Water

Martin Hatchuel.

The mountains far across the way stood sharp against the clean, clear morning air and Niven lifted his bucket to the ground and stopped to rest and look and dream a moment. He'd never been further than the town that lay like a necklace around the lagoon at the bottom of the hill and the mountains seemed to him a place he'd like to visit. From here they seemed untouched by houses and buildings, and he thought they'd be empty of people and silent and calm.

But he bent down and struggled the yellow plastic drum to his shoulder again and moved off through the alleys of the camp where he lived. The houses here were made from off-cuts saved from the saw mill, from old plastic sheeting and old corrugated iron, from old signboards and from raw poles cut from the pine plantations aways atop the hill; their windows salvaged from demolition sites, their doors gaping open where the buildings sagged and yawed. Tin-barrel fireplaces burned in their yards, their thick smoke, acid smell and charred motes of paper floating down on the windless air. Washing hung from lines and sagging fences, dewy in the morning light. The wash of mud in the streets, the cows and the pigs, the goats and the dogs rooting amongst the paper, the glass and the shopping bags, and the weeds. The smells of porridge and meat cooking and the shit from outhouses peppered the township like the swarms of flies that surrounded it.

And the radios and boom boxes and television sets and the noise of thirty thousand people living together reverberated and distorted and assaulted his ears.

He climbed a slope and came to Ta' Betsy's and knocked and went in. Ta' Bets was cleaning and tidying and making her bed. Her single-roomed shack was as neat inside as it was chaotic out, her walls papered with cuttings and pictures from magazines, famous socialites, jazz singers, formal photos of her soccer teams: Orlando Pirates and (Ta' Bets never took sides) Chiefs and Swallows. The bed was covered with a deeply embroidered counterpane filled with biblical texts and a portrait of the baby Jesus. The shelf was decorated with a line of angels cut from newsprint. A salvaged yellow curtain hung beside the only window, open now to the morning.

Ta' Bets had a table and a single chair, a one-pot primus stove, and a large water bucket. Niven poured his water into the bucket and then asked for a rag to dry where he'd spilled.

"Sorry, Ta' Bets."

She handed him twenty cents - two ten cent pieces - and smiled as she dipped a cup into her bucket and drank. "Your water's always clear and sweet," she said. "How do you do it?"

The water that came from the municipal taps was brown and bitter. None of the houses here had tap water of their own, and these taps, one each for every hundred huts, were their only sources of supply. From them they drew their water for their washing and drinking and cooking, and boys like Niven (and some of the girls, too) made their living by carrying their precious but filthy cargo to the homes of people who hadn't the will or the strength or the time to collect for themselves.

But of all the children who carried water, only Niven delivered his sweet and pure. Some said he'd found a new supply, a secret spring, but most - those who saw him standing in line at the dripping, spitting taps - knew that what he had was a powerful magic.

Niven was small for his eleven years, thin and wiry. His mid-brown skin was scaly and chapped, his hair was hidden under a red woolen beanie and his clothes were torn and worn; but his pale green

eyes, with their dark-ringed irises, were alive and watchful, humorous and guarded.

"No auntie, I just get the water from the tap and bring it," he said. "I don't do anything to it."

She looked at him levelly for a long while, until he started to become uncomfortable. And then she said: "My grandmother once told me about a water carrier like you, a water carrier who had the gift - although in those days carrying water was work for girls."

"I can carry better than any girl, auntie!"

"I know," she said, "but aai, what our world has come to that boys have to do the work of girls."

Next he took water to old auntie Margaret, stooped and grey and toothless and frightened. He knocked on her door.

"Aunt Margaret, it's Niven."

"Go away. What do you want?"

"No, aunt Margaret, it's Niven, I've got your water."

"Ay?"

"Your water, auntie, it's me, Niven."

"Niven?"

"Yes auntie."

"Well come in, what are you standing out there for?"

Niven giggled and opened the door. "I didn't want to give auntie a fright."

"Is that how you greet your elders, boy? - 'I didn't want to give auntie a fright?'"

Aunt Margaret's shack was as tidy as Ta' Bets', but it bore the fraying edges of her age. She, too, had a bucket by her table and Niven poured his water into it and watched as the rancid greying contents turned clear and pure.

"Aunt Margaret's been getting water from the other boys again," he said.

"Well, what do you expect, you're never here, I can't smell if you're going to be here from one day to the next!"

"Auntie knows I come as often as I can but auntie also knows I have a lot of houses who have to have their water, too. And the other boys, they charge auntie for the water, don't they?"

"Of course they charge me!"

"But I never charge auntie."

And that was true. Three or four times a week - when he had time between his other deliveries - he carried water for some of the people in his quarter who couldn't afford his services; and although Aunt Margaret never said a kind word, she amused him. How anybody could be so happy to be unhappy!

He giggled again.

"What's so funny, boy?"

"Nothing, auntie. I'll see auntie again on Wednesday," and he slipped out the door.

Now, holding his yellow plastic drum upside down, he beat a tune as he walked.

Daily he trudged from the taps to the houses and back again. Like most of the other water children, he, too, had been orphaned at an early age and he now lived in a single-roomed shack with a boy called Mark, and the boy's sister, Michelle. They looked out for each other and Michelle - who was two years older than the boys - cooked for them whenever she could, and whenever they had food.

But Niven was their leader, that was clear, in his happy, easy way.

He passed by their shack and checked inside - no one home - and he opened their cooking pot to take a handful of last night's cold maize porridge. But he yelped as he stuck his fingers into the pot;

someone had mixed broken glass into the porridge and he'd cut himself deeply.

He bandaged his finger with an old cloth and emptied the pot into a plastic bag and then carefully tied the bag closed; then he took the bag to the bins at the end of the road, overflowing with rubbish even though the Municipality had been here to empty them only last Friday.

He knew who'd done this; and there he was leaning against the doorpost of Doc Radebe's shebeen. Ernest, the leader of the African Loud Boys, a hugely overweight sixteen-year-old with bad skin and a straggling, struggling beard, thick gold studs stuck loudly to his ears and, as ever, a toothpick stuck in the side of his ugly, leering mouth.

He watched Niven silently, smiling smugly.

Niven held up his hand, showing him the bandage.

