



The New Richmond Reader



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Our Literary News from the Heart of the Karoo

I am back in Joey after a wonderful week in Richmond in the Karoo having taken part in the 3rd annual JMCoetzee, SA Nobel Laureates and Athol Fugard Festivals all wrapped into a splendid weekend of cerebral entertainment, wonderful participants, fantastic summery weather and some fine food and wine.

Despite the fall off in the number of visitors, which we put down to the rise in travelling cost, insufficient publicity and just plain winter blues, we did get many comments from some of our most regular regulars that it was the best festival of all, which gives old Darryl and me bit of a boost.

This month's New Richmond Reader has a couple stories from some new contributors in the guise of Chris Nicholson and Cynthia Price as well as regular contributor Robin Whales.

Once again I invite all writers to get to work on the old keyboard and send me something in any genre or theme; travel, historical, fiction, poetry, or anecdotal.... this country is full of stuff which must be recorded for future generations to marvel over as they ponder how "South Africa ever managed to survive?" Things will no doubt slow down as we move into the big winter chill in the Karoo; but an Aga stove, a good book and a fairly decent glass of red wine will no double help wile away the hours.

Peter Baker



Photo by

Chris Marais

Driving Nuts in India

by Cynthia Price



Take a motley bunch of vehicles... bicycles, cycle rikshas, auto-rikshas, tour-buses, battered taxis and trucks painted in gaudy colours... add a pedestrian pushing an unwieldy 2-wheeled barrow piled high with cabbages plus a smoke-belching tractor, a dawdling water-buffalo-drawn-cart, a few scrawny dogs, an elephant, a couple of bad-tempered camels and the usual scattering of sacred cows... and you have a typical donga-ridden road in India. You also have a very good reason why it is not wise for a foreign traveller to rent a car and do a self-drive around this continent... only the locals know how to manage this moving madness!



Our driver for three days in Jaipur was a young man called Rafiq... a chatty little fellow we found sleeping in his auto-riksha outside the Pearl Palace Hotel when we arrived... his skimpy brown legs sticking out from the side of his vehicle, his bright purple sneakers glinting in the afternoon sun-glare. He awoke as soon as he heard our taxi from Vrindavan pulling up and immediately popped out of his mobile sleeping-quarters and offered to help us unload our bags and check into our rooms... he was hired on the spot to be our personal guide for our stay in this pink city.

Rafiq's riksha putt-putted bravely up steep long hills to Amber Fort then free-wheeled back down to the bottom of the hill to where the working elephants had their lunch-break swim in the river. It wriggled through the throttled streets in town to take us to buy railway tickets, draw cash at the bank machines, try a hasty lesson at playing the tabla and shop for hand-embroidered bed-spreads. Rafiq spluttered us through a bumper parade of utter confusion at the end of the working day to show us the most beautiful sunset in all of Rajasthan... a jaffa-orange sun dipping down behind the sparkling white carvings of a Hindu Temple on the outskirts of town... a purple haze settling over the hills in the distance to fade-wash the sky in muted colours.

He borrowed a friend's car to transport us to an eating complex outside town to try the local cuisine for dinner, the thali consisting of a clutter of little bowls on a tray... each bowl containing a dish spicy enough to peel the paint off a cast-iron bridge! On the drive

back to the hotel, we opened the car's windows wide and hung our chilli-murdered tongues out in the breeze to revive our damaged taste-buds. Rafiq laughed so hard that the tears monsooned down his cheeks.

Even more amazing though, than the city's eloquent sights and bombastic tastes, was Rafiq's own story. On our long-winding rides he told us a bit about his life. His drunken father had deserted the family when he was only 7 years old, leaving him to become the man of the house. Rafiq abandoned his early schooling to make money to support his Mummy and 3 older sisters... at night, washing dishes in a hotel and during the day, running errands for local shop-keepers. When he was a bit older he was able to convince a taxi-owner to take him on as a driver. This young man had reason to be proud. Not only had he fed and clothed his family and paid monthly rent on the one room that they called home, he had also earned dowries for two of his sisters and had almost saved enough for the third sister to be married. His plan was to then buy a small house for himself and Mummy before he could start looking for a wife.

Rafiq could also be proud of his education. Despite having only two years of schooling, he had taught himself languages. His English was near-perfect! He could also communicate in German, French and Italian and was busy learning Japanese... all this so that he could offer a wider service to his passenger-customers.

