captain and Vice-Admiral Elphinstone, standing with apparent unconcern eyeing the approach to land. How many years, wondered Adam, did it take to reach that cool demeanour? His muscles were as tight as standing rigging.

The shore battery opened fire. A clean so far and no further warning.

"General signal to anchor," the Admiral said evenly. He watched the fountains of water where the shot fell considerably out of range and raised the glass to his eye. "Let's see what they have in mind."

Adam and the seaman with him hurriedly bent on the flags, the signal went soaring aloft and the squadron anchored. Adam took a few deep breaths. The men remained at their stations with the guns loaded and run out. It had been a tedious voyage to the tip of the continent, everyone hungered for action.

The large number of the 78th Foot packed into the already cramped quarters were delighted when Table Mountain had been sighted. To everyone's disappointment it had soon become obvious no engagement in Table Bay was to be attempted.

Charles and Andrew Peal had been gazing wistfully at the town when Dawbridge, a really tarry individual in Mr Adam's division was overheard talking to his mates.

"Stands to reason," he lectured, "plenty of batteries around this here bay, most like all able to heat shot too. Could never get close enough to pound the Castle!"

It became apparent after a while that no pounding of Simon's Bay was to occur just yet either. So much for action, Adam thought with a sigh.

"The best we can hope for," said Jack Huntley as they sat down to tough beef and flinty biscuit, "is probably a load of cabbages."

"Well, t'would be a change," remarked Adam, eyeing his beef grimly. "And I'd haply trade my grog ration for fresh water. This stuff has more life in it than a village pond."

In fact, the loading of much-needed stores, and the disembarking of the sick provided the ship's company with their only

change of routine for the next few weeks. Nor were their short rations lifted, as Simon's Bay had little in the way of fresh provisions. However, they did get cabbages. "Told you so," said Jack.

Winter was setting in, and a fine but steady rain was falling early one dawn, as Adam stood watch with Lieutenant Tod. Miserably cold and wet, his black hair damp even under his cocked hat, Adam surveyed the grey sky and heaving sea with moody dark eyes. This was nothing more than blockade duty. He was jolted out of his gloom by a shout from aloft.

"Deck there! Sail, starboard quarter, Sir!"

"Aloft with you, Mr Adam," called Lieutenant Tod.

"Aye aye, Sir."

Adam shed his coat, heavy with moisture, and grabbing a glass, swung himself onto the ratlines. Visibility was poor, but he spotted the topgallant sails of two vessels after a long look.

"Two ships, Sir," he shouted down presently. "Can't make out their colours yet."

Balanced easily on the crosstrees, with an arm hooked through a stay and the Dolland glass held to his eye, Adam watched as the vessels came hull up over the horizon.

Damp and cold were forgotten.

"Deck there!" he yelled. "American colours, Sir!"

"Very well, Mr Adam, down you come."

Before Charles Adam's feet had again touched the deck, a stream of orders had been issued.

Instantly the ship was a hive of activity, with boats, crews being told off and the men working furiously to hoist the long boat and cutter over the side. Adam was elated when he was ordered to join one of the boarding parties with Mr Riley, Third Lieutenant. He stood by as Riley received his orders.

"All dispatches, mail and newspaper to be confiscated with as little force as possible." The Admiral kept his sharp eyes on the young officer. "We're not at war with America and I don't want complications. Is that understood?"

"Aye aye, Sir."

Charles Adam went over the side after the men into the cutter. He settled in the sternsheets, Mr Riley landing with a thud beside him. He took a firm hold of the tiller with that breathless, taut feeling stealing over him again. For every hour of action, men and officers of His Britannic Majesty's Navy endured weeks of dreary routine, and Adam knew a thrill of pure elation.

The swell was considerable, but the men at the oars put their backs into it and in a short time they were hailed from the American frigate, hove-to with topsail backed. The reply was yelled across just moments before they were alongside, and Riley hardly waited for the cutter to be hooked on before making a grab for the hand ropes.

Scrambling up the side in the lieutenant's wake, Adam swiftly straightened his sword and hat, and settled the pistols

tucked into his waistband. There was a decided air of menace on deck, the American seamen standing in groups, armed with a variety of weapons. A very tall blue-coated officer, obviously the Captain, strode forward.

“And who might you be, mister?”

“Lieutenant Jason Riley, of His Britannic Majesty’s ship Monarch, Sir. My orders are to relieve you of any mail, dispatches and newspapers.”

The captain looked at Riley and Adam, and the British seamen behind them. The ship was tensely quiet.

”And should I resist?”

“Well, Sir,” said Tod with a wave of his hand at Monarch, “Vice-Admiral Elphinstone asked me to be sure to tell you that he would much regret using force and endangering the lives of any Americans, but that he would not accept a refusal.”

