

Rusty scales of long-dried blood gilded the gum-boots. Izak, who was sent over to buy beer at the shanty town behind De Beer's farm, recognized the blood-coated boots before he separated the faces of the men in the drinking-place, a one-roomed house with a roof held down by rocks and pumpkins. Izak had a milk-can with a lid secured by a chain, for the beer; it jingled its early-morning sound as the two men cycled back together in the half-dark.

- That husband of Dorcas came past with Izak. - Jacobus's wife brought him a mug of tea.

Jacobus coaxed the last of the pap round his flowered plate, with his fingertips, and made it into a final mouthful. - You can see in the dark. -

She put sugar in the tea.

- Where'd Izak find him? -

- How do I know. Eight o'clock, nine o'clock - when they work in town they come when they like. They go where they like. - She and Alina spent a lot of time together complaining about their children and their children's husbands and wives.

Jacobus passed the paddock where the calves were lying down for the night. One or two staggered to their feet and he murmured something soothing. From here he could see the light of the braziers at the compound, reddening the walls of the breeze-block.

- So you went off to go and get him from the India's? - He treated young Izak with the tolerant amusement of an older man for a youth.

- He was there where I went to fetch beer for Thomas. - Izak was wearing his cap, smiling.

- That place! - Why do you people send Izak there? -

- You go yourself sometimes. -

- I go. He's a child. That place is worse than the location, for him. They'll take your money. If they don't do it themselves, with a knife, they'll get those dirty women to steal it out of your trousers. -

Izak looked softly from side to side, enjoying attention.

The fowls were quarrelling for places to roost on stumps of a tree hung with loops of iron and bits of wire; someone made as if to beat at them and the dark shape of the tree blew up.

- They'll take something else out of his trousers -

- That's nice, Izak? Ay? He likes that -

Jacobus said to the quiet face of the man without work

- Well, what does he say? -

But the man in the blood-gilded gum-boots whom they all thought of simply as Dorcas's husband, since she was the daughter of one of them, of Alina - answered directly, in his place. - Even if he had a pass it's no good, man. There's no work now. That time when I talked to you ... but not now. It was the time at Christmas, before they stopped the farmers sending so many cattle. It was when too many cattle were coming at once. They were dying at the station. You remember? The slaughter-house was full up, we couldn't do anything. The farmers were sending more and more ... because of no rain ...

The man who was looking for work shook his head slowly before them all. The black and white checked cap defined young Izak's head clearly, but this head was still dusty from the morning's work, it had a mothy dimness, half-effacing itself into the perimeter of the firelight. The fowls settled again; the children coughed in their sleep; a woman brought round the last of the beer.

- You keep away from there, Izak. No one should send you, soon you'll begin going on your own and I tell you, that's the beginning of trouble for you. You'll give *me* trouble and that will be the end of it, for you. -

Nobody laughed. Nobody said anything. Jacobus was speaking and he must be heard through.

- That's where they came from, not from the location; the people who left that - down there at the river. -

Nobody spoke but the quality of their presence had changed;

quite suddenly, drawn away at the touch of these words, clenched as the tendrils of a sea-anemone move with dumb show recoil deep under water.

– I'm telling you. –

Izak looked from one to the other, for a clue, quite forgetting. For the moment the withdrawal seemed another reproof directed at himself – what had he done now? – Then the touch reached him, too. He remembered.

Jacobus took a gulp of beer, releasing them from the necessity to bring among them something no one spoke of. But just as they were beginning to talk about other things, he broke in again – I don't ask anyone there. I won't say this one or that one. Who or who. But all the same – He rapped four fingers at the bony plate of his breast, behind which this knowledge, for all of them, was thrust away.

This house smells of cat. For weeks now. Every time he comes, he is greeted by it. It's because the place is shut up all week.

She never ever came to the house.

Although he has spoken to the servants nothing seems to be done. There are too many cats around and God knows how they keep alive, anyway. He has suggested to Jacobus that there are too many cats, but being Jacobus, he just grins and counters with another positive statement: There are too many rats. Cattle apart, you can't get them to care for any animal. He would like to keep a beautiful dog on the farm, a collie or a pointer, but there's no one to look after it during the week.