Ernest and his boys collected money from all the children on the street - all the children except Niven and, because he was scared of Niven, from Mark and Michelle. But a rival gang was a danger to Ernest, who wanted to control the township's water, and this wasn't the first time he'd tried something like this.

Niven returned to his shack and collected twenty rand from their savings, kept in a hole in the floor under the mattress. Then he took his drum and went to the tap and waited his turn to fill it. As always, the water was dirty and brown and smelled of the compost heap.

Then he went and stood at the gate to Doc's Shebeen, knowing that Ernest would be drinking at the bar. Just stood there, his drum on his shoulder, and didn't say anything at all.

At length one of the crowd called out to him. "You, boy, what you think you doing there?"

But Niven was silent.

There was a shuffle inside and then Ernest emerged. "Voe'sêk, jy!"

Niven looked at him and then tipped the drum and started to pour the brown, muddy water onto the ground.

"Bliksem, so it's not true! You can't ..."

And Ernest stumbled to silence as the water began to clear and run crystal and pure from the child's yellow plastic drum.

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Niven turned and walked back to the tap. This late in the morning there was no longer a queue, but the tap was guarded by one of the Africans - a boy who hadn't seen what had happened at the shebeen.

He tried to block Niven's path. "Time you started paying for your water, laaitie," he said.

"The water's free!" said Niven.

"Not to you, it isn't."

"So, what now, it's African water?"

The boy nodded. "Yep, and you gotta pay."

"I won't."

"You will, you know." The boy was quite matter-of-fact about it, grabbing Niven by the throat.

Suddenly Ernest's voice boomed "Los!" and the boy dropped Niven immediately. "I'll get this one," he said. "In my own time."

They left him and Niven continued to fill his drum and carry it and pour his pure, clear water into the buckets of his clients. They all paid him in cents - ten cents here, twenty, thirty there - but Niven never complained about the amount nor asked for less or more: he knew that they paid according to what they could afford. And here in the camps, very few could afford very much at all.

In the afternoon he hitched a ride into town and went and sat by the lagoon for a while, quietly on a bench in front of a hotel in the waterfront where he liked to watch the yachts at their berths. It was neat here, orderly and clean. A paved path, edged by a finely-trimmed lawn, ran along the water wall and beyond it the yachts bumped gently and floated serene and square against their wooden walkways. The ropes that held their bows and sterns lay coiled on the boardwalks, the sails rested tightly under their covers and the masts pointed to the sky and towered over him like a forest of white, branchless trees.

He enjoyed watching these resting beauties as much now as he did when he saw them out and alive on the weekends, their great spinnakers like giant balloons, and he imagined what it must be like to whoosh, whoosh through the water under sail.

He'd sat for about ten minutes when a security guard came past. He nodded at the man and the man nodded back. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"Sitting," said Niven.

"Well you can't," said the guard. "Move."

"I don't have to move for you!"

The guard got out his night stick. "Voe'sêk!"

Niven was getting tired of that word. "I'm not your dog! Why you telling me to voe'sêk?"

"This place is for the larnies. Now go." He started to lunge at Niven with his stick.

Niven shouted as he fled: "Larnies got your balls in a bag you fukken cocoanut!"

In the town he bought a short length of chain and a padlock for their front door and then a small bag of maize meal for their supper. He found Mark and Michelle at home when he returned: she'd bought a can of tomato and onion paste, and there was still paraffin in the stove so they could cook and they had something to eat after all.

Niven told them about the broken glass. "We need to keep the house locked," he said. "Look, the lock came with four keys," and he handed one to each of the others; "I'll hide the extra one for a spare," and he lifted their mattress and slid the key into their bank in the floor.

Their shack had no electricity and they slept early and restlessly: the noise of the shebeens became louder and louder as the night wore on and the children woke often. Once during the night Niven thought he heard one of the others get up to go out for relief and another time he thought he heard the catch of a cry deep within a dream.

They rose before the sun and ate the last of their porridge under the light of a single candle. Niven made a hole in the door and another through the wall at the doorpost and they threaded the chain though them and locked their house behind them, carrying their water drums into the prison-like orange glow of the Klieg lights that flooded the camps at night. The roads and footpaths were busy already, lines of men and women walking to work in town, the walkers the people who couldn't afford the taxi fare, the people who didn't want to pay, the people who were too terrified to climb aboard those rattling mini-busses, the aggression of the drivers and their loud, thudding music adding to the tyranny of the day.

The children split up and went to the taps closest to their first clients of the morning. Niven had a longer way to go and he followed the road that followed the ridge and looked down onto the town below. The sky had started to lighten and the water of the lagoon had begun to colour: sometimes when he saw it at night, it seemed a shiny nothingness caught and held by a necklace of jewels carved from a thousand pieces of light; and sometimes, when he saw it

on a troubled summer afternoon, when its surface was broken by whitecaps torn from the pain of an easterly wind, when its colour was brown and green and grey and when its air was thick with salt and dust, then it seemed like a dirty, boiling hell; but now it looked its best to him, perfectly calm, serene as a mirror, quiet, friendly and warm; and he longed for it.

At the tap he greeted the others in the line - three or four boys, a girl and a few older women who carried for themselves. They spoke easily and laughed often as they waited for their buckets and drums to fill. Niven had arrived just in time for behind him the line began to grow as more and more people woke to the day. It was light now, windless and cloudless and it looked to be a hot summer day. The schoolchildren started filing past in their knots, the boys all alike in their serge pants and white shirts, the girls in red smocks, striped string belts tied loosely at their waists.

"It's a pity you can't be in school," said one of the women, but Niven avoided her and pretended he hadn't heard.

Although he'd spent three and a half years at his classes, carrying water was the only thing that Niven now knew, and he was grateful for it; it was what he'd been able to find to keep himself after his mother had sickened and died, covered with sores and cruelly thin. He saw how some of the other children were forced to beg, how some of the boys stood at the corner and got into the cars with rich white men, how the girls hitched along the highway and climbed into the trucks and earned their money there; and he saw and he felt how they cried. He couldn't have said it, but he knew that his water was honest work, and that when he was tired at the end of the day, it was a fatigue that was his alone, a fatigue he'd earned.

"You got your money for the Africans?" said one of the others.