The officer looked across the water at the British squadron. Not all nine ships were anchored, the sole frigate and one of the seventy-fours having set sail to frustrate any attempt to escape. One single broadside from that ship-of-the-line could sink his vessel or his consort. And all the world knew the fledgling American Navy was desperately short of ships.

“Very well,” he snapped.

“Stand guard on deck, Mr Adam,” Mr Riley ordered, and then went below with a party of armed men.

Two hours later, Charles Adam was in the midshipmen’s berth, stripping off his wet uniform. The sea had come up and it had been a hard pull back to the Monarch, spray and rain drenching every man. He felt restless and irritable and knew it to be a result of the promises of combat coming to naught. The Americans had handed over their dispatches with a poor grace, ready enough to fight but unable to do so. At only nineteen, despite four years at sea, Mr Adam still had too much to learn about patience.

His frustrations lasted only another week. On 7 July, Vice-Admiral Elphinstone gave the order to seize the two Dutch merchantman still at anchor in Simon’s Bay, and in the next few days, all vessels of the squadron were kept hard at work taking soundings along the coast and off Muizenberg beach.

It was dangerous work, and the northerly wind blew up a sea that had waves pounding in the surf — no sailor liked being that close to the shore.

Charles Adam took his turn in the chains, casting the lead. After an hour he stumbled down to the midshipmen’s berth, drenched to the skin and shivering, the muscles of his right arm and shoulder aching abominably. Jack Huntley sat at the table and grinned at him.

“If you’re quick you can purloin Andrew’s last shirt. It’s the only piece of dry clothing left.”

Charles stripped off his wet uniform, and towelled himself dry. “Not now,” he said shortly. He was cold and tired, but at least, he thought as he wrapped himself in a blanket and rolled into his hammock, he was not bored. Soon there would be

action, he knew. His eyelids drooped and he was asleep.

He was shaken awake some hours later. Peering in the gloom he saw Andrew Peal holding an armful of clothing.

“Dry uniform for your grog ration?” he offered.

“Go away!”

“You’re going on deck wearing a blanket? The shame of it with the 78th disembarking!”

“What?” Adam shouted.

In one movement he rolled from the hammock and snatched at the clothing.

Emerging on deck he found the troops lining up for the boats.

“Cutter, Mr Adam!” shouted the First Lieutenant, seeing him.

“Aye aye Sir.”

He need not have hurried. Landing 450 troops and their accoutrements took some hours, even though the beachhead was not under threat of enemy fire. The soldiers were hesitant in getting from ship to boat, and the seamen plucked more than one redcoat from the water who had mistimed his jump.

“Blimey, Sir,” said a tarry seaman to the corporal he had hauled over the gunwale, “no need to swim in.”

“Yea,” said his mate, “a penny ferry will take ya!”

“Now here,” commented Jack later, standing on deck and gazing toward shore, “we have a perfect example of the advantage of Navy over Army. Six years in this service and I cannot remember once having to march into action. Those lads have a long walk ahead.”

“Sure to be joined by Marines and seamen. Maybe you should volunteer, Jack, walk off some of that fat,” commented Adam. Already on two-third rations, everyone was continuously hungry and even plump-faced Jack could hardly sport any extra flesh.

As it turned out, Jack did go ashore, grumbling that a march from Simon’s Town to Muizenberg was sure to ruin his boots. And Charles Adam, to his delight, was to command a gunboat, the Squib, detailed to sail close inshore as support to the troops.

“We’ll mount a swivel-gun and two six-pounders, Mr Adam,” instructed the First Lieutenant.

“Keep just ahead of the columns. Don’t know what these Dutch chaps may have in store.”

“Aye aye, Sir.”

“A crew of twelve must be told off. You have two hours to make ready.”

Mounting guns, even the small six-pounder, into a boat on a choppy sea was not an easy task. Officers shouted while men swore and strained and heaved. Adam stood in the Squib, shouting himself hoarse giving directions.

Finally, loaded with powder and shot and fresh water, he settled in the stern-sheets and gave the order to shove off.

The troops of the 78th Foot were glad to be on land again, and fell easily into step. Jack Huntley and the Marines seamen, not nearly so comfortable marching on ungiving ground after walking wooden decks year in and year out, stumbled along, cursing on the uneven surface. The corporal who had taken a soaking was unable to resist getting his own back.

“My, but who’s like a lot of drunken tarts, then, eh?”

“Blimey,” groaned a voice from the back, “the whole place is made of little stones!”

Adam turned his gaze from the shore where the marching feet were sending up a trail of dust, and looked at the men sitting in front of him. With the single sail set they moved slowly along the coastline, moving easily in a light westerly wind. The guns were loaded and waiting. He tingled with anticipation and would have given much to be able to move about. He slackened his grip on the tiller, hoping his tension didn’t show.

