



The New Richmond Reader



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Our Literary News from the Heart of the Karoo

The Karoo was blanketed in snow in what is hoped to be the last throw of the dice for the winds off the Antarctic into the African sub-continent. Things are pretty quiet in the dorp as they are really, country wide as we become more and more aware of the hard economic time we are living in. The bright sparks in the government who told us that a weak rand was the answer to our problems are ruining this ludicrous policy, as fuel prices skyrocket and travel other than to work and back are becoming major undertakings. This having been said we had a wonderful turnout at the JMCoetzee, Noble Laureates and Athol Fugard Festival in May. Many said that despite the small and intimate nature of the gathering that it was one of the best they had experienced anywhere in South Africa. We are very proud that we have been able to maintain Athol's presence in the Karoo and had a quite marvelous day devoted to this iconic personality.

This 9th edition of the New Richmond Reader has some familiar contributors, Robin Whales in particular who has come up with a sassy little ditty which you will no doubt enjoy.



Photograph by

PC Baker

We are pleased to welcome Bruce and Pat Hulley to our growing list of contributors; both masters of the fine art of falling off a cliff into the dark of night. In addition Rosemary Rudd, well known to Booktown Richmond has sent us her literary production, Where is my Son? We are always delighted to get new writers into the stable and encourage any more would-be's to put pen to paper.

Remember that BoekBedonnnnerd VI is fast approaching and we look to have an extremely good line up of speakers. I hope that you have booked accommodation and we shall look forward to seeing you all in the dorp.

A generous woman – to a point

by Robin Whales

Hazel Plendalith loved her ballet boys and girls. In her studio, off Main Road in Cape Town's busy Rondebosch, she had built up a collection of games and DVDs for the youngsters. She had also traded in her sedan for a ten-seater Toyota to transport some of her children from school, and run them home, even the ones she didn't charge for lessons. The mirror-walled studio, with a large screen, bought and equipped with a loan from her advocate father, was spacious, warm in winter and cool in summer.

Pretty and shapely, with a short brown bob and a cheeky upturned nose, Hazel enjoyed a fabulous life to the brim. She cherished her freedom and stress-free existence living in a residential hotel in nearby Rosebank. Her current boyfriend of eight months, Peter Olliver, was a good guy, a liquor salesman, who would never become a manager, the sort of man her generous nature embraced. There was absolutely no prospect of marriage which suited them both. Peter had tried it once and at forty-two, eight years older than Hazel, was pleased she had not suggested they live together. He was average in height and looks, and she loved his easy-going, uncomplicated disposition. But what she liked most about him was his spontaneous bursts of sexual energy. With her libido on permanent high she was always willing to accommodate him, day or night.

They spent many weekends away and seldom arrived at their destination without stopping at some deserted spot on the way for a quick one. They had found a nook near a lay-by on Sir Lowry's Pass, and it was becoming their tradition to use it when they went to Hermanus to watch the whales mating, or for a weekend in bed at Arniston.

What Hazel did not like about Peter was his preference for being on top on those open-air occasions because the bare earth gave her an itchy bottom. She joked about it once when a tiny black beetle trespassed, but never seriously complained. To solve that problem she carried on-the-ready a terylene jumper which she would tie around her waist so that the body of the garment flapped over her trim behind.

Some said she followed the tendency of prudes to wear a garment so that men who followed a trim apple or peach for blocks would be denied this once ubiquitous presentation. Especially the acute split-fit. But Hazel wanted to accommodate Peter, and she forfeited the pleasure of attraction in favour of protection from sand, pebbles, grass, seeds, and animals. Teaching ballet with an itchy bottom was stressful.

When Peter's good buddy in Bloemfontein, Casey Penfold, suggested he and Hazel spend a long weekend in Knysna with him and his wife, they agreed immediately. Casey was due to fly to Cape Town for a management meeting two days ahead of the weekend and he wanted to make good use of his company-paid flight.

He and Peter had been colleagues in Stellenbosch until Casey was promoted to sales manager in Bloemfontein three years ago. They had only seen each other at the annual company bash and when

Casey married his English wife, Jill Mumby, last year. Peter had been organiser of the wild bachelor party and best man.

