

CAR-BOY

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LAST call, Richard's Bay.

One foot on the gearbox and one on the throttle (puffs of dust from the car ahead linger, and we thread them like a darting needle), through a cutting—whaaaa-wha-whaaaa—and we surge between the gum trees.

Gum trees in the wind sound like steam escaping . . . hissss . . . ssss.

Stones clatter against the mudguards hard . . . Ta-Ta-Ta.

Sometimes I'm not sure I've got control of the car.

The dust in front lies deep and ridged and furrowed. The country's dry.

Behind it rolls in the thunder, up and out.

Sharp turn . . . she slides sideways, but nothing comes on the empty road and we continue.

Jesus, she's done 98,000 miles. That's what one buys a Rolls for. 98,000 miles in a Plymouth and still she sways and surges forward when I kick.

Ernest's eyes are shut. His head nods.

I'm lonely.

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Ernest and I have travelled in this car for two years now. We've sat together in the heat and watched the dust ooze slowly through the floor and float in the hot still air. We've shared the same small space for two years. The car has thundered forward and the speedometer needle has swung rhythmically and uniformly from side to side . . . 65 . . . 60 . . . 65 . . . 60.

"What are you thinking about, Ernest?"

"Soccer."

"Do you feel lonely, Ernest? . . . Do you ever feel lonely and sad?"

"Yes . . . sometimes I feel sad."

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We surge on.

"Do you want to drive, Ernest?"

"Do you want me to drive?"

"For Christ's sake I didn't say that! . . . I asked if you wanted to drive . . . Don't you ever feel like anything but having women?"

"Yes, I will drive."

We change seats. I step out of the car, stretch, and walk to the other side. All is quiet after the thunder. A far-away bird calls.

He slides across the seat. The car shakes on the corrugations as we pick up speed.

"I'm sorry, Ernest. Would you like to go to the sea after we've been to the Trading Store?"

"Yes please. It's a long time since I was at the sea."

Yes please. It's a long time since *I* was at the sea.

I was there too . . . and the time before . . . and the time before that. Two years and it's still 'I'. Two years . . . We got rid of the 'Sir' first, and then we talked of politics . . . remember . . . and justice . . . and religion and reality and sport and sex. Two years and still when the car door opens it's 'I'.

Has our friendship to be held together by four closed doors?

Must we be isolated by our movement across the still country before we can talk?

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At Richard's Bay the wind is cold.

"Would you like tea?" says the Storekeeper.

"Yes please."

The place smells dry of the country . . . and cosy. Greasy blankets, Pennant paraffin in drums, meal bags rolled down to the level of promise (others sagged like old skin, barren), fill the room.

"We need rain . . . Would your car-boy like tea?"

Lean through the window.

"Ernest, you like tea?"

"Yes please."

Sit down on the wooden bench.

"How's the road to Ntambanana?"

"Corrugated . . . we need rain."

"Looks like you'll get some . . . Two spoons please."

"Never, it's far too cold . . . Your car-boy take sugar?"

"Ernest," through window, "how much sugar?"

Clap . . . the door swings back and forward in the wind . . . clap, clap, clap . . . a white kitten with its fur in points appears . . . clap.

"Two if it's a cup . . . six if it's a jam tin."

"Cheeky bastard, but he's got a sense of humour."

The tea cup has minute cracks and the tea is hot. Blow and tip. Suck gently . . . blow . . . suck gently. Lower the cup.

“New bridge completed?”

“Yes, they’re on the one over the Mpilwane now.”

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Then down to the sea.

Through the camp sites . . . up, round, down, left, up . . . pass a hundred cosy nooks for Summer’s canvas, numbered in bitumen paint on boards nailed to trees.

Two monkeys sit by the roadside.

“Monkeys.”

One’s tired from young, one’s with young. It’s late for them . . . or is it early?

Christ I’m lonely.

A Citroen stands by the sand dunes. Over the dunes the cold wind blows, and the black man runs into the sea with his trousers rolled. A wave breaks and he runs to where the sand is dry and rubs it on his legs.