“Summers!” he called to the seaman up in the bows, “keep a sharp look out for any sign of those Dutchmen!”

“Aye aye Sir.”

Squib crossed the bay off Vishoek then went about and crossed the bay again, keeping station with the slower moving land force. They could hear the thunder of gunfire as America, Stately, Echo, and Rattlesnake pounded the Dutch positions off Muizenberg.

It was just as they rounded the headland and approached Kalkbaai that they were pitched into battle.

Summers shouted, “There’s a gun mounted in the road there, Sir.”

“Lower the sail, stand to your guns men!” Charles yelled, moving swiftly up forward. The Dutch gun went off with a bang and a plume of water rose ahead of Squib. Charles crouched over the six-pounder, waiting for the range to shorten.

“Fire as you bear,” he ordered the gun captain crouched at the other six-pounder.

“Aye aye Sir.”

The party ashore appeared in the V of the dispart sight and he barked the lanyard. The gun roared out, recoiling past him belching smoke.

“Sponge out and reload,” he ordered, coughing, his eyes searching for the fall of shot. Another plume of water rose, this time astern of Squib, at the same time as the gun fired. The gunboat bucked wildly from the recoil.

He snapped an order at the men at the oars and then stared at the shore. It was clear there was only one artillery piece there, but he had to hit it. Even one gun could wreak terrible havoc on a column of men, especially if it was loaded with grapeshot. He was very aware of the danger they were in, but the marching men were probably just around the headland by now. He had to keep drawing the enemy fire. The Dutch gun would be bigger, have a longer range than the six-pounder and the boat was moving nearer inshore.

He crouched over the gun again.

“Increase the elevation,” he ordered, paused, “Enough!”

He tugged the lanyard and stood to watch the fall of shot, the smoke catching his throat. A shot whistled overhead and ploughed into the sea, drenching them all with spray. The second gun barked out but Adam could not see through smoke and spray where the shot fell.

The men backed their oars at his command and there was a sudden volley of musket fire around them. The man beside Adam gave a quick intake of breath and clapped a hand to his bloodied shoulder. Adam glanced at him and drew his breath in sharply as a musket ball knocked his hat off.

“Ready Sir,” someone yelled. He swallowed, bent over the sight and jerked the lanyard. This time he saw the shot fall, ploughing into the gun carriage and scattering men, followed four seconds later by the other shot from Squib.

“Load with grapeshot,” he ordered.

The guns vomited a hail of iron, and the Dutchmen took flight, abandoning their gun lying drunkenly in the path of the approaching soldiers.

“After them!” Adam yelled. The men rigged the sail, Adam again at the tiller, keeping the vessel as close inshore as he dared. ‘Squib’ fired several times at the retreating soldiers, but they left the track and moved into the cover of dense bushes on the mountainside.

“Cease fire!” he shouted. He ran a hand through his dark hair, feeling the grit from the gunpowder. Then he picked up his cocked hat, rammed it on his head.

The Battle of Muizenberg was now in plain view, with Rattlesnake hove-to nearest Steenberg mountain, and the other three ships strung in a line along the beach. The boom from the big guns was continuous and a thick pall of smoke hung over the water. Squib took up station between the mountain and Rattlesnake to continue giving cover to the advancing troops.

Adam stood by one of the guns, watching big breakers crashing onto the shore and thinking how difficult it would have been to land the troops there. And while he stood there, the bombardment ceased, and it became apparent that the Dutch had abandoned their position and were in retreat. In the sudden silence he rubbed his eyes and felt very tired.

Mr Charles Adam, midshipman, was, with Lieutenant Tod and others, mentioned in Admiral Elphinstone’s dispatches for “... steady and correct discharge of [my] orders.” He went on to distinguish himself in the service rising to the rank of Captain and commanding the 74-gun Invincible.

Jean de Kok

Pip

Some characters are pretty outrageous. I have known quite a few and they can be fun in a rather alarming way.

Pip, however, was not outrageous, he hadn't the energy for it as he lived in a cloudy world of pain, discomfort and bewilderment. But although his looks were freakish his nature was exceptional, his joys unusual and his concerns about his destiny uncanny.

There was nothing he liked better than to be pushed in his wheel-chair. Even the journey from his room down the long passage to the dining room gave him pleasure.

Sometimes the other inmates gave him the 'thumbs up' sign and he felt even more cheerful.

When his care-giver wheeled him she was always cautious because he had fallen out several times, and although he was now strapped in she still wheeled him slowly over the bumpy farm road. And not for long enough either, because she had so much else to do. He understood this but liked it when she parked him in the garden when she unpegged the washing, so that he could look at the trees and the pastures and, specially, the sky.