Casey was paunchy, hairy and prematurely grey, had a loud, gravelly laugh like a concrete mixer and was addicted to porn movies. Jill, slender and timid, with rosy cheeks and soft creamy skin and full of nervous energy, was a fluttering contrast to her husband. Peter booked their flight to Knysna and a B&B, and arranged for a 4x4 to be delivered to George Airport. Late on Friday afternoon, after the management meeting, they boarded the plane.

From the eighty-seater the vast garden of lakes and forests, white beaches and jagged coastline, rivers and green hillsides speckled with white and brown dots of houses brought tears to Jill's eyes as she thought of her family. Hazel cheered her up with her father's stories about the legendary widespread tints of royal blue in Knysna from the blood of the exiled George Rex, an early settler. Jill laughed when she heard about the extravagant child bearing capacity of the Rex women and other early settlers, like the Norwegians, and the prolificacy of kissing cousins.

Underfloor heating in their shipshape B&B cottage high on Paradise hill gave them a warm welcome. There were two en suite bedrooms upstairs, and downstairs an open-plan lounge-dining room and separate kitchen. Sliding doors opened onto a pinewood deck with a panoramic view of the estuary and the Waterfront and hundreds of white-sailed yachts, the Heads and Indian Ocean beyond.

After a hot shower and supper of takeaways, three of them were soon in bed and fast asleep. Peter and Hazel took the main bedroom with its double bed and Jill flopped out in the second bedroom. Casey lit a cigar and checked that the DVD set was working. Before ten in the morning they were on the sunny beach at Brenton-on-Sea, on the other side of the West Head. Hazel, her jumper in place from habit, was like a foal released from its box. She skipped and hopped, swung her arms and tossed her head, ran in the shallows, chased the seagulls, and gasped, "Yes, yes, yes," as the wind buffeted her into submission. She collapsed happily on the sand with arms and legs splayed wide.

Jill came alight and tripped along, elbows tucked into her waist and loose hands flapping left-right-left. Minutes later Hazel sped off along the near-deserted beach which curves seven kilometres to Buffels Bay. She stripped to her undies and plunged into the cold water, and then dried off with a run.

The men strolled on dry sand higher up, and scanned the bay with their binoculars. Casey told Peter that the new German porn movies he'd brought were said to be the best quality in their genre. Looking at the long dune mountain thrust roughly up from the beach, Peter alluded briefly to his and Hazel's exploits close to nature, and Casey exploded in mirth when he heard about the beetle and the protective terylene jumper.

They stopped for bangers-and-mash at The Bell pub in the gardens of the old Belvidere Manor Hotel and it was here that Hazel listed what they had to do so Jill could experience as much as possible. They would drive to the East Head boardwalk for one of the best viewpoints in the world, take a ferry to the Heads, and enjoy an

oyster supper at the Waterfront.

On Sunday they would visit the elephant park before heading to Bloukrans for a bungy jump, and come back for lunch at Keur-booms. Hazel had heard that sex after a jump reached new highs, and decided to use this as leverage to persuade Peter to join her in a jump.

Jill had seen the contrasting grandeur of the Karoo, the Maluti Mountains, Franschoek and Cape Point, but the diverse beauty of the Garden Route and quaint shops in Knysna opened a new world to her. Excitement filled her with wet-lipped desire, and she was determined that this weekend would not be another when her husband settled into a couch with his cigars and liqueurs.

At the oyster supper Casey had one glass of wine to keep a clear head for a night of porn viewing. To Jill this had a different meaning, and she consumed a minimum of liquids and no starch. Hazel enjoyed a full meal, and Peter drew Casey's gravel laugh with references to the exquisite detail of modern German films. Casey aired his oyster jokes, but his chauvinism drew sarcastic laughter from the girls until Peter brightened the evening with office gossip.

At the cottage they sat around, enjoyed the view, watched television, and the girls bathed and changed for bed. Casey fetched his box of liqueurs and lit a Don Juan cigar. When Jill caught a whiff, she came into the lounge with a sad face.

"Oh, Casey, you know I hate the smell."

"Yes, lovey, that's why I haven't had a smoke all day."

"Except this morning on the beach."

"Except this morning on the beach." He winked and she smiled.

"I'm on holiday for the first time in how many months and I don't have to get up early? Please. I need to relax completely. It's the pressure."

"All right, my darling." She always surrendered. "I suppose you deserve it."

"Thank you, lovey. I married the best beauty in the world. You go on ahead if you want, and I'll come up just now."