There was a rumbling, and a discontent. "There's none of them here," said a woman with a child in her belly and another wrapped in a blanket to her back.

"Why are we paying those gangsters?" said a tall, beautiful girl, a willow by a stream.

"No, you gotta pay them, they keep us safe," said an older auntie.

"Safe from what?" said the girl.

"But none of them are here today," said another and they all looked around.

"They were here until they saw Niven coming along," said the girl, smiling at him.

Niven blushed.

"The Africans aren't scared of nothing, but they're scared of Niven. It must be his magic," she said, and Niven felt the burning in his ears.

He was grateful when his turn came at the tap and his drum was full and lifted to his shoulder. He had to pass the girl, though, still waiting at her place in the line, and she patted her hand on his arm as he walked. The bucket wobbled. "Whoops!" she said, helping him to steady himself and smiling again, down at him and deeply into his eyes.

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He did well that day, and later he took his money to the spaza, the tiny grocery store that Aunt Faniswa ran from the main room of her house a few doors down from his own tumbled shack. He bought a strawberry drink and turned his drum upside down on the ground outside the shop and sat on it and drank as he watched the people walking home. Many of them stopped here to get their tobacco, their sugar, their canned pilchards, their maize meal, their dusty, doughy

potatoes, their packets of Drink-o-Pop, bars of soap, jars of Vaseline and cans of thick, spicy tomato-and-onion Chakalaka. Aunt Faniswa also kept a chicken coop, a dirty, noisy mess of brown-white feathers and wobbling combs and shivering wattles that squawked and cawed and screamed and cried whenever she opened their door, and she had a black-and-tan dog that slept at her feet. She dressed in ankle-length blue and white print dresses which she sewed herself (the wooden cabinet of her ancient, noisy sewing machine was always open, a command post from which she ruled), and she wore a blanket round her waist, and hid her hair under a neatly tied doek that matched her dress. Her shop was a meeting place, open until the last person had bought their supplies for the night, and there was always a queue for the pay phones which lined one wall of the room - and often a queue of people, who, like Niven, simply wanted to talk to its motherly, matronly owner.

The fizzy cold drink tickled the boy's nose and washed his mouth with its cloying sweetness but it was warm (the shop's old fridge wasn't very efficient) and unsatisfying. He drained the can, put it on the ground, and crushed it with his foot. An older boy approached him. "Hey Niven," he said. "What you doing tonight?"

"Nothing."

"They looking for another gillie on oubaas Thompson's boat. You want to come?"

"To sea?"

"Ja, come on, he told me to bring someone and I've asked everyone and they're all too scared - but you're Niven, you're the water boy. You'll love it."

"Through The Heads?"

"Ja, man, come! We'll be back tomorrow morning."

"For sure!" said Niven. "But I've got to tell the others." He looked in the door. "Auntie Faniswa?"

The old woman had heard their conversation. "No," she said, "go if you want to. I'll tell Mark and Michelle, they're always in here anyway."

"Thanks, Auntie," he said, turning to the boy. "What was your name again?"

"Berold," he said. "But you know me."

Niven nodded. "Seen you around. You serious, you'll take me out through The Heads?" They were walking away from the spaza now, heading for town.

"The oubee said I must bring another gillie."

"But I don't know anything about fishing."

"Don't worry, these rich larnies don't know anything, either. You just gotta cut the bait for them and put it on their hooks. If they catch anything, I'll gut it for you, but you gotta let me have your share."

Niven knew that that wasn't fair, but he didn't mind: this was something he wanted. He had always seen the great flatness of the sea from their camp on the hill, but it'd also always seemed to him just as far away and just as inaccessible as the mountains in the distance.

They walked down the steep, winding road, fighting against the raucous flow of workers coming home. Niven was excited, talkative, and nervous: he'd been onto the water in a rowing boat before, and he'd swum in the shallows of the lagoon, but he'd never been on a power boat, and he'd never been out to sea.

The *Daisy Dancer* was coming alongside as they arrived at the angling club. Niven realised that she was one of the boats he'd seen at the waterfront; she was one of the few without a mast, but she had a tall superstructure that arched over the wheel on the upper deck (there was another inside the cabin), and she was a bright and

exciting confusion of plastic and ropes and stainless steel and glass. "Is that it?" said Niven.

"Ja," said Berold, laughing. "Wait 'til you see the inside."

They walked along the quay and down the ramp onto the floating jetty, where a middle-aged man had just finished tying the lines. "Oubee," said Berold, touching his forehead.

"Who's this?" said the man, nodding at Niven.

"This is Niven," said Berold, "the one I told Oubee about."

"He's not very big. What do you know about fishing, boy?"

"He doesn't know, but I'll show him, Oubee."

Thompson grunted. "Get the cooler boxes and the petrol cans off the bakkie and let's get going," and he clumped back up along the jetty, an ageing man with arthritic knees.

Berold helped himself to one of the loading trolleys that stood at the top of the ramp and told Niven to take one, too. They rolled them up the quay, and Niven said: "Is it just him?"

"Nah, there's normally three or four of them, but if they're not on the boat they'll be in the bar," said Berold, waving at the clubhouse. It was a long, low building, red face-brick with a red-tiled roof and a neatly trimmed garden around a long, narrow swimming pool, alive with underwater lights and sparkling from above, too, from warm white floodlights that cheered the scene as if they were lighting it for a party. Some children were playing in the pool, and a little dog was dancing among them, barking at the water and trying to catch the droplets with its mouth as its bronzed and beautiful owners in their expensive swimsuits screamed and laughed, splashed and dived.

The load box of Thompson pick-up was heavy with a huge blue cooler and half a dozen fifty litre fuel cans. "Geez, bra, how we gonna carry those?"

"Nah, it's not so difficult, you just gotta let them down easy from the back of the bak onto your trolley, and then take them down to the boat one at a time. Just leave them on the jetty and we'll load them together when we've got them all down there."

"How many times you been out to sea?"

"Jirre, now you're asking me. Hundreds?" said Berold.

"What's it like?"

"No bru, just wait and see."