On weekends when his farmer friend Chris was free he took Pip out and this was a special event because Chris was not careful at all. He pushed Pip so fast that the wheelchair bumped and lurched. It was splendid; Pip felt as if he were a racing driver. And Chris had time to stop often so that they could look at the cows and pigs and horses, and once Chris even gave him a baby chick to hold. He could not hold it properly so the soft yellow thing soon fell off his lap, but he thought about it often and would try to open his hands in case he ever got another chance.

Most of his time, however, was spent indoors where it was rather dark. People were busy with their chores so there was lots of noise from the kitchen and also lots of mutters from Louise, whose job it was to do the dusting, only she was always forgetting where she put the duster. And outside Carl was singing the same verse of the same old song over and over again while he was supposed to be sweeping the yard.

These sounds made him feel less lonely as he struggled to thread his large needle. His job was to make a tapestry for the chapel, but he couldn't see the colours very well.

But he squelched up his eyes and managed to do a few rows each morning before it was time to quit.

Every day Bab said the same thing, "Pip, you've done splendidly."

But he knew he hadn't. His hands just wouldn't move properly and he got really tired sitting in the wheel chair all morning, never knowing when someone would come and take him to the bathroom.

At meal times Bab tied a big bib around his neck so that his clothes would not get too messed up. He always smiled and was grateful to be taken such good care of.

His food was cut up into tiny pieces and his hand was helped to grip the spoon and, somehow or other, he managed. If the spoon fell out of his hand someone helped him get started again. He really liked it when his friends chaffed him.

“Come on Pip, don’t pour all the pudding down your neck.” This made him feel like a regular guy. Because Pip couldn’t get out and about like the others he was allowed something very special. A radio. On Saturday afternoons he sat in his room and listened to the races. He really liked the announcer who got so excited when he was relaying the race that Pip found that his own hand clenched, which is what they always refused to do when he wanted them to. So Pip listened to the races Saturday after Saturday until, quite suddenly, the horses started talking to him. He heard them quite clearly. They told him if they were tired or unhappy.

And Pip spoke back to them. He comforted them.

Never mind being sad he told them. I know about this, you will feel better tomorrow.

They also told him if they were going to win or lose.

Pip cheered them.

“You are a very good horse to be able to win a race — or it is just as good to come second or third.”

Pip even told them about his mother and the two rand she sent him every month and they advised him, most carefully, to think about putting his money on one of the races

Well! How exciting Saturdays became after this. Dancer or Stormer would tell Pip of the form for next Saturday and he would ask Chris to place fifty cents or one rand on THE horse. Sometimes he won three rand but it was not so much the winning as being able to talk to the horses. Although he often opened up his Post Office Savings book just so that he knew he now had twenty-two rand in it. And he did like feeling rich.

One Sunday Peter and Chris helped him get ready for chapel as they usually did. They lifted him from his bed, dressed him in his Sunday best and pushed him onto the porch. But it was raining. Bab bustled by.

“Pip can’t possibly be pushed to chapel in this downpour” she said breathlessly. “He would get wet, sit in chapel in damp clothes and catch his death. He must stay in the house. Wheel him into the kitchen where he can stay with cook until we get back for lunch.”

And off she fled.

Pip would have liked to go to chapel in the rain. It was so long since he had felt the rain on his face and how he would have enjoyed getting drenched with all the others.

On the other hand the kitchen was one of his favourite places and he certainly loved Cook. Not only because she often

gave him tasty nibbles but because she always listened properly and spoke to him as if he was the same as everyone else.

It was so comforting to sit and watch her peel the potatoes and wash the spinach. But he felt he had to ask her something and ask her right now while they were alone.

“Cook,” he said quite loudly “do you believe in re_incararnation?”

Cook stopped doing what she was doing and gave this question serious thought.

“Well Pip, I can’t really say. Some people do and some people don’t.”

“Yes Cook, but something is bothering me about re-incarnation.” She put down her paring knife and sat on a stool. “And what might that be?” she asked seriously.

“Well” mused Pip “if you die and are going to be re-incarnated into somebody else, what I want to know is whether you have a little time to rest in heaven before you come down again. Or do you have to come down immediately?” Cook thought and thought about this as it was a very difficult question.

“Pip you will definitely have time to rest for a while. The same as I need a rest after cooking all day just so will you need a rest after living each of your days.”

Pip sighed.

“I would be so glad to rest for a while” he murmured.

“Never fear” said Cook. “Didn’t Our Lord rest for a few days?”

And she opened the oven, basted the chicks and started to wash the lettuce.

Pip was silent for a long time but his face was troubled.

“And so, Pip, you have another serious question for me? I can see it rising out of your head like smoke.”

She looked at this precious soul, confined to the chair, arms, legs and feet getting more and more paralysed.

“And so?” she urged “get on with it young man otherwise the lunch will burn.”

