

Lessons From The Sauna

- the peril of online dating & more -

by

Michael Klerck

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Klerck was born in 1955, in Cape Town, South Africa and soon went on to spend a significant part of his childhood on the infamous Robben Island where his parents met during the war. He began writing at an early age, and concentrated for some time on writing short stories, one of which was published by Stand Magazine, Newcastle. He qualified as a teacher at the then well-known Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College, and went on to gain a Bachelor of Arts degree through the University of South Africa where he read courses in Economics, Communication and Philosophy while majoring in Psychology and English. He spent six years teaching in the former homeland of KaNgwane near Swaziland and began lecturing in tertiary education in 1987 which saw him involved in a number of pilot teaching programmes.

He is the author of a number of textbooks for the college market, including one on Public Finance that has enjoyed one of the longest uninterrupted runs in the college market since first published in 1996.

He has also had various articles published by Men's Health, South Africa, and is the winner of the 2001 Mondi Paper Magazine Writer's Award for work in the same magazine.

He is the author of the novel ***The Key To Tantalis***, a children's fantasy book, and an adult literary novel called ***Where The Light Is***.

And his autobiographical travelogue, ***From Biltong To Beef Jerky & Beyond***.

He lives in White Rock, near Vancouver, British Columbia.

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This one is for you, Chris.

~ In memory of Drywer Du Toit, and others ~

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Taking A Peek

"Women with small dogs..." said Gord. "Keep away from them."

I did not wish him to think that I might be contradicting him, even by simply asking why it was that they were dangerous, so I kept quiet.

Gord sweated some more and then added, "They buy dogs to replace their husbands and, trust me, you'll never have any place in her home. Before you know it, you'll be sleeping on the couch. And you won't be able to go anywhere without the frigging dog."

I looked sideways at him.

"They are all highly bred, shit chocolate and bark at everything."

I contemplated this for some time while I sweated too.

"And the owners are not far off that either," he added.

Gord had clearly had a bad experience.

I decided to visit the water fountain, but before I could get myself off the seat, Gord continued.

"This one time I had a second date with one of them. I think they try to make up for the size of their dogs, I swear..."

I said nothing.

"She ordered three glasses of French wine at \$20 per glass, on my credit card, and then when we got back to her place, she took out some crap that didn't cost more than \$8 for the whole bottle."

I coughed, trying to show some sympathy.

"Then we took Foo-Foo for a walk. I have never seen such a dump - I swear it was bigger than the dog! And then she expected me to carry the poop in the bag. When I said I didn't know her, or her dog that well, she asked me if it was because I didn't like animals!"

Gord had never said so much before. I could see that his experience had not been a good one.

A lifeguard peered inside through the window. It is likely that they felt partly responsible for the fracas between Trevor who was now banned from the gym for a month, and George who was sitting next to me on the right reading his book, and so no longer opened the door each time.

We were grateful.

"Make sure you check on their profile. There will always be a picture of a small dog somewhere. Usually up against their face. And they're all so frigging ugly too," he added.

I assumed Gord meant the dog and not necessarily

the women.

By this time Gord had managed to get me onto *Match.com*, *Plenty Of Fish* and a few other sites. My favourite was *poF*, although now looking back, and because I no longer have any need for these sites, I cannot tell you why.

I think it was probably because it was free.

Not that I want you to think that I am cheap, even though my friend, Johan, a doctor originally from Oudtshoorn in the Klein Karoo said that he felt I might appear as such.

I did feel a little insulted, but I also felt that maybe he had a point. I had told him the story about one of my first interactions. A very nice looking women by the name of Celia from North Vancouver who had answered a wink I had sent her. She seemed quite keen on phoning me which I thought was very nice.

I was to find out, later, that this was unusual.

I sent her my number and she phoned me one Saturday morning. We chatted for a while and then she suggested we meet somewhere for lunch.

For some reason I became a little suspicious.

The first meeting is always something like sharing coffee, or perhaps just a walk somewhere. But it is not seen as the first date.

Gord had been very specific.

I decided to follow his lead and asked her whether she considered the first meeting a date or simply a meeting.

She seemed hesitant, but then did answer: "I think it is a bit of both."

After a respectful pause, I then asked if it was just a

meeting also, whether she felt we should share the bill.

I was careful to say this gently, like the Canadians do, and not be pushy in any way.

The phone call ended abruptly.

I was left with two trains of thought for some time afterwards. One from Gord who said: "I told you so - she's just a serial dater, and goes from one lunch date to another. You would have paid for the lunch, and never heard from her again."

There was also the opinion of Johan when next I sat on his stoep at the back of his house and had a beer with him.

"You never talk about money on the first date," he said. Then he looked at me, and quickly added, "or the first meeting."

I sat without saying anything because I felt that Johan should know about these things. He had only been divorced once, and his father had also been a doctor. And also coming from Oudtshoorn which had been a very rich town when Ostrich feathers were popular, and not Observatory in Cape Town, he probably knew better.

When Merle skyped me that night she said that she wasn't sure who should pay for what, but that a flower was always a good thing.

And so with this in mind, I always stopped somewhere to buy a flower or two.

It was to Zoe that I took the first flower, a small tulip, one day.

She was, during all the months of dating, the only woman who ever contacted me first. She mentioned

that she was impressed with my reference to *intellectual stimulation*.

It had been Johan, and not Gord who had alerted me to this. It might be tempting to talk about physical attraction, but he had said that this was not what most women were looking for, only.

I thought that coming from Oudtshoorn he knew best so had included the fact, in my profile, that I felt the other kind of stimulation was just as important.

Besides, I had noticed an *Emily-lu* from Port Moody whose subtitle read, "*Sincere men seem to be obsolete. How much truth is this ?*"

It spurred me on to believe that maybe Johan was right, and I decided it was important that I should come across as *sincere*. And talking about physical stuff up front is perhaps not the way to go about this.

Zoe had emailed me to say that she liked my profile and thought we should meet.

When I read this I was encouraged because I thought that I was getting the hang of things.

Even Gord said that it is quite rare for women to email first, that they rather wait for the man to email them, or give them a wink before responding.

I scanned all three of her pics for dogs and found none. After three or four emails we set about finding a place to meet.

I could tell from the way she said things that she also saw this first meeting as just a meeting.

We agreed on False Creek which is probably my favourite place next to the Waterfront in Cape Town. One can spend hours walking around, looking out across the water at the boats and the apartments on

the other side. And when one gets tired, a ride on a water taxi is even more exciting.

So we met for coffee at a local pub, right on the water.

I paid.

After we had walked all the way to Science World and back, she said she would like to see me again. It would be my first real date, apart from some meetings and two lunches.

So we made a date for that Saturday evening. I was sure the flower had done it.

I took her more flowers - this time two tulips.

I think she was delighted.

I found parking which can be difficult in Vancouver and can also result in one's car easily being towed away, and a fine costing more than three dates.

We had agreed on Mahony & Sons again.

We sat on the deck downstairs, and looked out over the water with the sun catching the windows of the apartments on the other side and turning them into mirrors that looked as though they were made of gold.

There was a thin blanket of snow on the mountains above them, and we chatted about the beautiful vistas Vancouver offered so abundantly while we enjoyed a delicious dinner and some wine.

Then we walked some way around False Creek once again, and caught a water taxi back to the opposite side of the creek.

I felt my heart beating when she slipped her hand into mine and, just like a teenager, I was worried that my hand might be sweaty. Even though it was cool

outside, I began to feel I was in the sauna back at the pool.

This worried me because I could recall a long conversation Merle and I had had, on skype, about hot flushes.

I made a mental note to ask Johan if men could also get them.

Before I knew it, we were standing outside an apartment building, just one street up from False Creek. I had hardly noticed, holding so tightly onto Zoe's hand like that.

"Would you like to come up for some coffee?" asked Zoe.

Gord had said that I would know that things were going right if they invited me in for coffee.

Or something else.

I was almost breathless from expectation and, all I could do was nod. She led me inside, through the fancy front doors, and up in an elevator that seemed to have been decorated by family of a Spanish conquistador.

It was when she opened her front door that I felt things had turned around for the worst.