When they'd brought the petrol on board, they poured it into the boat's tanks and returned the empties to the pick-up; then they carried the cooler below and Niven went into the cabin for the first time and stood and gaped as Berold filled the fridge with cold drinks and beer. Leather seats, wood paneling, chrome trim, bright inset lights that shone like stars, and smoky grey windows to let in the view but block out the sun.

"Is this where he lives?" said Niven.

Berold laughed. "No, bru, he lives in a house by the golf course, what you thinking?"

There was a kitchen with stoves and a fridge and there was a banquette surrounded by a deep, high-backed bench; there was a tiny work table with a reading light, and a glass-front bookshelf filled with books of the sea; and on the starboard side was the other wheel, and a high seat like a throne behind rows of levers and dials and switches and radios. And abaft the seat, five fishing rods lay neatly, each on its rack on the wall.

"Go and look through there but don't touch anything," said Berold, pointing to a short companionway that lead further into the depths of the boat. Niven stepped slowly down the stairs, his arms held up, his hands inches from the walls, and he came to a tiny passage with more wood paneling and three strange doors with rounded corners; through the left hand one he saw a shower cubicle, to the

right was a toilet, and in the centre he saw a small but plush bedroom with a strange arrow-shaped bed that followed the contours of the hull. Everything was perfectly clean, perfectly neat and perfectly bright in the evening's half dark.

"Tsst! Come out of there, they're coming," said Berold, and Niven felt immediately guilty.

The deck was fitted with a double row of fish boxes covered with striped canvas cushions. Another, taller box formed a table, and under it was a locker for the life vests and the safety equipment. At the stern, a thick steel railing held the rod holders and separated Niven from the shiny, silvered cowls of two enormous outboard motors.

Thompson and his guests - there were three of them - stepped through a low gateway in the freeboard of the boat and Berold closed and latched the opening. The men carried warm jackets, bottles of brandy, and camera bags. The owner didn't introduce them. "Give your stuff to a boy," he said. "He'll stow it for you."

Niven suddenly found himself holding more than he thought he could carry, and, frightened, he followed Berold below. "Just watch what I do and do the same," his guide had said.

They were still hanging the coats when Thompson shouted: "Gillie! Maak los!"

Berold winked at Niven. "Can't speak a word of Afrikaans, but he's gonna try all night, you watch. Thinks it impresses his chommies," and he ran out on deck.

Niven was aware now that the floor was rumbling from the thrum of the engines, and soon he felt the gentle rock as the boat reversed off the jetty. He went topside, and joined Berold, who was leaning against the railing. The guests were standing on the upper level, clustered around Thompson, who had the wheel.

Niven felt unsteady, and screamed briefly as the deck rose towards him and the boat leaped out of the water and settled back onto the plane at a speed he could never have thought possible.

This was a slow-speed, no-wake zone, but Thompson threw a finger as they passed the Park offices, knowing that the bureaucrats and rangers who manned them had left for home hours before. His guests laughed.

He lurched the boat to a stop just before they entered the mouth. "Here," said Berold, handing Niven four lifejackets. "Take these to them and come back and get one for yourself."

They all passed the thick, flat floats over their heads, and tied the laces at their necks and around their stomachs. Berold showed him what to do, and Niven, who'd never been so nervous, thought he'd keep his jacket on until they were safely on shore once more.

Berold laughed. "Nay man, if we get into trouble, I'm never gonna put one on. You just gotta wear them now 'cause the NSRI's watching - but I swear, these things gonna kill you. You check, every time a boat goes down and they find a body, he's wearing one of these, but he's dead.

"They call them 'life jackets,' but they're death jackets, that's what I scheme."

Niven's eyes were wide, and Berold laughed again.

"No, don't worry, my bru, nothing's gonna happen tonight. Check how calm it is."

And it was indeed calm.

The two cliffs of The Heads rose up above an almost flat expanse of water, about 300 metres wide. Niven knew that when The Heads was up, this channel could boil white as a witches pot, in it's anger dashing its giant waves against the shore and sending massive swells crashing against the sea wall on Leisure Island a kilometer upstream.

But now the boat rocked gently in the dying light until with sudden force it danced upwards again and Niven heard Thompson laugh as he pushed the throttles forward to begin their passage to sea.

Niven didn't know how to pray, but he closed his eyes and wished he was back at home at supper with Mark and Michelle.

"Look, man! Look!" said Berold sharply in his ear, "you don't do this every day!"

Thompson was guiding his *Daisy Dancer* as close as he could to the western cliff, knowing that the double bar of rocks that guarded this dramatic passageway left him only a narrow, eighty metre wide channel hard by that shore.

Soon they were beyond The Blinders, and they fell into the rhythm of their journey. Thompson planned to fish about 15 miles out, and he rode over the ocean with confident arrogance. Presently the darkness was complete around them, the only lights their own and the stars in the moonless sky.

"Hey!" shouted one of the men. "Get me a beer," and Berold ran to do what he was told. When he returned, Niven was sitting on the canvas cushions of the fish boxes.

"Get up!" whispered the older boy. "Come on, get up! We're not allowed to sit there."

"But?"

"C'mon!"

Niven rose slowly, holding onto the railings, and moved to the back again. "But where are we supposed to sit?"

"We have to stay here, by the engines" said Berold. "The cushions are for the larnies."

"All night?"

Berold nodded.

"But they aren't even using them..."

"Lissen, laaitie, you do what you're told, OK? I don't want to lose my wages tonight."

Thompson called down to them. "Maak reg, ons gaan vis vang hier."

"Come," said Berold. He brought four rods out from the cabin and fixed them into their holders in the gunwales. Then he opened the bait box and brought out four small fishes, and showed Niven how to tie them to the hooks. Two of the men came downstairs and Thompson lurched the boat to a sudden stop.

One of the men looked at Niven. "Gillie!" he said. "Gimme some water."

Berold nodded in the direction of the galley. "Mineral water," he said. "In the fridge."

Niven went below and came out again.

The man didn't thank him. "Jesus," he muttered. "Why don't you just take your time?"

Niven handed him the bottle.

"Christ!" said the man. "Can't you even open it?"

Niven unscrewed the cap and offered him the bottle once more.

He drank and he spat. "Shit!" he shouted. "This water's brak! Get me another one," and he threw the bottle at Niven. It splashed cold on his shirt.