It was on our last day in Jaipur that we learnt the most amazing

thing about Rafiq. We were bumping around in mid-morning traffic on our way to the station to catch our train when he suddenly said “ooh-ooh!” (and a stream of words in Hindi which sounded as though they should not be translated in delicate female company) and did a winding U-turn through tooting taxis and trucks before sidling into a side alley.

“Traffic police up ahead!” he threw the words over his shoulder as he bumped around the potholes and made a detour along the sidewalk to get around a stalled camel-cart, “If they stop me now they will want baksheesh and there will be a lot of arguing before they let me go further and I do not want you to miss your train.”

“Why would they want a bribe? Your driving is excellent,” we argued.

Rafiq took a while before he admitted to us that he did not have a driving licence!

At the station we settled our bill with Rafiq and said our goodbyes but we had not seen the last of this young man. We were sitting on our bags on the grubby platform when we saw him running towards us holding a newspaper cone in each fist. “Local snacks for the train for my two South African Mummies!” he announced, “You cannot leave Jaipur without trying our famous bhel puri!” He opened the top of one of the paper cones and showed us. “You see,” he said, “sev, peanuts and popped rice sprinkled with a tangy tandoori spice and topped with freshly chopped tomatoes. I promise you it is not too hot for your sensitive English tongues!”

Before he could leave I grabbed hold of his arm. “How much does it cost to get a driving licence?” I asked.

“One thousand Rupees.”

Only a thousand! A hundred and forty Rand! I dug out a thousand rupee note and handed it to Rafiq. “Go get your licence!” I ordered, “You are smart. You drive well. You will get your licence without a problem. Then no more baksheesh nonsense from the police!”

Rafiq slapped his side and started laughing. “Without a problem?” he hooted, “Thank you for your kind offer but the problem is I am not yet old enough to get my licence. I am only fourteen”

About the Author

Cynthia Price matriculated from Pinetown High School in 1968 and studied for her BA through UNISA, majoring in Judaica. She started writing short stories about thirty years ago, always trying to capture little slices of life from unusual and different viewpoints. Cynthia has travelled extensively over the past twenty years... on a meagre budget which forces her to use local transport and sleep overnight at home-stays and cheap budget hotels. Her travel experiences and interactions with locals as far afield as Mongolia, China, Cambodia and Madagascar, have helped to feed her writer's hunger for new stories and new angles to those stories. She has written a few travel articles for the Saturday Star and has had four

An Old Flame

by Chris Nicholson

Two different explanations of the fire-festivals have been given by modern enquirers ... On the one view the fire is a genial creative power which fosters the growth of plants and the development of all that makes for health and happiness; on the other view, the fire is a fierce destructive power which blasts and consumes all the noxious elements, whether spiritual or material, that menace the life of men, of animals and of plants.

The Golden Bough by J G Frazer

I do not know what got us on to the subject of fire at my braai, but it immediately brought a hint of sadness to me as I remembered my very dear friend Patrick Carfax. He was my most enthusiastic drinking friend at university, and we drank many a cheerful pint at the Ansonia Hotel and other student watering holes. He grew up in the Karoo and introduced me to the glories of that area. His aunt, Eve Palmer, wrote wonderful books on trees and that classic *The Plains of the Camdeboo*. His uncle, Geoffrey Jenkins, wrote a succession of thrillers, commencing with *A Twist of Sand*, that became the staple diet of many wives seeking Christmas presents for their husbands. Patrick, who was then contemplating a legal career – I think he was too honest for that line of work – and I were judges' clerks learning the trade from within the courts.

Thinking of Patrick made me remember wonderful suppers at the Jenkins' home in Waterkloof in Pretoria. As I recall those marvellous meals, I must single out the Karoo lamb whose unique taste, I was told, emanated from the hardy pentsia bushes that survive the rugged climate. Eve Palmer also introduced us young students to the marvels of tomato salad drizzled with Balsamic vinegar.

At my braai it was my friend Koos van der Merwe who started off the discussion. I was entertaining guests in the typical South African manner of roasting meat over charcoal. It had been raining and I was battling to start the fire. Koos said he knew a man from Tzaneen who could start a fire with as few as seventeen matches. Others started telling of better fire makers. I tried to steer the discussion in a more philosophical direction by exploring the origins of fire.

‘You all know, of course, that Prometheus brought fire to earth ...’

Peter Henson raised an eyebrow.