There on the floor, staring up at us, was the smallest, scruffiest looking dog I had ever seen.

In the olden days before they genetically engineered fruit, mangoes were very stringy. And when one had finished eating a mango, one was left with a pip and an untidy bunch of stringy hairs that jutted outwards into the air at all angles, and that always reminded me of the flames from rockets.

This dog looked just like a mango pip.

As I stared at him I was hoping that the *flames* were not the result of a desperate attempt by fleas to escape from his body.

In addition to his untidy appearance, he had one black eye and one blue one.

In fact after sitting down to recover, and eyeing him myself for a while I became convinced that Zoe could make money by casting him in an alien movie.

Of course I didn't say anything to her about alien movies. I was mindful of the fact that I was there to give her intellectual stimulation, as I had claimed in my profile, and not advice about her dog.

While she poured us a drink I sat looking at him.

He sat at my feet, staring up at me.

After a while I noticed that his left eye was not only blue, but that it was also squint. One small tooth also stuck out, and a portion of his tongue dangled to one side, out of the corner of his mouth.

I think he assumed I was startled in noticing all this, and felt sorry for me, because he tried to pacify me with a tiny, friendly growl. Even when he did, his tongue did not go back into his mouth.

"He's my Little Man," said Zoe. "I couldn't do without him. He keeps me company, listens to my stories and welcomes me home each day after work."

I asked what he did all day while she was at work.

"Oh, he goes to doggie day care," she said. "It's a little expensive - \$500 a month - but the Little Man deserves the best, don't you think?" she said, as she put a glass of whisky in my hand.

I took a small sip and immediately felt better.

At eight thousand Rands a month, I imagined

Merle could keep at least two families alive in Cape Town.

Zoe sat down next to me. I wondered what would happen next.

I soon found out.

It is amazing how women seem to treat couches. No man may ever puts his shoes or feet on a couch, as Merle and my deceased wife always told me, but here in Canada, or perhaps with a newer generation, women today lift their feet and curl them under their buttocks or a blanket on any couch.

It looked very inviting when she did that, and I took another sip of whisky.

For a while we spoke about the difference between whisky and whiskey. Thankfully I knew that one was Scottish and the other Irish, even though I could not remember which one.

I told her that the best way to drink whiskey was to drink it neat without ice, because the ice bruises the whiskey. And to pour into the glass a teaspoon of water to release the flavours. I then commented on the peatiness of the taste and suggested that it might come from the Isle of Islay.

She squealed with delight and said I had guessed the exact place. I did not want to tell her that it was pure luck that I had recognised the taste.

I think Zoe was impressed because she moved closer to me and before long I discovered that my right arm was on the couch behind her and my hand was hanging over her shoulder.

When I realised, after a third sip, that my fingers were neatly fitted over her small breast, I quickly sat

more upright and took my hand away. It's amazing what a few tots of whisky can do, I thought.

But Zoe must have seen the position of my hand as a good sign, because she unfolded her legs from under her, got up and beckoned me to follow her.

When I did lean forward to get up off the couch, I felt a tiny pressure on my foot. When I looked down I realised that the *Little Alien* had his behind resting on my shoe. I was grateful that when we came into the apartment, Zoe had said not to worry about taking my shoes off, which is what Canadians usually do before they enter their home.

Zoe disappeared down the passage.

I leant forward and very gently, so as not to upset the Little Man, nudged him off.

I followed Zoe down to the end of the corridor. There I found her bedroom.

By this time the whisky was beginning to have some effect and I even found myself commenting favourably on the many pictures of her and the Little Man on the walls all around me.

Before I knew what was happening I was lying down on the bed next to Zoe. I had a warm feeling, lying there. We were alone and it was comforting to smell the aromas of lavender and peach in the room.

I exhaled deeply, closed my eyes and began to float as though I were one of the yachts tied to a buoy in False Creek, with just a gentle current that lifted and dropped me every now and then.

Suddenly I heard a soft thud.

I raised my head and found I was looking straight into the blue, squint eye of the *Little Alien*. He had

taken position in the middle of a bench covered in furry fabric, at the foot of the bed. He was staring at me with his head cocked to the left. I became convinced that with the weight of the squint, and also the dangling tongue pulling him in one direction, that this was why his head was bent over to the left.

I took a slow, deep breath and lowered my head onto the pillow again.

Zoe seemed very comfortable. In fact, so comfortable she leaned over and began to tickle my ear with her tongue. I was immediately reminded of the kiss she had given the dog when we entered the apartment, and hoped that the whisky had had some effect not only on her mood, but also on her mouth.

It was a strange sensation, the tickling, and soon I realised that the entire tip of her tongue was inside my ear.

"I don't mind some nookie," she said, taking her tongue out of my ear, "but I must just tell you that when we're finished, and you do perhaps get to sleep over, it will have to be in the spare room."

I was determined not to show my ignorance in asking what *nookie* meant, because I felt I was getting a handle on the whole dating scene, and imagined I knew what it was.

At least, if I was to sleep over, I could do so alone without the Little Man between us. Or staring at me from the foot of the bed.

Zoe whispered into my ear, after licking it once again, "Just pretend to fall asleep and he'll go away."

I lay as still as I could with my eyes closed.

I don't know if it was the whisky, or the fact that I

had brought her two flowers, or just that it was having a man lie down beside her, but she soon fell fast asleep.

All that talk of nookie, me sleeping over, and whisky must have been just too much for her.

I lay there contemplating my future with Zoe. And the Little Man.

When Zoe started snoring I decided that perhaps The Universe was giving me a sign.

I slipped off the bed as easily as the Little Man had slid off my shoe, and made my way down the short passage to the front door. Behind me I could hear the soft thud of a tiny body landing on the floor of the bedroom, and then the pitter-patter of little feet on the tiles all the way to the kitchen and the front door.

What happened there reinforced my idea that Gord knew exactly what he was talking about when it came to small dogs because when I looked down, just before I closed the door, there was the *Little Alien* sitting on his butt, staring up at me.

I cannot tell you for certain whether it was just the image of the mango pip that did it.

Or if it was the three tots of that deliciously peaty whisky I had in my stomach, but when I looked down at him he seemed to have swapped eyes.

The right eye was now blue, and squint. And the left one was now black. In addition to this his tongue was now dangling down the right side of his face, rather than the left, having followed the squint.

I know, after talking to Johan, my doctor friend, a few days later, that this is impossible but I have decided to record these incidents just as I remember

them.

In addition to the fact that they had swapped places, the right eye, which was now blue, went especially squint.

But it was not just that it went squint.

It was that it went so squint, and his tongue dangled out so far, that the poor little fellow fell right over onto his side.

I felt so sorry for him, that when I did relate part of the encounter to Gord the following day in the sauna, I referred to the dog as neither *Little Alien* nor the *Mango Pip*, but respectfully as the Little Man.

Gord just said, "I told you so."

And that was the end of it.

We never said anything about small dogs again.

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When The Trains Roll By

Every man has an iconic male who plays the part of a role model.

Driver Du Toit was one of them, for me.

It is strange, but even in a bad society, sometimes good things happen. It was because I met Driver Du Toit that I met Patrick, and because I met Patrick that I met Merle and she then started working for my parents and became a member of our family.

And if the Universe makes connections, no connection could possibly be more strange than the fact that Gord, from the sauna, looked almost identical to driver Du Toit.

But it is perhaps unnecessary to look for so many co-incidences. What is important is that Driver Du Toit made an impression on me, and I on him.

I had just finished two years of conscription in our national service and I had some time on my hands. A friend had told me that getting a job as a fireman on a

steam engine paid really good money.

And so it was that I found myself working with Driver Du Toit, on his steam engine, in the middle of the seventies when South Africa still had a large fleet of them in operation, and people would come from all over the world to photograph them. And us.

You might be wondering what this has to do with living in White Rock, British Columbia and dating. But in fact it is impossible to live in this small town and avoid the trains, and not see my Driver Du Toit. I see him regularly, high up on his seat, commanding the engine. Looking out over the tracks up ahead.

Looking out for any danger.

Leila found me online, and messaged me out of the blue one day.

