

# **EXPRESSIONS**

**SPRING 2006**

**Certainly  
The Art of Writing  
Is the most miraculous  
of all things  
Man has devised**

**Carlyle**

**Pinelands Writers' Circle**



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A selection of stories written  
by some of the members of the  
Pinelands Writers Circle

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## 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.

During October and November each year members compete for the prestigious President's Trophy, awarded annually in December. (See page 75 for previous winners of the trophy).

Ray Hattingh  
Secretary

Alwyne Todd  
Chairman

Stewart Finney  
Treasurer



**Jean de Kok**

## **BEST FRIENDS**

Tess and I live in this really nice cottage. We both have our own space and are always free to come and go as we like. I wander a bit and so does she but at the end of the day we are both here for each other and that is what counts.

Tess has friends in quite often and I like them a lot. Especially Peter who used to come around regularly. He would put his feet on the coffee table, order a pizza and watch TV with me. But one evening he stood up, kissed Tess on the brow, gave me an extra cuddle and told us that he was going somewhere or other for a while. This made me sad. I also know it made Tess sad.

So it was no surprise when someone else started to visit.

The awful Brendan. I took an instant dislike to him and the feeling was obviously mutual. He did not greet me the first time he arrived even though Tessa introduced me to him so sweetly. But as much as I disliked Brendan it was Tess`s behaviour that bothered me. She was up and down like a yo-yo. When he visited. The wine, was it the right one? The snacks, were they what he liked? And she giggled a lot until they went out.

She did not forget to give me a hug when she left, which was a good sign but she did forget my evening snack so I sulked a bit but when it got to be late I took up my usual post at the window and waited for her to come home which she did, eventually. She scooped me up, fell into bed and I slept beside her. It seemed the same but it was different.

Tess continued to hug me a lot but she often got a bit absent. She spent an awful lot of time getting dressed. I sat on the end of our bed watching her throw one dress after another on to the floor.

‘Pushkin,’ she would ask ‘do you think I look good in this? Or this?’

It was impossible for me to tell her that I thought she looked wonderful in her jeans, her dressing gown or even when she had a cold in the head. I have a serious language problem.

Brendan pitched up too often after this. He took no notice of me even though Tess told him often that I was her very best friend. He took to glancing at me with hostility but I responded by fixing him with an unblinking stare. This is something I am very good at.

‘Tessa dear, your cat looks odd to me’.

Tess was cooking up a storm in the kitchen for Brendan but she almost let the stir fry burn.

‘Odd? My Pushkin? What nonsense Brendan, he is the dearest cat in the whole world.’

I almost purred when I heard these words but it turned out that Brendan had his own plans for me.

`Of course poppit,' he said in his silky tone. Of course he is special to you but do you really think he will settle in my large house when we marry'?

My fur stood up when I heard these words while Tess concentrated on the stir-fry.

Brendan checked that the creases in his trousers were straight and sauntered over to the kitchen.

'Come now Tess, you know how well we get on don't you? I think you are an absolute darling. And perfect for the social life we will lead'.

He moved closer to Tess. 'I mean to marry you, my pet, move you out of this pokey place and give you everything you deserve.'

'So,' he cajoled, 'be a sensible as well as a pretty girl and give some serious thought to finding a new home for your animal.'

'Animal!' I could have leapt at Brendan and ripped his tie to pieces.

Tess stood at the kitchen hatch looking scared.

'Are you saying that if I married you I would not be able to keep Pushkin?'

Goodie, goodie. Brendan was now in a position but he was not going to be a pushover for a cat.

'Let's eat darling. We'll discuss this matter another time.'

He sat down at the table while Tess waited on him.

'Brendan,' I thought, "you are an awful man, you are too sure of yourself. How dare you call this cottage `pokey?'

I planned my next move and this was quite easy to do while continuing to stare at Brendan. But I noticed that Tess was straightening her shoulders and looking grim.

Someone had to save her from this unctuous individual and who else but her best friend? So I launched myself into the middle of Brendan's plate, splashing its contents over his immaculate shirt and splattering rice and soy sauce onto his shiny shoes.

He was beside himself with fury. He lashed out at my evil nature and Tess's stupidity. He grabbed a dishcloth and bristled out of the door.

I sat still and waited for the consequences. But Tess didn't say a word. She scooped me up and hugged me close even though I had bean sprouts and celery clinging to my fur.

While I licked myself clean and found a few juicy pieces of chicken on the floor Tess tidied up, getting angrier and angrier with herself.

'Pushkin, I am really a very stupid person.'

I comforted her and let her know that I loved her.

And, although it was already nine o'clock, there was a rattle at the door and in walked Peter.

'Sorry to be so long,' he said as if we had been expecting him, 'but Nambia and the wild horses were tough going. Why did I ever choose to be a Vet? Darned good to be back here.'

Tess offered him some left over stir-fry.

“Stir-fry?” Peter looked surprised. “No thank you. This is a special homecoming dinner and don’t we always have a pizza?”

So he picked up the telephone, patted the couch beside him and, just as I was about to join him, Tess slipped into my place.

I am a satisfied cat.

**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 was 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, despite the pollution. 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. She 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 the kites 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 were 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 Aloof New 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.

## Stewart Finney

### THE TRAM

‘We’re going to the big city, Johannesburg!’ I was excited. ‘I’ve never been to a city before! What must I wear? I’ll get out my Sabbath church suit and ... and ...’

Ma put her head round the door and said, practically, ‘Here, let me help you pack. We are only going for a long week-end so there won’t be much we need. Get down your suitcase.’

It was 1929 and I was nine years old. We lived on a farm some hundred miles away and Pa was invited to spend a long week-end with his brother and to bring Ma and me. I was terribly excited, and not a little scared, at the prospect. We travelled by bus and settled in quickly. Oom Sarel was a friendly man whom I had always liked, the more so because he always brought me a large packet of sweets. He smelled of Boxer tobacco.

I was intrigued by many things, particularly the trams which ran past the house to the terminus at the next block. I had seen pictures of them in some of the learning books Ma had bought me from time to time, and Pa had explained how they worked, but seeing them and hearing them was different. Each time one came past I stood near the track or went to the terminus and watched, fascinated.

Some were small, four wheeled double-deckers, with balcony in front as well as behind the upper enclosed deck. The balcony itself was open but if it rained there were canvas blinds which the conductor would lower and clip in position. The driver stood in the open on the lower deck and operated a small lever that drove the electric motor and also a large brass handle that he used to work like a ratchet to bring the tram to a final halt.

There was no hooter to warn of the tram’s presence but a large foot-operated bell which the driver clanged loudly. The seats were of wood, not upholstered, and because the tram could be driven from either end, their backs were pivoted at the bottom so that they could be swung backwards or forwards depending on which way the tram was travelling.

The larger trams had eight wheels, most had the balcony and the driver’s platform glassed in for shelter. Usually the seats of these larger trams were upholstered. I am telling you these things because I was so taken by these, to me, monsters and longed to ride in one.

On the Sunday my uncle left us to do as we pleased. After our midday dinner, Pa said, ‘For a treat let us take a ride on one of the trams to the other terminus where we can stop and have afternoon tea’. A ride in a tram! I was shivering with excitement. What an adventure!

We strolled to the terminus and waited. After a few minutes one of the small four-wheeled variety arrived. Up we climbed to the top deck.

‘Can I sit outside, Pa? Please?’ I asked.

‘Certainly, but you do not stand on the seat, do you understand?’

‘Yes, Pa. Can I kneel?’

‘That’s fine, but NO standing’

Outside on the balcony was a curved wooden plank seat, its back topped part way up by a wire mesh safety screen. There was no one else there – the whole front was mine! I looked down the spiral staircase to the driver’s platform and saw him getting ready to leave. A moment later we were clattering down the street.

I immediately became the driver! I had watched their actions, so as we slowed down to pick up some passengers I swung the big brass lever to match the movement of the tram, my body moving in a wide circle.

‘Whoa, whoa, slow down now,’ I grunted from the strain of pulling so hard. ‘All aboard!’ Then we were off again.

Down the main city street we clattered, jolting a little from side to side. As we turned out of it I became the conductor.

‘Tickets please, tickets please’ ‘Thank you madam’. ‘Thank you sir’. ‘Your change, madam’. ‘Yes, sir, this tram does pass the Zoo Lake. Get on’. I tugged the leather strap which rang the bell for the driver. ‘Hold tight please!’ I clicked my imaginary ticket punch strapped to my side and got small change from the open mouthed leather pouch hanging just below my stomach.

We passed along one of the main streets, my eyes goggling at the variety of shops on either side. Our nearest little dorpie has a single street and no more than half a dozen shops, a post office and a police station. On we went, stopping to pick up or drop passengers while I copied the driver’s actions.

A few minutes later we left the city and entered a residential area, mostly semi-detached houses. After the wide open spaces of home these houses seemed so cramped together.

Then we passed a large park and I heard the music of a band. Looking through the trees I made out a bandstand with a group of musicians in uniform with their conductor waving his arms in front of them. I also saw the people in their deckchairs lounging back and enjoying the music.

Along we rode until we started a long, steep climb. I became a pilot, climbing up to the clouds. Remembering my latest comic at home I said ‘Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome aboard Flight 37 bound for London. I am your pilot and my name is Captain le Roux. We will fly at a height of fifteen thousand feet and the weather is good. The next stop will be at Salisbury where we refuel while you have a nice cup of tea. Thank you and lay back and enjoy your flight.’ We weaved along a winding route and at each turn I banked around imaginary clouds. Down another hill and I was preparing to land my airliner.

‘Slow down. Slower!’ And as we levelled out and prepared to drop a passenger I put my wheels gently upon the ground and rolled to a stop.

