

Three-word story
Hitchhiker, Derelict Farmhouse, Dream (noun)
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The Inexplicable

I relaxed as I turned off the N1 onto the road to Prince Albert. It was a relief to leave the highway with its interminable number of large trucks, careening wildly downhill or crawling uphill.

Angora farming in South Africa started in the small Karoo hamlet in 1869 with the importation of two rams and an ewe from Turkey. The wily Turks had sought to prevent any competition with their trade by castrating the rams. What they did not know was that the ewe was pregnant with a male kid. Fortunately, the animal world is not concerned with incest and so it all began in that parched landscape. A local grower had recently won the International Quality Award for the second year in succession and this had prompted my research trip-

My musings were interrupted by a sudden thought - was that chap a hitchhiker - standing next to the railway line I'd just crossed? An ardent lover of trains, I'd hoped to see a train and was so engrossed with scanning the railway line in either direction, that I'd been subconsciously aware of my surroundings, yet a fleeting impression of him now disturbed me.

Overcoming a feeling of unease, I rounded a corner a few kilometers further and came upon a derelict farmhouse. My curiosity aroused, I pulled off the road to have a closer look.

The old windmill was missing a few blades and most of the others were buckled, a faint 'Stewarts and Lloyds' still barely visible on the vane.

The roof of the barn had collapsed but not that of the house, badly rusted, but still in place. I walked around, peering in through each window. The usual accumulated detritus of time and animals littered the floors, crackling underfoot. I walked in through a gaping doorway and moved cautiously from room to room, vaguely aware of a strange feeling.

I imagined I heard a muffled sound from a room but a movement outside distracted me. Glancing through a window I saw a car pull up and two men alight, pistols drawn. Their wary manner and approach rooted me to the spot in panic.

As the first man entered the room, I took fright and sat bolt upright in bed.

"Shit," I exclaimed, more in relief than anything else.

I guessed the dream had probably been triggered by an article on angora farming in the Prince Albert website that had piqued my initial interest.

The next morning my editor called me, “Tom,” he said, “I want you to cover the Angora Woolgrowers conference in Prince Albert. It’s being held in South Africa for the first time and to add to the occasion, a local grower has won the International Quality Award for the second year in succession . . .”

“In Prince Albert? Angoras?” I interrupted him, surprised.

“Yes, why?”

I blurted out, “What a strange coincidence, I’ve been looking at their website and had just such an article in mind.”

Sitting back at my desk, I was perplexed – there was no mention about the International Quality Award on their website. Where could that have come from in my dream? Then I remembered.

Oh shit, I thought, I’d once before had a predictive dream that ended abruptly with a scare only to later experience a scary extension of the original. I shuddered inwardly at the prospect of something similar.

And so it was, in a déjà vu moment, I swung onto the R407 to Prince Albert. I’d seen the prestigious Blue Train in the far distance, so I stopped at the crossing to watch it sail majestically through, its two, blue electric units shining like burnished steel.

As I watched it depart there was a tap on the passenger window and I looked into a pair of steely blue eyes. My mind raced, *I’d seen that face before, but where?* Then it dawned on me, it was the hitchhiker from my dream. He opened the door and said, “Hi, can I hitch a lift to PA,” which was more of a statement than a question as he slid into the passenger seat.

In my surprise I almost mumbled an apology for passing him by last time before I checked myself, remembering that it actually never happened. That thought sent a chill ran down my spine as I remembered the Quality Award.

He seemed preoccupied with his thoughts and attempts at conversation were met with short responses - so I shut up.

As we crested a hill and the road swung to the right he said, “Pull in over there.”

I froze inside, was this a hijack. But then I saw the derelict farmhouse. *Holy shit, I thought, is this another premonition coming true.*

He opened the door and said quietly, “Follow me.”

I obeyed and we entered the derelict farmhouse. Somehow, he seemed to know where he was going. It was close to midday and the Karoo was silent, waiting for the heat to pass. In that silence, I was sure I heard a muffled sound from somewhere in the house.

As I followed him into what must have been the main bedroom, we came across a figure, bound and gagged, propped in a corner.

With dexterous hands he untied what turned out to be a young girl. He held her clumsily while she sobbed uncontrollably.

Once he had calmed her down, she remained fearful, "They are going to collect the ransom from my Dad and then come back to kill me after they let me talk to him. Then they will probably kill him too."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a car stop on the verge. Two men got out and cautiously looked around. Then they moved warily towards the house, covering each other with drawn pistols, stopping to have a thorough look at my car. My hitchhiker had already seen them.

"Neither of you move nor make a sound," he whispered sharply.

Frozen with fear, I watched as a pistol entered the doorway followed by a snarling face, "You interfering little shit . . . "

The next word was drowned out by a shot and I winced at the concussion in the confined space. My ears were still ringing when a second shot went off.

I opened my eyes to see a body slumped on the floor and the second man holding his right hand, wincing in agony. The bag he'd been carrying lay next to him.

The stranger stepped out into full view and recognition crossed the bag carrier's face as he began shaking, babbling something along the lines of, "I . . . I . . . mean . . . I . . . never meant to, I . . . " But his protests were cut short at a third shot and he collapsed untidily to the dirty floor.

The hitchhiker pulled a cellphone from his pocket and keyed in a number, "Job's done - here she is," was all he said before handing the girl the cellphone.

"Daddy," she exclaimed and began babbling away through her sobs. When her emotions eventually settled and she became more coherent she repeated the story about her kidnapers.

I stood rooted to the spot, appalled and intrigued by what was going on.

Then he said gruffly, "Give me the phone," and took it from her.

He spoke, "Yes, it's the old derelict farmhouse as we suspected. Get the Prince Albert cops out here. They should get here about the same time as you. My job's done."

Turning to me, he said, free hand outstretched, "Give me your car keys and cellphone."

Then to the girl, "You heard me, your Dad will soon be here."

Looking at me he said, "You'll find your car parked at the Prince Albert Hotel and the keys and cellphone will be with the receptionist."

Then he picked up the bag and looked intently into my eyes. Another cold chill ran down my spine at his parting words, "This never happened Tom - just like your dream." Then he left

Startled and stunned, I tried to cry out to the departing figure, "Dream? Tom? How the hell do you know all this about me?" but no sound came out

As if in answer to my soundless question the stillness of the Karoo night was shattered by the haunting screech of a barn owl.