She was obsessed with trains.

And in White Rock, it is impossible to avoid the trains. For some reason, the British Columbian government, or the little city of White Rock itself, had seen fit, many years before, to actually sell all of its water frontage to a foreign company in America in order to lay down tracks and have trains pass through.

I felt it was strange because I had never heard of a country selling sovereign land to a private company, and in another country. I had been used to 99-year leases in South Africa, as my father had once explained to me how they worked.

And so years later, in contrast to the small logging trains and a few others that brought tourists to the sleepy town of White Rock many years before, trains were now much longer, with not just one engine pulling them, but four, and each weighing hundreds of

tonnes. And the fully loaded cargo trains weighed in more than the largest ferry in the British Columbian Ferry Services fleet.

And there are many of them each day, swamping the town itself. As you can imagine, many people are not impressed with these trains as they often wake the residents when blasting their horns early each morning. And the tracks, sadly, do a good job of separating the shoreline and the bay from the town itself.

Their presence presented a conflict inside of me, because I remembered Driver Du Toit with each one, and when a train goes by, I look up and honour my memory of him by acknowledging the driver himself. With at least a nod or a smile.

Of course there were some residents who glare at me, and one day one even said, "Don't wave at them, please; it only encourages them. We don't want the trains here."

Leila was different.

She became so excited when any train rumbled by, she would whistle, call out hooray! and sometimes jump up and down like a schoolgirl trying to attract the attention of the captain of her sporting team.

I asked her if her father had perhaps been an engineer, or what we in South Africa called a *drywer* in Afrikaans - a driver.

She said no. She simply loved trains.

I did not particularly like sarcasm, but I do remember saying to her, on that first meeting-date, that I felt she had come to the right place.

Because in White Rock, it is impossible to separate oneself from the trains. The little city is only 3.5 square

kilometres, and its waterfront promenade is only about 2,5 kilometres long. In most cases the trains themselves run the full length of this promenade.

Much to the delight of Leila.

And so it was that the three meeting-dates we enjoyed before the abrupt ending, consisted of her waving frantically at the engineers on board, and whooping with delight at the passing of each railcar.

I did relate a few details of our first meeting to Gord.

Uncharacteristically, he looked sideways at me. "If they like trains, it's probably because they come from some small town, or a farm, on the prairies. They're good people."

I nodded. Who could question Gord?

He was so certain about his observation that he added, "In fact, often the best kind of women."

Perhaps I felt we might have had a future, or perhaps I just wanted to impress Leila, but on our second date I mentioned that I had once derailed an entire train.

When she looked at me and whooped again, I was reminded of how that angel came to life in the stadium on Robben Island that night. It was as if I had flicked a switch and Leila lit up inside. Perhaps it was more appropriate to say that she looked almost as if she was going to explode.

"You derailed a whole train!" she shouted, getting up off the bench and responding so loudly, the people walking by stopped.

One even clapped.

I tried to look the other way, but could not escape

this reaction that brought so much attention to both of us.

Thankfully, as Leila continued to shout, scream and holler with delight, another train came by and all but drowned her exuberance.

"Man!" said Leila when she finally sat down with the passing of the last railcar, "That must have been so awesome for you! I mean, what happened?"

I said that if she agreed to sit down with me at a coffee shop somewhere far from the thundering trains, I would tell her. I also suggested that she not become too excited with the unfolding of my story, as it was not that much of a spectacular derailment.

Just an ordinary one.

She agreed.

Once we reached the coffee shop, I settled down with a green tea latte and began.

Leila had decided on just a glass of water, and was eagerly waiting for the episode to unfold.

I told her that I was just nineteen, before I went to study to be a teacher. I had six months on my hands and someone persuaded me to join the railways as a stoker. They were also referred to as fireman.

During the interview, I thought this might mean that I was going to be putting fires out, but on my first day, I realised that I would actually be making them.

Leila's eyes opened wide.

I told her that I had reported for duty on a June morning, in the middle of winter, at 05:45, to Salt River Depot in Cape Town, to be greeted by long lines of steam engines.

Large ones, small ones, dirty ones and others that

looked as though they had just been delivered from some showroom because, lovingly tended to by their drivers, they gleamed with the gold reflection of their highly polished brass in the early morning light, and their shining black boilers.

It was a frightening moment for me - dark, raining and very cold.

I didn't think, I told Leila, that I had any idea what I had let myself in for.

I had clutched, in one hand, a small box of food and a drink I had been told to prepare for myself. And in the other a small bag with pyjamas and a change of clothing. We were going over the pass, sleeping at a siding overnight, and coming back the following day.

As I walked over the tracks looking for my engine, and Driver Du Toit, I suddenly realised that I might have let myself in for something that was a little beyond me. Drivers and firemen stared at me. Some making comments about the new rookie. A few shaking their heads; clearly they knew what I was about to discover.

The engines themselves spewed out steam, oil, water; they heaved and coughed as though they were alive, even though still stationary there in the yard, their drivers tending to them, oiling them down one side, and then down the other. It was as if they did this with love. And with each oiling, with each touch, the engines themselves seemed to sigh or groan gently in response.

It was an eerie scene, I told Leila. And that first day I would not ever forget.

I could see the fireman on the footplates above

me, cleaning the interior, and now and then throwing a shovel-full of coal into the red hot furnace.

I continued to walk over each track. I felt that I might never be able to do what was expected of me.

But then a large man, holding an oilcan, raised his hand and greeted me. He called my name. It was Driver Du Toit.

"Good morning," he said. "Report to Nico up there," he pointed to the cabin itself.

I nodded. I climbed up.

It was hot inside.

Nico greeted me and showed me where to put my bag.

"You keep out of my way, and just watch. Don't try to do anything. After a few days I will start telling you what I am doing. But for the first few days, just watch."

I nodded.

I was dressed in work pants, boots, and a dark shirt. I could feel the heat of the fire on them.

Driver Du Toit climbed up, shook my hand and sat down.

"So you're here with us for six weeks. To learn."

I nodded.

"And then the exam?"

I nodded.

"I will give you one of my books I used to learn the rules of the road, with drawings of all the signs. You will learn from it, look after it and give it back to me when you have finished the exam."

I nodded.

He settled down. A shunter came up to the side of

the cabin, below. For a while they talked. I was to learn, soon, that it was the shunter's job to make sure the train had the right railcars.

And this later became really important with the derailment, I told Leila.

She exclaimed with a soft whimper.

I thought about asking her if she had ever seen or travelled with a steam engine, but I decided against it.

I resumed my story about that first day.

It was time to go, I told her.

"Gooi!" Driver Du Toit beckoned to Nico. Throw!

I turned to look at the fire doors. On the boiler in front of me was a nameplate in shining brass - details of the model and manufacturer.

It also read, two fireman every eight hours.

Nico saw me staring at it.

He smiled.

"Don't wait for anyone else..."

And he began to throw coal. Lots of it.

After what seemed like a very long time, he stopped, sat down and lit a cigarette.

He and Driver Du Toit were looking up at the steam gauge. It was close to the red-line they were waiting for.

Just before it reached the red-line, Driver Du Toit pushed the large accelerator down towards the fire doors.

The engine groaned, all four pistons working as if with immense primordial effort. And then a skid-shudder, as one wheel slipped. And then another.

But with each sshhoef! of steam, and forward thrust of the pistons themselves I could sense the en-

gine trying desperately to bite into the track in its quest for true, lasting traction.

Then, suddenly, we were moving.

And as we pulled out of the yard, she couldn't help herself, and let go. And the steam valve opened wide, and it felt as though the entire engine exploded. The steam came pouring out above us so loudly I thought it would wake the city itself.

But it did not last long, and soon we were chugging down the line, eastwards, towards the Hottentots Holland mountains, and Sir Lowry's Pass itself.

I said to Leila that I knew we were going to go through the tunnel in the mountain and come out on the other side.

Nico didn't manage to sit down for very long, to rest and to smoke his cigarette.

With just a flick of Driver Du Toit's left hand, he would slide off his seat and start shovelling the coal from the tender behind us, into the hungry fire.