Not long after this we came to the Zoo. The driver stopped short of a junction in the rails and I stared from above, puzzled as he picked up a rod with a sharpened point which he pushed into the rail points and moved them. A click and then back to drive into a loop section after which he went back to the points and reset them. Why were we stopped? There were no passengers getting on or off and the driver didn't seem to be taking a tea break. Then I heard the rattle of an approaching tram and there it was, on the line ahead of us. It was then that I realized that the double set of rails had ended and we were on a single track and that the other tram had come from the outer terminus.

As the other driver waved and drove past us our driver went to a grey painted box with two small glass windows, one red the other white. He took a key from his pocket and inserted it in the box and turned it. He repeated this on the other side and the glass glowed red. Later I asked Pa the reason for these lights. He explained that, being a single track and operating two trams on it, the light at the loop was set red to warn our driver that another tram was using the track ahead and he had to wait for the first tram to clear the track.

A little way on I saw the glint of water from the Zoo Lake. I now became the Captain of a ship on the high seas. The sway of the tram became the roll of the ocean swells and I spun the big wheel's spokes back and forwards to counteract them.

'Port your helm – Steady!' When we got near enough to see the island I called out 'Land Ahoy!' In the very best manner of the 'penny dreadfuls' I was able to read in the school library.

'Hold your course, engines to Slow'. The island slid alongside us and 'Stop!' as we came to a second loop line. This time only the lights were changed and we went on our way.

One more hill and we pulled up at the terminus. I opened the sliding door and joined my parents as we went down the stairs. Pa waved our thanks to the driver and then we made our way to the little tea room nearby.

I was still tingling from the whole adventure but this was soon forgotten as I saw the variety of cakes on display! Plain cake, Madeira cake, Swiss roll, some thick with cream and others covered in chocolate. How could one possibly make a choice? We sat down and a smartly dressed waitress came to serve us. How different from the tea place in our dorpie with Tant Hennie waddling about clattering the cups!

I was not certain which of the cakes to choose and looked towards Ma. She laughed and said, 'Choose any one'

'I'll have the cream doughnut and', at Ma's suggestion, 'a cream soda float'. I'd never heard of this and when it arrived I found it was made up of a big blob of ice cream in a green coloured, highly scented liquid full of bubbles. It came with a long-handled spoon, the better to dig out the ice cream remaining at the bottom of the tall glass after the rest had been swallowed and which the

straw could not manage. At the end of it all I sat back dreamily and thought of everything that had happened so far.

I was brought back to the world about me when Pa said. 'Wake up, Jannie, we still have to go back and here is the tram coming'.

And there it was, only this time it was one of the big ones, all enclosed. I felt almost cheated because the open-fronted one seemed like a bouncy puppy compared to this severe-looking monster. Frowning, I went up the spiral stairs and made my way to the glassed-in front balcony. The mystery of the other tram had evaporated and I felt all closed in. When running this tram did not make much noise and rode the tracks more smoothly. It seemed soulless after the little one.

Disappointed, I went back inside and Pa, who had deep insights to many things, saw that I was unhappy with the change. He leaned over to Ma and they had a brief conversation and she moved to the seat alongside.

Pa then said, 'Come, son, we will sit together and play that game we do sometimes when we go to the dorp. You remember? I Spy with my little Eye'

Through my dejection I saw a bit of light. It was a game which I enjoyed and which he used not only for my amusement but for teaching because he always insisted that I spell the name of the object I had to identify, as he, too, did.

'I'll start off' he said 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with – er – S'

'Street light? No? Shop? No?'

'Look at the tram tracks' he suggested.

I looked hard. 'The sleepers between them - S-L-E-E-P-R-S'

'Uh-uh. Try again'

'S-L-E-E-P---E-R-S'

'Well done, now it's your turn'

Almost before I realised it we were back at our terminus and walking to my uncle's house.

That evening I lay in my bed and re-lived the afternoon. I knew for certain that Gerrie and Jakes at home would not believe a single word of my Great Tram Adventure.

**Isabelle Goodson**

## **THE ODD HOSTAGE**

In shocked whispers, the news, the bad news, ran round the bank in record time. Two German soldiers had been murdered, stabbed, near Omonia Square. The bank was in the same area so that anyone in it could regard themselves as being in a danger zone. Athens wasn't a safe or peaceful place to be in 1943 with the Germans occupying Greece.

Sitting at his desk, his precious parcel at his feet, Heracles Stefanou bit on his pencil. Outside the July summer sky hadn't a care, or a cloud, but inside the bank the staff remained rigid with fear. Perhaps Heracles had reacted more sensitively since he was a poet and a pianist, banking being the way he earned a living. Some of the staff began to move around, creeping up to the windows.

Killing German soldiers was unforgivable. There would be reprisals, swift and final. If you toed the line, did as the Germans ordered, you came to little harm. The worst enemy was hunger and Heracles had seen people slide to their deaths on the pavements of Athens. Now, for some, the passive co-operation phase had passed after two years, and sabotage and guerrilla bands operated on a larger scale.

Heracles didn't blame them. Desperation drove them. He was too old and asthmatic to join such groups. Besides he had a wife and two young daughters to consider. He pushed his glasses back, rubbed his eyes. All he wanted to do was to get home with his parcel. Reprisals meant death and he didn't want to die before his younger daughter's birthday tomorrow.

The bank was empty of customers. Those who had heard the news had scurried out. Soon the military vans would come by, screaming out the orders and instructions in two languages. They were very precise, most correct, did everything by the book, including cruelty and kindness. They gave rationed milk to babies, loved the Greek ruins, but broke bones if a boy tried to steal a loaf of bread.

Yianni leaned across from the next desk. "It's nearly closing time," he whispered, "We'll have to leave here soon."

Heracles rocked in his seat. "Yes."

"You get your parcel okay? Down by the old bus station?"

Heracles nodded. In the parcel, the covering made by a piece of old flour bag, were the almost impossible to get ingredients, some of them, for his daughter Athena's birthday cake – the honey, scarce as petrol, the walnuts and the olive oil. Athena would be twelve tomorrow and had just recovered from pneumonia.

How he longed to just get up and go home. He felt guilty too. His wife, Sophia hadn't wanted him to sell her treasured silk mat on the black market. They'd argued about it . . .

“The mat will last forever. Better to keep it for a wedding gift for Athena.” Her brown eyes flashed. “The cake will be gone in a few minutes. Anyway, I don’t trust those black market crooks down there.”

“Sophia, dear – please – there’s a war on. We must make a happy day for Athena. She’s not tough like her sister, Dora. It’s, it’s the now that matters.”

She sniffed. “All right. Have your way.” She thrust the rolled up mat into his arms. “Take it.”

The girls were asleep. Dora, he smiled, with her violin next to her, Athena, her face on the pillow as he crept out of the small house on Phaleron Bay. There was no curfew at the moment but he still had to be careful. Some patrols could be quite officious. Keeping close to the buildings, his thin body taut as he held on to the quite heavy mat. It took him about thirty minutes to traverse the streets to the bus station.

More life buzzed here. Dark and dank, the old buses stood like worn-out farm horses, but belching noxious fumes, in the old shed of a building. Heracles had to tread carefully on the uneven watery surface. He had ordered his needs previously and the trader was on the lookout for him.

Cap low on his forehead, a shabby coat covering his body, he pulled Heracles behind a pillar.

“Show me.” He held out his dirty hands.

Heracles unrolled the mat. The bright colours shone even in this gloom. The blue-caped serene Maddonna, holding the infant Jesus, was surrounded by tans, golds and brilliant blues. It nearly brought tears to Heracles eyes.

“Looks OK to me.” He grabbed the mat and rolled it up. He shoved the parcel into Heracles hands and disappeared before Heracles could examine the parcel. It was so well bound up that there wasn’t time . . .

Now he was sitting, dummy-like, in the bank, waiting: closing time 5 pm arrived. The manager told them he had to close the bank. The women put on their hats or scarves, the men tidied their desks. The blinds were lowered. The staff made a silent exit.

Heracles held his parcel close to his chest. The streets were emptying fast but some trams were still working. He stood with his back to the building, uncertain which way to go, not sure where the assault would come from. He strolled around the corner. He looked up. In the distance the Parthenon on top of the Acropolis crumbled but still stood. It reminded him of an earlier occupation: the Turks for nearly four hundred years. He could never understand how the Turks could have used the Parthenon as a powder magazine so that their enemies, the Venetians could blow it up. When was that? Over three hundred years ago. As a symbol of freedom it gave him a spark of hope.

Yianni came past. “Better get a move on Heracles.”

Just then a tram slowed down on the corner. Heracles jumped aboard, standing at the back. There was little to hear, only fear to feel. He didn’t know

where they were trundling to but just wanted to get out of the city. From his position at the back he had a good view of what was coming behind.

Suddenly the stragglers and carts were overtaken by army trucks. Sirens rent the air, voices blared. They were here, the German troops, big guns steady in their hands.

Heracles closed his eyes and prayed. He never imagined his life would end like this.

Two trucks with soldiers passed the tram, then turned around. "Halt!"

The tram stopped with a jerk. The passengers waited, nervous: he could see it in their eyes and movements: some crossed themselves.

Then began the short-term lecture, by an officer, smart in his greenish, well-cut uniform and shining leather. "You know why you are here. Two brave soldiers of the Wehrmacht have been murdered. We demand retribution. Zo. Fifty hostages will be taken. That is the price – fifty hostages to die."

"Right. Out. Form a line and march to the square." He pointed. The square wasn't far away.

Murmurings rippled through the crowd, pointless protestations. A few prods from the grim-face soldiery soon put a stop to that. Stoicism settled on the damned.