He looked up at her, his eyes deep with longing, “What I really want to know Cook, is whether I will come back to earth the same as I am now.”

Cook didn’t cross her fingers; she did not raise her wooden spoon to whoever might be listening but she said to him in tones that brooked no argument whatever: “Philip Stone, I promise you, I myself promise you that you will come back to earth like Ivan Lendl. You wallop about the tennis court, you will hold a racquet like a knight and lots of young people will want to be just like you.”

“Now, balance this salad bowl on your lap while I wheel you into the dining room in your chariot.”

She ruffled his thick black hair, too heavy for the slender neck to support.

Her heart ached. It was so easy to feed a body but how to sustain a soul? She never knew if he believed her or if he was

comforted.

She never knew whether a host of angels took note of her raised wooden spoon.

Only Pip knows.

Jean de Kok

The Indian Summer of
Joan Sinclair

"I must be out of my mind."

Joan looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and the face that stared back at her made her more nervous than she already was. She did not usually give her face much thought but tonight it really bothered her

"I'm really a dull looking person," she lamented.

She was, it is true, quite plain, with fairish hair and plumpish features. Not that she hadn't tried her best to improve things by using extra make_up.

"I look like a clown with all this stuff on my face" she grimaced, and was so nervous that she smeared a second layer of lipstick.

"What am I doing this for?" she asked herself, "Why am I doing it? Why don't I stay home and read a book or watch TV. What on earth persuaded me to accept his invitation?" She sat down heavily on the loo seat, took several deep breaths and tried to keep calm.

Last week when she was at Joe and Betty's Silver Wedding Anniversary, mainly helping in the kitchen preparing the snacks, she had been as relaxed and comfortable as she usually was. She had not dressed up for the occasion as it was a very casual affair, and had even worn an apron over her good slacks and the embroidered pink blouse she liked so much because it did not require any ironing.

The party was not large, a cluster of old friends drinking not-too-expensive wine, chattering away and making the usual jokes about "How could Betty and Joe have stood each other for twenty-five years."

She was aware of her good fortune in having friends who always included her in both special and ordinary occasions. Even though she was so very unattached.

Few of them knew that she had once been married, but it had been so short lived and ended so long ago that she herself hardly ever thought of it. At the time, thirty years ago, it had been very painful and she had never got over the feeling of being rejected.

"I was a silly girl to think that a man like Tony could really love me," she used to say to herself. And had always put herself down believing that she understood why, after only two years, he had packed his bags and headed for more exciting

pastures.

She came to believe that she did not have the kind of charm that attracted men, but this had not spoiled her life. Her job as librarian was absorbing and she knew that her attention was much sought after by young and old alike. She enjoyed her small house and garden and never missed the presence of a man." Not that" as she often mused to herself "hordes of men have been pounding at my door."

All had gone well at the party until Betty had brought a man over to be introduced. A man new to Cape Town and an old friend of Joe`s.

"I am a silly middle-aged woman even to think of this," muttered Joan to herself, still on the loo seat, "I cannot imagine now why I liked him so much."

But she did know. For although she only vaguely remembered what he looked like she had found him gentle and unassuming. They had chatted in a pleasant way.

"What on earth did we talk about?" Joan wondered. But she had returned home feeling quite perky. Until she got into bed. This had always been her time for taking herself to task.

"Just because a man spent a little time with you there is no need to get all fussed about it. He was being polite and you were being polite and that`s all there is to it." But she fell asleep feeling that it had been a quite special evening.

Two days later her phone had rung.

"This is Don Mackintosh. Do you remember me? We met at the party on Saturday."

"Yes. Yes of course I remember you. It was a very good party wasn`t it? I have known Joe and Betty for years."

"They are such a special couple. But you are also one of their old friends." Joan could hear herself going on and on. It was just too awful.

"I hope I am not bothering you but wondered if you would like to go out with me on Saturday? To dinner perhaps?" Joan experienced feelings of both pleasure and alarm. She hesitated.

"Well, that is very kind of you. Joe and Betty would be pleased. Thank you. I would like to go out to dinner."

The time was set and here she sat with blurred lipstick and uncomfortable hairdo and high-heeled shoes, feeling an idiot. To say nothing of wearing a fussy dress that was not at all like her.

The doorbell rang. She hoisted herself up and went to answer it.

There he stood, looking so unlike what Joan had imagined.

He was all spruced up in a suit and tie. Slicked down, shiny and round.

"This is what comes of having a date with someone you don`t know," muttered Joan to herself, "when you should have the sense to realise that you are long since past this kind of thing." Her heart sank.

"Shall we go?" he asked. "I did think of going to a little place in town where I have been eating since I came to Cape Town but you look so special that maybe you could suggest something more elegant?" Joan pulled herself together.