Every time Driver Du Toit opened the doors, Nico's swing was perfect, and into the furnace the coal flew, thudding against the sides of the boiler walls, or its roof.

And then the doors were closed again, and the burning on my pants, against my skin stopped. But only for the few seconds it took Nico to turn around, pick up another shovel-full and thrust it, forward, into the flames beyond the open door.

Leila looked as though she needed to take a deep breath.

I took a sip of my green tea. And then continued.

I told her that once I had counted how many

shovelfulls of coal Nico threw before we left the yard.

Leila stared at me. I asked her how many she thought he would have to throw before Driver Du Toit decided it was enough to start our journey.

"I...I don't know! Fifty?"

I told her that once I had counted two hundred and fifty five throws. And each shovelful weighed around fourteen pounds, or seven kilograms.

"That's a lot of coal," said Leila, "a lot of coal!"

I remember Nico sitting down with his cigarette, and within minutes, Driver Du Toit beckoning with his hand. And the process would start all over again.

When we got to the tunnel, things got scary, I told her.

Leila sat there with her mouth slightly open. I could see she was in great suspense.

"The tunnel? What happened?"

I shook my head, adding slightly to the drama of the story itself.

Just before we entered, I told her, I could see Driver Du Toit looking up at the steam gauge. He saw me notice his glance, and he commented:

"We must make sure there is enough steam to get us through the tunnel. If there is not enough, we're in trouble..."

Leila held her hand up against her mouth. "What did he mean by that...?"

Well, I explained to her, as though I were an expert on trains, which I knew I was not. If there was not enough steam, the steam-brakes would come on automatically. And if that happened in the middle of the tunnel, there are only two things the fireman can

do.

Leila leant forward. "Throw more coal to make more steam!"

Well, I told her, cocking my head to one side - this is true.

But the problem with this option is that more coal makes more smoke. And smoke inside a tunnel is not a good idea.

Leila looked a little frantic.

"But they can crawl out, right? I mean, there must be space between the engine and the tunnel wall..."

I nodded slowly. But then, shook my head also. Slowly. And in deference.

I told her I could well remember the sad look on Driver Du Toit's face when he told me how his nephew had died inside that tunnel.

Leila gasped.

"Hy was te vet," he had said, looking at me, assuming I understood. He was too fat.

I told her I had put two and two together, and realised that he could not fit between the engine and the wall of the tunnel itself.

He had suffocated, desperately trying to build up more steam, while the driver himself had escaped.

Leila gasped.

In fact it was such a gasp that it reminded me of the sound when the fireman kicked the lever on the footplate of the cabin, expertly working it back and forth with the toe of his boot, so as to create a vacuum, and thereby the suction needed so the water could flow from the tender behind us into the boiler.

I could remember how it had taken me four or five

attempts before I was able to do this. The first few had resulted in a rush of steam down the side of the engine itself, almost connecting with an angry shunter who was coming up beside us, and water gushing out of the pipe below, onto the tracks.

Nico had laughed at me.

But when I got it right, the gasp of that sound made me think, there on the footplate inside the cabin, that with the hissing of steam and the engine's gentle grumbling and groaning, that I was attending to a living thing.

And any engine was always a female to all of us.

And I told Leila that the precise nudge of that short water lever, this way and that, on the floor of the footplate reminded me how much those gentle prod-dings made her truly come alive, as if it was just what she had been waiting for. How the right touch could, in fact, make her groan from pure satisfaction - like when that water began to flow through her and the water level began to rise in the glass, she always seemed to make a deep sigh.

I noticed Nico smiled each time. And after a while, I smiled too.

I told Leila I felt this was a mystery, because deep down, I knew the engine was just a machine. Even though it was not what I experienced each day I was on any steam engine. There was always some realisation, some feeling that I was wrong about this. And it was a feeling that haunted me.

Just that little kick, a nudge - a touch, and she seemed to calm down. Each time.

I don't think Leila blinked once.

In fact, I became so concerned, that I stopped with my story, and got up to fetch her another glass of water.

When I returned it was as if she, too, had calmed and when I sat down again she said, "I can see it. I can almost smell that fire, and see the water rise in her boiler. Please don't stop..."

I was starting to become concerned, and wondered whether we should rather change the venue and go somewhere private.

I was worried that when I reached the climax of the story, Leila might become so excited, she too might blow off some steam, right there in the coffee shop, and in front of other people.

I did not in any way want to have the kind of reputation that I was someone who set dates on fire.

But then I remembered this was only our second meeting, and that suggestions of such things, like a private location were not proper, and I might very easily lose any further opportunity to see her again. And so I continued with my story.

I told her that we made it through the tunnel, with the steam gauge not far from the red-line mark, and when we reached the summit and levelled out, she let go again, and spewed her heat and the contents of her belly out through that escape valve stirring the rocks, and the fynbos - heather - that blew gently in the breeze on top of the mountain itself.

Leila stared dead ahead, at me.

I told her we had a good night's sleep. And the next morning took on coal and water, and collected the long train of apples at the Elgin siding, and started

our way back down the mountain.

I stopped talking for a moment, and made as though I was stirring my cup of latte that was now empty.

Leila could see that something might be wrong and she touched my hand. "Did something go wrong?"

I told her that it was a difficult memory, but that nothing had gone wrong that particular day. Although, thinking about it again, I realised that day was the start of it.

In fact we made it to the bottom of the mountain, through the tunnel. We had stopped at Sir Lowry's Pass Village station to take on a little more water. To visit the little shop on the platform, and buy some cigarettes. I can remember buying a large, cold Coke and another packet of Chesterfield Mild. Nico had bought a packet of Lucky Strike. Plain.

Driver Du Toit was nervous, in his seat, high up in the cabin.

We knew that this village had a bad reputation for riots, insurrections, mobbings and general social unrest.

It was in the middle of apartheid, and three white men stopping, albeit inside a large engine on the tracks, attracted attention. No one knew why this village was so traumatised; perhaps it was because it was so far from any major centre. Perhaps the small police station was under-staffed. All I learnt that day was that it was an unsafe place, and if there were riots in Cape Town, they would always somehow start there.

Driver Du Toit called us. "Kom, ons moet ry!" Come,

we must go.

Nico and I climbed back up into the cabin.

"So you made it back to Cape Town?" said Leila.

I thought about it, looking down at my empty mug, and realised that my memory was fading - it was such a long time ago that I could not remember whether it was that trip, or another, that saw Nico and me inside the coal tender behind us.

It could not have been that day, because I remember taking coal at Elgin. The tender must have been full.

Perhaps it was another time. But I told Leila there, inside that coffee shop, how one day Nico and I, some five or six kilometres from Salt River Depot, had run out of coal. The gauge was dropping. Thankfully we did not have a full load behind us, but we could not stop in the middle of the main track.

It would have been embarrassing.

Driver Du Toit laughed, and pointed to a little cupboard under Nico's seat.

Nico opened it and took out a small dust pan and two brushes.

He beckoned to me, and we both climbed into that coal tender and gathered the last remaining coal dust to get our engine and our train back into the depot. I had, at first, burst out laughing at him, thinking it was a joke.

But I shall never forget standing upright in that tender that day. I looked around and realised that Nico had, single-handedly, thrown some fourteen tonnes of coal from the time we had left our siding many hours before.

"That's a lot of coal!" gasped Leila. "Fourteen tonnes - oh, my God!"

I got up and filled her glass with water. The bubbles gurgled inside the large container on top of the counter as the fresh cold water came spewing out the bottom.

Leila beckoned to me, her hand up in the air, "I need a coffee. I can just feel it - the derailment is coming up..."

I watched her approach the counter. I felt a little uncertain. Should I be letting go of all this on just our second meeting-date, I thought? What more would I have to tell her, I felt, if I told her everything right there?

She sat down again.

"So you said that the driver was responsible for the engine. And the....the shunter was responsible for the railcars. I know that this is important when it comes to the derailment, right?"

I nodded.

That particular night, I told her, I had been driving the train. But it was all about the shunter.

In fact it was Patrick. A brand new shunter on our watch.

I told Leila that we had to go forward a couple of months.