Heracles trailed behind the group of thin men and women, some young, some old, but they were mostly men. The ragged crocodile dragged itself to the execution site.

Heracles hoped he would acquit himself honourably when the moment came. His mind seemed to be operating on another plane. And everything was so quiet as if the world held its breath. Even the pigeons had disappeared. He'd heard about many patriots who, before the bullets hit, shouted "eleftheria" – freedom.

"Halt!"

There was already a small group of people huddled on the square.

"Right. Forward." A German officer began to count the hostages. "One, two, three as they passed him and were lined up by the soldiers in a line. At twenty-five he paused. "Another twenty-five."

He started to count again. The number of hostages shrank. Heracles trailed at the back. In his numbed state he could still reckon. This German had made a good estimate because there seemed to be exactly fifty people present.

He closed his eyes as his nemesis came nearer. Faintly he heard forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine – fifty.

"You, fifty-one, you can go."

Heracles opened his eyes and blinked. "Go, go?" he stammered stupidly.

"Yes, go on. Don't stand there. I said you can go. We only need fifty hostages for reprisal."

His head down, Heracles shuffled away, saved by the German respect for exactness. He couldn't even spare a backward glance for his doomed

countrymen. So many had died this way, whole villages and their occupants burned to the ground – for reprisals. It took him a couple of hours to get near his seaside home. The rat, tat of the rifles kept repeating in his head.

He didn't go home at once. He turned and walked towards the beach. No sign of the enemy here. The sand seeping into his shoes slowed his progress to the water. The sea lay a calm stretch. The lights of the docks to the right gleamed dimly.

He felt so powerless. He was forty-five, his hair thinning, weary of being a prisoner in his own land. He had to pull himself together before he faced his family.

Lowering himself onto the sand, he laid the parcel down, that little package of hope and pleasure. He took off his shoes, his fingers nearly coming through the hole in the sole.

The water lapped the shore gently. There was little tide in the summer in the Saronic Gulf. The moon, a silver circle, cast its image on the rippling sea. Such a beautiful world – such pain. He got up and paddled for a few moments. The warmish water stilled his inner turmoil.

While he put on his shoes he looked along the beach. Just visible were two figures, struggling against the soft sand to reach the road. The shapes indicated a man and a woman. Flattened against the beach, he then saw silhouetted against the light, two German soldiers following the couple. His heart began to thud again. This could only mean trouble. He rose when all four had disappeared.

He ran, too, home. Outside his house he paused, breathless in the scent of oreganum and basil, about the only things not in short supply.

“Papa, Papa.” His daughters and his wife crowded to the door. “Where have you been?” Athena clung to him, her thin face smiling. “Papa, is something the matter?”

He handed the parcel to Sophia. “We were so worried about you. I, I heard about the trouble downtown.”

“I – just took a walk by the sea to, er, unwind. But I'm all right.”

Sophia helped him off with his jacket, her fingers trembling.

He whispered in her ear. “Down there on the beach, I saw some people running. Chased by the Germans. Have you seen – anything?”

Sophia put her fingers to her lips, shook her head. “We'll talk later.”

He nodded back, saddened further by the anxious expression in her eyes. He turned to his daughter. “Ah, Dora, I see you have been practising the violin.”

“Oh, yes, Papa.” Dora was the quiet one, loved music. Unfortunately, the piano, her favourite instrument, had been sold long ago.

“I'll get us something to eat.” Sophia moved away.

Before she could get far, they were all struck as if to marble, by rifle butts banging on the door.

“Open, open.” The strident order wasn’t to be argued with. Without any preliminaries the German soldier demanded, “You have not seen two fugitives, a man and a woman? You are not hiding them?” His look was fierce.

With complete honesty, Heracles was able to reply, “No, we are hiding nobody.” Sophia was clutching his hand like a vice. “Come in. See.” He clutched Sophia’s hand back.

They pushed in, looked around, poked under the beds.

“Come, Heinrich,” the taller one said. “Nothing here.”

Heinrich glared at the nervous family. “You know the penalty for harbouring Juden.” He slid her hand across his throat.

Heracles nodded. Poor Jews, he thought, even worse off than us.

The girls, holding each other, watched in the gloom from the window, as the soldiers tramped off.

Heracles followed Sophia to the kitchen. “What’s up?” he whispered.

“They are hiding behind the wood stack. They have a rendezvous nearby. They wouldn’t come in,” she shivered. “Just as well.” He hugged her briefly. “All right. Let’s try to act normal.”

They joined the girls in the front room.

“The soldiers have gone, Papa. Listen.” They heard the van’s motor gunning and drive away.

In the kitchen Sophia opened Heracles well-bound barter parcel slowly. Strange there was no sweet smell. She held the parcel to her nose.

Inside the newspaper wrapping, her suspicions proved to be right. Poor Heracles, so trusting, had been duped. Never mind the loss of the heirloom; she was more worried about the desperate couple in the yard.

The nuts turned out to be acorns; she put her finger in the honey – pure sugar with no body. The oil? It never came from any olive trees. She shrugged. There were bad Greeks too. Parcelling up the rubbish, Sophia shoved it into a cupboard. Her husband was in no state to hear about this now.

“Papa,” Athena’s voice carried to the kitchen. “Don’t look so sad. You’re home safe and that’s what matters most.”

Sophia sighed as she tied on her apron. The child had a point. In the times they were living in, being together counted.

Dora began to play the violin, not too well, but the scrapings squeaks and false notes went unnoticed. To Heracles, the plaintive sound soothed well as saddened, softened the echoes of his brush with death. He smiled. Soon as he could he would have to go outside and see if the fugitives had gone. The day wasn’t quite finished.

## Ray Hattingh

### QUICK PAYBACK

“Drat. What a pillock I’ve been to leave this late with the setting sun right in my face. I should’ve left much earlier,” thought Alex as he held up one hand in a vain endeavour to add some substance to the totally inadequate sun visor of his old skiddonk.

Driving with one hand, especially when you are blinded by the sun, is not conducive to a quiet life. Suddenly, the noise of rubber on gravel drummed into his consciousness and he hit the brakes.

“You alright?”

Alex looked out the driver’s window into a bemused face.

“Yes,” he said. Did I nearly kill you?”

“You made a pretty good attempt,” the stranger smiled.

“Damn, I’m sorry. It’s this ruddy sun.”

“No problem.”

Mike continued apologising.

“No problem,” the stranger said again, “but could I ask a favour?”

“Sure,” Alex replied.

“I’ve got to get to Yeoville and I’m afraid I’ve no money. Are you going anywhere near there?”

“Sure, it’s close to my route. Hop in,” Alex said, reaching for the passenger door handle.

The stranger settled in.

“Thanks. I’m Mike,” he said, holding out a huge paw.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Alex.”

Alex pulled back into the road, squinting.

Mike leant over the back seat to retrieve Mike’s document folder.

“Here,” he said, “Let me hold this up to keep the sun out of your eyes.”

“Thanks, that helps.”

As the road began to twist and turn, not only did the sun move from side to side, but the tall pines lining the road turned the evening light into some brain-befuddling demon, making concentration even more difficult.

“How do you feed yourself,” asked the stranger.

“What?” retorted a startled Alex, trying to concentrate in the flickering light.

“I mean, how do you earn your living?”

Alex could sense Mike’s grin.

“Oh. I tinker with ham radios. Install them. Tune them. In fact, I’m just on my way to sort out a problem with a bloke in Chrisville. What do you do?”

“Well, nothing at present,” said Mike, “In fact, I’ve just been released from jail.”

Suddenly dry mouthed, Alex clutched the steering wheel and stammered, “Wh-wh-what were you in for?”

“Nothing serious,” laughed Mike, “I’m just a pickpocket.”

“Oh Lord,” Mike cringed inside. All the cash from his previous job was in the document folder.

Involuntarily he squeezed hard on the accelerator.

“Hey, slow down,” laughed Mike, “You’ll kill us both. Besides I’m not liable to steal from a Good Samaritan – it’s just not cricket.”

Mike suddenly felt such a fool as he sighed and took his foot off the accelerator.

Too late.

Standing ahead in the road was a traffic cop, flagging him down.

The “Good evening, Sir,” came in those polite, measured tones that make traffic officers sound so bloody infuriatingly superior. “In a bit of a hurry then, Sir?”

“Good evening officer. You see . . .” Mike began and then trailed off with an, “Oh forget it.”

“I’m afraid that you have exceeded the speed limit by quite a bit, Sir.”

Alex got out the car, followed by Mike.

They watched the officer note the licence details before asking Alex, “Can I have your particulars please, Sir?”

It was a sombre Alex who pulled off after that rude awakening.

“Hell,” he thought, “Now I’ve really blown this afternoon’s earnings. So much for being a Good bloody Samaritan.

They drove in silence to the Yeoville address Mike had given him.

“Thanks a lot,” said Mike, as he opened the passenger door, “Sorry I scared you into that little debacle with the cop. You know, you’re the first bloke to show me some kindness in a long time, so here’s a small present for you,” he said and, in the gathering gloom, he handed Alex a small rectangular object.

Dumbfounded, Alex stared at the traffic officer’s ticket book.

**Allan van Riel**

## **THE COUNTDOWN**

*He was just closing the garage door when the sound of a shot cracked through the crisp air.* He paused for a moment. The gooseflesh rose on his arms. He knew what the sound of that shot meant. In a short while, it would be his turn.

He had been a keen participant for many years, always with the same reckless arrogance of youth – supreme confidence and a feeling of invincibility. He had, as with all things in life, pushed himself to the limits, taking his body beyond what could reasonably be expected of it. Not once did he consider that there would one day be a price to pay. That day was upon him. Today there would be no glory, no magnificent victory. Today there would be only survival.