‘Prometheus? Tell me more about him, Ponsonby. Where did he farm?’

There was laughter from some of the other Philistines I had foolishly invited.

‘Prometheus, the Greeks believe, was the creator of mankind, and it was he who brought culture and civilization to humans. He was the bringer of architecture, astronomy ...’

Koos simulated a huge yawn, but this did not deter me from trying to bring a semblance of education to my acquaintances.

‘Zeus, the head of the Gods, was angry that humans were advancing so fast, so he decided to destroy the whole race, but Prometheus saved it ...’

Some of my friends seemed to be listening, though their frequent visits to the ice tub with beer was distressing.

‘There is more beer in the outside fridge ...’

I thought of Patrick who had decided that law was not his best choice as a career. He worked on a newspaper in Johannesburg before moving to one in the Eastern Cape. I dragged my thoughts back to the assembled company.

‘Prometheus stole fire and brought it to earth. Zeus was so angry that he had him chained naked to a pillar, where a greedy vulture tore his liver all day. The liver grew again at night, so the torment continued forever.’

‘Talking of liver, is it not time we started the braai?’ asked Martin, one of my more respectful friends.

‘Talking of liver, should you not be drinking less, Koos? I bet that vulture would have died if it had eaten yours.’

And so the banter continued, with my friends missing the most important detail that, in stealing fire, hitherto the monopoly of the Gods, Prometheus brought a great benefit to mankind.

‘Fire is probably man’s most important discovery, apart from the wheel ...’

Freddy volunteered that gem, and for a while there was heated discussion as to what was the most important invention.

‘Of course, the Greeks regarded fire as one of the four elements that made up all matter on earth ...’

The jeers showed that I was again throwing pearls before swine. I thus resisted the temptation to tell them about Empedocles, who identified fire, water, earth and air as the primal matter of which all consisted. They form the four elements of the Zodiac that astrologers use to such great effect in deceiving gullible members of society into regulating their behaviour patterns. I did, however, mention Heraclitus, as I recalled his view of matter had some bearing on our verbal jousting.

‘Heraclitus reckoned that fire was the basis of everything.’

It would have seemed like boasting to tell these heathen that Heraclitus, who lived in the fifth century BC, was an Ionian from Ephesus, a little north of Miletus. Like Thales who founded the first stock exchange, he bought wine presses when he thought the harvest would be good and then sold them when bad. He decided on fire, or energy, as the primal force. Change, for Heraclitus, is the only constant – all things flow, nothing abides – is his most famous saying. He is also known for the saying that we cannot step into the same river twice, because new water is constantly flowing onto us.

‘Ponsonby, I wish you would stop pretending you are more educated than us ...’

Freddy made a valiant attempt to retrieve the situation.

‘Something Heraclitus said reminded me of you, Freddy. He said asses prefer straw to gold ...’

There was laughter and my dignity was restored at last. I thought again of Patrick and his move to work on a newspaper in the Eastern Cape. Always a very artistic man, whether sketching, painting or working in wood, his great ambition in life was to build a wonderful yacht and sail it round the world. He bought a hull and then constructed the most beautiful ship man has ever created, which he named Water Turtle. I wish I knew more about wooden inlays so that I could describe the manner in which he built the deck, the cabins and the furnishings of the craft. Once it was complete he left for the East to buy sails. As I thought of his absence on that mission, my eyes misted over and I pulled out a hankie.

‘It is no good crying. That will never fix this fire of yours, Ponsonby.’

I must confess I am the world’s worst fire maker.

‘You are suffocating the wood with all that stuff.’

Peter pointed to some leaves and bark I had put on to stimulate the blaze.

‘Do not worry, a huge blaze will soon arise from the ashes like a Phoenix ...’

I looked around to see if anyone had noticed the classical allusion.

‘Are you thinking of the fabulous Arabian bird, the only one of its kind, which according to Greek legend lives a certain number of years, at the end of which it makes a nest of spices, sings a melodious dirge, flaps its wings to set fire to the pile, burns itself to ashes and comes forth with new life ...’

Freddy grinned inanely. I was astounded and somewhat put out by his knowledge of what I thought was a very esoteric subject.

‘I recently looked it up for a crossword puzzle ...’

Freddy had more to offer.

‘You all know the date palm phoenix dactylifera, so called because if burned down it rejuvenates itself and rises fairer than ever ...’