Niven stared at him for a moment, and then turned back to the galley, but Berold was there before him. He brought out another bottle, opened it and gave it to the man, who sipped once, gingerly, and then drank deeply.

Berold shoved Niven back towards the aft railing. "What the fuck did you do that for?" he said.

"Do what?"

"You turned the water!"

"No, it wasn't me!"

But in the dim light Niven saw that Berold was smiling. "I don't know how you do it, bru, but you do it, and that was one of the best."

Niven shook his head. "But I didn't do anything."

The men lifted their rods and cast their lines as Thompson started forward again, slowly now, the boat rolling and yawing as the water passed beneath them.

They trawled like that for a long time, and after a while Niven began to feel ill.

"Bru, I'm going to puke."

"Well, just climb down there next to the engine and do it where the larnies won't see you," said Berold.

"I'm not going down there! I'll fall off."

"No, you won't. Just do it."

"No man!"

Berold pushed his face close to Niven's. "I told you, laaitie, I'm not gonna lose my wages tonight because of you. Now go!"

The colour went from Niven's face but he climbed beneath the railing onto the platform below. He held onto something that was part of the engine and knelt and tried to vomit, but nothing came, although the kneeling made everything feel even worse. He stared, petrified, as the water bubbled out from under the boat and washed away behind it.

Berold climbed through the railing and stood beside him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Come," he said, gently. "It'll only get worse if you look down. You need to look up. You need to look at the horizon."

Niven had never felt so ill. They climbed back on board, and Niven tried to stand at the railing, but his knees buckled beneath him and Berold helped him to lie down behind the fish boxes. Later, as he lay there, the smell of the bait caught him, live bait and chokka, and he struggled to his knees and leaned over beneath the railing and tried again to hurl into the sea.

Nothing came. He hadn't eaten all day and nothing came.

Suddenly something started to change beneath them.

"What's that?" shouted one of the guests.

"It's just a bit of wind," said Thompson. "It's nothing. It happens at this time of night."

But it wasn't just a bit of wind. Soon it was tearing at the boat and the swells were climbing above them and throwing spindrift like shot into the air, stinging their faces and the skin of their arms.

Thompson ran awkwardly down the ladder from the upper deck and took the wheel in the cabin, and all three of his guests leaned over the gunwales, and Niven thought he could smell their vomit over the smell of the sea, and the sight of their retching made him reach for the side and he tried again to throw up again, to quell the nausea in his stomach.

But still nothing came.

"We're going to die," he moaned to Berold.

Thompson decided to risk returning through The Heads. It was a long ride, and they fought the water's anger all the while, the fishing forgotten, the gillies forgotten, every man concerned about nothing except his overwhelming nausea while the radio screeched with commands and requests, updates and news.

But all coherent speech was lost in the fight between the water and the wind.

In one of his lucid moments, one of the guests shouted, "We'll never get through The Heads!" but they did. They slid, slipped, tossed, and surfed into the lagoon, and none of them knew how they

did it - but they did, and Thompson had the cheek to call it a miracle.

Niven, though, knew that it was foolishness, and he hurried ashore and walked away as soon as they'd tied the boat to the jetty.

+ + +

Even though the night had grown cold with the wind, and his jacket was thin and inadequate, Niven lay down under a tree at a little picnic spot beside the lagoon, and tried to rest. It was all he could think to do to overcome the terrible clawing in his stomach and the immense headache that came with it. He crawled into the space beneath one of the fire places, a little shelter from the wind, and curled tight around himself.

Somehow he managed to sleep, but sometime before dawn the wind died and it began to rain. He rose and started the long walk up the hill.

+ + +

He saw it long before he came to their hut. A municipal fire truck and two police vans were blocking the street, the red and blue of their emergency lights piercing the orange of the Klieg lights, and all of them reflecting heavily off the gathering rain.

Five homes had burned down, and his neighbours and a small audience were watching as the firemen packed their hoses away.

There was nothing but charred wood and ashes, and a bed frame and a melted television set that stood, dripping and smouldering, in place of what had once been Ta' Elfa's two-room shack.

Ta' Elfa was enormously house-proud. Her employer had given her the appliances, and sometimes she'd invited Niven and Mark and Michelle to sit on her vinyl floor and watch the shows they loved. She stood now, wrapped in a blanket, watching, and crying.

Aunt Faniswa was there, too, and Niven said, "Auntie, what happened?"

She shook her head, and as she did Niven saw Ernest behind her, leaning against a post on the opposite side of the street.

Ernest reached for his toothpick, and saluted Niven with it, and smiled.

"Where are Mark and Michelle?"

Suddenly her sobs became screams and she collapsed to her knees and bent over, beating the ground.

A man came up behind Niven and put his hand on his shoulder. He waved towards the fire engine. "They think it stared at your house."

"And Mark..."

"The ambulance took them."

"And?" said Niven.

But the man shook his head. They were both dead by the time the firemen had got to them.

Ernest hadn't moved, and he was still smiling at Niven, but he'd stuck the toothpick back in the corner of his mouth.

+ + +

For the second time in one night, Niven turned and walked away. He knew only that there was a heaviness he could never explain, and his eyes began to burn, and then to run as he walked. The early morning din of the camp was muted by the rain, but the noise was more than he could bear.

Now it was time to find the mountains.

+ + +

He followed the main road, walking uphill and against the crowds of workers on their way to town. Soon he was out of his own quarter, and amongst people whom he did not know, and it was easier that way. The crowds thinned as he came closer to the edge of the camp, and then the road passed into a pine plantation. He realised he was hungry, and thirsty, and when he found himself crossing a bridge over a stream he slid on his backside down the bank and leaned over, and drank from his hand. The water was brown as cola, as it was everywhere in these forests, but it tasted sweet and pure, and the rain hadn't yet washed it with mud. When he'd had enough, he splashed his face, and then settled onto his haunches to watch the bubbling as it flowed around the pebbles and across the sand.

The stream was fringed with ferns and bracken and, on one bank, a stand of arum lilies, white flowers brilliant against the early dawning. As he watched them, a bird began to call, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoooo, a hollow, haunting, lovely sound that trailed into nothingness, and he realised as he listened that the noise of the township had gone, and that there was a silence around him, broken by the irregular dripping of water from the pines, and by the songs of the birds and the river as it danced.