He quickly slid the lock into place and glanced at his watch as he straightened up – 5.30 am. It was an ungodly hour to be up and about, made even more ungodly by a night's sleep that had been restless, punctuated by dreams of impending failure. Looking around, he could see only darkness and, not for the first time, he thought, "I must be crazy to be doing this."

Re-entering the house, he closed the door quietly, doing his best not to disturb his sleeping family. The smell of freshly brewed coffee filtered down the passage and he moved to the kitchen, silently blessing Melanie for having filled the automatic filter machine before going to bed the previous night.

Putting two slices of bread into the toaster, he thought, "And the condemned man ate a hearty meal before . . ." That brought a smile to his face – Melanie always teased him, saying that with an imagination like his, he should think about writing.

A minute later, the toast popped up. A light scraping of butter was all that he thought his stomach could handle. He cut the slices and arranged them on a plate, poured himself a mug of coffee and went through to the lounge to enjoy his frugal meal.

"I have to eat – it's the last chance I'll have until this afternoon," he reminded himself and nibbled on the toast, eventually eating half a slice, before discarding the remainder as not worth the risk of vomiting.

Sipping his coffee, he thought back over the past eight months. Training had begun as perfectly as could be hoped for and he had looked forward to a season of outstanding performances. Six weeks down the road, the reoccurrence of an old injury shattered his dreams. His days of serious competition were over and his participation would have to be scaled down.

The limitations led to a mild depression as he discovered that his heart was no longer in it. Were it not for Melanie, the depression would have worsened and he would almost certainly have joined the ranks of the armchair sportsmen. With her encouragement and support, he began looking towards setting new goals and meeting new challenges.

He was beginning to come out of the depression, having realised that the injury did not have to mean the end, but rather a new approach to sport, when the news about Patrick hit him.

“The pediatrician phoned today. They have the results of the tests,” Melanie told him when he arrived home from work. He wants to see us tomorrow afternoon – can you make it?”

“Sure – of course.”

They looked at each other. There was no need to voice their thoughts – both of them knew there was something very wrong.

He and Melanie had driven to the hospital with a great sense of trepidation. As they waited to be seen, he kept muttering, “Patrick will be fine. Patrick will be fine.”

**“Your son has a malignant tumour – Neuroblastoma. It is located on the adrenal gland,” the pediatrician said.**

“What! How bad is it? What can we do?” he rattled off, totally thrown by the news, unable to think rationally. “Calm down,” Melanie said, reaching out, gently squeezing his hand, “Let the Doctor finish.”

“It is very serious – life-threatening,” the pediatrician continued. “The odds for survival are not good. There is a treatment plan which may have a chance, but,” he paused, “we need a decision now – we have to start soon.”

The details of countless hospital visits, biopsies, chemotherapy sessions, blood transfusions, operations and the bone marrow transplant flashed before him. He had held his son in his arms. The little body seemed too frail as Patrick fought for his life through yet another infection, yet more pain.

The memory brought gooseflesh to his arms for the second time that morning. He wanted to go to Patrick’s room and hold him now, but resisted the urge – just as he had resisted it, many times, since Patrick came home.

“Treat him normally. Resist the urge to be too protective,” Dr. Hattingh had told them, as they left the hospital, “All we have to do is see that he regains his strength and makes up for lost time,” he added, rubbing Patrick’s head where, already, the hair was returning.

He thought about bailing out and getting back into bed, beside Melanie. Her warmth would help to ease the ache that he felt, deep within his heart. He tried to reason with himself that it would be for the best and that it was what his body needed. He told himself, that for too long he had ignored his injuries and the price for that had been heavy; that anyone else would have given up.

But, it was no good. He knew, even if no one else knew, that he would simply be giving up. And, if he did that, if he gave up, then he would be dishonouring the courage that Patrick had shown throughout the past year. That was something that he would never allow himself to do.

Once again, he would push himself to the limits – this time, for Patrick. And, if he were to truly honour that courage, then he must do it, not only for

Patrick, but also for himself. As he sat there, he made himself a promise that he would cross the finishing line and that he would place his finisher's medal around Patrick's neck.

He was roused from his thoughts, by the sound of another shot – his turn was getting ever closer. Once again, he glanced at his watch – it was now 6.15 am and almost time to, as his late Uncle Ray was fond of saying, “Sort the men from the boys and the boys from the wimps.”

Getting up, he went to Patrick's room and tiptoed to the bedside where he stood for several minutes, gazing at the still form. Patrick always slept with his arms thrown back in abandon and the covers in a bundle, at his feet. The expression on his face was of angelic peace and, not for the first time, he thought of those people who believed that God sent angels to live among us – maybe they were right.

As with so many nights in the past, he could feel a lump forming in his throat and knew that soon there would be tears in his eyes. Bending over the bed, he pulled up the covers and, tucking them around Patrick, planted a gentle kiss on his face. “I love you, my boy ... very much,” he whispered as he left the room.

In darkness, he passed the master bedroom, where Melanie was beginning to stir, and tripped over Bruno. The Rottweiler puppy had joined the family as the result of Patrick's pleading – at times he could charm you into agreeing to almost anything. The puppy had taken it upon himself to be Elaine's protector and spent most nights stretched out in the doorway.

At foot of the cot he froze as Elaine stirred and then settled back into a deep sleep. She had delicate features and, asleep, presented an image of the perfect porcelain doll. He felt that he could stand there for hours, watching her sleep. Bending over the cot, careful not to disturb the musical mobile, he placed a gentle kiss on her head. “I love you, my precious princess”, he whispered and tiptoed away.

The master bedroom's lights were now on, Melanie sitting up in bed, blankets clutched to her chest.

“I love you. Please be careful.”

She knew the risks, knew that if something went wrong, he could end up crippled. But she also knew that if he didn't do it, it would haunt him.

“Aren't I always?” he asked, trying to keep the conversation light.

“No comment,” she said, arms wrapped around him, “just come back safe – that's all that I want.”

Going outside, he heard the sound of yet another shot cracking through the air. Mentally ticking off the shots, he calculated that the fifth shot, after this, would be the one that called him. Five shots, spaced five minutes apart, gave him just twenty-five minutes grace.

Checking that everything was packed, he hooked up his bicycle, got into the car and drove off, to the start of the Argus Cycle Tour.

**Barry Kemp**

## **THE PILGRIMAGE**

After the most uncomfortable night of her existence in a cramped Air India Boeing, Mumbai airport felt almost like paradise to Sally Chandler. Almost, until Roger shoved one of his disgusting cheroots in his mouth and fished in his pocket for a light. She listened to the chorus of complaint that followed but Roger was unmoved, as he had been ever since the tour began almost a week ago. But even as he brought the flame to the cheroot she heard another voice above the chorus.

‘I’ll make a deal with you Roger, you don’t smoke in my company and I won’t stub your filthy fag out in your ear.’ Paul’s voice was gentle but his words carried a menace that made Roger hesitate.

‘India is a free country.’ Roger blustered, ‘If I choose to smoke, I will.’

‘Light it, and I promise to stuff that thing so far into your ear it will set both eardrums alight.’

‘Very funny.’ Roger said, but it was Sally who was amused when he slipped the cheroot back into his pocket.

‘Thank you Roger,’ Paul said mildly, ‘I hope I don’t have to have this conversation with you again.’

She suppressed a smile and turned away. The escorted tour to the exotic east, as the advert had described it, had been fun and interesting to begin with, but living with forty strangers in and out of hotels and aircraft had its own stresses and strains.

Paul had intrigued her since they met but he kept to himself and it was only when they reached Delhi that she had the opportunity to take the initiative, dawdling at the rear of the group at the Red Fort one morning so she could pretend to bump into him when he strolled past.

‘Hello.’ she said in her most charming voice, ‘I can’t remember doing this much walking in my entire life.’

‘It’s good for the figure so don’t complain.’ he said cheerfully and she laughed.

‘My feet feel it most by the end of the day.’ she said.

‘You should wear sensible shoes. No wonder your feet complain.’

‘Gandhi wore sandals, why shouldn’t I?’ she retorted.

‘Gandhi’s sandals were handmade in leather, not from scraps of recycled plastic in a makeshift factory in Salt River. Your feet deserve better treatment Sally, we’ll have to buy you some sensible shoes.’

‘We.’ she said suspiciously, ‘Who exactly are we?’

‘Me Paul, you Sally,’ he said, pointing first to himself and then to her. ‘Them sheep,’ he said dismissively, gesturing in the direction of the rest of the group clustered around the young guide reciting his well-rehearsed script.

She frowned. ‘Thewe-they trick is as old as the hills.’ she said suspiciously, ‘I’ve used the same technique on my patients to gain their trust. What are you after?’

‘Life is too short to play mind games with you Doctor.’ he said mildly, ‘I took you for more than a sheep but perhaps you’d better join the rest of the group.’ He smiled and doffed the floppy old hat he always wore, excused himself and strolled casually away.

She felt insulted at his implication but reasoned that it was she who had offended him. Too embarrassed to apologize, she decided to keep her distance but as things turned out, by the time she clambered onto the bus that was to take them to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, she found that he had kept her a seat. She was grateful and thanked him but maintained her reserve, refusing to fall into the trap she was convinced he had set for her.

He had obviously studied India’s history in great detail and despite her best intentions, she found herself warming to him as he explained some of the country’s long history. By the time the hair-raising journey was over she realised that he knew more about India than all the tour guides put together and began to understand why he referred to the rest of the group as sheep. It was only when she was relaxing in her bath that evening that she realised she been taken in by his we-they trick and resolved to avoid him altogether from that moment on.