I had studied driver Du Toit's book from cover to cover. And I had passed the two-hour oral exam.

When I came for my last shift with driver Du Toit and Nico, I had climbed up onto the footplate, and there was my driver beaming from ear to ear.

"They told me you got a distinction. I have never

had a fireman who got a distinction. You make me proud man. You make me proud," said driver Du Toit.

And so it was that I never forgot driver Du Toit's teaching. And his pride when I had made the grade.

But it was his patience, above all else, that I remembered. How he worked his engines, how he fed them the oil from his personal oil can each time, as though he was tending to something he loved. And how he had treated both of us. Never shouting, even when we made a mistake.

He had been a true gentleman.

I stopped briefly, and I must have had a tear in my one eye, because Leila reached out and touched my cheek. Her head was bent to one side and she looked sad.

"I know something happened," she said. "It's okay. You can tell me about it."

I shook my head, wiped my eyes and said that I had promised to tell her about the derailment, and that was what I was going to do.

After I said goodbye to driver Du Toit, they posted me to the harbour of Cape Town, I told her.

Thankfully I had a much smaller engine - an S-class, if I remember. She was a shunting engine, I said. It never went *op die pad* - on the road as we called it. Instead she scuttled between all the warehouses, connecting long trains, positioning them, and making them ready for the larger engines to collect them the next day, or that evening, depending on the shift, for the long journey up country.

And thankfully unlike Nico's engine, she carried only three tonnes of coal.

I had a very different driver. He was much younger. A tough man who was very much unlike Driver Du Toit.

But we did also have some fun.

Our favourite thing was to drag-race that small S-Class engine down along a straight track in the shunting yard.

One time he challenged me, betting me two Rands, which was the price of a restaurant meal in those days, that he could out-accelerate me in my Volkswagen Beetle.

Leila's jaw dropped.

"And what happened?"

I told her that to my own amazement, over about one hundred metres or so, he managed to do just that, and from a standstill.

They were perky little engines, those S-Classes.

Patrick was the shunter who was assigned to us most nights, and by this time he and I were friends.

He was Coloured and it was, I told Leila, only in 1975 that the South African Railways & Harbours employed non-white people to such an important job for the first time.

He came aboard at the start of each shift, and chatted to both my driver, and to me.

Nico, in the four-piston Garratt engine had taught me how to cook bacon and eggs, and *boerewors* - sausage - using the shovel as a frying pan and the heat of the fire inside the fire-box as an oven.

We had many delicious meals that way.

When I was posted to the harbour shunting yard, and met Patrick, I used to cook for all of us. And I think

this is how Patrick and I became friends.

And then he had introduced Merle to me. And it was a blessing, because my parents were looking for a housekeeper. I told Leila that Merle had been with them ever since. Even when she was semi-retired, she still did work for them because my mother said she was family and she could not imagine life without her.

Anyway, our normal night shift, in the harbour, consisted of us arriving at around six in the evening.

Patrick would come and fetch us, and give my driver some idea of how much shunting we would be doing that night.

In most cases, we were done by around ten o'clock. And my driver would pull up between two buildings, out of the way and out of sight. And he would take the shovel, and expertly throw just enough coal onto the fire, almost blackening the red surface, so that very little glow was visible. He would fill the boiler with water, and then settle down for the rest of the night, and sleep.

When Patrick came to fetch us the next morning around five o'clock, the fire would be glowing perfectly, the water half way down and we would make the slow journey back to the yard, clean up and go off shift.

But this one night it was different, I said.

Leila leant forward again, her eyes slightly wider.

Patrick kept coming back, I told her.

It was this track, then another, this train, then another. So many railcars had to be coupled to so many different trains on different tracks that long after midnight my driver became irritated.

I didn't like the look of his eyes when he was angry.

And I had seen him angry now and then, like when I had levelled the coal inside the firebox with the long fire-iron.

I never found out what that fire-iron was meant for, but when he saw me using it to level the coals inside the firebox he was enraged. He said that if he caught me levelling the fire with that fire-iron again, he could *bliksem* me - beat me - so that I would never be able to throw coal again.

He told me a good fireman throws the coal right. And that is how a fire is level - by throwing coals properly. Not with anything else, least of all a fire-iron.

After that day I was a little scared of him.

And it was a weird thing, but years later when I heard about Driver Du Toit, I also heard about that driver whose name I will not mention in case his family is still around, and alive. But, I told Leila, he had gotten into some altercation at home, and had murdered his uncle.

I never levelled the coals with anything ever again.

He was a naughty man, too, and used to spend most of his days out on the road, on his bike, looking for young girls.

Clearly he relied on his night's sleep in the cabin of his S-Class engine to catch up.

But that night there was no catching up.

We were busy doing one *afskop* after the other.

This was an illegal manoeuvre that most drivers in shunting yards agreed to do.

It entailed shunting a long train towards, and over a junction point. The shunter would swivel a green

light, signalling that he wanted us to accelerate, and then just before the junction itself, he would switch to a red light, signalling us to stop as quickly as possible.

He would have already uncoupled the railcar at the end, and that would then continue to travel down the track to join the particular train it was assigned to.

This, I told Leila, was called a flying shunt - *afskop*, or in direct translation, a kick-off.

It was illegal, because many manoeuvres took place at high speed, and some railcars contained animals or dangerous chemicals. I must admit that most drivers would not do it when this was the case.

One flying shunt actually involved Patrick one day, I told Leila. I was smiling when I said this, because it was so funny.

We always had what north Americans call a ca-boose. It was a small railcar that housed guards or personnel that travelled with a train, usually on long journeys. In fact we called it just a guard van.

There was always one at the back of every train.

One morning we were shunting, and my driver and I watched as another engine did flying shunts up and down on the track next to ours. Eventually the guard van had to be attached to the end of the train.

Patrick and another shunter got on board. Of course they were both new in the job.

The idea was that one shunter would look out of the window and call out to the other shunter to turn the wheel at the back of the guard van in order to apply the brake. The flying shunt was particularly fast and if they didn't apply the brake, the van could collide mightily with the rest of the train.

They flew past us, down the track, at high speed. Unfortunately the communication between Patrick and the other shunter had not been good, because as that guard van sped down the track on a collision course with the end of a very long train, each shouted to the other: "Draai! Draai die briek!" Turn, turn the brake!"

Neither of them could see it, but their heads, each stuck out of the opposite window meant that there was nobody turning any handbrake inside that guard van.

And, man, did that van hit that train with a force.

Its back wheels jumped straight up into the air, and it was a miracle that van did not end up on its side next to the train.

Both Patrick and the other shunter could be seen coming down the tracks towards us, each holding their heads in their hands and shouting obscenities at one another. "*Jou stupid fok! Ek't gesê draai die fokken briek!*" You stupid f*ck, I told you to turn the brake!

Of course it didn't sound as funny in English.

Leila laughed, nevertheless.

Anyway, I continued, that night we did flying shunts, one after the other. The engine itself was at the end of a siding, so we were doing these shunts backwards.

Not that this mattered in any way.

I could see my driver becoming more irritable.

"*Kan jy dryf?*" he asked me at one point. Can you drive?

I was taken aback as this was a privileged and important job. I could not believe he was actually want-

ing me to drive the engine itself.

Leila squealed, softly.

I told her that I got up off my chair and walked to his side of the footplate.

I looked at the long accelerator on the left of his seat. And then at the gear lever that was either pushed forward in order to advance, or backwards in order to reverse.

I had also noticed that when he wanted to stop he would quickly pull the accelerator up towards him. Then immediately after that, push the gear lever in the opposite direction, and then pull down the steam brake so that it was horizontal. The engine would stop within a very short distance. This was essential so that the rest of the train, in a flying shunt, did not go over the points.

He got up off his seat.

I sat down where I had watched him sit all those months. It felt strange.

I took a deep breath.

The first time I touched the accelerator I was terrified. I had been attending to her, loving her, filling her with coal. With precious water. Looking after her just as Nico and driver Du Toit had taught me.

But touching her there, on that handle was quite another thing. It took me to a higher place. What if she didn't want to respond to me? What if she didn't like my touch, I thought.

