

Short Stories

We Took Our Afternoon Naps Together

We took our afternoon naps together. There where the house became dark and cool late in the day. The linen had the smell of rain on it, especially at those hours, because the sheets didn't suffer the heat of skin at night. You know that smell of rain as it billows toward you, slow and inescapable across the brittle ground and grass. That is my best smell in this whole wide world. For some or the other reason, that bedding cottoned you in just that smell. We had volcanic blood in our veins, us two. That is why we *maar* headed to the south side in the heat of the day, to cool down a bit.

Fielies, again, hated the cold. Stayed *semier* in his own room for siesta, there where the sun *sommer* four o'clock, exactly in time for tea, would fall on his crown like a slap in the face. That's how *Fielies* liked to be woken, there on the other side of the old farmstead.

That was now peaceful: a little isolation. We didn't say much there where we lay, but we both knew that it was nice to be alone together. Sometimes I *sommer* woke up under her flank where I probably snuggled in against the cool of the dark room with its smell of African thunder. I'd pretend to be asleep if I woke like that, to memorize the knocking of her heart, the consolation of her breath on my forehead, and the hollow folding of her hand on my hip.

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Piet and I have to fetch my parents. The government scraped the road just after the rains this year so it should only take about two hours in to *Ojiwarongo*. I'm kitted out in my new V-neck with a fall of frills from the collar all the way down to just a *tirtsie* cleavage. Piet fell for the shirt I packed out just so, nice and neatly over his chair, but I wasn't quite so lucky with the rest of his outfit. He's wearing his all-day-ever-day pants with the hole on his back pocket where his Leatherman has worn away at the khaki colour. He's kept with his dirty farm boots although, just this Christmas, I spent almost all the money he gave me to buy him a present with on nice new town shoes.

But no. And now here he sits next to me, whistling along to the old singles on the radio.

When we arrive, the two *oudstes* are standing in the front garden with their suitcases. Only the main road was ever tarred so we park trailed by a cloud of dust that's been signaling our arrival since the horizon. *Ouma* and *Oupa* stay *tjoepstil* as *Fielies* scurries around the corner with his grey suit pants and short-sleeve button up. He scuttles through *Elmari's* roses that prance dry and lonely circles of powdery dirt

on either side of the front door. “But my *magtag*, Pa, for what are you standing out here in the sun? I *mos* told you I would hear if Rosie arrives.”

I don't want to, but like turning your head when you drive past an accident, I walk slower down the entrance corridor than the rest. And there it is, our family photo on *her* wedding day, hanging above one of *Fielies* on a tricycle, when he was two, in an oval frame. Next to it is a black-and-white one of her parents and our parents on the beach in their twenties. The one of her wedding day is in a thin silver frame of delicate vines that curl in the corners. In its borders she looks beautiful and happy. I'm two cousins to her left and I know that I'm looking straight at Piet in the crowd behind the cameraman, thinking, “If she's going to bed some man, I'm *vir-flippen-seker* going to bat my lashes at the most handsome *kêrel* here.” Even my eyes lie a believable smile.

“Table is set. Shall we *sommer* so long have a seat?”

Every time I see this scar on my knee, I remember how I tripped walking up the church stairs that day.

“Sis, *Elmari* specially made your favourite sweet pumpkin and creamy green beans for lunch.”

Elmari's food is bland as usual. The trip home is *maar* quiet. I sit at the back with Ma and open all the gates on the way, happy to escape the stale air in the car.

I ask Maggie to make us some tea as soon as she's put the old people's suitcases in their new room, the one with matching wardrobes for each, my christening dress above the desk and my grandmother's vase filled to spilling with sprigs picked from the wisteria that crawls up the water tank outside their bedroom. By the time Maggie serves us on the back *stoep*, Piet has already balanced his feet on the edge of my freshly whitewashed pot with the *ranonkels* from the seeds I've harvested since *Ouma* first planted them on De Hoop. Maggie lowers the tray onto the glass top with a scraping sound from the thin film of dust that no amount of wiping can clean.

“*Dankie, ou dier.*”

With a nod to me she eyes *Oupa*. These two are going to cost her hours of extra work and she knows it. I take the doily off the milk jug and pour until just after the curve at the bottom of each cup. Except for Piet, who likes his half full. Maggie always lets the English leaves draw before she heats up the milk so I don't have to wait for that before I fill each up to the gold rim just below the lip of my white set, a wedding gift from *Tannie Louna* and *Oom Lourens*. Her parents.

Piet starts talking about how last year we had the least rain in recorded history: twenty-two thumbs. For the twenty-second time since I married him I look at the *sering* tree next to the gate and vow to have it chopped down as soon as I can get Piet to spend the money on a sharp new axe. It is the exact same shape and size as the one on De Hoop, the one I fell in love with that afternoon.

When I woke up from my nap, she had turned to *me* in our slumber and not the other way around. Her hand under my dress was sweaty against my belly. Her open mouth against my shoulder made it warm and wet there too. Her closed eyes made two perfect shapes and there was a soft weight on my hand where her ribs pressed against me. My eyes were still hiding from the afternoon light blowing in with the curtains. I turned to say thank you without thinking what for and kissed her open lips instead. I stayed there without thought. When my eyes opened her silhouette shaded me. My fingers were wet and I had learned that our hip bones matched perfectly; she pressed hers against mine ‘till she slipped off, falling closer to me in laughter. When our laughter died she kissed me and slid her fingers around the little rise until we both felt it swell. We dropped off the side of the bed so that if someone came in they’d think we’d gone for a swim in the dam. By then we had figured out that the smell of rain in that room came from the *sering* at the window. Lying on the floor under it, I fell in love with our old tree.

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After tea I leave Piet on the *stoep* to fill Pa in on the history of rain on the farm and I take Ma to unpack.

“*Ouma*, you see it’s best you just keep the gauze window closed permanently. There are more snakes out here than in town with *Fielies*. Wait, let me do that.”

I can feel her looking at me while I take her things out of the faux ostrich-leather suitcase at the voetenent of her bed: her oversized brassieres in a cheesecloth bag drawn closed with string goes straight into the second drawer; her pantyhose in the first; her bleached thin dresses on the rail to the left and her hand-knitted jerseys to the right. Her beige, old-person’s sandals I find with their soles facing at the very bottom of the suitcase. They go under the dresses, facing me with their worn inners. It’s *darrem* really a scandal that *Fielies* never bought them any new clothes.

“Ma, how would you like it if we went into town on Wednesday to fetch the rations and stopped by Edgars to get you a few *spickerish* dresses?”

“Ag, no what, Rose. That’s now really not necessary.”

Thank God. She stays sitting on the edge of her single bed, the one closest to the window because the man must *mos* sleep closest to the door to protect his woman. Poor old *Oupa* Guy, with his thin arms he can’t protect anyone anymore. “Rose, way with you. I can’t sit with my hands idle like this.”

“Certain, *Ma*?”

She rearranges it all – twists every hanger to face left, heaps her panties in rows of five, swivels to see if I’m still there.

“Thank you, Rosie. What with the drive none of us had our afternoon nap today. Let’s have supper soon and get to bed early.”

We took our afternoon naps together. I take them on the north side of the house, where the sun strikes me like a slap in the face at exactly 4 o’clock, just in time for tea, so that the thought of *her* is not the first thing that burns when I wake.

- Ethne Mudge