I realized too late that I should never have embarked on that discussion. There was silence and I thought of another Phoenix. She had risen from the ashes of a most terrible tragedy. On the night of the 20th December 1985 she had been asleep in her mother Jackie Quinn’s arms in a small house in Maseru, Lesotho. Nearby her father, Leon Meyer, snored gently. Her parents were involved in the struggle to overthrow the apartheid regime. I dragged my attention back to my guests and the braai.

‘What sort of wood do you guys use?’

The best charcoal next engaged their attention with some speaking of gum trees, wattle and tambuti.

‘There is nothing like the chattering of a fire made from gum wood. I suppose it is the eucalyptus extract in the logs. The Afrikaans word kaggel gives the proper onomatopoeia for such a blaze...’

Peter looked around, feeling rather pleased by his contribution.

‘I had a girlfriend named Tara who could light a fire by just kissing the wood.’

There was laughter and more beers were summoned and quickly swallowed, as bobbing Adam’s apples marked the passage of the fluid.

Frik van Heerden said he knew a woman, Flamenco van der Merwe, who could just speak in her husky voice and the wood spontaneously burst into flame. Henk Serfontein was of the view that she cheated because prior to the feat she had warmed it between her thighs.

‘She was an old flame of his.’

Frik swallowed beer and continued. He had been dancing with her at a braai on the evening in question, and he claimed she had recovered her old desire for him.

‘I was rekindling the embers of a very special love that separated us from the common herd ...’

‘More likely a highly elevated lust!’

Henk had also been present and decided to conclude the vulgar narrative.

‘There was little that could dampen her ardour, but then her husband came and spoilt everything...’

I dislike that sort of talk and tried to discourage it. I tried to drag the discussion back to more decent topics.

‘Fire is also associated in Heraclitus’ theory of mind or spirit. And, just like any other fire, he points out that our individuality eventually dies.’

Freddy shook his head sadly.

‘Mostly at the crematorium ...’

There was a huge round of laughter. I don’t like others getting the laughs.

‘He said there is no personal immortality. Only God – the divine fire – is eternal.’

There were shakes of the head and silence for a moment as a purple-crested lourie uttered its harsh cry before wheeling away in flight, revealing its brilliant scarlet plumage.

‘And I think we need eternity before we are going to get any food...’

The mention of death and immortality prompted more reflections on the baby Phoenix. On that fatal night, a Vlakplaas death squad of six, led by Eugene de Kock, heavily armed with silenced weapons, broke into the house and murdered nine people who had no chance to resist. They left baby Phoenix to cry alone. The South African government denied all liability. I turned my attention back to my guests. Again I had to find a way to get my fire going properly.

‘Let’s get some firefighters and some newspaper...’

I searched in the cupboard and pulled out a copy of the local rag. ‘You can never make a decent fire with that paper.’

The discussion moved onto the best newspaper to start a braai. ‘The Rand Daily Mail was the most fiery English paper of the sixties and seventies, and I found that it was best...’

It was strange how the spirits of those who contributed to its columns inserted their incandescence into the very paper it was printed on.

‘The only real opposition to the apartheid regime was the English press in those days.’

There were nods of agreement. For a while there was a heated discussion on the merits of *The Weekly Mail* and the other English language newspapers.

‘Perhaps the best of all the papers was The Daily Despatch.’

I could not put the thoughts of baby Phoenix out of my mind. It later transpired that the State Security Council held a meeting on the 21st October 1985 and State President P.W. Botha recommended ‘offensive action’ against ANC bases in Lesotho. According to the guidelines which the apartheid government had laid down, such action needed to be approved by the state president himself. So the order had come from the very top. Jane Quinn, sister of Jackie, gave evidence to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and said,

‘This was a disgusting, brutal, deceitful, treacherous, and cold-blooded murder. The death squad operatives made their own choices and like other human beings they have to strive to be better than animals.’

The members of the death squad were given the Police Star for Bravery by General Johan van der Merwe, who said they ‘showed remarkable skill, expertise and ability in the evaluation, investigation, planning and execution of a highly secret and clandestine operation during which the members were exposed to extreme danger’.

Jackie Quinn and her eight friends were victims in a vicious war to perpetuate apartheid. Heraclitus, the philosopher who saw fire as the basis for everything in life, thought that the best way to achieve success in life was through keen competition. He even saw conflict as the great catalyst to growth and renewal. He said,

‘We must know that war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife.’

