

## Karoo Dust

He is angry. He is frightened. He is hurting. He is trying to get drunk but he just can't manage it.

He has finished all the hard liquor and is down to beer in a can. It tastes like old dust and dried blood and the way burning feathers smell.

He sits on the only chair at a table which seems more drunk than he, lurching on its uneven legs, on the uneven stone floor. The heat of the Karoo afternoon is trapped in the dim room, the thick grime on the windows and the closed door keeping out the sunlight that he cannot get away from but not the heat.

He snarls: 'Get me another beer!' He hears the shuffling and snuffling behind him, the click of the old fridge door, the shuffling again as she puts the can clumsily on the table beside him. He doesn't turn his head. The snuffling retreats to the far corner. He knows she is uncertain. She is familiar with his moodiness and she is trying not to become the focus of his attention.

He would like to blame someone. He has blamed someone but in the end he realises that he has failed. Again. How many more chances will there be before the end comes? How much longer can he hold out against what is now becoming inevitable?

He cracks the can open and takes a long swallow of the warm beer. Everything is so hot here. He is used to high temperatures but the lack of humidity is draining him, shrivelling him, desiccating him. He must, he must achieve refreshment.

He has come to this forsaken farm in this dust-ridden land by an accident of circumstances. His whole life has been lived in the shadows but under his own control. He'd done the necessary training with the Haitians then he'd slunk away to practise the craft on his own. He's made some mistakes, sure, but he has been strong enough to maintain himself over the long, long years, always finding refreshment when he needed. He's never been caught though there have been some close calls which he has always managed to slink his way out of.

Until now. He knows he is lucky to have the labourer's job and this broken down shack to live in. This body is showing its failures, weaknesses and flaws, the cracks are showing and he knows he doesn't have much more time.

He'd thought that the farmer's nephew was his salvation. The young man, oozing sleek well-kept health was just what he needed. He'd done the stalking, the preparation, the incantations and the practicalities. Two days ago the time was right, the moon was low and the dust-hazed stars were in order. He'd done the chanting, the muttering of prayers, the summoning of the spirits.

He'd drunk the last of the medicine that would give him the strength he needed and he had struck suddenly, surely, and in the darkness the young man had fallen, blood had flowed and he had tried, he had feverishly tried, calling out in desperation but the spirits would not, could not make the crossing, render the exchange that he so desperately needed. He had been left with a limp corpse, cooling in the desert breeze, his own sweat drying in spite of his fearful exertions, and the girl whimpering somewhere in the darkness.

They'd found the young man the next day. The incompetent authorities, made stupid by heat and arrogance, had been easy to fool, even in his weakened state. He had been worried about the girl but she had just squatted in a corner, panting lightly behind her straggling hair and they'd been able to get nothing from her.

He draws in a long breath, feels the ache in his stringy limbs and curses long and low. It doesn't help much. It had been ironic in the extreme that he'd been made to dig the grave for the burial of the stupid young man. In the relentless sun he had dug and scratched into the unyielding gravel, hour after hour, shovelling out dirt and stones to make the required pit. Then yesterday, adding bitterness to his humiliation, he'd had to stand to one side during the pathetic wailing commemorations of the family, the stupid fat farmer and his tall ugly wife. Then the farmer had ordered him to fill the grave, drag big stones to mound on top and finally, place the four posts with their right-angled struts, at each corner of the grave, like short sentinels holding their thin arms out to surround the grave.

Suddenly he stands, knocking the can of beer over. It drips sullenly onto the floor. He groans, stretching his tall skeletal body to ease his discomfort. This body had been a good one, one of the best he had ever had, lasting many years with the help of his special herbs. But it was wearing out and he needed a new one. The stupid young nephew's body would have been perfect. He might even have inherited the farm and been set up for another long stay. He is sure they would never have known. He is good at insinuating himself, ingratiating himself, making himself indispensable – but only when his body is willing.

He rounds on the girl who is still making snuffling sounds in the gloom of the corner, grimy clothes pooled around her. He still thinks of her as 'the girl' though she has been with him a long time now. She doesn't speak but has other ways of making her needs known. It was her spirited opposition that drew him to her in the first place and now, he thinks, they are a couple, a pair, sister and brother, welded by time and stitched by circumstance.