"You're not going to watch those horrible movies?" Casey roared with laughter and Hazel stuck her head in the door.

"You naughty boys! So that's what you get up to when you're together."

"They're like overgrown schoolboys," Jill said.

"It's public relations," Peter said, and they laughed. "No, seriously. The bottlestores want to know what to stock for customers."

"So you don't watch for your own pleasure" Hazel said. "It's for the cause."

"Why do you think they sent me to Bloemfontein?" Casey said, stirring up the gravel in his chest.

"The Free State has become a modern state since his arrival, and he's still working on it," Peter said.

In this jovial atmosphere, Casey opened his box and laid out six different liqueurs on the coffee table, and turned up two glasses.

"Randy is lekker but liqueur is better," he said, mangling Ogden Nash.

"That depends on which you prefer," Hazel said. "Come, Jill, let's make tea for ourselves like our mothers used to. You boys want some?"

"Nah, tonight we're going to be alkies," Casey said. "Only kidding!" In the kitchen Hazel filled the kettle with purified water while Jill set the tray.

"He reeks after a night like this," Jill said. "I always pretend to be asleep when he comes in."

"That's the advantage of not living with a man. When Peter's had too much I send him home. There's no sex."

Jill laughed. "Casey tried waking me up once, but it was a flop." They giggled like schoolgirls, and when Casey heard them he looked anxiously at his watch, worried that he would not be able to see the two DVDs to the end that evening.

"What are they up to? Why don't they go to bed?"

"I'll see what I can do," Peter said. He put his head in the kitchen door and grinned. "What's going on girls?"

"We are talking about you two sexy young men," Hazel said. Peter lowered his voice. "Casey wants to start the dirty movies."

"You haven't invited us to the movies," Hazel said, setting off trilling laughter from Jill. "Why don't you lock the door?"

"How can we lock you out?"

"We promise not to come in," Jill said. "Casey knows I never do."

"All right, I'll tell him." He stepped into the kitchen. "He's got two, each ninety minutes long and with a story."

When the tea was ready the girls took it upstairs. They went to Jill and Casey's room first, but Hazel said they should rather enjoy the comfort of the main bedroom. They could smell the cigar smoke and hear the strains of heavy, dramatic music and mumbled dialogue.

In the warm bedroom Hazel took off her dressing gown and sat on the easy chair in her short, flimsy, silk nightie. She threw her head back with a sigh of contentment.

"What a nice day. Did you enjoy it, Jill?"

"I'm loving it all." Jill was staring at Hazel's curvaceous body. "You have a beautiful figure."

"Thanks, Jill. Ballet gives me a good workout six times a week. You don't do too badly yourself."

"Oh, me, I'm a stick."

"That's what men like. Let me see. Take off your gown." Underneath she wore striped pyjamas, like a boy's, button-up front, full sleeves, three-quarter legs and woolly socks and slippers. Hazel took one look and laughed, setting off a high-pitched giggle from Jill. At the same moment Casey's gravelly boom reverberated through the cottage, and both girls pointed downwards and erupted into more laughter. Jill examined herself in the full-length mirror.

"Would you like to borrow a shorty?" Hazel stood beside her, and they smiled at each other's reflection. "I always take a spare, just in case."

At that moment an exquisite feeling of desire that Jill had experienced once in the swimming pool change room at school, flitted with butterfly gentleness into her consciousness.

"I've often wondered what it would be like with a girl," she said quietly.

Jill's tiny frame twinkled with delight seven times that night, the first while Hazel was slowly peeling off her pyjamas, and Hazel's four times. The fifth was best for Jill because by then Hazel had brushed aside their inhibitions. In between, they dozed quietly on the large bed, and chuckled happily as bursts of laughter drifted up. They locked the door and pinned a note on it:

QUIET PLEASE GORGEOUS HUNKS!!! Please use other bedroom to keep booze and tobacco stink from fragile damsels. Can't wait to see you in the morning.

"Men like to have their naughty achievements acknowledged," Hazel said. "Remember to tell them what devils they are." They buried their laughter in the pillows.

Casey eventually passed out on the couch in front of the electric fire, and Peter used the second bedroom.

There were giggles on the drive to Bloukrans when the girls, sitting in the back holding hands, admonished the boys for their betrayal, and Casey responded with self-satisfied, husky laughter and a knowing wink at Peter. When they arrived, the girls arm in arm and with noses in the air, bought their tickets and strode off to the catwalk leading to the bungy platform. Casey and Peter made for the viewpoint with their binoculars to watch them.