He thought of his friends, and wondered what would be done with their bodies.

He'd known death before, even at his young age. The violence of the disease that had killed his mother, the violence of the arguments in the shebeens on Friday nights (Saturdays were often more peaceful, the money used up the night before), the violence of old age, the violence of the slaughter of cattle, pigs, and chickens - no one was immune to violence in the camps. Here, death wasn't held at a remove.

The rain began to lighten with the coming of the morning, but Niven had grown cold, so he climbed back up to the road and began to walk once more.

He warmed a little as he walked, and his clothes began to dry on his body once the rain had stopped, and he listened for every plop and drop as the water dripped from the trees.

He loved the muted quiet of the plantation, but this was a forestry road, and soon the trucks began their long, slow, noisy climb up to their marshalling points where thick logs, fragrant with resin, waited to be loaded and brought to the mills in town. He stopped and stood to the side to watch each one as it passed, and to wave to the drivers. They all smiled back at him, and waved, too, but none of them stopped for him, and nor did he expect it.

He walked for another hour until, at the crest of the hill, he came out from under the canopy of the plantation and saw before him a steep slope that dropped down to a stream far below. A parting in the clouds threw a brief flash of sunlight, and he was suddenly tired and desperate for rest.

The floor of the plantation was soft with pine needles, and he retreated there, and lay down with his head on a log for a pillow, and fell immediately asleep.

The sun was high when he woke, and he was thirsty. He rose, nimble as only a child can be, and began to walk. He was slower now, the hunger had weakened him, but he knew that he would eat eventually, that he couldn't turn back just to find food, and that at the bottom of this hill was the stream that he'd seen, and that there he'd drink sweetly.

The trucks were coming from the opposite direction now, noisily and heavily grinding their way up the hill, their drivers as friendly as before, perhaps even more so now that they were forced to a crawl, and with no option but to relax and allow their machines to do their

work. Now Niven hoped that one of them would stop, and, if he did, he decided, he'd beg some food.

Further down the hill, he found a house that was occupied, and he stood outside the gate and called, "Is anyone here?"

An angry woman came to the door, and as she did a wild, red-brown dog threw itself at the gate and began to bark.

"Ja, whaddayawant?"

"Please, auntie, something to eat."

She turned her back on him and as she did, shouted, "Man, Voe'sak!" and the dog's barking became louder, if louder was possible.

Niven stood for a while, his eyes burning again, and then he continued his walk.

Closer to the stream, the forest started to close in around the road, and Niven saw that here were dozens of different species of trees, and that the undergrowth was thicker and more impenetrable that it had been in the plantation.

The bridge was narrow - wide enough for only one vehicle at a time - and its stonework was aged and old, with high parapet walls that ended in short, decorative columns topped with pyramidal finials.

A dressed stone plaque was decorated with a date - 1898 - and another, more modern (but rusted and itself aged) road sign gave a name to the river - the 'Silver.'

As he crossed the bridge, he became aware of the crunch, crunch of the yellow sand beneath his shoes, of the noises of the forest, and of the singing of the water in the stream

On the other side, he found a path down to the riverbed, and there he drank again. The water was muddy and gritty and left his mouth scratchy and strangely dry, and he worked his tongue and built up a wad of saliva which he washed through his teeth, and spat on the ground.

The road followed a contour along above the river bed, and presently he came to a widening where three of the laden timber trucks had stopped, their drivers at a rustic, wooden picnic table, their lunch boxes open before them. They greeted Niven when they saw him, but he walked towards them with care.

"Jirre, laaitie, what you doing so far from home?"

"I'm walking," he said.

"To where?"

"To the mountains."

They laughed, and another said, "Aren't you the child I saw this morning?"

Niven nodded. "Please uncle, can I have something to eat?"

They became solicitous and kind, and made space for him on one of the benches, and one of them gave him a sandwich with peanut butter, which he ate as fast as he could.

"Jirre, seun, when did you last eat?"

His mouth was still full. "Yesterday morning, uncle."

One of them pushed a plastic ice cream tub in front of him. It was half filled with maize porridge and stew. "There, that'll make you strong."

They were shaking their heads now, muttering between themselves. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"No, uncle, I carry water."

"Are you the boy whose house burned down?"

"Yes, uncle." He spoke through the food in his mouth. It was cold and fatty, but he thought it was delicious.

They nodded. "And now you're going to the mountains."

Another asked, "Who are you going to meet in the mountains?" and they all laughed again. But Niven didn't know, and all he could do was shrug his shoulders.

When he'd finished eating, they looked among themselves and collected what food they had, and put it in the tub. "Here," said one, a little older than the others, definitely their leader. "This'll help you get there."

"Thank you, uncle,"

They pulled bright orange plastic tobacco pouches from their pockets, and sheets of newspaper, and rolled cigarettes for themselves. Soon the ferny, watery, leafy smell of the forest was lost in acid smoke, and the men were lost in the silence of their thoughts.

At last the old man stood, and motioned to the others. "Better go," he said.

"What's your name, son?"

"Niven, uncle."

"Sure you don't want us to take you back, Niven?"

"Back to where? He hasn't got a house any more," said one of the others.

Niven nodded. "No, uncle, I'm going to the mountains," and they laughed at his conviction and his serious tone.

"Well, after about three kilometers you'll come to the next plantation, and there's a cutting station there. If you change your mind, ask for Piet Diesel, they all know me there. We're not allowed to give lifts to anyone, but I reckon you're small enough, you can always duck down to the floor if we see any of the managers' bakkies coming along."

The men laughed and one of them said, "No, Piet, I don't think you'll be giving this one a lift any time soon. He's got a mind of his own, this one."

"Thank you, uncle," said Niven to the man who called himself Piet, and watched as they climbed up into their vehicles.

It felt like the forest itself was shattered by the roar and grumble as they started their engines, but he remained standing at the picnic table and waved to each of them as they drove off towards the bridge.

He waited a long, long time, but the noise faded slowly and he heard them gearing down as they approached the bridge and began to climb.

He was thirsty, and he returned to the stream and drank. It was unusual. He'd never tasted water like this, sour and muddy, and he had to wash his mouth with saliva like he had earlier, and he wondered if he'd lost his gift forever.