He says abruptly: 'We must leave this place. Go pack up some food for the journey.' Although he feels too weary to make the effort. He aims a half-hearted kick in the girl's direction then notices that she is crouching very still, eyes fixed on the door. His hearing is not as good as hers but as he turns to look, even he can hear the slow tread outside on the gravel.

In a moment of strange hopefulness, he thinks, 'It worked? Is it him? Did some part of the process actually work?' Then his flash of hope is replaced by deep-seated dread of what might be outside in that hateful sunlight. 'Did I not make it deep enough?' He wonders. He stands, rigid, staring.

There is a knock at the door. Not apologetic or peremptory but it is clearly a summoning. It says, I am here; prepare for me to enter.

The room is completely still, waiting.

The latch lifts and the door groans. A sliver of light, as sharp as a cleaver flashes silently across the floor, illuminating the squalor of the room. In the doorway stands a figure, black against the light.

'Goeie dag. Kan ek maar inkom?'

In a flash the girl scurries on all fours across the floor and slides under the table. He stands speechless.

The tall brown woman, a little bent but still strong in shoulder and frame, nods her turbaned head. She is the wife of the farmer he works for, the aunt of the healthy young man now rotting in his coffin in the heat of the Karoo summer. He feels an enormous relief.

He nods, curtly, afraid of giving too much away. He knows the tall brown woman sees the girl under the table, matted hair covering her filthy face.

The tall brown woman speaks. She says in a deep, clear voice: 'It is time.'

He stares at her but she is watching the girl. She steps forward and bends down slightly. 'Toe kom, meisiekind,' she says, firmly. 'Don't be afraid. Dis nou alles in order.'

The girl doesn't move. He steps nearer and says: 'Mevrou?' His relief gives way to apprehension. He doesn't know what else to say.

The tall brown woman puts out a hand to the girl. He reaches instinctively to pull her arm back. The tall brown woman turns on him sharply and bares her strong yellow teeth. They are the same height. They stand eye to eye. He steps back. She says sternly: 'It is time for you to go. We don't want you here. You must go. Now.'

He gapes and stares. The tall brown woman speaks now with a resonance that shakes him to his heart. She says: 'We all know what you are. We knew right from the beginning. You think we don't have our own people here too? You bring that old voodoo rubbish to Africa and you think we don't have our own spirits – far older than yours, from the darkest of Africa's twisting roots – they were our spirits before they were yours and they are far older and far, far stronger.' She steps forward. He steps back again.

She intones: 'You killed a man then you tried to take his body and live in it with your stupid spells. You failed. You are a thief of bodies, a stealer of other people's lives. You are a parasite, a tick, a stomach worm, you live off others.' Again the tall brown woman steps forward; he is up against the wall now, eyes white with fear, 'You must go, you are useless. You are finished. It is the end for you. Go now!'

He is speechless. With all his knowledge and expertise, he is powerless against the force the tall brown woman is pushing against him. He begins to shudder, little internal convulsions that spread outward, growing stronger, his arms spasm, fingers clutching at nothing; his back arches, head jerks against the wall, again and again, and bits of plaster cover his shaking shoulders. His knees loosen, quaking to some tectonic force that rips him softly apart. His eyes roll wildly as more plaster sleets around him until he realises in panic that he himself is the flakes of plaster, he himself is the fine dust of the wall, he himself is the grime on the floor.

The tall brown woman breathes out suddenly, a gust big enough to blow him out of the door. He is without sense or sight, or mind. He is the dust of the Karoo.

The tall brown woman turns to the girl, who stands now, beside the table, staring at the open door where the knife blade of sunshine illumines a few fine specks of blowing dust. The tall brown woman says: 'Bedaar, meisie-kind, bedaar.' although the girl stands quite still. She continues: 'The man is gone and will never return. But you and I, meisie-kind, you and I have business to attend to. Come with me. Come.'

Again the tall brown woman stretches her strong hand to the girl. After a moment, the girl pushes her hair off her thin pallid face and takes the outstretched hand.

'Yes,' the girl says in a hoarse, unused voice. 'Yes. I'm coming.'

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