Fortunately the struggle to overthrow apartheid was now over, and for a while the guests round the fire, roasting their meat, thought of how high a price many had to pay to bring about true democracy in the country.

My thoughts returned to my friend. Patrick worked on The Daily Despatch, and was responsible for the bold approach adopted by that paper in exposing to its readership the excesses of the apartheid regime. When the apartheid government sent its forces into Lesotho's capital in an effort to get rid of those trying to overthrow that evil regime, including baby Phoenix's parents and seven others, Patrick led the report with a headline:

'Maseru Massacre'

The forces of evil, under orders – no doubt – from their masters in Pretoria, carried out another very sinister and clandestine operation. At midnight they crept up to the Water Turtle and poured kerosene over it. Within minutes that wonderful work of art was ablaze, and late calls of neighbours to the fire department elicited no response. The telephone lines had been cut.

And so a great work of art was burned. How often had such burning reflected a deeper sickness in the minds of the fascists in the past? The crematoria at Auschwitz were the worst example of that doctrine.

The great German writer and poet Heinrich Heine, who was himself a Jew, was so prescient when he declared in the middle of the nineteenth century:

'Where books are burnt, in the end people are also burnt.'

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The Purple Panties Mystery

by Robin Whales

Jennifer Wattridge found the purple panties with bright red polka dots wedged between the boards under the mattress when she was making their bed in Connie's B&B in Hout Bay. With a thumb hooked into each hip side, she held them up to show her husband Jock.

"Look what I found."

He turned around in the breakfast nook, then back to the television. "Must be this Connie Coetzee woman's."

"The prim and proper headmistress of a church school wouldn't wear these, my darling."

She smiled and looked at Jock with devilish delight in her eyes.

"I think they are your niece Susan's."

He gave her his full attention.

"What makes you think that?"

"This used to be her boyfriend's room. Connie and her husband converted it into a B&B when he went to university."

He frowned. "Hadn't you better throw them away?"

"I think I'll return them to Madge at lunch today."

"Don't stir it up," Jock said.

"She should know. She might want to have a little talk with Susan."

"Are you joking? She's in matric, isn't she?"

"With two sons you just wouldn't understand."

"You know what my big brother's like. He might kill the guy."

"Frank doesn't have to find out, my darling?"

"I wouldn't tell him, but Madge might."

"That's up to her?"

Jennifer wrapped the panties in paper towelling, and slipped them into her handbag. She decided to leave it to Madge to tell Connie about them as they had become good friends and Madge had, after all, arranged the B&B for them.

Walter Coetzee had transferred one of his timber building-site offices to their sprawling garden for son Andre during his last year at school. Connie and Walter's architect, Anna Karstad, and builders, had converted it into a B&B when Andre moved into residence in Stellenbosch.

The three-week period working with Anna Karstad had been

the most stressful in Connie's well-ordered life since their 20 km move from Cape Town to the Hout Bay enclave six years ago. Ms Karstad, forty, plump and red haired and with a loud, high-pitched voice, had grown up in this once-cloistered fishing village, as had her forebears, when it had only one grocery store. She claimed that Karstads had helped build Chapman's Peak Drive and the famous Hout Bay harbour, and she hated the streets full of shops and restaurants, the traffic, and the shopping centre, with a Woollies. Anna Karstad still went everywhere on her horse, as her people had been doing for 200 years, and insisted on maintaining a rustic appearance in her work, including Connie's B&B, even down to a compacted-manure pathway leading from the gate. She screeched through her design proposals by parading her architectural knowledge and 'old-family' background.

It was not long before the two women refused to remain in each other's company, and eventually big, easy-going Walter appealed to Connie to let Anna have her way to get the job done, and they would modernise later. He did not often challenge his headstrong wife but Connie, busy preparing for school inspectors and arranging a trip to De Hoop Nature Reserve for her seniors, gave way. She had decided that she would never again speak to that sweaty, hysterical, dung-beetle-shaped woman of indeterminate sexual preference.

Jennifer and Jock Wattridge, in town from Swellendam for the long weekend in March, were Connie's second guests. The first guest, albeit at no charge, was the strapping Kevin Nash, a phys-ed student teacher doing a practical at Connie's school, who had left a few days before.

The Wattridges left Connie's 10 o'clock on Saturday to meet brother Frank and Madge for their wine-route lunch. As soon as they had gone, Connie went into the cottage ahead of the maid and searched in vain for her missing panties.

