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Watching Them

‘Daddy, I’m thirsty. Can we stop for cold-drinks?’

‘Okay, we’ll stop at the next petrol station. Do you guys need the loo?’ Ash and I say no. Out of the front window, I can see the Magaliesburg Mountains. They rise in the distance like whales, beached on the dry veldt grass, purple, round and sudden. The road turns to gravel. Ash undoes her seatbelt. She is bouncing in the middle seat. On her other side, Natalie is asleep against the door.

‘I’m going to pee dad. Don’t go bumpy.’ I need the toilet just as badly. I press my nose to the window. Daddy is pulling up at the petrol station. A huge green shield sits atop the convenience store – ‘BP’ it reads in bold yellow letters. The car comes to a stop.

‘Sir, good morning sir. Is a lovely day today. Do you want me to fill up sir?’ A black man says to daddy. He has a big smile and is outfitted in the service station uniform; a one piece outfit patterned with holes. I climb out of the car, Ash places her feet on the bull bar and slides down behind me. There is only one other petrol pump. Next to it is a bucket of sloppy green water and a purple bottle of *Handy Andy*. The black man dips the cloth in and wrings it out. He smiles at us exposing a gap of gum and a row of small white teeth. His thin arms bunch momentarily tight and while daddy waits, he wipes the car windows down.

Ash and I can’t find the bathroom. We go inside the convenience store and I ask the man behind the counter where it is. He has red eyes, and arms that are even thinner than the black

man's outside. He is smoking something that looks like a stick from a tree. His cheeks puff in and out as he speaks,

'There, is no, bathroom,' he says, and then all in a single breath, 'but there is a little hut at back. You see chickens and then you see hut.' Ash is bouncing on her feet now.

'Stacey,' she moans. I don't like walking out of sight of daddy. He is standing in front of the Mercedes, looking out toward the mountains, not watching us. My heart speeds up as Ash and I turn the corner. There is no one in sight, only the tall yellow veldt grass. To one side is a little pen fenced off with brown barbed wire. Chickens are mulling inside squawking. The ground is dry and the soil red. Next to the pen is a plastic *Port-A-Pottie*.

'Eew,' Ash says when she opens the door. The smell of antiseptic and excrement is suddenly strong. Ash holds the door open so I can enter behind her. I lock it and wait for her to pee. 'It smells' she says. She pulls up her shorts and turns around. 'How do I flush?'

'You don't'

When we get back to the car, daddy is tipping the black man. He gives him a couple of silver coins, and out of the plastic packet that is on the car's hood, he takes a litre box of *Liqui-Fruit* juice. He gives it to the black man as well.

'Thank you boss, thank you sir.' The man's smile grows even bigger. I can't help staring into his mouth again. It is like the piano keyboard daddy bought me for my birthday; white interspersed through with black. My fingers take on a life of their own and mimic the only chord I've learned to play so far; a piece from the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth. The man bows his head to daddy and skips backwards into the store. He waves at us before kicking the door open.

‘The toilet didn’t flush dad,’ Ash says.

‘It was a *Port-A-Pottie*’ I say, ‘I told you Ash.’

‘We had long drops in the army,’ daddy says.

‘Why did you go to the army?’ Ash scrunches her nose. She is trying to unzip her little backpack. Her arms are more tanned than mine. Her skin is olive like daddy’s.

‘You went to the army or you went to prison. I only got out of it after one year because I wrote to the Geological Survey every month. Rhynie didn’t. He was a doctor. He went up to Angola with – do you remember John Venter? He drove the ambulances and his-’

‘Dad, I’m thirsty,’ Ash says. Daddy pulls off the gravel and onto the road again. There are no cars, just the endless stretch of tar. He holds the steering wheel with one hand and fumbles in the plastic packet. Out of it he takes a can of *Just Juice*. He passes it back to us, and does the same for two more. Natalie is still asleep so I put her can in the drinks holder in the middle.

‘Can I have a guava one dad?’ Daddy passes the whole packet back. I peer into it while Ash looks for her guava juice.

‘I bought some food if you girls are hungry too.’ Mommy would be so mad with him if she saw what he bought; a packet of *biltong*, *Fritos*, *Nick-Nacks* and a selection of chocolates.’ I grab the *Aero* before Ash can.

‘Can I open the *biltong* Dad?’