"I would much prefer your little place," she said, "elegance terrifies me."

His relief was so obvious that Joan decided to make the most of it.

"Would you mind waiting for a few moments while I change my shoes?" she said. "These pinch."

And she grabbed a cardigan which she hoped would cover up the fussy dress she had chosen.

Once seated at his Italian eating place it was not easy for either of them. Joan wondered what on earth they would have to talk about. Don was equally concerned so they both started talking at the same time.

"Hasn't the weather been fine?" they said in unison.

They both felt silly but somehow a little ice was broken.

"I think we had both better avoid the subject of the weather," Joan said. "You will find that Capetonians spend an awful lot of time talking about it. Rather tell me how you have settled. I think it must be difficult to start anew in strange place."

And Don did. It seemed as if he had been waiting a long time to tell someone of his retrenchment after thirty years with the same company in Howick. Of his despair and of his good fortune in being offered a position as Tax Consultant with Joe's firm.

"We were at school together in Natal you know," Don said.

"Joe was much my junior. He seems to think I made his early boarding school days much more bearable. So we always kept in touch."

He was silent for a little while and then added, "I will be fifty-five in a few month's time. Awful thought!"

"Joan could never quite remember how it was that their evening out suddenly seemed so right. She relaxed and settled back more comfortably in her chair. Don took off his jacket and loosened his tie. And they began to talk.

They talked and talked about themselves, about books, about living alone, but never about the weather.

The evening was so companionable that it was only when he helped her into her cardigan that Joan became aware of the unusual warmth of his hands on her shoulders.

They parted at her front door. After a slight hesitation they shook hands and arranged to go walking together on the following Saturday.

Track-suited and bareheaded they did the Cecilia Forest walk, huffing a bit on the way up. Joan was glad to accept the offer of Don's arm on the way down and it seemed quite natural to invite him in to have coffee and a toasted sandwich after their exertions.

Before many weeks had passed Joan found that Don was constantly in her thoughts. She was glad to find him in the

library waiting for her to finish her late shift. She was glad when he phoned, glad to prepare a simple supper for the two of them, glad to repair his sweater, glad when he offered to put up a bathroom shelf. She was, in fact, permanently glad.

She suddenly felt it was time to take herself to task.

"Joan Sinclair," she spoke firmly to herself in the bathroom mirror. "You are getting sillier by the day. Don is just a lonely man finding his feet in Cape Town and you are letting your life revolve around him. It is time you started evening classes or something."

When Don phoned the next morning to ask her out to a movie she took a firm grip on herself and said, "I don't think I can manage that. I am thinking of taking classes in calligraphy. Two nights a week. And I will surely have to do some homework."

There was a dreadful silence.

"Of course. I understand. I have been taking up too much of your time. I have been thoughtless."

After she had put the phone down Joan burst into tears.

Before long her head ached so she lay down on her bed and felt awful.

She awoke from a troubled doze to hear the bell ringing.

She opened the door and there he stood.

They looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," they said together.

"No," said Don. "I am the one who is sorry. Just because I think about you a lot and enjoy being with you I"

"You do?" interrupted Joan.

"Do what?"

"Think about me a lot and enjoy being with me?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"But," Don added apologetically, "I realise now that you were just being kind because I am new to Cape Town. I have been making a nuisance of myself."

He looked at her closely. "What's the matter? Are you ill? You look as if you are coming down with a cold. Let's sit down."

He led her to the couch and said in a concerned voice, "I don't think you take proper care of yourself."

Joan could not help smiling at his tone and Don thought she looked lovelier than ever in her crumpled state.

He held her hand and she blurted out the story of the calligraphy class that she didn't want to go to.

"Well, why go?" he queried. "It does seem a bit daft to take it up when you don't want to take it up."

He looked perplexed and thought their conversation was beginning to be a bit weird.

"Oh, Don, I am really a very silly woman," wailed Joan, "I only thought that I should occupy myself with something else instead of depending on you."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you depend on me?"

Don looked at her so intently that Joan could not help repeating, almost word for word, the conversation she had had with her mirror. "What pumpkins we are ... so bothered about getting attached I am sure the young manage this very easily."

"Mind you," he added with a shy smile "I do not feel that THAT old."

They sat a while in silence. Then Don stood up purposefully and said firmly, "I will make you some tea. Then you must take an aspirin and go to bed. Tomorrow we will have supper at that Italian place."

He made the tea, stood over her while she swallowed the aspirin, kissed her on the cheek and left.

He arrived promptly at seven with one arm full of flowers and the other hand grasping a bottle of champagne.

"Oh Goodness," cried Joan, "it must be your birthday. Why didn't you give me advance warning?"

"No," he said, reaching out for her, "it is not my birthday. I hope it will be a day much more worth celebrating."