Back in her study she phoned Kevin Nash who was taking part in a cycle race over the Ou Kaapse Weg.

"Hi, coach, it's Connie."

"Hello Connie," Kevin bellowed from a water-stop. "This is nice."

"How's the race going?"

"Wonderful. I'm in the middle of the pack."

He burst out laughing.

"Yah, I'm going to finish before cut-off, hey?"

"I knew you would."

But I wish you would keep your voice down, she thought.

"The hills are killing me."

"Well, before you're too exhausted to care, please tell me if you have seen a small item of my clothing?"

“What clothing?”

“If you want me to be specific, it’s an undergarment.”

He laughed out loud again. “How would I know anything about your undergarments, Connie?”

“You may have nicked them from the washing line.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“So you haven’t seen them?”

“I didn’t say that?”

He laughed again.

“Well, have you?”

“There’s a beautiful sexy pair hanging on my mirror which might be yours.”

“Be careful, muscle man,” Connie chuckled.

“OK, Ma’am. It’s my favourite souvenir.”

“Sweet. Don’t let it become a fetish?”

“A what?”

“Never mind, you can look it up. I would like them back soon.”

“So I don’t know what fetish means, hey?”

“Of course you do, but not now. They were an anniversary gift from Walter, honey.”

“Oh, shite, a gift. Does he want to see them?”

“He might.”

“For Saturday nights?” he cackled.

Connie did not reply.

“Do you want them right away?”

“Soon.”

“Can I deliver them personally?”

“How else? I’ll let you know when, and wrap them up.”

She smiled, relieved that she had located her missing garment.

A nice, healthy (dare I say virile?) young man, but in need of further social tutoring, Connie mused, recalling his first staff meeting. He had been asked what the children should wear for gym. The big girls, he said, should wear tight tights, and no underwear, or underwear only. The staff, mostly women, gasped in horror, and

Kevin responded with a loud laugh: “Only joking, hey?”

Connie had to subdue an angry delegation demanding that Mr Nash be dismissed and reported immediately. She persuaded the ladies to give him another chance. He was young and a little immature, but had a good heart, and dismissal would ruin his career. That was the moment Connie had decided Kevin needed some private tutoring.

On the wine route, while the Wattridge brothers were on a pre-lunch cellar tour, Jennifer unfolded her package and placed it before her sister-in-law.

“I don’t know if I am doing the right thing, Madge, but…”

Affecting a concerned expression she finger-tipped the tainting evidence.

“These were under our mattress in Connie’s cottage. Andre’s old room.”

Madge laid the panties on her lap, and shook her head.

“I am sure Susan doesn’t own a pair like this, Jen.”

“I knew it,” Jennifer smiled sweetly. “I am so pleased. They must be Connie’s after all.”

“Leave them with me, and please don’t say anything to Frank.”

“Would he thrash the boy? That famous temper.”

“I said they aren’t Susan’s, Jennifer, but nevertheless don’t tell Frank. All right?”

“Yes, Madge, of course.”

To convince Jennifer of her daughter’s innocence, Madge quietly passed on the gossip about the headmistress.

“They probably do belong to Connie,” she said.

“I don’t want Frank to hear this, and she is my friend, but there have been a few rumours about her lately.”

“Really? Who told you?”

“A friend who knows one of her teachers. If Frank finds out he might take Susan away from Connie’s school and she’s so happy there.”

“Connie is attractive, I must say. So slim and stylish. What’s her husband like?”

“Walter’s a sweetie, like a huge, dozy teddy bear.”

“The poor man.”

“He has building work all over the place, at the moment in Hermanus.”

"That's most likely the problem."

"Apparently there's a penalty clause so he and his strange architect Anna Karstad are working flat out."

"Well, don't worry, I wouldn't think of telling Frank, and Jock said he wouldn't."

"So Jock is in on this as well?"

"I pulled them out when he was right there. He's not in on anything."

That evening when Susan came home in her mother's car after a day on Clifton beach with Andre, she found the purple and red polka dot panties on her pillow. She angrily stomped through to her mother.

"Mum, what are these doing on my bed?"

"Your aunt found them hidden in Andre's old room where she's staying," Madge said.

"They aren't mine." Susan threw them onto the kitchen table. "Why give them to me?"

"I knew they weren't yours, and I'm sorry, my darling. That cow. Her sons are so perfect."