‘I bought it for all of you,’ he says. Ash tears the packet open. My mouth waters when I smell lemon and salt and the spice that they put on *biltong* – the one that sticks to it in little balls, that look like peppercorns but aren’t. Ash shoves the packet at daddy.

‘What’s that? No, no, I bought it for you.’

‘But you love *biltong!*’ Ash says emphatically and tries again, waving the zip seal packet back and forth. The car weaves on the empty road.

‘That’s *drywors*. I don’t like that,’ Daddy says. I am secretly glad. Daddy always eats so much and he eats without tasting. Unlike him, I love *drywors*, have done ever since grandpa added it to his special Wednesday lunch tray. The best food was always near the middle. Pickled onions took the central compartment. Ash and I finished those together. She liked the white ones while I preferred the red and green because they were extra sour. Outside of them was the *drywors*. It stuck up like stiff brown fingers, the fatty skin peeling off of it very much like real skin. Grandpa always bought the best stuff, the most expensive stuff that mommy refused to buy. Kudu *biltong* laced through with streaks of white fat. When grandpa wasn’t looking, I rolled a few sticks of it into a napkin and stuffed the napkin into my sock so that I could save it for later at home.

The rest of the tray was always more important for Ash than it was for me; slices of avocado – browning quickly the longer they were left uneaten, balls of mango and cantaloupe and watermelon, scrunched purple granadilla halves, slices of cucumber.

Natalie never paid the tray much attention. She wasn’t allowed to. Granny worried about her choking on things.

‘Have some soupie,’ she always said to Nat and she pushed the tray slightly closer to Ash and me, away from Nat. When Nat had finished her bowl of soup, it was always quickly refilled.

The scenery outside the car is changing now. It's not as flat anymore. We're coming into the foothills of the Magaliesburg range. Dry thorn bushes jut from between the rocks. There are even a couple of broad branched Acacia trees. Daddy's cell phone rings. He answers.

'Hello? Rhyn, we're nearly there. Where are we?' Stacey, get the map book out.' I shuffle with the huge book that is lodged into the pocket of the seat in front of me. Its spiral binding is loose and bent out of shape.

'Go to the index and look up...hang on. Where are we?' Daddy flips the sun visor up and ducks his head, squinting through the window, 'Look out for any signs girls. We're looking for...which town are we looking for Rhynie? Potgietter's dorp. Look for Potgietter's dorp Stacey'. I am flipping the pages, quickly. I can't find the index. It's all a mess of green and red lines, little yellow dots, and tiny italicised names. A loose sheet of paper falls out. It's one of daddy's random 'genius' sheets. This one is something about his latest theory on meteorite impacts.

'I can't find it Dad.' I'm growing more irritated by the minute. I hate reading in the car. It makes me car sick. Just moving too much in the car makes me want to hurl.

'Give it here.' I pass the map book forward. Some of the pages are just short of tearing. In the rear-view mirror, I can see daddy is scowling.

'Potgietter's...are you looking for signs Stacey?'

'Why me?' Even so, I peer out the window. It's not much of a town, if that is indeed what we are passing through. There are a couple of shacks with corrugated iron roofs. The pavement is dry brown sand. Here are there, a thorn tree springs suddenly up, olive green, in stark contrast to the sky which looks even bluer than it did earlier on. It's now so blue it makes me think of the

African violets that daddy got our gardener to plant in the front garden at home – a long bed of flowering bubblegum. Rubbish is strewn everywhere. It looks like glitter in the wind, dancing over the road, shining white then brown, then white again. And then, I see a triangular sign. It has a white silhouette of a cow on it. There are two small holes through the cow. Someone has obviously shot at the sign. Daddy is not paying attention to the road. In fact, he is pulling over, the map book spread open on the steering wheel. He steers the car onto the pavement and comes to a stop, right in front of the shot cow sign. The road behind and ahead of us is empty. I am silent. Ash is reading an *Archie* comic book. She is still on her first stick of *drywors*, slowly peeling the fatty skin from the meat. The car comes to a complete stop right in front of the shot cow sign. Ash looks up and sees it.

‘Cows, dad! Where are the cows?’ Daddy doesn’t answer. He is mumbling over the map book, something about Pilansberg Straat, B1 and F4. Ash stares up at the sign, ‘I want to see a cow.’

‘Don’t be stupid. There are no cows here.’