Jill went first. She quivered and whooped the moment they started strapping her into the harness, and they heard her screaming all the way down. Hazel stepped up and blew kisses to everyone, drawing whistles as she raised her arms and swallow-dived into space.

Back on the platform after their jumps, the girls waved to Peter and Casey and climbed the steel stairway from the catwalk to the bridge. Once on the bridge they raced to the far side where they turned, waved once more and, with Hazel leading, ran towards a patch of greenery fifty metres along the cliff-edge of the gorge. Peter and Casey continued to watch them.

"You know, this is the highest bungy jump in the world," Peter said.

"No shit?"

"No shit. They say the adrenalin rush is powerful for an hour afterwards."

"I can do without it," Casey said. "I wonder where they're going."

As the girls scrambled towards a clump of trees, the boys saw Jill tying Hazel's terylene jumper around her waist.

End

WHERE IS MY SON !?

by Rosemary Rudd

Despite Bella's best intentions, the day had started out badly. Davey groused non-stop about not being allowed to see Richard today because he was being punished. For not doing the delegated tasks he'd been set but also because his school teacher had complained that both David and his classmate Gareth had been terribly disruptive in class of late and his report had reflected this. David had to start taking responsibility for his behaviour both at school and at home and the only way to enforce that was to take away his rewards.

At age 40 Bella had decided life was passing her by at such a pace that if she didn't have a baby that year, it would be too late and she would live to regret it for the rest of her life. After two broken-down relationships, she had resigned herself to the fact that she would be a spinster forever, which certainly didn't matter to her. She had always been a loner, preferring her own company to that of insincere and shallow females or egotistical, macho men.

She had amassed a considerable fortune during her 15 years in business and felt she was perfectly poised to have a child as a single mom, and provide very well for it. So, she had gone ahead and had a baby, and now, here she was, 9 years later.

Her corporate gift and small cmt companies were both thriving, despite the appalling economic climate; her vehicles were paid for; she was meeting her monthly wage bills well enough (at least, for the most part) and although there was quite a large bond on the house, the move to a smaller home in a more affluent suburb would undoubtedly hold them in good stead for many years to come. Davey's school, excellent as it was, was costly, but these days, in South Africa, one had to send kids to reputable private schools to ensure they got the best education money could buy.

The problems she faced as a single parent were not unique to her, she knew that, but it sure was hard not having anyone she could get advice from or sound things out with, and of course David would really benefit from having a male role model. Oh, well, she thought, I made the bed, so I must lie in it. I'd probably have to be the roll model so that he could have a role model but I'm past that now!

After hours of long faces, surliness and back chat, she had lost it completely! She'd grabbed hold of David, ushered him into his bedroom, thrown his backpack on the bed and instructed him to pack a change of clothes, pyjamas and his toiletries and to phone Richard to arrange a sleep over – at Richard's house for a change!

David was thrilled and couldn't believe his ears. "Wow, Mom, thanks"! he said, hurriedly jamming his stuff into the not very large, grubby backpack before his mom changed her mind. "And when you get back tomorrow, you get that filthy bag washed, please", she admonished.

David grabbed his phone and dialled Richard. "Hey, dude, guess what? I've just scored us a sleep over at your house tonight. How cool is that? Will it be ok with your Mom"? Apparently Richard was equally thrilled, and David said "Ok Bud, I'll see you now,

now".

An assortment of toy weaponry was packed into the Merc along with the scooter and backpack, and off they went. Bella asked David if he was quite sure Richard's Mom was ok with the sleep over, to which he replied "Oh yeah, Mom, she's quite happy about it. She never minds what Richard does at the weekends – all she does is lie on the couch, watching TV, smoking and drinking wine. She's a real cool laid-back Mom".

And I suppose I'm not because I do worry about my son and I don't lie on the couch drinking and smoking, Bella thought with mild irritation, as she drove into Richard's drive-way.

Both Richard and his Mom were at the gate when they got there, and they cheerily helped unpack the stuff from the car. Bella said she'd collect David the following morning at about 9, unless she heard from him to the contrary. David jumped out of the car, shouted a hasty "bye Mom, love you", and was gone.

