

Father's Hands

I'd only been to the rail station once before. For a start, it was a long way from the house and then, we had nobody who ever came or went anywhere on the trains that chuffed their officious way in from somewhere, bringing the sulphurous smell of coal-smoke with them. I remember that the time I went there, there was a crude wooden box on the platform, in which a large brown bitch was nursing puppies and that it occupied all my attention.

My father did some sort of work with his hands. Whatever it was, it had shortened three of his fingers by an inch or so, and self-consciously, he would seldom display the hand flat and spread out, so that he always seemed to be clenching a fist at life. Not that it ever affected his dexterity, nor the immense power in those hands. To this day, I can see them twisting or bending some object beyond the ability of normal men to distort.

To see him gently lift one of the pups from the box, ignoring a warning snarl from the bitch, was to believe that he might, against all hope, be going to give it to me. But he had simply held the little animal against his chest for a moment, and then sighed and replaced it.

This time, when I struggled along in his wake through the thick sand to the station, I found that the pen, the bitch, and her brood had long gone, but there seemed to be much more in the moment and I clambered up on the bench beside my father and like him, sat quietly, watching the heat haze rising off the gleaming tracks and listening to the cicadas in the silence.

I never saw my father after that day, although his presence surrounded me for the rest of my life, challenging me to fill his place.

From the passage he'd cut through the sub-tropical South Coast tangle, mostly euphorbia and assegai wood, to afford us a path to the beach, to other demonstrations of his skills and determination to bring some comfort to the lopsided cottage, singlehandedly built for us – an escape from the dreary prison of that tiny Durban flat, overlooking noisy St George's Street. I grew up on matter-of-fact tales of his life before my time – a succession of equally daunting accounts of determination and hard, manual work.

I don't know whether he really had dug a well in search of water – forty feet into the coastal sand, with crumbling walls that threatened to engulf and entomb him on every hand over hand descent and climb back up the rope to haul up just one more bucket of sand to the surface. Nor whether he'd found water after all.

As usual, he crossed his hands, left over right, as though the left would protect the right. Then, the left gently pried my right forefinger from its idle exploration of a nostril and held it gently in his massive grasp. And after a while, he began to speak. He seldom initiated conversations with me, and I listened, sensing the importance of the occasion.

I can't say I understood much of what he said, nor the significance of the small, battered suitcase he'd set down beside the bench. Although, since he'd brought his best hat, it seemed he was going away. Going away and not coming back. The concept was foreign. He, my mother and I had been together since I was born. No other situation had ever occurred to me.

It's possible that the rumble above my head lulled me, so that from a state of intent listening, I descended, in the silence and the heat, into a soporific consciousness. I woke with a start to see that a train had fussed its way into the little siding that we called a station and now stood, wreathed in steam and creaking as it fought the brake, like some enormous restless animal held in momentary check, eager to be off again.

I watched, heavy-lidded, as my father stood, picked up his suitcase, and reached out one of those enormous hands to me. I took it to ease myself off the bench and stood there, blinking at the train, at the faces at windows, momentarily curious and then turning back to their books, newspapers or conversations.

My father clasped my shoulder and turned my face towards the sloping embankment from which our path wound back into the bush, and gave me a gentle push. Nothing was said, and he didn't bend to kiss me goodbye. Our family wasn't much on kissing. He crossed the tracks, opened one of the panelled doors with the railways crest visible on the window, and in two steps, was gone from sight.

For the novelty of it, I watched the train labour into motion, amid more steam and metallic noises, to pant its way out of the siding. The single whistle it emitted was not loud, but it sounded relieved more than boastful, echoing away across the cane-fields and dense bush.

I got home, delayed by a wait to watch a troop of vervet monkeys dawdling through the canopy overhead, scattering the leaf mould beneath with half eaten scraps of their feasting, occasionally exposing their pale eye-lids in a token warning to the small, human presence below.

My mother was in the kitchen, standing at the sink, a tea-cup to her lips, staring out at the sprawl of unkempt grass we called the front garden. She didn't acknowledge my return as I passed her and didn't tell me to wipe my feet. I thought her eyes looked red.

As children do, I busied myself with the important things that occupy one's time and hardly thought about my father's last words.

It was many years before I thought I understood them.

"Some secrets are better not shared with your wife"

Mike Job