The road followed the contour for a long while, and he was refreshed and strong, and he walked easily in the shade of the trees; the clouds had gone as abruptly as they'd came and he grew warm and stopped often to drink.

The plantation began at the point where the road began to climb, and here the walking became heavier, but he was fit and strong, and he continued without resting. At the cutting station he saw a woman with a clipboard who sat sunning herself on an oil drum, and a number of men were lifting and moving logs with the clawed cranes of strange, animal-like, three-wheeled tractors. They nodded to him and he waved back, but he didn't stop, and soon he was past them and relieved as the sound of their engines faded behind him.

When it began to grow dark, he found shelter under a fallen tree, and ate some of the food he'd been given, and waited for the night.

He slept undreaming, and woke before the dawn, and waited again until it was light enough to see. He took another mouthful or two, closed and sealed the tub, and began walking once more. Soon he came to another crest, and here he found a T-junction with a tar road. He turned right, towards the mountains, and continued for some time. He

passed a wealthy farm house - but knew better than to beg there - and a roadside stall, barred and shuttered and long disused. He was out of the forest now, on a wide, broad plain paddocked and divided with fences, spotted with farm dams and dotted with cattle. New sounds started to come to him; the far off lowing of cows, the squeak, squeak of a windmill, the hum of a generator in the distance. Occasionally, though, a car whooshed passed, or a taxi, filled with people and trailing in its wake the boom, boom, boom of its music, and he felt he wanted to put his fists to his ears to return to the silence he'd found by the stream.

He found a dog when he stopped to drink at a dam by a two-track farm road, a township dog with yellow fur and a white muzzle and floppy ears and hollow ribs and a tail that revolved unendingly. It smiled at him and crawled forwards, its head down, pleading attention.

Niven laughed. "Who are you?" he asked, stroking the animal's head. It jumped up on him, it's paws a lightness on his arms, and it tried to lick his face. Soon they were on the ground, wrestling wildly, Niven's laughter and the dog's barking ringing happy across the water.

When they tired, they sat together on the banks of the dam and Niven hugged the dog's neck and stroked her chest, and when he got up to go, she got up, too, and trotted beside him.

"Isn't your baas going to miss you?" said the boy, but the dog thought this was another invitation to play, and jumped up at him again and gently mouthed against his arm.

They walked like that for a long while, boy and dog, until they came to another dam, where Niven knelt and dipped his hand to drink, and the dog lapped at the water beside him.

When the day began to wane, Niven looked for a copse of trees and under them cleared a spot where he could lie. He opened the ice cream tub and ate some of his food, and fed the dregs to the dog, who licked the bowl incessantly.

The dog came to lay beside him when it had finished, and he smoothed his hand across its ribs. "Seems you're even hungrier than me," he said. "Sorry there isn't more."

He slept early and when he woke he found the dog curled up against him, and he was surprised at how pleased he was that it was there, and that it hadn't run home in the night.

"Looks like you're going to stay, so I'm going to call you something." He thought for a moment and then said, "Lady," and nodded once, agreeing with himself, and then he stood and looked north to the mountains.

This morning they seemed much closer, just on the other side of a valley that dropped away into the grey of the dawn. "C'mon, Lady," he said, and they began to walk.

Daylight came early at this time of year, so it was a long while before the first cars and taxis sped past. Niven wished he'd kept some of the food from yesterday, and looked for a stream: water always staunched the hunger, even if only for a few brief moments.

The walking lead them into another forest, a lane of oak trees planted to decorate a cluster of enormous, rambling houses that stood well back behind trimmed hedges and electric fences. At one, a horse grazed in a paddock; at another, a sign for an "Eaterie. Open Tuesdays to Sundays. Dinner by appointment only."

He pushed on through a dip and up again and out of the trees until he came to an opening where he found a petrol station, a general dealer, and a sawmill. The station and the shop were closed, but he found a tap and drank deeply, and Lady lapped at the water where it splashed on the ground.

When they'd finished, he looked around again and realised that the mill's gateman was watching him.

"Morning, uncle," he said.

The old man nodded. "Seems like you've taken a long road, son."

"I came from town," said Niven.

The old man nodded again. "But where are you going?"

"To the mountains," he said, with pride.

The old man laughed. "There's a location down the road, and then just forest and nothing else. You get into that forest, you'll get lost for sure!"

Now it was Niven's turn to nod. "Is there food in the forest?" he asked.

The man laughed again. "No, son, you'll starve in there. Although once there was a child who got lost somewhere round here and years later they found him in the Longkloof."

"Where's that?"

"No, on the other side of the mountains, almost in the Karoo. But I think that story was just a story. I saw it in the movies."

"Does the uncle have anything for me to eat?" said Niven.

The man shook his head. "I finished my sandwiches. My shift's nearly over. But keep going: the location's only about two kilometers from here, and you'll find someone there who'll help you. Ask for her: Aunt Maria."

"Aunt Maria?"

"My daughter. Maria Grootboom. You'll find her. Tell her I sent you."

Niven thanked him and called Lady and walked on.

He passed the mill on his left, a huge barn of a building, open-sided but nevertheless still somehow dark and mysterious. The saws were running, and he felt their screams whenever they bit into the thick, resinous logs. Lady was skittish and he tried to calm her, but she didn't like the noise and jumped continually. "Come," he said, and broke into a run, and the dog saw this was a game, and seemed immediately happier.

The oaks had ended at the end of the houses, and here it was flat and open, with more fenced fields, some with cattle, some with maize, some empty and fallow, and beyond them the mountains, covered in their blanket of forest. Again Niven felt sure there was nothing but one valley with one stream between them - himself and his dog - and his dream.

Presently he came to the camp that the old man had called The Location. Here the houses were timbered with the plentiful off-cuts from the sawmill, further apart and neater than they were at home, but still as poor and needy. He turned left onto a muddy, sandy road and made his way towards the centre, looking for a communal tap.

He turned a corner and came upon a muddy field where a short line of children stood waiting to fill their drums. "I'm looking for Aunt Maria Grootboom," he said.

No one spoke. "Aunt Maria...?" he said again.

"Who are you?" asked the oldest girl in the queue.