Bella reversed out of the driveway and drove off to the hardware store to collect the items she needed for her 'me time' tasks. She'd decided to get stuck into the bathroom renovation herself, and get as much of the painting finished as she could before the plumber and handyman arrived next week.

Although she felt a twinge of guilt at having bundled David off to his buddy, she was also quite relieved to have a few hours to herself at long last. There was so much to do before the Christmas break, and just lately there had been a lot of conflict between her and David while the 'new rules' were being enforced.

The psychologist had told her there would be times like this, but Bella hadn't expected them so soon nor to be so draining. This time of year was always rough on them both, thanks to year-end deadline pressures and school term endings. Bella made a mental note to remind herself not to take on so much next year end.

She finally got home with all the goodies and began unpacking the car. Scruffy, the Miniature Schnauzer, came bounding out of the house barking hysterically. "Alright, alright, sweetie, I'm home again. Down, boy", she said, trying to get around the frenzied dog without tripping over him.

The day flew by and Bella was feeling proud of all she had achieved.

"Damn", Bella thought as she rummaged in her over-crowded bag for her cell phone after hearing the sms tone. She noticed that it was already 11.45h. Finally locating the phone at the bottom of her bag, she read the message which advised that she had one voice message. The message was from David.

"Mom can you come quickly! Richard fell and hurt himself. We need you"!

She phoned Davey and asked what had happened to Richard and why they couldn't have phoned his mother instead. She was informed that Richard had fallen off his bike and that his mom "didn't have any airtime". Really, that woman is the end!

"Where are you", Bella asked?

"We were going to the field to ride our bikes but Richard hit a pothole and fell off before we could get there and now his leg's bleeding. He's not crying but I can see he's in pain. We're nearly at his house but his mom is going to freak at him".

"Well, if her son is hurt, she shouldn't be cross with him" said Bella? "I'll come if you need me to but if you're nearly at his house, let his mom sort out his leg. "She has a car so if he needs a doctor or to go to hospital, surely she can do that"?

"But, not if she's been drinking, Davey", she hastily added. "If you are worried about that, I'll come straight away, see"?

"Ok, thanks mom", said David with an anxious tone in his voice. "I'll let you know".

She'd heard nothing again after that and continued with her painting and sorting. Obviously Richard's Mom hadn't freaked after all, she thought.

Later, the sound of the sms tone drew her attention, and she checked her watch. Two o'clock. Gosh, how time flies, she thought as she put the kettle on and got out the tea bags. She checked the message and was a bit surprised to see there were 2 messages. First message: "Hi mom, do I have to sleep over? I don't really want to". Second message : "mom can u fetch me at 3 o'clock pleez? She had just finished reading those when another one arrived! "Can u come get me now"?

Bella was somewhat perplexed. After all the nagging all week long and then the excitement today at being allowed to go, suddenly he wanted to come home again. "Shit", she said. "I wonder what's going on now. There's still so much I want to do and if he comes back, with or without Richard, that's not going to happen"?

She switched off the kettle, grabbed her keys and the dog, and went off to Richard's house to see what the problem was.

Arriving at his gate, she hooted a couple of times, expecting someone to come out and open it, but no-one did. She could see the patio door was open, so they must be there. Impatiently she got out of the car, with Scruffy at her heels, yanked open the gate and strode up to the door.

"David, I'm here," she said. Nothing. "David"! "Richard, its Bella, I'm here to fetch David". Not a sound could be heard, and Scruffy had begun to growl.

"What's it, boy" she said?

Scruffy's ears were flat, the hair on his back was on end and his growl rumbled even louder. Bella could see into the lounge. It was empty of humans but the mess was shocking! She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise and she grabbed hold of Scruffy's collar. A feeling of dread crept into the pit of her stomach. Trying not to panic, she and the dog stepped into the chaotic room where a stench so foul and nauseating assailed them.

Simon

by Pat Hulley

I watch Simon as he sleeps, curled foetus-like on his right side, hands stiff and fingers splayed. His blue-green eyes are hidden behind twitching lids. Is he dreaming of that time when summers stretched long and days brimmed with promise? He looks so endearingly young. I catch sight of my reflection in the dressing table mirror and know that I have not worn so well. The lattice of lines mapped on my face remind me that more than thirty years have passed since that day when joy disintegrated and innocence died.....