‘Look!’ Ash points out of Natalie’s window. I turn, expecting to see a cow. But it is not comes that Ash is pointing to. On the other side of the road, watching us are two black men. Neither of them is wearing shirts. Their chests are hairless. They gleam in the sun. Daddy looks up too.

‘Dad, can we go.’ I say. But it’s too late; his finger is on the window button. He presses it. Natalie’s window rolls down. She jerks awake with a yelp.

‘Sorry Nattie! Are you alright?’

‘What’s wrong?’ Natalie says. Her eyes are red and she looks like she is about to cry.

‘I’m just going to ask these men where we are. Mind your hands and fingers.’ He closes Natalie’s window and presses another button. The passenger seat window rolls down. My heart is throbbing in my chest. I think of how we must look in our gleaming white Mercedes, silver bull bars all around the car. The men are talking to each other. Daddy waves a hand to them,

‘What town is this?’ he shouts out the window. The black men don’t move. They look at us.

‘Lock the doors’ I say. Daddy doesn’t listen.

‘Wat is die naam van hierdie dorp?’ he tries in Afrikaans. The men are walking over now. My face is hot.

‘Put your bags under the seat,’ I hiss at the others.

‘What’s wrong Stacey?’ Natalie says. She is undoing her seatbelt. Her eyes are wide.

‘Lock your door Natalie.’

Ash has shoved her backpack beneath the seat. I sit on my left hand. My watch is cold and hard underneath my thighs. Ash’s Fossil watch gleams brightly on her tiny wrist; silver and blue. The two men are at the car window now. They bend down to look in. I can hear my heart thumping as if it is in my ears. I see now that they are not completely hairless. Small black hairs curl sparse over their chests. They don’t say anything. Their eyes pass over everything in the car; the plastic packet on the front seat, daddy’s cell phone, daddy’s CDs on the passenger seat, us at the back.

‘Hoe gaan dit?’ Daddy says. He doesn’t wait for a reply, ‘I’m looking for – weet julle waar Pot-‘

‘We talk English’ the one man says. His teeth are so white in comparison to his face. The other man is still looking in at Ash, Nat and me. My fingers dig into my thigh and my jaw is clenched tight.

‘Do you know how I can get to Potgieter’s dorp? What is the name of this town?’ Daddy says. I look at the map book and try to pretend I too am concentrating on it. I try to pretend I am not thinking of what they might do to us. What they might do to us beneath the shot cow sign, far from home – in between Joburg and the Mountains, far from telephones and cars and other people. I think momentarily of mommy. She is probably at the stables now. Maybe she is feeding Baylinn carrots. I think of her in her jodhpurs, smiling, hair everywhere after her dressage lesson. For once she has forgotten the need for lipstick and hairspray. Thembi is probably untacking, heaving mommy’s long dressage saddle off of Baylinn, currying her down and slipping a sweat sheet onto her back. I think of mommy who has no idea where we are. What would she do if something happened? If she were left on her own? I think of all the white pill bottles in her bedside table drawer; the Panado, the antidepressants, the sleeping pills. I feel sick.

The black men are talking to each other now. Not in English. One of them is shaking his head, the other is nodding. I lean forward while they talk.

‘Can we go dad?’ I whisper.

‘Hang on,’ daddy says. He is still frowning. He has turned the map book sideways now and is tracing one of the fat brown contour lines. I cannot believe him. I sit back. Finally they bend down again to look in at us.

‘Where you going?’ one of them says.

‘I’m trying to get to the Hartebeesport Dam, but I first need to find Potgieter’s dorp.’

‘This is not here,’ he says something to the other black man, then to daddy, ‘you go straight. You see small café. You drive straight past café. For long time is just road. Then you see small tiny petrol station. Ask them. They know how is to get there.’

‘Are you sure it’s straight? There’s a right turn here. I don’t want to miss the one I should take.’ The man shakes his head.

‘This direction I is giving is right. Go straight past café. Then go straight.’ Daddy closes the map book.

‘Thank you’ he nods to the black men. Slowly he turns the key to start the ignition. They take a couple of steps back, still looking in at us. I lock the car doors. Daddy closes the window. He pulls back onto the road. Suddenly I feel as though I’m choking. I give the two black men a small smile as we pass them. I try to will my smile bigger. I suddenly feel so much for them and I want to cry. I even turn back to watch them shrink in the back window. I watch them until they are the size of little black ants.