He took her in his arms and kissed her so passionately that Joan's knees felt weak.

When she had recovered she looked into his dear face and knew what she had always known. That this was the man for her. Betty and Joe, feeling like proud parents, gave them a small reception after their quiet wedding. Joan was not in the kitchen making snacks but she did wear her favourite pink blouse. And Don was no longer the out of town man. They smiled at each other across the room. In the years that followed they never tired of talking about their first date; of how nervous they had been, of how old and out of it they had felt.

"Although," Don always said "from the very first time I saw you I knew that you were the girl for me."

And Joan never ceased to blush at being called a girl. But she always reached over to touch his hand and she always said, "Hasn't our weather been fine?"

Fiona McCutcheon

Koeksisters

I was lounging against the counter in Stoffel Naude's store in Zeerust, watching Stoffel carefully as he weighed out five pounds of two-inch nails for me. Stoffel sometimes made mistakes that he was very sorry for afterwards if you noticed them, but it was better to watch for the mistakes before they happened. He had sent his boy out to the yard to get fence posts for me, and I knew it would be a long time before he came back. The boy was very careful about things. He often had to go and think behind the workshop before he did anything. He found that smoking his own brand of tobacco there helped him think a lot, although I thought it just made him sleepy.

Stoffel's shop was a good place to hear about one's neighbours. Stoffel always knew exactly who was building a new barn, and who was mending a wagon.

He stood there behind the counter with his pipe between his teeth, and his ears sticking out as if they were looking for his floppy-brimmed hat to support. As well as all the farming goods, he stocked flour and sugar, and sold some home-baked food that some of the women made. I planned to take home a nice melktert that was sitting on the shelf. It looked as if it hadn't been there very long.

As I stood there, the door to the street opened, and Mevrouw Smit came in with two baskets. She was a big lady, with her hair scraped back into a bun at the back of her head, and heavy black glasses. Her mouth was drawn in a determined, straight line.

She had been a school teacher until she had her own children, and Stoffel always said that if Mevrouw Smit had been a General, we would have won the war. When she looked at you, you wondered whether your fingernails were clean. Her husband had died when their youngest child was just a year old, and she had kept the family alive by turning her home into a boarding house. People who lived there ate very well, but they had to keep her rules. The new school teacher and a young bank clerk were staying there now, and they were getting used to being locked out if they came home later than ten in the evening.

"Morning, Stoffel," she said, and put the baskets down carefully on the counter. "Here are the koeksisters. Just make sure you don't let the flies sit on them."

"Morning, Mevrouw Smit," said Stoffel. I guessed he would have liked to tell her that he would look after his own shop, but you don't talk to Mevrouw Smit like that. "I will put them here under the glass cover."

"And where is my money for the last lot?" she demanded.

He drew out a bag with money in it, and she counted it carefully. When she was satisfied that every penny was there, she

walked out with the empty baskets.

Only a minute later, the door opened again, and a young woman came in, looking around almost furtively. She was short, with a tiny waist and beautiful golden hair. She had deep blue eyes, so that she looked like a doll that would break if you touched her. “Morning, Oom Stoffel,” she said, in a soft voice. “Can I have a dozen koeksisters, please?”

“With pleasure,” he said, openly admiring her.

Fritz van Jaarsveld had been so proud of his clever daughter that he had sent her to a fancy boarding school in the Cape. Since then, nobody had seen her much except in the long holidays. Fritz used to brag about Marita, and when she was top of her class in Matric, he had sent her on to the University, and she had come back a Bachelor of Arts.

“Bachelor of Arts?” Stoffel had said. “What sort of a thing is that? You can see just looking at her that she isn’t a bachelor. I always said University learning was a waste of time. And she doesn’t paint pictures — all she can do is read Latin and Greek.”

Marita had been married just a year, and we all envied Hannes Joubert, who had won this prize ahead of all the young blades in the area. She could play the piano and sing, and recite poetry, and the way she walked made all the young men stop and watch. Oom Fritz had had his hands full keeping them all away from her. Eventually she had decided on Hannes, and they had got married and settled in Zeerust.

She put some money on the counter, and picked up the parcel that Stoffel had made up for her. We watched her walk away, each of us with his dreams. “She’s a beauty,” I said.

“Yes,” agreed Stoffel. “Hannes is a lucky man.” We were silent for a minute. “Mind you,” he said, “he’s got a problem. She can’t cook.”

“Can’t cook?” I echoed in surprise. It seemed impossible that any of our Marico girls could grow up without being able to cook.

“No. All that Latin and Greek is no use. Hannes says you can almost eat the pap and wors she makes, but the pap is tasteless and the wors is dry. Hannes likes fancy stuff, too, and she can’t get it right. He loves koeksisters, and every week for months she tried to make them, but they were always too hard, or too soft, or overdone. Now she always comes on a Saturday and buys Mevrouw Smit’s koeksisters for Hannes, because she can’t bake them herself.”