-----oOo-----

I was ten that summer, and Simon was almost twelve. I can still see the five of us, how we were on that day – Mike and his sister Marni, Vanessa, me – and Simon - the boy I loved with all my childish heart. Our vivid faces shone luminous in the chrome yellow sun and I can recall every word we spoke. It was Vanessa who suggested the game. That is all it was in the beginning, just a game - a stupid game that all kids play. We played it to while away the restlessness of that long, hot summer afternoon, as we sat giggling and showing off to each other, lolling on the wet sands that banked the fat brown Mucheke River. It was Simon's turn to answer and Marni's strident voice called out the familiar chant: "Truth, Dare or Command? C'mon Simon – choose!" Simon squinted at her, shielding his turquoise eyes from the sun. "You have to pick one. Make up your mind." Simon hesitated. So often, I have wondered why he did.

We added our voices, Vanessa and me: "Simon! Truth, Dare or Command? Say which one!" Simon turned to glance at Mike who was poking a stick at a beetle in the sand. He looked up and grinned at Simon before resuming his preoccupation with the beetle.

"Ok, ok." Simon shrugged his shoulders, and tilted his head – I remember admiring his strong, square jaw. "To make you girls happy, I'll take a dare."

The three of us girls giggled and huddled together, whispering and arguing amongst ourselves. "I know....." It was my voice I heard piping the words. "Let's dare him to swim across the river!" "Yes!" A chorus of agreement and we shouted out our dare in unison. I can see him so clearly. He stood up, stretched to his full height, gave a mock bow and shook off his slip-slops. He pulled his shirt over his head and turned towards the river. His tanned back glowed in the sun. We all padded down the bank after him. Simon was a strong swimmer, the school champion in fact. With a cavalier wave of his hand, he plunged into the water.

The Mucheke River was muddy and swollen after days of heavy rain. It was flowing swiftly over rocks and tree stumps, carrying with it broken branches and clogs of solid dirt and debris. Mike was the first to sense the danger."Simon, you idiot, get back! The current is too strong. Stop! Get back!"

The urgency in Mike's voice alarmed us. I felt stabs of fear zip through me as we watched Simon pushing hard, desperately fight-

ing the current. "Simon! Stop! Turn round! Turn back!" We were all yelling now. I remember starting to cry. He's going to die, I thought. Please Simon, don't die, I begged. Please God save him. He seemed to be swimming sideways for a bit, but suddenly, he wasn't swimming at all. The rushing brown cascade propelled him head first into an outcrop of rocks, close to the bank. We watched in horror as his body was buffeted and bounced from one rock to another. Over and over, in slow motion, he spun like a crazed rag doll before finally coming to rest face down in a shallow pool between the rocks and the shore.

The four of us were running, tripping over each other, shouting Simon's name. A powerful figure flashed past us. A big black man was racing towards Simon. "Get help!" he yelled as he lifted Simon's torn and bleeding body from the water and cradled him in his arms. I heard Simon cough. Water sprayed from his mouth. "He's alive," the black man said. "It's ok, boy, it's all ok now. Don't worry. You're going to be alright."

-----o0o-----

But he wasn't.....

There were no facilities for quadriplegics in our small town. No support systems for children with irreversible brain damage. Simon's parents left to live in the city where their son could receive treatments that might help him. I locked away my heartbreak and guilt and I grew up. I didn't forget Simon. I just kept him in a place where I didn't visit. I graduated from university and forged ahead with my career.

It was Mike who called to tell me that Simon's parents had been killed in an accident. There were no relatives willing to take Simon so he was to be placed in an institution. I knew without even forming the thought that I would never allow that to happen. I would take him to live with me. This was what was always meant to be. I had called the dare, Simon had accepted the challenge and he had paid the price. Mea culpa. But that was not my reason for doing what I did. No. I did what I did because it was my destiny. A course set by my heart when I was ten years old. I had loved Simon then - and I had never stopped loving him.

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Gently, I ruffle Simon's thick, tawny hair and watch him wake. Translucent turquoise eyes meet mine. If he could reach out, he would hold me. If he could speak, he would utter words of love. I know he would. But our love is simple and chaste. We are both still children, Never-Never-Land dwellers ever playing our childish games, Simon and me. He is here, and I need nothing more. Life is exactly as it is meant to be.