I pushed the accelerator down, gently. We moved down the track, but too slowly, so he beckoned for me to push the long handle down further.

I did so. Soon we were moving effortlessly.

He watched my every move. Forward. Stop. And then back. Stop. Change gear. Flick the steam brake up to release it. Down, to activate it when I pulled the accelerator up, to stop. Then we moved in the opposite direction when I moved the gear lever forward.

He must have watched me for about ten minutes.

"Jy kan dryf," said finally. You can drive.

He went to my side of the cabin, and began to shovel coal into the firebox. He carefully filled the boiler with water. And then he did the most amazing thing. He settled down for the night and fell asleep.

"No!" said Leila, almost knocking her cup of coffee over.

I breathed in deeply, stirring the memories within me.

I told her that it was actually quite easy. I sat with my back to the open window, so I could lean out and look down the track. My left hand would normally have been positioned on the handle of the accelerator.

But because we were shunting backwards, I had my back to the window, and so I manoeuvred the accelerator with my right hand in fact.

And my right hand was also ready to instantly pull down the steam break, and also change the gear to either forward or reverse.

Because I knew, that if we were travelling forwards, I would be sitting facing forwards, and that my left hand would be working the long handle of the accelerator, and my right both the gear lever, and the steam brake, I took notice of the fact that my first driving position was different.

Leila had her mouth open again.

I told her I got so good, that after my third flying shunt I felt myself becoming confident.

My engine and I were working in unison, as though we were one.

And I told her it was just like...; but then I stopped and changed my mind. It was, I told her instead, like cooking a meal together with a woman, and laughing at the same things.

It was a thrill to be there in the middle of the night with her; alone.

To be in full control of this huge, beautiful beast that breathed; that was alive.

Even though, I reminded her, it was just an S-Class steam engine.

Leila took a quick sip of coffee, but soon realised her cup was empty, so she held up her hand and quickly filled it with fresh dark roast. Black. And when I looked down at her cup, I realised it was as black as those steam engines had been the first time I had laid eyes on them.

"Okay, go on," she said.

I tried to describe the darkness all around, in the dead of night. And the silence.

Except for the breathing of the engine: her gentle, slow hissing. Her sighs. And, now and then, the urgent gasps when I accelerated her, or the disappointed hisses when I slowed her down.

Or stopped her.

I felt, that night, that I learnt for the first time what it is to be connected to another life form. When I touched her there on her accelerator, enticing her to

move, she always drew in a little breath, just before her wheels began to turn. It was an interaction that made me feel more authentic, more alive.

I leant out backwards, my head out of the window, and looked down the track.

Far in the distance, I could see Patrick, I said.

There was some movement on the side of the last railcar. He was uncoupling it.

And then, suddenly, the urgent sideways-flick of the his green lantern: *afskop* - kick-off!

I pulled the gear lever down towards me for reverse. Remember, I told Leila, we were shunting backwards.

I released the steam brake, pushing it up. And pushed the accelerator down, gently, towards the door of the firebox. And when she began to grip the tracks, down even further. Further, even more.

We were now going fast, rocking gently from side to side as we went down the long track itself.

It was what the engine did: rock, from side to side as she thrust herself forward. Or back.

And then, suddenly, it happened.

Leila could not contain herself. She let out a whimper.

I told her that the engine shuddered, shaking from side to side much more violently than usual.

I did not wait for the red lantern.

I instantly yanked the accelerator up. All the way, towards me.

I grabbed the gear lever and thrust it forward.

And as my hand came down I pulled, with urgency, the steam brake into a horizontal position in front of

me.

The jerking, the sudden de-acceleration, the quick squeal from her belly, and the groan she made as her wheels bit into those tracks woke my driver.

"Wat was dit?!" he shouted. What was that?!

I was terrified.

Leila grabbed my one arm. And then put her hand up against her mouth with her other hand.

I realised, I said to her, that something had gone terribly wrong.

My driver got up and looked out of the window. And then he climbed down from the engine, and walked along the tracks.

I knew I could not avoid taking a look myself.

Slowly, I leant out of the driver's window and peered into the darkness.

It was a sight to behold, I said to Leila who by now had tears in her eyes.

There were railcars everywhere, I told her.

They were spread all over the quayside. Scattered, carelessly, like dinky toys a little boy had thrown out into his back yard.

I paused, and then looked down at my empty mug of latte. I told Leila, I could feel my heart beating wildly when I saw all those railcars thrown around like that.

I asked Leila if she could remember what I had said about the driver, and that he was responsible for the engine alone.

She nodded, not able to say anything. Her one hand was now gripping my left arm so tightly I could feel the blood-flow stop.

I told her I had managed to stop our engine just three or four metres from the junction point itself.

Poor old Patrick had not switched the point fully - the railcars had all been empty and were therefore very light, I told her. One had jumped over the point itself and dragged all the others with it.

Leila gasped.

My driver came back to the cab. He looked up at me. *"Jy't goed gedoen. Die engine staan nog reg!"* You did well. The engine is fine.

Leila gasped again, letting go of my arm.

I flexed my fingers, and let the blood flow back again. It was almost painful.

I told her it took them just two hours to put those railcars back on the tracks.

I never drove a steam engine again after that night, but until my very last day, my driver always looked at me with more respect. And sometimes, he even gave me a smile.

I told Leila that it had been like being with a beautiful woman. And then something terrible had happened, and I was never allowed to be alone with her again. Even though, when I returned to just taking on water and feeding her coal, I never felt that she was in any way angry with me. It was just that I could never be with her in that special way again.

I think it was on that date that Leila held my hand very tightly as we walked from the coffee shop onto the promenade on Marine Drive.

We did meet once again.

But I am not sure I should say too much about that third date. Perhaps I should be remembering it as our

first proper date - but I think that the memory of that derailment became even clearer when we met again.

Leila made me repeat the entire episode, word for word and I shudder, just like that engine on the track that day, when I recall what happened as a result of my retelling the entire story, alone that night with her.

It reminded me so much of being alone, in the darkness, with that little S-Class.

And it made Leila's ending even more difficult for me, because that night I learned that knowing how and where to touch a woman can produce wonderful outcomes.

I did not see Leila again, because soon after that wonderful evening, she had gone jogging on the tracks and a train had struck her.

When they found her earphones ripped and torn to shreds, one earpiece on one side of the track, and the other on the other side, the police came to the conclusion that she had been listening to music, and so could not hear the honking of the train's horn.

And whenever I think of how much she had loved trains, it made me truly sad.

Because now, when I walk down the promenade, it is difficult to do so without thinking of her.

And I think, also, of my driver Du Toit.

He, sitting so high up on that driver's seat. And how good he had been to me.

It was many years later, just after Emma and I had married, that I saw Patrick again. It was, funnily enough in Adderley Street, just outside Die Groote Kerk - more of that later.

He told me they had killed Driver du Toit - mors-

dood.

One evening he had stopped at Sir Lowry's Pass station, to take on water and feed his engine, just as we had done that first time I travelled with him into that dark tunnel, and through the mountain itself.

The people in the village had been rioting.

"Hulle het hom met 'n baksteen, deur die venster doodgegooi," said Patrick, looking down. They threw a brick at him through the window and killed him.

They had then dragged him off from the footplate of his beloved engine, and beaten him until he was unrecognisable.

I was glad I had made him proud that day when I passed my exam with a distinction, and remember how he had bragged about me to the other drivers.

And so, when I walk along the tracks here in White Rock, and look up, and catch the eye of one of the engineers in a train, and wave, I think of my driver Du Toit, and of how he must have felt a premonition of his own death that day we had stopped at that station, all those years before.

Because I remember, so well, how he had been agitated that night and how he had urged us to climb back onto the engine, and to get going as quickly as possible.

And it makes me sad to think of him lying there on the ground, next to his mistress. And I wonder what gentle, mournful groaning that engine might have made there at that station, knowing that she would have to make the journey back home without him.

And I sometimes imagine that I know just how she might have felt when I think of Leila. Because the day

she died I realised I would never get to feel her exuberance, or hear her exclamation at the sight of a train ever again.