Delhi was vast, noisy and dirty despite the historical significance of the city and it’s buildings, many of them designed by Sir Herbert Baker, a name she remembered from her schooldays at St Cyprians. It was when she was sitting with Cathy Francis at the hotel the following day, both of them with their shoes off to ease their aching feet that Paul came strolling past and nodded to them.

‘You ladies should get some sensible shoes then you won’t have sore feet.’ he said with a smile and was about to pass by when Cathy called him.

‘I notice that Roger doesn’t smoke in the bus any longer.’ she said, ‘I’m curious; would you really have stubbed out his cigar in his ear?’

‘Well,’ he said conspiratorially, ‘he fears that I will because I said I would, which is presumably why he no longer smokes in my company. Most people live in fear of some kind and he’s no different. You live in fear that if you wear sensible shoes people will think you’re butch, so you wear fashionable shoes that hurt your feet. Am I right?’

Cathy nodded, laughing and asked what he feared.

‘What is the worst thing that could happen to a person?’ he asked.

‘You could die.’ Cathy said after a moment’s thought.

‘Certainly you could,’ he said, ‘but if that were to happen, that would be the end of you, and your fear would end the moment you died. So, anything less than death is not to be feared, and if one thinks about it, why fear death because it’s inevitable, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not that simple.’ Cathy said and he shrugged.

‘You may be right Cathy. Perhaps we’ll talk again in Tokyo.’ he smiled, and walked away.

‘What a weird man,’ Cathy said, ‘I don’t know why he came on the tour, we hardly see him. I wonder what he’s afraid of?’

‘I wonder too.’ she said thoughtfully.

The flight to Tokyo was exceptionally bumpy and she was pleased to feel terra firma beneath her feet as she followed the tour guide to yet another coach. After the heat and humidity of India, Japan was blessedly temperate, and despite the crowded streets and subways, she found herself far more at ease than she had felt in India. Few people spoke English however so she was careful to stay with the tour group under the watchful eye of Mrs. Amano. The Bullet train frightened her, speeding through the railway station where they waited with a sudden burst of noise that was as unexpected as the incredible speed, the train disappearing from sight in seconds. Traveling in the train was smoother than in a Cape commuter train and infinitely cleaner. She watched in awe as the speedometer in the carriage crept up to almost two hundred kilometers per hour, yet she was able to walk to her seat as though she was at home in her lounge.

Paul was as pleasant but as distant as ever, although he and Mrs. Amano seemed to have struck up a rapport, the two of them talking animatedly about Japanese theatre which he seemed to know a great deal about. She felt a pang of jealousy at their comfortable intimacy, and later, when she found herself at dinner with the empty-headed Cathy she found herself regretting her decision to distance herself from Paul.

Taiwan was interesting; Malaysia was bustling, Indonesia was disappointing and Mauritius, where they spent a day and a night was wonderfully relaxing. On the last night of the tour their guide arranged a traditional beach buffet followed by Sega dancing and the inevitable disco. Paul was his usual courteous self and made a point of shaking everybody’s hand and wishing them well, even Roger. She retreated into the shadows when Paul approached, relieved when he left the gathering a little later. She drank too much that night and regretted it the next morning, and was very pleased when the aircraft finally landed at Cape Town.

As luck would have it, she found him standing alongside her at the carousel and they made polite small talk while they waited for the luggage. Her case emerged first and he retrieved it and loaded it onto her trolley.

‘Goodbye Doctor,’ he smiled, ‘Don’t forget to wear sensible shoes on your next trip.’

She wanted to speak to him, to say something meaningful, but the words caught in her throat and she felt like a fish out of water, tongue-tied and foolish.

‘Ah! Mine at last!’ he said, and he was gone, striding briskly away, his floppy hat firmly on his head.

Her friend Mandy, ever on the lookout for likely marriage prospects raised her eyebrows when she told her about him.

‘Paul Barker is only the most eligible bachelor in town,’ she said, ‘which planet have you been living on? He sold Barker Industrials for a few billion just last year and announced his retirement. At age forty. Hello! I’d say you blew it doll.’

‘Money isn’t everything. I didn’t like him very much.’

‘Phone him, or give me his number and I’ll phone him! What are you afraid of?’

She often thought about Paul, and she thought about Mandy’s words but that was all she did until one day she took the phone book and turned to the Bs but there was no Paul Barker.

‘Of course he won’t be in the book, his number will be unlisted.’ she said to herself, and tried to put him out of her mind. But she couldn’t. She didn’t know why but she found herself thinking of him at the oddest of times, even when she was seeing patients.

Her heart gave a huge lurch one evening some months later when she saw his face on television, and she turned the sound up.

‘Paul Barker died recently,’ the announcer said, ‘he was terminally ill and died in India.’

The rest of the words were a jumble and she sat down, staring unseeing at the screen. Something a man being interviewed said jolted her back to reality and she listened intently.

‘Paul was my best friend. He was a brilliant businessman but he had a human side too. He was kind and generous to a fault, and for years he endured a terrible fear of flying. Only recently did he conquer his fear and travelled to the Far East, a region that had fascinated him for years. When his illness was diagnosed he chose to live his last days in India because he often said that once one conquered fear, death became insignificant. He elected to die among the Parsi people who believe that death is simply a transition to another plane of existence. They believe that when life ends, the mortal remains are to be returned to earth by being left on a hilltop to be consumed by the creatures of the earth, in so doing completing life’s earthly cycle. Paul conquered fear and died at peace with himself.’

‘You sold your practice! Sally, have you lost it?’ Mandy demanded.  
‘What will you do when you get back?’  
‘I’ll manage.’ she said calmly, ‘I always have so I’m not concerned.’  
‘How long will you be gone?’  
‘Maybe a year, perhaps two or three I guess.’  
Mandy shook her head. ‘Where are you going?’  
‘On a pilgrimage.’  
‘Where?’  
‘I want to climb to the top of a hill in India. What do think of my shoes?’  
‘You look like a dyke.’ Mandy said and she laughed out loud.  
‘Why don’t you come with me? What are you afraid of? The eligible bachelors are all taken.’  
‘What do I need?’ Mandy asked and she scarcely hesitated.  
‘Once you lose your fear, all you need are sensible shoes.’

**Alwyne Todd**

**IN THE LIBRARY WITH A . . . .**

With finicky precision Millicent Sharp pressed the rubber date stamp onto the flyleaf of a popular Joanna Trollope novel. Among the neat columns of stampings on the page she noted, with exasperation, the higgledy-piggledy efforts of Emily, the younger of her two assistants. Would the girl never learn that neatness is next to godliness?

A single mother approaching forty, Millicent had run the small suburban library for twelve years with the discipline of a sergeant major. At this early hour the regiments of books, perfectly aligned on their shelves, glowed in the golden rays of the morning sun that slanted in through the high windows. The floor gleamed. Its polish scented the air and brushed the very books with lavender – her favourite fragrance.

The customer slid her last book under the poised date stamp. But Millicent's hand froze in mid air as the sudden sound of angry men's voices echoed loudly from the far end of the library.

“Oh, no, not again. I'll bang their stupid heads together.” Millicent strode off towards the source of the noise. At the end of the rows of shelves she turned left into a secluded area lined with reference books on one side and magazines on the other. One of the five reading tables had been thrust askew – evidently by the two elderly men grappling with each other. The object of their struggle was, just as she had suspected, that morning's Cape Times. Half the newspaper was in pieces on the floor. A tug of war was taking place over the rest of it.

“Barney . . . Colonel, stop that!”

Her ringing voice cut through the men's panting and grunting. Two red faces turned towards her. There could not have been more of a contrast. Barney – grimy, unshaven, his long, straggled grey hair tied behind his head . . . an aged hippy. Colonel Pilchard – white-haired, primly-moustached, unbowed by his eighty-plus years – kitted out in his usual khaki shorts and epauletted shirt, looking every inch the military officer.

They both started talking at the same time.

“Quiet,” she bawled. And then in a quieter tone, “Barney was here first. I saw him come in. We've only got the one newspaper and it's first come, first served. You know the rules Colonel.”

“I only asked him to let me have the business section, which he never reads” said the colonel, his voice rising. “I don't know why you let him in here. He's festered in that filthy T-shirt for at least a year. He stinks. He sleeps under the railway bridge for goodness sake. He's not fit to mix with decent people. He's rubbish.”

“Don't you call me rubbish,” shouted Barney, grabbing the colonel by the collar. Millicent thrust her tall, strong frame between the two old men. But

Barney was not to be silenced. “He’s nothing but a stuck-up, stingy old God botherer. The bastard’s got pots of money. He can afford his own newspaper. But he’d never give a cent to an oke like me, who’s down on his luck.”

“I said, that’s enough,” shouted Millicent. “And I don’t want that kind of language in my library. Now both of you behave or I’ll call Security and have you thrown out. Just this once I am going to send out my assistant for a new paper. Barney can read it first, and if he wants to part with the business section – well, that’s up to him.

Colonel, why don’t you read the bible meantime.” She nodded towards the library’s most prized possession – a two-hundred-years-old, Quaker bible. Bound between leather-covered wooden covers, and far too big for the shelves, it rested heavily on its own small table in the corner of the reading room. Colonel Pilchard loved to pore over its ancient pages and often startled other readers by reading out some of the Good Book’s more doom-laden passages in a loud fire-and-brimstone voice.

The peace did not last long. Just three days later, another shouting match had Millicent dashing into the reading area. This time Barney was the aggrieved party.

“He won’t give me the Argus,” he whined.

“But he’s reading the Times,” said Millicent.

“The devious bugger’s got the Argus hidden underneath it.”