A Mother's Courage

by Bruce Hulley

There was a sense of urgency in Nyombi's movements as she licked her newborn calf Sonni clean and using her snout, helped him to stand, albeit hesitantly, on his spindly legs. Nyombi, a kudu cow in her prime, had been very careful in selecting her birthing site and was sure that they were not in danger from predators. Nevertheless, even though she could not identify the cause, her senses were warning her of an immediate threat to the two of them.

As soon as Nyombi judged Sonni ready to walk, without knowing why, instead of rejoining the herd, she instinctively set out eastwards towards the Shangani River, some eight kilometres away. To start with, they could only move at a very slow pace, but as Sonni gained in confidence and strength, Nyombi gradually increased the pace. They had not yet covered a kilometre when she became aware of birds, in increasing numbers, winging their way towards the Shangani. Not long thereafter, small antelope of many varieties, all swift of foot, started passing them, heading in the same direction.

At about this time, Nyombi became aware that a west wind of increasing strength was building up behind them. Deep in her subconscious she knew that the wind was directly related to her sense of unease and that there was an urgent need to push forward as fast as possible. Getting behind Sonni, she tried urging him to move faster with frequent nudges to his rump, but there was a limit to what the new born calf could accomplish. But for Sonni, Nyombi would, by now, have been in full flight.

They were nearing the halfway point when she first smelled the smoke. Almost simultaneously, the large kudu bull and three cows, together with their older and stronger calves that comprised the rest of her herd, came up beside Nyombi. They slowed to her pace for a moment, then urging her to rejoin the herd they increased their speed again and forged forward. Nyombi would not desert Sonni who, although gaining strength and speed, was still unable to achieve the pace set by the herd bull.

As the wind grew still stronger, tendrils of smoke began to appear like wisps of mist on a sunny morning. Larger animal species, giraffe, eland, sable and the occasional rhino, now thundered past the struggling kudu calf and his protective mother. A leopard sprang from a tree in front of the pair and without a backward glance, streaked ahead in his dash for safety. For a short time, Nyombi was aware that she and her calf were being paced by a lone cheetah who, in turn, lengthened her stride and left them behind. Up to this point, the only real danger they faced from other animals came from a herd of buffalo that threatened to engulf them for a short while as it thundered on towards the perceived safety of the river.

Nyombi was within two kilometres of the river when she first heard the crackle of burning grass and leaves. The sound terrified her and her immediate instinct was to stretch her legs to the maximum in a final dash for the safety offered by the large and deep pools of water to be found along the bed of the wide Shangani River at that time of the year. With great difficulty she overcame her instincts and instead concentrated on urging Sonni to even

greater efforts to increase his speed.

As mother and son entered the final kilometre, the pressure of other species overtaking them was easing off as most of those who were going to make it to the river before being engulfed in flames had already passed them. An old male lion, slowed down by the onset of arthritis in his bones, but still escorted by the faithful members of his pride, loped passed the pair without a glance. Nyombi no longer feared these predators – they too had only one thing on their mind, the river and its deep pools.

Just as the trees bordering the river came into view and Nyombi began to believe they would survive the bush fire, a great gust of wind deposited a thick layer of acrid smoke and burning embers over her and her calf, causing Sonni to stumble and fall. Nyombi quickly pushed her snout under Sonni's stomach and with a Herculean effort, lifted him back on to his hooves. Pushing him towards the river, she quickly had him moving at, what was for him, a fast trot.

With patches of hair on their backs smouldering from burning embers embedded in their skin, they dashed forward through the trees and across the open riverbed sands to the nearest pool of water, into which they plunged without hesitation, to join the wide variety of animals that had arrived ahead of them. Nyombi urged Sonni to move forward until only his head protruded out of the water, then she crouched next to him, covering as much of her body with water as she could. In the cool safe waters of the Shangani, the kudu cow and her calf could now watch and wait until the terror of the smoke and flames abated.

But a sudden rustling, slithering sound in the reeds followed by a muted splash heralded a new and lethal danger, every bit as horrifying and threatening as the fire. Nyombi, momentarily frozen with fear, stood trembling as a sinister grey/green form of a huge crocodile lunged powerfully towards them. The brave cow struggled valiantly to place herself between this new threat and her tiny newborn calf...

For comments, suggestions and criticism, please do not hesitate to contact us via e-mail at any time.

If you wish to submit material we shall look forward to receiving your writings or photographs.

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Yours Sincerely,

The New Richmond Reader