"I'm Niven."

"Never seen you before."

"I'm new. But I won't be staying: I'm going to the mountains."

Now the children all laughed together. "The mountains? And what are you going to do there?"

Niven couldn't answer: he had no way of saying what he wanted with the mountains.

"Aunt Maria?"

One of the girls pointed to a patch of water lilies at the end of the field. "There, in the house with the flowers."

Niven nodded and thanked her, and crossed the field - which he now saw was a soccer pitch, with rickety, crooked goal posts made of untreated wood - and walked to the house with the flowers.

It was neater than many of its neighbours, one of the few that had been painted (a turquoise blue, its doorway a deep ruby red), and he saw as he approached that it had squares of neatly trimmed lawn on either side of a raggedy brick path, with three fruit trees to one side and a vegetable patch on the other. He recognised mielies, sweet potatoes and pumpkin.

He stood at the gate and called. "Aunt Maria?"

A woman's head appeared above the closed portion of the stable door, and she opened it awkwardly and Niven realised she was seated in a wheelchair. She, too, had a dog at her side, a sweet-natured thing that crept closer and closer to the gate as they talked.

"Yes?"

"Aunt Maria, the uncle said I should ask for you."

"The uncle?"

"At the mill."

"My father."

"Yes, auntie."

"Why?" The dogs had met now, heads held high, tails arched, noses twitching.

"He said I should ask if the auntie had any food for me," he said, looking down at Lady. "And for my dog."

"Come, she said.

"The dogs?"

"Can't you see she's OK?" said the woman. "No, they won't fight. What's yours called?"

"Lady, auntie."

"Fine. Mine's called Pippa."

"Yes, auntie."

He opened the gate and walked gingerly up the pathway, unsure of how to approach a person in a chair. "Come," she said. "Come inside. I've got some bread here, and food for Lady. You can have bread and jam and tea."

The house, like all the houses he'd known, was immaculately tidy within, but it was different because of the chair. Everything had been built to allow access for Maria: the doors were wider, and the sink and kitchen counters were lower, than any he'd seen before. It had three rooms. The kitchen was the living room, with a two-plate paraffin stove, an old black and white TV and a comfortable sofa, and the other two were bedrooms, one each for Maria and her father.

She made his meal, dexterous and nimble despite the chair, and she fished a cupful of biscuits from a storage bin and poured them into a bowl for Lady, who ate them with unlady-like speed.

"She was hungry, auntie."

"I know, and I think you are, too."

"Yes, auntie."

She had him sit at the table, and she sat with him as he ate. When the first rush was over, and he'd relaxed a little, she said: "Where have you come from? You don't live here. I know all the children here."

"From town, auntie."

"Who gave you a lift?"

"No auntie, I walked."

"That far?"

He nodded. "It only took two days."

"You walked all the way here from town? Why here?"

Niven shook his head. "No auntie, I didn't come here. I'm going to the mountains."

But this auntie didn't laugh when he said it. "The mountains? Why, child?"

Niven bent his head and felt a newly familiar pricking at the base of his eyes. He stared at the plate before him, unable to speak.

"Where is your mummy?"
He shook his head.
"You don't know."
He shook his head.
"Do you have a mummy, my child?"
He shook again.
She wheeled her chair closer to his and reached out and touched him. "Tell me," she said, and he started to cry.
Maria reached behind herself for a tea towel, and handed it to him, and sat and stroked the back of his neck over and over, and Lady sidled up to him and rested her chin on his leg.
When he could speak again, he said: "It's quiet in the mountains, isn't it, auntie?"
If she was surprised at this she didn't show it. "Very quiet," she said. "Very, very quiet."
"I want to go there," he said, and nodded his head.
"We can go this weekend."
"How do you say?"
But Maria had made up her mind. "You can't go on your own, child. You'll stay here until we can get a car to take us there. You can sleep on the couch."
"I carry water," said Niven.
"You carry water? Don't you go to school?"
He held his head proud and tall. "No auntie, I work."
"Little man," she said. "And do you live all alone?"
"No, auntie, my house... there was a fire..."
"And that's why you ran away?"
"I didn't run away! I walked."
Now she laughed, long and hard, and he stared at her, not realising what he'd said.
"How did it happen?"
"I don't know, auntie, I wasn't there. Mark and Michelle..."
"Mark and Michelle?"
"We all lived there. We lived together. They burned with the house, and I was out at sea," and he was crying again.
Through the course of that morning and late into the afternoon, Niven told Maria more than he'd told anyone anything before. He spoke of his school days and of his mother, of his water carrying and his friends, of his terrifying night at sea, and of the fire that had brought him to come to the mountains.
He told her everything - but he never spoke of his gift.
At length, by the time Maria's father, Christopher came home, Maria had fallen in love with Niven, as parents do who adopt their children, and she'd consider no discussion: Niven was sent to them, and he would have to stay here, where he'd have a home and parents (of a sort), and he'd go to school, and in return he'd carry water in the afternoons, like many others in their little camp here by the mill, and on the weekends they'd take him into the mountains and that way they'd show him their love.
And in the meantime she'd make a bed for him on the sofa, and with his next pay packet, her daddy would start buying the timber they'd need for a bedroom of his own.

+ + +

The mountains across the valley stood sharp against the clean, clear morning air and Niven lifted his bucket to the ground and stopped to rest and look and dream a moment. It no longer mattered whether he made it there: he'd collected his first load of water from the tap and now he was on his way home again, a home he'd never dared wish he'd have.

When he'd left Maria an hour ago, she'd got out her sewing machine - a hand-operated affair because her legs couldn't pump a treadle - and she'd measured him up for new pants and a shirt. Oom Chris, who started a week of late shifts this afternoon, was glad to hand over his duties as chief water carrier of their new little family, and he'd sat out on the lawn, sunning himself and idly throwing a stick for Pips.

And here were Niven and Lady, working again and happier for it. "C'mon girl," he said, lifting the weight to his shoulder with ease. "Let's get home."

And back at Christopher and Maria's house - his house - he emptied his cola-coloured, stream-fed water into a bucket by the stove.

And as he poured, poured it clean, sweet, bright and clear.

Knysna 2008 / BD Lodge Mozambique, July 2009
10,846 Words

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