Millicent looked closely. “So he has. Now, come along, Colonel, you can’t have two papers at once.”

“But when that rubbish gets hold of the Argus he keeps it for hours while he does the chess problem. That’s not fair . . .” His voice tailed off as his eye caught a movement behind Millicent. She turned. It was Emily, her assistant, bearing an armful of magazines, having just arrived at the library half an hour late. At nineteen Emily had the kind of figure that would look good in an old tarpaulin. But there was nothing tarpaulin-like about her outfit. Perched on high-heeled sandals, her white hipsters were stretched tight as paint. Thin shoulder straps supported a filmy sepia top that barely hid the dark aureoles of her nipples.

Millicent rolled her eyes in exasperation. She had warned the wilful girl many times about her skimpy attire. “It’s so unprofessional, my dear,” she’d told her. “If the Director ever pays us a call and sees you dressed like that, we could be both out of a job.” But today the girl had really gone over the top.

Her musings were interrupted by a thunderous voice. She turned to see the glowering colonel pointing a shaking finger at Emily like a vengeful Moses.

“The girl might as well be naked,” he ranted. “The Lord’s wrath shall descend on the fornicators. The sins of the flesh shall be punished in hell,” he roared.

Emily’s face crumpled in terror as she dropped the magazines and fled. The finger of God was then turned on Millicent. The colonel showed the whites

of his eyes as his voice rose to a crescendo. “Why do you let that slut in here. This is a library, not a brothel.”

Millicent glared at him before turning on her heel to follow Emily. She found the girl in the wash room – her face tear-streaked with mascara. Millicent hugged the sob-wracked shoulders.

“There, there, my dear. Don’t let that nasty old man get under your skin. Just keep away from him. Now why don’t you go back to your flat and take the rest of the day off - and come back tomorrow, in something a little more . . .”

“Biblical?” smiled Emily wryly.

*An uneasy truce settled over the reading area during the next couple of weeks – Barney sitting close to the entrance, and the colonel at the far end near his beloved bible.*

Then, on a quiet Tuesday morning, something happened that launched the little library into the newspaper headlines.

Millicent had been helping a customer with a book search on the computer when she caught a glimpse of Barney enter the reading area. About five minutes later he came rushing out.

“We must get a doctor, ma’am. There’s something wrong with the colonel. I can’t wake him.”

Millicent followed him back into the reading area where she saw the colonel slumped over his table, face down on his newspaper. A trickle of blood from his nose was slowly spreading over the crossword puzzle. Millicent shook him gently by the shoulder but there was no response. She felt in vain for a pulse in his neck. She rushed to the phone.

The doctor peered intently at the dead man’s face. The bloody nose puzzled him. There was no sign of injury. A cerebral haemorrhage perhaps? He pressed gently on the back of the head – then abruptly straightened up. He turned to Millicent. “Miss Sharp, will you please lock the library doors. No one is to leave. Touch nothing until the police get here.” He dialled a number on his cellphone.

“Now, Miss Sharp,” said Detective Chief Inspector Botha, “you’re saying that the old tramp physically attacked the colonel just two weeks ago.”

“Well, yes,” replied Millicent. “But he *was* provoked. Colonel Pilchard had a vicious tongue.”

“And you say that nobody else entered the reading area before Barney.”

“No, I said I didn’t *see* anyone enter. I can’t see the library’s main entrance from the desk. Someone slipping in along the children’s section would be visible only briefly as they crossed the short space into the reading area.”

“So all you saw were the two schoolkids at the computers and the old lady renewing her book. OK, that’ll do for now.”

The detective strode back to the reading area where he found the police pathologist closing his medical bag.

“It was a blow to the back of the head,” reported the pathologist. “An indented fracture. Something heavy and blunt. Probably killed him in seconds. The nose bleed was a result of his face hitting the table.”

The detective turned to his sergeant who had just returned from taping-off the grounds.

“Did you hear that, Sergeant? Well, there’s no sign of a weapon like that in here. Better call for a couple of constables to make a thorough search of the library and the grounds.”

The sergeant scanned the room. Her eyes lighted on the bible lying on its little table. She walked across and bent over the huge volume examining the cover minutely. She donned her latex gloves before turning it over. It weighed even more than she had expected.

Her boss raised his eyebrows.

“A book? Now that’s a thought. Any sign of hairs or blood?”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Bag it all the same. Now what have you done with our prime suspect?”

“On his way to the station, Sir.”

It was a cold day but, in the back of a squad car, Barney was sweating.

“It was the old vagrant, Sir, beyond a shadow of doubt,” reported DCI Botha to his superintendent.

“But it’s been over a month, Botha. Why haven’t we arrested him?”

“The old bugger’s sticking to his story, Sir. He says the victim, was dead when he got there. We gave him a right grilling, but he won’t budge.”

“Couldn’t someone have got in unseen by the library staff?”

“In theory, yes. But where’s your motive? The colonel was an unpleasant old sod. But murder? I don’t buy it. Until we look at Barney. Now that’s a different story. Barney hated him. Had come to blows with him. And, guess what? The old skellum’s on our books.”

“What for?”

“Possession of dagga and . . . assault!”

“Ah.” The superintendent looked upwards and followed the perambulations of a spider crossing the ceiling.

“What about the forensic?”

“Yes, well, it *was* the book. They found some tiny white flakes deeply embedded into the leather. It was dandruff. And it matches the victim. We’ve just got the DNA report.”

“Finger prints?”

“Too many, Sir. Badly smudged, but we got partials for all three staff members and plenty for the colonel.”

“And none for Barney?”

“And none for Barney.”

Barney had just opened his Cape Times when a steaming cup of coffee was set down in front of him. He immediately recognised Millicent Sharp’s sturdy wrist with its gold bangles. He looked up at her.

“Why thank you ma’am, that’s most welcome.”

“You deserve it Barney. You’ve had a very stressful time.”

“You’re right ma’am. That cop tried hard to pin the murder on me. Look, I’m not sorry to see the back of hoity-toity Colonel Pilchard. But who on earth would want to kill him?”

Millicent reached across and placed her hand gently on Barney’s. Her eyes, brown and bright, stared into the old man’s for what seemed minutes before she spoke.

“Barney, I’m sorry you had to go through all this. But nobody . . . nobody, calls my daughter a whore.”

**Shirley van de Graaff**

## **THE HUNTED**

At the unmistakable crack of a twig, she pulled her body into a knot even tighter than the one in her stomach. She tried pushing closer to the earth forming the backing to this short tunnel, unexpectedly fashioned by the roots of trees, moss, and fallen branches. She couldn't go any farther back.

Where was he, this man bent on destroying her? Despite the chattering of the myriad birds, the perpetual humming of insects, all the expected sounds of this wooded bush area, to her it seemed as if the whole universe was holding its breath.

Then she heard it. His breathing. He was a large man. Broad-shouldered, heavy featured, clad in khaki shirt and shorts, a strip of leopard skin circling his hat, ankle-high boots made from the skin of a buck. He exuded an odious, pungent smell caused by a mixture of beer, tobacco and sweat. She smelt something else: that peculiar scent killers exude when they are about to fell their victim. That smell of evil excitement when they know they hold the power of life and death, even above God.

Vivid in her mind was her brother's terrible death at the hands of this man. Before he and his two equally brutish sons had come to this area, this was their family's territory. Now every time they set forth to find the food they considered rightfully theirs, they were being harassed, persecuted even. There seemed as many signs saying "Poachers will be Shot" as there were trees.

So far they'd managed to survive. Today, luck ran out. They came to a clearing and, very cautiously, her brother stepped out. There was a crack like the last echo of a thunderbolt and she saw her brother's slight body airborne, then slump, an unearthly cry escaping from him as he hit the ground. The bullet, intended for his brain, missed and hit his left eye, which was a bloodied scramble of tissue and blood and veins. Instinct told her to rush to him, to tend his wounds, to be with him. But she saw the order from his dying eye and instinctively knew he was right: "Run. Run until you're safe". Another rifle shot ran out and ended her brother's young life.

She ran. Swiftly and as silently as a shadow. The man hadn't seen her. Suddenly she came across a small group of Swainson's francolins. Startled, they flew into the air, their harsh krrraaak-krrraaak-krrraaak and flapping wings sounding thunderous on the sleepy day. She froze. Now, he would know she was there.

For a moment she felt disorientated. Run. Where to? Instinct told her he was already after her. She started running again. Blindly. Her headlong flight was unexpectedly halted. A fallen tree was right across her path, its branches still in leaf, making it impossible to jump over. She ran along the length of the tree, around its upended roots that were reaching into the air like clawing

tentacles. Tired and short of breath, her desire for rest was fighting her panic to get away. She couldn't see anywhere to go. Fatigue won. She got down onto her belly and crawled along the tree's trunk, wriggling in between its branches until she felt she must be completely hidden. Her breathing slowed. She played dead.

She could hear the man getting ever nearer. She could hear him curse as a thorn tore his shirt, then again as he stumbled. She could hear him swatting flies away from his face. Then he was quiet. Eerily quiet. What was he thinking? What was he planning? Had he seen her and was just waiting for her to make a move? She remained dead still.

Eventually the silence was broken as he moved away. Away from the tree, retracing his steps.

She breathed a little easier but waited a long time before daring to move, before wriggling out from between the branches that had given her protection, given her time to gather her strength. Crouching she walked around the tree, looking for a clear path before setting out once more at a brisk pace.

She'd gone about seventy-five metres when that same crack like a thunderbolt echo broke the peace, this time accompanied by an extremely high-pitched whine. Thwack. She felt a nearby tree wince in pain as a bullet lodged in its trunk. Yes, it winced, because trees are living things and also feel pain.