The smell is strongest in the bathroom. Of course, if a cat gets shut inside, it will often do its business in the bath. There is no disinfectant to pour down the plughole. He keeps forgetting to buy something. Even cologne would do.

'I'm sending you to fetch a most charming and beautiful woman.' 'A most delightful man will be coming to fetch you.' – So that people are already embarrassed and prepared to be bored with each other before they are thrown together in this calculated, voyeur's match-making game. He asked his passenger to get from the glove-box the slip of paper with the address where the lunch-party was being given, and she read out solemnly from some company report that he'd stuck in there: '... and its wholly-owned subsidiaries, Tube Manipulations, Hot-Dip Galvanisers...' The voice she assumed was pompous, the sort of voice she wanted him to think she thought company chairmen must use – she who, of course, couldn't be expected to know because she belonged to another world.

– I'm in pig-iron. –

– No ordinary pig-iron dealer. –

If, when he telephoned her a few days later, he had suggested meeting for a drink or taking her out to dinner she might have been able to say no, the approach somehow confirming they 'had nothing in common', as dinner-party sexual mores would have put it. But the fact that here is a man who phones with the rather odd idea of asking a woman he's recently met at lunch, casually somewhere, if she'd like to drive with him to look at a farm he's thinking of buying – that was the right sort of move with a woman like her. Out of their own set of conventions they allowed themselves that a tycoon – not merely a petty businessman, mind – might have some imagination and dash quite amusing to toy with, in a detached way, never forgetting what sort of person such a man was. The agent did not give him the key of the house. He looked in at the windows, cupping his eyes against the reflections on the glass that prevented him seeing properly into the rooms that, indeed, he could imagine ... if he were to buy the place, bring her there. It was perhaps then, exactly, that the purpose of buying had come to him, taken him up, and exactly because they had not been able to get into the house that day. What it was meant for, for him, was defined and set aside by the fact that it was closed against anything else. She showed no interest in the house; she stood by with her hands full of silver rings spread on her trousered thighs, gazing, with the sleepy look city people take on in the country, away down over the weed-high fields to the willows. – If I had your money, I'd buy it and leave it just as it is. –

– No farm is beautiful unless it's productive. –

– You hear these things and believe them because they sound 'right'. That's your morality. –

The flirtatious sneer in her voice unexpectedly gave him an erection. (Even then, perhaps? ... the beginning of these – inappropriate – reactions now, being pecked on the cheek by some child he's known since she was in napkins.)

– And what's yours, my dear? You're so concerned about those pot-bellied piccanins on the way here, don't you think land ought to be growing food? –

He knew all the answers she could have given, knew them by

heart, had heard them mouthed by her kind a hundred times: On starvation wages? For whose benefit? For your profit? Or your loss, in a bad year, to reduce your supertax? But she decided to play culpable. They sense when they've had that effect on you, it flatters them even if it doesn't excite them, even if they're aware, as a thirty-something-year-old woman must have been, that it can happen to you in response to all sorts of stimuli, few of which they'd find it flattering to be associated with. Smiling, pulling a face: – Yes I know – I know. I want to change the world but keep bits of it the way I like it for myself. If I had your money ... –

That is why you will never change the world or have my money. Wherever she's landed up, marching on embassies, enjoying heroic tussles with nice London bobbies who don't even carry a gun. She will have thrown her bra away by now, like the others, tits wobbling as she is dragged off. A face full of intelligent stupidity, just as the very last time he saw it, not in the slightly shiny olive-coloured flesh but put together by the black dots of a newsprint photograph, recorded looking back from the steps of the aircraft. What was it her kind always said – *I love my country deeply and I am heart-broken at having to leave*. But the highly-respectable company lawyers employed and the contacts with the British government implored for a foreign passport to get away! The intelligent-stupid face so indignant after police interrogation; shit-scared. What did they expect?

– You've bought that farm! –

– Come out to celebrate with me. –

– Where? –

Not yet the house; but soon, soon there. – Wherever you like. The Carlton. –

– Oh God, no. Not champagne and smoked salmon. –

– An Italian place? –

– No, no. Parma ham and melon. –

– All right, you don't like restaurants. –

– We can eat here. Better than those lousy expensive places where you go. I prefer my own cooking. But you must bring wine, I've got nothing worthy of celebrating your farm. –