If they weren't hers, whose were they? Susan wondered, glaring at the panties. And what were they doing in Andre's room? She hadn't been there for weeks. She grabbed them and stormed out.

Madge phoned Jennifer to tell her how her daughter had reacted.

"I simply thought that she may have forgotten them behind when she changed for a swim in your pool," Jennifer cooed.

"I understand that," Madge said, oozing saccharine triumph. "I'll return them to Connie."

Connie was embarrassed and surprised when Madge phoned her.

"What must Jennifer think?" she said, and wondered how she had missed them and what Kevin Nash had been up to?

"Don't worry about my sister-in-law. She took enormous pleasure thinking they were Susan's, found in Andre's room."

"Is that what she thought? My poor little baby, he's just out of disposables. I know he hasn't been there."

"Nor has Susan, so we can relax."

"For a long time," Connie said. "Won't you give them to me the next time I see you. I must trace the owner."

"Wasn't there someone in the cottage before Jock and Jen?"

"That young bachelor from my school, Kevin Nash, but I don't

think he cross-dressed."

"You never know."

"You may be right," Connie said.

But I know you're not, she smiled.

After his swim with Susan, Andre had returned to Stellenbosch for rugby training. When he later settled down for his evening chat with Susan he received blocked and engaged signals for an hour. He called her mother who said Susan was in her bedroom, probably talking to her friend Mary.

On Sunday morning, Jock Wattridge left early for a morning game of golf at Clovelly with brother Frank, and a friend of Jennifer's was picking her up at Connie's for breakfast. Connie had not made her apology to Jennifer yet as she had also left early to collect flowers from parents for the evening service in the school chapel.

While Connie was busy with the flowers her son Andre was making his way in from Stellenbosch because he had still not heard from Susan. He was terrified that she might be pregnant.

At the refreshment break after nine holes Jock joked about Jennifer's purple and polka dot panties discovery. Frank knew nothing about it and Jock assured him that they weren't Susan's which was why he had brought it up. Frank was still lost and Jock had to tell him the story from the beginning.

Frank blasted his way through a disastrous second nine holes, wondering why Madge had not said anything to him about the panties. What was she hiding? She had spent many hours with Connie and big friendly Walter. Frank tried to recall whether Madge had been at the B&B when Connie took her Grade 7s to De Hoop. His driving became angrily erratic, and he missed every fairway. In his fomenting rage, he reduced, in his mind, Walter's size to less than average.

Connie and Andre arrived home at the same time, and Connie hugged him and laughed about the panties. Andre did not know what she was talking about.

"Susan didn't tell you?"

"I haven't spoken to her for two days."

"Why, my darling?"

"Her phone was off and she hasn't returned my calls. She's never done that before."

"You poor boy. She thinks you have another girlfriend."

"Why would she think that?"

Connie explained about the panties, and Andre thanked the heavens as he laughed out loud in relief.

"You'd better tell Susan."

"I would if she answered her phone."

"Go to Madge's and see her."

"Mrs Wattridge said she's out."

It suddenly occurred to Connie that a little get-together would iron out the wrinkles of the past two days. She wanted to make it up to the Jock and Jennifer Wattridges for the mysterious garment in their room, and to the Madge and Frank Wattridges for upsetting their charming daughter. Walter would also meet Jock and Jennifer and she would ask Kevin to bring her missing garment.

Madge liked the idea, and they decided to arrange a light luncheon for that day. The two of them would quickly contact the other Wattridges and Walter, and Connie would fix a venue. Madge said Connie should warn Andre that Susan had inherited her father's anger genes, but Connie said there was no other girl involved, so there was nothing to worry about.

Anticipating Andre's visit, Susan had walked from home in Noordhoek to see Mary, her best friend since Connie's school and the daughter of Rev Donald Childes, the school's religious instructor. Madge left a detailed message about the luncheon on Frank's cellphone, which he had switched off while playing, and then phoned Rev Childes's home to tell Susan, but she was out walking with Mary. He agreed to give Susan the message and offered to bring her to Hout Bay on his way to a christening.

Susan had decided to confront Andre after Mary had giggled with delight at the sight of the panties and hearing the story. This had incensed Susan even further.

After eighteen holes at Clovelly, Jock hurried in to fetch Jennifer at her friend's house, while Frank holed up in the club's public booth to look up Walter's cellphone number. When he got through Walter was already well on his way from Hermanus. He was surprised to hear from Frank as they hardly ever spoke. He was even more surprised at the hysterical tone building up in his voice.