He'd obviously bided his time and now his patience was rewarded. He had her in his sights. Terror gave her feet wings and unconsciously she became almost impossible for him to hit, dodging around bushes, termite mounds, large boulders. Another shot rang out, but went wide of its mark. There was a slight, gravelly slope which she should have negotiated carefully. There wasn't time. Her speed sent loose gravel scattering and she felt herself slip, slide and tumble down a small embankment. Slightly dazed, she came to a stop. And that's when she saw the place to hide. Once more she dropped onto her stomach and crawled to the end of the cleverly concealed tunnel, twisting her body so she could keep her eyes on the opening.

For so long she remained motionless, she thought the man must have given up. Then she heard him. As light-footed as the killer tried to be, each surreptitious step warned her that he was coming nearer. With great caution he negotiated the embankment. Through the network of dead leaves and twigs she could see the glint of his rifle barrel. She was sure the beat of her heart sounded like a primeval drumbeat of surrender. Did the primitive beat drums when they surrendered? And did she exude a victim's odour just as his killer odour became ever more powerful?

He was now so close if she'd reached out she could probably touch his boot. She could feel the hairs on her neck rising out of a mixture of fear and anger. Her natural wish for survival created a monumental fear of dying. It was matched by a monumental anger. Had she not a right to live? Was her brother murdered simply because of his hunger? This man was not hungry. He did not

kill to eat, as they had poached to survive. He would kill her because that was his nature. A natural-born killer.

Another shot rang out. It was not from his gun. In fact, the bullet came so close to his hat, his immediate thought was that someone was trying to kill him. He dropped like a stone to the ground. And looked straight into the eyes of his intended victim, crouched at the end of her little hide-out.

The slight, weather-beaten man lowered his rifle. Was that really a leopard? Or was it the leopard-skin band on Dirk du Toit's hat that he'd seen? My God, if I've hit him, I can claim the band as my excuse. Maybe I should check – it's only about a hundred metres. But if I have hit him, what do I say? "Sorry, broer, it was an accident." Not bloody likely. Better I get the hell outa here. If I *have* hit him, I hope to God he bleeds to death. Murderous bastard, killing my prize Rotweiler, pretending he'd mistaken him for a bush pig. Maybe I should track him down and finish it. Willem van der Riet didn't have the courage to track him down. Not quite yet. Maybe a cigarette to calm my nerves, he thought.

Dirk, the intended victim, was looking at *his* intended victim. She was his for the taking. Nowhere to run. No way out other than past him. But if someone was trying to kill him, she was safe. For now. From his supine position he couldn't shoot. And he daren't move. The silence stretched, with killer and victim looking at each other, neither knowing what to do next. Now that he may be a victim, he felt a momentary sympathy for her.

By now, she'd emptied her bladder, emptied her bowels, and felt as if she were the sacrificial offering to a godless entity. She waited, hardly daring to breathe, for her adversary to make his kill.

After a long suspension of time, the man got to his feet. Shaken, he dropped his hat, dropped his rifle. He was also a little ashamed at his knee-jerk reaction. Of course no-one was trying to kill him. Obviously some poacher taking a wild shot. Nevertheless he was somewhat disorientated and uncharacteristically unnerved. It took him a few moments to register why he was here.

Yes, he had to kill her. It was a matter of pride. He positioned his rifle and aimed down the little tunnel.

A bullet went screaming past, the air in its wake singeing his nose. My God, that was no accident, he thought, as he crouched and ran zig-zaggedly into the bushes, as if pursued by the devil himself.

After his cigarette and swig of brandy from his hip flask, Willem van der Riet's courage surged. There'd been no movement in the bushes, then he caught sight of it: Dirk du Toit's hat. He took aim. Give the bastard a fright, he thought. Whew! That was close. Chuckling, he decided that was enough sport for the

day. Let the murdering sod live. On the other hand, why should he? Another nip from the flask decided him.

Although the big man had gone, her fear had increased. Another shot, another murderer on the loose. After what seemed like time stretched to infinity, with no further shots, no more than the usual natural sounds, she decided she was out of immediate danger.

Literally inching forward on her belly, she came to the entrance of her tunnel. Her heart still pounding, her limbs stiff from confinement and weak from fear, she emerged. Getting unsteadily to her feet, she looked suspiciously around. There seemed no immediate danger so she ran. The message in her brain was still telling her to run – run for your life.

The shadows were lengthening. Soon the sun would provide a crimson backdrop to the silhouette of the trees and bushes. Soon the African night would come with its usual disconcerting swiftness. Then it would be even more difficult to find her way home. In the last couple of minutes it had already become darker.

What was that? A crack of thunder? Yes, a storm was brewing. No wonder it had suddenly darkened. She must hurry. She was quite close to home. Abruptly she sensed a terrifying danger. Her feet became leaden. Shivering with renewed fear, she took one tentative step at a time. In the half light familiar shapes were taking on grotesque proportions.

A flash of lightning stopped her in her tracks, her blood drained and her heart stopped beating altogether. There was the man. Sitting propped against a tree, staring at her with bulging eyes, rifle aiming straight at her. Even in the little tunnel, she had not faced death with such certainty.

There was something very strange about the man, about Dirk du Toit. He was too still. Why hadn't he shot her? Another lightning flash showed that his eyes were no longer seeing. The real poacher, was dead. For now she'd escaped earth's most vicious killer. Man.

The little jackal now ran with a phantom swiftness to the lair where the family would be waiting, worrying about her. Some of last year's litter, staying with the clan to take care of the newer siblings, would be particularly distraught. Together they would grieve for her brother, for his blood that had seeped into the earth, which for eons had absorbed the blood of millions of slain. Absorbed it and wept for it. Allowed the rains to wash it until it was no longer blood but an immaculate spirit that rose once more through the earth and into Heaven itself, forming the rays of the sun, the incandescence of the moon, the fabric of hope.

## Mike Job

### BUTTERCUP

A more experienced man would have seen right away that she was trouble. But as I trudged up the grey, stone steps with my books, and as the morning sun caught that mane of golden hair above me, I thought she was a goddess. She was certainly very different from Sannie Bezuidenhout back in Tweebuffels. For a start, as I was to discover, she smelled different.

Tweebuffels is pig country, and Sannie and her four brothers got up at four every morning to do all the things that make pigs look like they do on calendars and bacon packaging. The hand that Rosalie Thorensen waved at me looked softer and cleaner than Sannie's had ever been in those heart-pounding minutes behind the school bicycle shed.

A more experienced man would also have recognised the expression on the face of her short, dark friend. I didn't. It's the kind of mistake that gets you bitten by jealous dogs.

"Hello" said Rosalie in the husky drawl that was to turn me inside out every time I heard it. "What faculty are you in?"

"Errum, I'm ... errum ... I'm in Engineering." I heard someone say in a squeaky voice. One of the heavier books was slipping out of my paralysed embrace. Close up, she was beautiful. There was no room for a sixth sense amongst the tatters of the other five. The nursery rhyme about the spider and the fly wasn't in the curriculum at Tweebuffels Pre-Primary, so it goes to show how important good basic education can be in later life.

"Is it? Tha's nice ... she trailed off, her lazy blue eyes lingering all over me. I shifted the books protectively across the darns in my last clean khaki shirt. A sound from the dark presence at her side might have been a snarl or a snort. The goddess spoke again.

"D'you play rugby? I mean, like what team are you in?" Again, the sound from her bristling guardian.

I thought about my five outings for Tweebuffels High second team and started to answer, but then something told me she was talking of a different kind of team. Perhaps it was the blue and white Varsity rugby badge pinned to her sweater, or the sight of some of the ruggger fraternity making their swaggering way down the steps towards us. If my lack of boots had embarrassed Tweebuffels High, it would not endear me to the inner circle on campus.

"Aaarr, I don't play any more," I gargled, "Married to the books." This last witticism accompanied by a ghastly smirk. Her blue eyes looked genuinely regretful.

"Is it? Tha's a pity - you've got the body for it. Such wide shoulders....." And then the cream of tertiary manhood descended on us in a jostling avalanche of patchy beards, artificially faded jeans and in jokes.

Somebody patted Rosalie's bottom and I fancied I heard a snarl from her protector as they were swept up and away. I stood there a long time, watching them go and just as I was sadly turning away, that perfect face looked back and smiled at me. Just once. But then, that's how many times the hangman pulls the lever.

Much later, I was in front of the cracked mirror Mrs Buchanan had grudgingly supplied with the room, when Gawie came in. His timing was never good.

"What the hell do you want?" I growled "Don't you ever knock?"

"Why should I?" he answered placidly, "I live here. Remember? Why've you got your shirt off?" I didn't like the way his eyes narrowed in sudden interest.

"Mind your own business." I said. I wondered if he'd notice Sannie's picture turned to the wall. Sometimes Gawie was quite quick.

"You got to watch yourself, ouboet. These big city women eat us like you and me for breakfast." As I say, he was quick for a plattelander. I used a couple of words I'd picked up on campus. Gawie chuckled and got out the bread and the coffee from our secret store. Ma Buchanan didn't allow cooking in the room, so I joined him in the usual singsong to drown the roar of the Primus. It helped to ease my embarrassment.

In the next month, I found out that Rosalie Thorensen was in Fine Arts, that she had no real boyfriend that I could identify, that she was constantly accompanied by Beulah Barovsky and that I couldn't stop thinking of her and those few sentences she'd uttered at our first meeting.

I analysed every word and phrase, experimented with alternatives and drew a half dozen conflicting conclusions. The little time I found for such diversions I spent, with Gawie as an amused spectator, on elaborate plans to contrive another meeting. Nothing ever materialised.