And, with her passing, I realised just how quiet it really is for me when the trains roll by.

8

Serving Papers

I said nothing to Gord about the abuse of my family jewels when I saw him again. I could sense that he was in a bad mood, anyway, as he did not enquire about my latest escapade.

Besides, I didn't think he knew anything about curried chillies. After all, people in Canada don't even talk about hot food. They call it spicy, as I have already said.

I sat in the sauna next to him, thinking that I might have been happier to deal with spicy rather than with the heat I had endured.

I decided also, after consultation with Merle, that I would take a short break from trying to impress women with recipes.

She did say that I should keep cooking, just in case. I did.

In fact I became an expert cooking *Bobotie - bub-boe-tee*.

This is one of the signature dishes of South Africa. Particularly the Cape Province.

To be quite accurate, as Merle often reminds me, most everything that is good comes from the Cape which is also known as The Cape of Storms - the name given to this location by the Portuguese.

Not only the food that arrived with the Malaysian slaves, but also the wine that arrived with the Huguenots from France have made this province famous all over the world.

Merle is sensitive enough to remind me that when I say things like this - that there is no need to leave the Cape, as it has the best of everything - it is an insult to people who live in the old Transvaal.

Or the Transkei, for instance.

Or KwaZulu Natal.

I said that I had no particular feelings on the subject but that I was simply repeating what she often told me and also what I remember Uncle Storky had always said. I think it was one of the few things that he and Oom Athol always agreed on, and they would often raise their glasses to celebrate this.

Not necessarily that all good things came from the Cape, but that they both agreed on something.

I am grateful that the Portuguese arrived at the Cape. I was reminded of their talent with food when I found myself in Canada, and encountered a Nando's Chicken franchise.

Don't get me wrong - they didn't perfect chicken only. I once heard a tourist say, at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront in Cape Town, that nobody can cook fish like the Portuguese.

I think they are right.

They also have their own spicy gift to food: it is called peri-peri. It was Weimaraner Diaz who alerted me to the benefits of peri-peri when I was young. He had always said that there was something special about this Portuguese sauce.

One day I asked Oom Athol about Weimaraner's name, and he told me the whole story.

Apparently, in the sixties, a Herr Hans August from Weimar, about 80 kilometres southwest of Leipzig Germany had bought a farm on the outskirts of Stellenbosch, and had employed Vernon Diaz as a farm worker.

Vernon apparently won Herr August over when he managed to produce a bunch of dead rabbits each Friday. Herr August was particularly impressed, because he loved eating rabbits, but could also not understand why, when he had specially-bred Weimaraners from Germany - dogs that were bred to catch rabbits - they never came home with any.

Herr August spoke so highly of Vernon Diaz to his other employees, telling them that they should follow his example, that the farm community started calling Vernon *Weimaraner*.

Each week, on a Friday afternoon, Weimaraner presented at least three freshly killed rabbits to Herr August.

Oom Athol said it was a mystery to the German farmer, because his dogs never came home with any rabbits. No matter how hard he worked them on his farm.

Not only did Weimaraner manage this, but he also

introduced Herr August to peri-peri. Of course he never told him that it came from the Portuguese. He told him that his wife had invented it, and made it in her kitchen.

According to Oom Athol, Herr August went wild when he tasted it. Especially when he used it to marinate the rabbit before slow cooking it.

In fact, according to Oom Athol who was distant family of Weimaraner Diaz, Herr August paid Weimaraner a fortune for the recipe and tried to patent the sauce, by using the African Bird's Eye Chilli discovered by the Portuguese in the first place.

He even called it *peri-peri*.

Unfortunately things did not turn out well for Weimaraner when Herr August found out that the Portuguese had been using peri-peri for years, all over the world.

Things went from bad to worse when he had a visit from a farmer who had a large farm up against the Hottentots Holland Mountain range.

Especially when it turned out that this farmer bred rabbits.

I had recovered from my sabbatical and took a peek at Match.com again.

I had four winks and three favourites, and two matches. The one was a women with a large car, so I deleted her.

The other was of Portuguese origin. I immediately thought of cooking something with peri-peri for her, but then remembered that I had stopped using food to impress women.

She was a lawyer.

I consulted Gord.

"Does she have any dogs?" he asked.

I said that I had twice scanned her pictures - there had been four: two outside some court. One at home on a deck looking at the sunset. And one in Mexico.

"The dog could be lurking somewhere," he warned. "Ask her straight out."

I said I would.

We began communicating via the site. She was busy the following week, but agreed to a meeting the week thereafter. I did ask about dogs and she said she was a cat person.

Her name was Andréa.

I prepared myself for the meeting.

I tried to think of as many Portuguese stories as I could, but all that came to mind was Weimaraner and Herr August.

And Weimaraner's divorce.

I was beginning to wonder whether my resolve to stop trying to impress women with my food was such a good idea. After all, I was sure that Epicurious.com or even Jamie Oliver would probably have a recipe with peri-peri.

Perhaps even one with rabbit.

But then I remembered the jar of chillies sitting in the door of the fridge back home, and decided against it.

The meeting went well enough. I thought it best to focus on her entirely and not tell her about the Portuguese in South Africa. Or bother to mention peri-peri.

I asked her about her work; she said she spent a

few days of her week in court. Mostly with divorce cases.

She asked about my work. I told her that I was retired.

"So you have an adequate pension."

I smiled, and nodded.

"So is it just a pension, or is it adequate?"

I told her it was both.

It was her time to nod.

"More coffee for you?"

I told her that I had only one cup a day, and that was decaf. She asked if I was allergic to caffeine. I said that I just felt it was not good for me.

"So doesn't decaf coffee still have some caffeine in it?" she asked.

I said not really; perhaps just a *residual* amount.

"Oh. So what's the difference between *some* and a *residual amount*?" she asked.

I smiled as though I didn't really understand and decided it was time I focussed on something else so asked, straight out, whether she owned a Bel Air.

She looked a little peeved, even though she smiled.

"No, I have a Lexus."

I smiled and nodded, feeling relieved.

I must admit I had been feeling I was under some scrutiny, as if in court. But I did like the sound of her voice, and she looked very professional.

I could not imagine her roaring down Marine Drive in a V8.

I began to wonder whether she had any date-rules. I considered asking her straight out before a date, but decided against it. I don't think she was used to hav-

ing anyone asking her questions. It was probably always the other way around in court.

We sat in silence, and then I got to thinking of Weimaraner's divorce.

It was a sad affair.

In fact after the sale of the recipe and the visit from the rabbit farmer over the hill, Weimaraner's fortunes turned for the worst.

He began drinking heavily again and soon Oom Athol was talking about him and his wife getting divorced, in the pub.

I had spent two years in the army, fighting the Cubans on the Border in Angola, and then came home. Unluckily for me I had been classified as a white by the apartheid government. Had I been coloured, like Emma I would not have been called up to fight.

My father had asked me what I wanted to do. I had vaguely mentioned law. Frankly the idea of debating issues quietly in a courtroom, after various military encounters in the bush, seemed to appeal to me.

In truth, I had no idea what I wanted to do.

He arranged for me to spend a week in court, and it so happened that Oom Athol and his wife arrived one day to show support for Weimaraner's wife at the final divorce hearing.

In South Africa, this is always in the supreme court, and not a magistrate's court.

I was sitting near the front because my father had made me go in early each morning. Although as a citizen I did not need permission to enter, my father had singled out this particular court because the judge was a friend of his.

Mrs Diaz sat demurely to one side.

I could see that divorce proceedings were not pleasant. I had spent the previous two days witnessing this.

It is like a death, and very sad.

And to make matters worse, it cannot be easy to stand up in court and speak of one's troubles. Especially when one needs to remember a long list of questions asked by one's advocate.

I had gotten used to the procedure. But it was easy, sitting down in the gallery. It was another thing standing, and talking about the failure of one's marriage, while responding to questions from one's lawyer.

And then having to remember to look the judge in the eye when delivering the answer. And *not* the advocate.

Even I got confused every now and then. And I wasn't even the one asking for a divorce.

Mrs Diaz seemed flustered when it was her turn.