"There was a week in February," Frank screamed, "when your wife went away."

"Yes, Frank, she took a group to De Hoop."

"And you stayed behind?"

"Part of the time. I was still negotiating Hermanus."

"Oh, yes, and when you weren't negotiating the contract what were you negotiating?"

"Hey, Frank, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you what's going on, Mr Coetzee. Does a pair of woman's spotty purple pants found in your B&B mean anything to you?"

"Oh, shit," Walter said.

"You bastard, you wait," Frank shouted, and slammed down the

phone. He dialled Madge but her line was busy.

"No, wait," Walter shouted, but he was too late, and when he clicked reply it was engaged.

He put his foot down. He would have to catch him before he said anything.

Connie chose the tea garden under the trees in front of Walter's Hout Bay offices for the luncheon. This was where she entertained her friends, parents and teachers, and the manageress knew her well. When she arrived early a ring of chairs already encircled tables pushed together, and a ceramic bowl and vases had been placed on the tables for the left-over strelitzias, roses, snowdrops and ferns which Connie had brought from the chapel. Two old local residents from her flower group were invited to stay for lunch. They would not be interlopers, Connie said. It would be a light cold chicken and salad snack with her family and the two Wattridge couples and Susan and Kevin before the Swellendam couple headed for home.

By 2 o'clock Connie, Walter and Andre, Jennifer and Jock, Madge, Kevin Nash, gripping a plastic bag, and the flower-group ladies were seated at the tables in the warm autumn sun, admiring the flowers. The topic of discussion was Connie's B&B, although an anxious Walter kept his eye on the road for Frank's blue Toyota. After the call Frank had raced in from Clovelly and driven straight to the tea garden. He skidded to a halt in the gravel parking area and made his way in his noisy, studded shoes towards the group. Walter jerked to life and strode rapidly to meet Frank.

"You've got it all wrong," he said quietly, taking Frank's arm.

"You bloody bastard," Frank growled, pulling free and punching Walter on his broad chest.

"Calm down, buddy," Walter pleaded.

"Me calm down. What about you? Buddy!"

"Quiet, Frank, please," Walter whispered. "It's not what you think, I promise."

Rev Childes arrived with his wife and daughter Mary and Susan, and drew up alongside Frank's car. When he saw the angry demonstration he went up to Frank and Walter and quietly asked them to desist. All eyes were on them.

"Ask him to desist, padre, not me," Frank grabbed Walter's shirt-front.

A few metres away Susan had shot out of the Rev's car and started yelling at Andre, wresting everyone's attention.

"Here, lover boy, give them back to her." She thrust the panties into his face.

Frank let go of Walter's shirt and stared at his daughter and the brightly coloured garment.

“Wow, look at this pretty pair,” Andre said, holding them above his head.

“They were under my bed all the time and I didn’t know it.”

“Neither did I,” Kevin said, throwing his head back in laughter.

“Susan darling, it’s all right,” Madge cried. “Come and sit down.”

“Andre had nothing to do with them,” Connie said, reaching for the panties. She examined them curiously, and Kevin peeped into his plastic bag.

“Who the hell do they belong to?” Frank said. “Sorry, padre.”

“Not me,” Connie, Madge and Susan chimed together.

Kevin waved his plastic bag and cackled, “They can’t be Connie’s purples.” In wide-eyed, open-mouthed horror, he stood up, ready to bolt and appealed to Connie with fearful eyes.

“I saw them on the fishing line,” he stammered.

“He means our washing line,” Connie said.

“Now, please everyone, let’s have some sanity around here. It’s a bit of fun. You know the pranks students get up to.” She twirled the panties round and round and summoned the waitress.

“Let’s start, we’re all here. Please order. Won’t you join us, Donald?”

“No thank you, Connie,” the stone-faced chaplain said. “I have a christening.”

At that moment Anna Karstad was dialling a number as she walked briskly along the path from Walter’s office. Walter’s cell-phone rang.

The well-endowed architect was smiling to herself as she bounced and bobbed towards the group. She stopped dead in front of Walter.

“Walter!” she gasped. “You’re in Hermanus!”

The chaplain and his wife, the flower ladies and a dozen others were staring at her, and the panties were dangling from Connie’s hand. She dropped her cellphone, emitted an agonised scream, and fainted.

Anna Karstad lay flat on her back, twitching in her tights and top, both purple with bright red polka dots.