Both of us were hanging on by the skin of our teeth to keep pace with the workload. Tweebuffels and Pofadder weren't places you returned to report failure. There'd been too much sacrifice back there in the dust.

I'd almost resigned myself to just watching her go by in the hopes that she'd look at me. It would have at least been something. I suppose it's hard to smile and wave from the front seat of a speeding sports car, or to pick out one lonely figure amongst the hundreds about you. I suppose she would have had to listen carefully to all those clever jokes, or miss the point and not be able to laugh in that delighted head back way she had, one hand over her mouth and golden hair swinging, so that they all laughed with her. It made me want to laugh too, even though I couldn't hear the joke.

In the end it was on those same stone steps that I found her, one overcast day, sitting alone. I'd been running for a tutorial I'd missed before, but the sight of her stopped me in mid-stride and I sank down beside her without thinking.

She didn't look at me and I was afraid to stare at her so we just sat like that, side by side, staring out over the hazy suburbs below. I stole a sideways glance at her, and a great cold hand squeezed my heart when I saw that she was crying. Not like Sannie had cried when I left, in great bellowing sobs and shoulder-shaking grief. But as still as the stone steps, with an occasional silent tear rolling down her cheek.

For just a moment I wondered where her bodyguard was before I reached across and dabbed at a tear with the cuff of my jersey. It seemed a safe enough thing to do without being savaged by Beulah, wherever she was lurking.

"What's wrong?" I asked, stricken to see her like this, but sure of myself for once. "Is it something I can help with?" I wished I had a clean handkerchief. In fact, any handkerchief would have been a start. She turned to me and despite the tears I was stunned by her beauty. If she was wearing any makeup, it certainly didn't dissolve and run like the trading stuff poor Sannie was experimenting with. Perversely, I hoped her trouble was enormous.

"I lost my ring." She sniffed. I looked at her fingers. They were full of rings. They all looked expensive.

"Which one?" I asked, disappointed. Scenes had been flashing through my mind where the van Schoor physique and intelligence were pitted against rather more dire threats. Still, if this was conversation, I was at least talking to her.

"The plain gold one." she husked "I left it on the studio windowssill and it was g-g- g-g-one! I can't find it anywhere!"

I looked up at the Arts building, half concealed in Autumn by scarlet Virginia creeper.

At an open window, I could see the curtains stirring. "Maybe the curtains swept it off the sill." I suggested.

At that, her eyes registered a brief, wan hope, but then two huge crystal tears welled up and she squeezed the incredible lashes tight shut and bit her lip. I imagine it was an appeal like that which put paid to the last sabre tooth tiger retaining his fur coat.

"Don't worry, Rosalie" said some impetuous idiot - using my voice "I'll get it back for you." I stood up and nodded confirmation, looking down at her tear-streaked face. I seemed to be impossibly tall at that moment and I knew that my shoulders were unbelievably broad. It was worth anything to see her slowly stand on tip-toe and reach up to put her arms around my neck. When she kissed me softly and breathlessly, I know that we both actually left the ground.

Then she was gone, her skirt swishing against the bushes beside the steps. Just once she turned and smiled, her head on one side. I sat down again, because I couldn't remember where I'd been going in the first place. It was a long time before I wandered back to the room. Gawie came in much later and sat on his bed, looking at me.

“And now?” he said, “What’s with the stupid grin? And what’s that stuff all round your mouth – what have you been eating?” He peered closer and reached out a finger to sample it. I brushed his hand aside and sat up. In the mirror over the sink, I surveyed the lipstick. I turned on him defensively.

“This my parochial friend, is the beginning of a new life for me. It’s the seal of approval from Rosalie Thorensen.”

“It looks more like Clifton Climax from Revlon,” said my insensitive roommate. “It also looks like bad news. What brought this on?”

I told him. He drew an imaginary square on the table with his finger. “You have a problem, ouboet. You didn’t ask her which window. If it was one of these two sides, it’s somewhere in all that creeper. If it’s this side, Buttercup’s got it!”

“Buttercup?” I hadn’t thought of that. The Zoology lab was below the studio on that side and Buttercup’s pond was the logical place for anything to land. Tame old Buttercup lay there, most days, like a weathered log, a speculative eye cast up at the laboratory windows whence she could expect an occasional windfall in the form of botched dissection material, hastily jettisoned before Professor Fremantle could freeze the perpetrator with his wintry gaze and add to the stock of memorable one-liners attributed to his ascerbic tongue.

“Lend me your bicycle – or give me a lift. Come on, before it gets dark!” I commanded. Gawie settled for the latter.

Together, we peered through the head-high mesh. Designed to protect rather than contain athletic crocodiles, it had clearly failed on at least two occasions. The words “Property of Gucci Inc” were painted in yellow on her placid, leathery back and someone with a felt-tipped pen had drawn a passable zipper around the edge of her permanently grinning mouth.

Buttercup lay at the bottom of the pool, immobile and nearly invisible in the gloomy water. Almost at once I saw a glint in the murk. Buttercup stirred slightly and I thought the glint moved too.

“It’s there, Gawie, look!” I hissed “Rolling around on the bottom. I’ve got it!!”

“Not quite, ouboet,.” he said evenly. “I’d say possession was nine tenths, wouldn’t you? Mind you, it’s only about a meter deep. I reckon you could whip over the fence, fish it out and be back out here if you really move yourself. Buttercup won’t even notice.”

“I looked at the two meters of shadowy menace. “I’m not going into that filthy water, Gawie! You must be mad!”

And that might have been that. If I hadn’t seen Rosalie Thorensen pass by with a gaggle of friends, Beulah in scowling attendance. And if Rosalie hadn’t seen me and blown a kiss that made me grab the fence for support. Beside me, Gawie sighed and scratched his neck.

“OK, man. Let’s do it. I mean why don’t you? I got an idea.” He was very quiet as we freewheeled back to the room.

Next day, we were back with the sunrise. It was Sunday, with nobody about to see us unpack. Ten sweaty minutes later, I was decked out in an evil-smelling rubber wetsuit and gasping for breath through a defective breathing hose. For some obscure reason, Gawie insisted I wear the flippers. "In case you need a dash of speed in the water." he said seriously, murmuring after a final survey "Hail the conquering frogman comes."

The flippers made it difficult to climb the fence, but clutching Gawie's noose, I felt marginally better. According to the plan, it was for putting over Buttercup's snout. I peered anxiously at Gawie through the cracked and smeary face-mask and he gave me the thumbs-up. He'd argued that someone was needed to hang onto the other end of the rope. Which, of course, was outside the fence.

Somewhere I'd read that crocodiles were deaf. I hoped so because the hammering in my chest was enough to wake those in the Pretoria Zoo. I sucked in a great draught of foul air and leaned over to where I could dimly make out my long, pointed target. There was hardly a tremor as I dangled the noose and then with a gentle tug, slid it over Buttercup's muzzle and pulled it tight. Triumphant, I turned and gargled at Gawie .

"Pull, man ! Pull the bloody rope!!!

He did, and the pool boiled as Buttercup reacted indignantly. Unspeakable things churned to the surface and I shut my eyes and mouth quickly and stepped into the water. I crouched, scrabbling about on the slimy bottom. When my terrified fingers found the ring it seemed large and abnormally heavy, but I grabbed it, bobbed back to the surface and flung it on the grass. There was some sort of brass and rubber plug attached to it.

Although Gawie was hauling manfully on the rope, I hardly had time to claw my way over the fence before Buttercup erupted, hissing and snapping at the rope around her tail. Anyone could have made the same mistake. Crocodiles are actually pointed at both ends, so to speak. Gawie and I lay there panting, watching the water drain out of the pool. The smell was indescribable.

There was quite a crowd round Buttercup's pool watching four Zoology students offloading a long stretcher-like contraption from a campus truck. Sticking out of the ends and sides were unmistakable bits of crocodile. I got a glimpse of the familiar artwork around the toothy end.

One of the students was holding forth "Aah yes,. It's most important to introduce the female to the male and not the other way round. The males get very territorial so, in this case, we swopped them for a while before trying to mate them."

I also saw Rosalie. She was clinging to a pipe-smoking Lothario in corduroy but she detached herself to run over and show me her ring.

"Hello! Listen, don't worry about the ring. It was so sweet. Monty took it and had a teeny diamond set in it for me for a surprise. Isn't it lovely?"

Eyeing the glittering gem, I murmured something appropriate. She pecked me breathlessly on the cheek and skipped back to Monty.

Watching Buttercup waddle eagerly to her new lover, I thought I could see a certain similarity. Except that he still had a length of rope around his tail.

**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 cellphone 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 breathe, 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.”

## WINNERS OF THE PRESIDENT'S TROPHY

1970	F. BRANDT
1971	M. HODGE
1972	D. MCLEOD
1973	P. ATWELL
1974	R. ELLIS
1975	I. GOODSON
1976	P. WILLIAMS
1977	S. BOLTON
1978	M. HODGE
1979	L. COETZEE
1980	M. HODGE
1981	I. GOODSON
1982	M. MURRAY
1983	F. GRAYBE
1984	M. MURRAY
1985	M. MURRAY
1986	N. SMITH
1987	M. BIRD
1988	I. GOODSON
1989	M. JOB
1990	M. JOB
1991	M. JOB
1992	L. LEWIS
1993	D. BELL
1994	M. JOB
1995	I. GOODSON
1996	M. JOB
1997	R. RODWELL
1998	M. JOB
1999	S. BURGESS
2000	M. WOLLENSCHLAEGER
2001	N. TREVOR
2002	I. GOODSON
2003	M. JOB
2004	I. GOODSON
2005	S. FINNEY