“Doesn’t she live next door to Mevrouw Smit?” I asked. “Why doesn’t she just ask for the recipe?”

“She did ask for the recipe. Mevrouw Smit wouldn’t give it to her. She said it had been in her family for years, and she couldn’t give it to anyone. And anyway, she sold her koeksisters here, and if she gave the recipe away, nobody would need to come and buy her goods. Since then they don’t talk to each other.”

We thought about the strange ways of women, and pitied Hannes for his plain diet. No wonder he looked so thin these

days.

It was a few weeks before I was back in Stoffel's store. The cattle had broken through the fence, and I needed some rolls of wire. It was hot and dry, and dust devils were making little pillars above the fields like the smoke drifting up from Stoffel's pipe. I asked for the wire, and settled down to wait for the boy to find it. It was a Saturday again, and there was a fresh plate of koeksisters on the counter. "She's still selling koeksisters?" I asked.

"Yes," answered Stoffel. "She still makes the best koeksisters in town."

"What about Marita?" I asked. "Does she still come and buy them here?"

Stoffel laughed. "Well," he said, "she does now, but two weeks ago she didn't come."

"Why was that?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "Hannes was determined that she must learn how to make koeksisters." He went himself to Mevrouw Smit and asked her for the recipe. And she told him also that she wouldn't give it away. He came home really angry, and told Marita that she just had to learn to cook. He told me later he felt really bad when she started to cry, but he has to eat, after all, and what else is a woman for? Anyway, she decided to find out how Mevrouw Smit makes her koeksisters.

That Friday, when she knew Mevrouw Smit would be baking, she crept out after dark and went next door. She came very quietly through the front garden, and along the side of the house to the kitchen window. There is a bed of cabbages there, and she got sand in her boots, and her skirt trailed in the wet earth, but she was determined to find out what Mevrouw Smit put in her koeksisters.

"Hannes says she crouched under the window for a long time, and listened carefully to Mevrouw Smit talking to the maid. She heard how much flour, and how much sugar, and what to do. She thought she knew almost enough to try making them again, but she was getting very cold, and all of a sudden she had to sneeze. It was a very big sneeze, and she tried very hard to stop it, but it didn't help. She sneezed so loudly that the dogs started to bark."

I used a word that isn't nice to write down. "What did she do then?" I asked.

Stoffel sucked at his pipe.

"Hannes says she got such a fright, she couldn't move. The only thing she could do was to try to hide right in under the window, but she could hear Mevrouw Smit come across and throw open the shutters. She kept very quiet, and didn't move. Hannes thinks Mevrouw Smit can't have seen her, because she stood there for a long time, not saying anything, and then she pulled the window almost closed, and went back to her baking. Marita was too afraid to move, so she stayed where she was."

She told Hannes that after that it was very easy to hear the recipe from Mevrouw Smit. She shouted out all the quantities to the maid, so Marita was quite sure that she had got it right. She only left when the kitchen lamp was turned off. She really

thought that now she could make koeksisters. Next day she had a terrible cold, and it took several washes to get the mud out of her skirt, but Hannes says she thought it was worth it.

“And did she make the koeksisters right the next time?” I asked. Stoffel laughed.

“Well,” he said, “Hannes’s parents were coming to tea on the Sunday afternoon, and they also love koeksisters, so she tried the recipe that morning. Hannes told me about the tea party afterwards. He said the koeksisters looked really good on the plate, and they all helped themselves to nice big ones. Hannes’s father bit into his one first.”

“Hannes says he’s never seen anyone get rid of anything so fast. He almost spat it out onto the plate. Hannes’s mother told him not to be so rude, and made a great show of biting into hers, but she never said another word, she just carefully took the piece out of her mouth and put it on the side of the plate. Hannes tried his one then, and he says it tasted worse than the stuff the doctor gave him last time he was ill.

“Poor Marita couldn’t understand what was happening until she tasted hers, and then she knew. It was terrible. She didn’t have anything else to give them to eat, and she was so embarrassed she went and hid in the shed.”

Stoffel stopped to kick at a cockroach that had crept out from under the skirting boards. It scuttled back in, and he continued, “Hannes’s parents didn’t stay long. His mother started talking about how thin Hannes was getting, and about the cooking lessons that she had heard about in Bekkersdal. And now Hannes has started eating his meals at Mevrouw Smit’s house.”

“But didn’t she follow the recipe properly?” I said.

“Yes, she did,” Stoffel replied. “Marita couldn’t understand it. She told me she is quite sure that when Mevrouw Smit was making the dough, she said to put in a cup and a half of salt!”

The End