"Please state your name for the court," said the advocate - the first of many routine questions.

She did.

He went on to ask her about their children.

Then about the marriage itself, which meant asking about her husband.

This was the confusing part, because every now and then she would refer to him as *Weimaraner*, and the stenographer would raise her left eyebrow, the judge would raise his right, and the advocate would raise his fist to his mouth, and cough.

She would then have to correct herself and give his

proper legal name.

"State his full name for the court, please," said the advocate quickly.

She did.

"And his date of birth."

She did.

Thereafter the advocate must have gotten the sequence wrong, because he suddenly jumped to another matter.

Instead of asking the routine question *how long has he resided in South Africa*, to which Mrs Diaz had been prepped for the proper answer, he said:

"You said also, Mrs Diaz, that he is an alcoholic."

She replied that he was.

"How long has he been an alcoholic?" he asked, looking at her with his head cocked to one side.

"Since birth, Your Honour," she said, looking at the judge.

Some people in the court burst out laughing.

This time the judge coughed.

I felt so sorry for Mrs Diaz standing there all alone in that dock and having to face these strangers.

But then she seemed to be relieved also as she began to giggle.

They eventually established that he had lived in South Africa since birth, and had been an alcoholic since working for Herr August.

When I began to tell the story to Andréa, she seemed less interested in Mrs Diaz, which I felt was strange as Mrs Diaz shared the same name as the Portuguese explorer - Bartholomew Diaz - who had been the first person to round the Cape of Good Hope.

She seemed far more interested in the court procedure in South Africa where attorneys and advocates perform different roles.

I told her as much as I could, but then when she began asking technical questions I felt a little like Mrs Diaz in court that day and began to falter with some of the answers.

I decided we should change the subject. So I asked her if she would like to meet again.

"Oh, yes, that would be fine," Andréa said, taking another sip of coffee, "when?"

I said any time that would please her.

Apparently she did have dating rules, and came out with one immediately.

"I just want you to know that if we do get on, and see one another again, I will want to take a look at your papers."

Once again it felt like a court appearance, and I suddenly thought of Magdalene and the couch, and wondered whether my prospects with her might not be better.

Somehow I could not imagine Andréa coming anywhere near my couch.

I had seen nothing in her profile about cuddling.

I began to strike all these possibilities off the list - *Portuguese cooking, cuddling, the couch* and then there was the fact that I wasn't even *divorced*.

Perhaps, as a divorce lawyer, she dated only divorced men to gather experience. I tried to think whether I had selected the wrong radio-button somewhere on the site, and had chosen the divorced option.

I didn't want to ask her whether she dated divorced men only, but then I couldn't imagine that she was wanting me to produce the burial papers of my late wife, in lieu of a divorce decree.

Eventually after some silence I plucked up the courage and told her that I wasn't divorced.

"Oh, not the divorce papers. Test results," she said.

I was just being silly, I said smiling, although I had no idea what she meant.

We left it at that and instead of inviting her to my empty couch and a counter full of ingredients, I suggested a walk the following Saturday.

She agreed, saying she would check her schedule and email me before Wednesday.

She did.

We met up that Saturday evening, around six at False Creek. It was a beautiful sunny day and after a long walk, with her pointing out various apartments across the water, saying she knew the owners and how much they had settled for, we sat down for a drink at a small local pub on the water.

I felt we were going nowhere with the dating-rule she had presented, which in fact had sounded more like an ultimatum.

I dived straight in, and asked her, with a smile, so that I could change it into a joke, where I could get such papers from.

"Oh, the papers? Well, any hospital; there are also lab clinics all over the place. But phone your doctor first, otherwise you will have to pay."

I sipped my beer slowly, thinking that perhaps I should have splashed out and bought an Innis & Gunn

with 7% alcohol, rather than the Honey Brown I had on the table with only 5% in it.

Another two percent might have jolted some memory deep inside.

I tried to think hard, as I focussed on a yachtsman, single-handedly, trying to tie up his small sloop to a buoy in the water below us.

Lab. Hospital. Papers.

I took another sip.

I had been thinking of legal papers.

Andréa got busy texting on her phone, after she apologised to me.

I sat with my beer and continued to watch the yachtsman. He had missed the buoy and his yacht was now slowly moving on a collision course with another tethered boat.

For some reason I recalled my other court visit.

After the divorce Oom Athol had felt sorry for Weimaraner, and when he lost his job on the farm, he had employed him as a driver.

I think Oom Athol had simply assumed that Weimaraner had enough experience.

When he and Oom Athol came the following week, not to the supreme court but this time to the magistrate's court in Wynberg, there was clear evidence that he had not anything of the kind.

My father had said I had seen enough divorces, and he was worried I would get used to them. He felt I should get a taste of real life in the local magistrate's court.

He knew the magistrate - Blackie Swart. They were old friends from the time we had lived in Simon's

Town.

It was rather strange, but it would be the second time I saw Oom Athol in court. This time Uncle Storky came with him for support.

Apparently Weimaraner had been in Oom Athol's bakkie (pick-up truck) on a delivery.

"Can you explain to us," said the prosecutor, "exactly where you were, and what you were doing."

"Yes, your Onna (Honour). I was in the bakkie."

We waited.

"Yes, but why? And what were you doing?"

"I was trying to get pass this man in his car, but his car stopped dead, right there in the street. He said there was something wrong with his alternator."

"With the alternator of his car?"

Weimaraner stared at him.

Having had to grapple with the difference between some decaf and the *residual amount* I knew now how he must have felt back then.

The prosecutor seemed unflustered, and repeated what he had said, as though this kind of confusion took place every day. Which, of course, it did.

"Yes, Mr Diaz, but you were on your way somewhere. We need to establish your line of work and the nature of your business on that particular day."

It must have been the long sentence because Weimaraner looked very vague.

Oom Athol began to grow impatient.

"Man, sê net vir hom waar jy op pad was!" he shouted in desperation. Man, just tell him where you were going!

Weimaraner said he was going to drop something

off at Mrs Lavender.

"Let's move on. You stated that the complainant, Mr De Venter, was in a stationary car in the middle of the road. And that you could not get passed him."

Clearly Weimaraner was unable to process more than one statement or question - the alcohol had clearly taken its toll over the years.

He stared at Oom Athol.

"Ja, man!" shouted Oom Athol.

"Silence!" said Blackie Swart. "Only witnesses being questioned may speak in my courtroom please."

"Yes, Your Honour," said Oom Athol.

Uncle Storky poked him with his elbow.

"Ja," said Weimaraner, "he was blocking me. I couldn't puss him."

"Can you please explain to us what happened next?" asked the prosecutor.

Weimaraner looked keen to tell his story. In fact he almost climbed over the dock railing.

"Mr De Venter got out of his car."

We waited. And waited. Clearly Weimaraner was waiting for affirmation.

The judge coughed.

He started up again.

"And he comes over to me and he says, 'man, can you do me a favour, my alternator has pecked up and my battery is flet.' "

"When you say *his* battery, you mean the battery of his car?" said the prosecutor.

Weimaraner looked very confused.

"My fok, ja!" shouted Oom Athol. For f#\$k-sake, yes!

"If there are any more outbursts, I will clear the gallery," said Blackie Swart, the magistrate.

"Ja!" shouted Weimaraner.

The prosecutor continued: "Now, let me get this straight, Mr De Venter came over to you and told you the battery of his car was flet. Sorry, I mean flat?"

"Yes. I already said that," said Weimaraner, getting cocky.

"And what else did he ask you, sorry I mean *ask* you to do?" said the prosecutor, suddenly looking flustered.

"Ja," said Weimaraner thinking again, "he asked me to poes him."

There was silence in the court. One could hear a pin drop. The women all looked down, and only one or two men smiled. But very demurely.

The word he had uttered was particularly crude in Afrikaans, and it referred to the most critical genital part of the female species.

He might not have chosen a dirtier word, even though it was only as a result of the inflection itself.

Of course he had meant *push*.

I was waiting for the prosecutor to ask for elaboration, but he didn't.

"He asked you to poe-push him?"

Weimaraner looked confused, as though the people around him were crazy, asking the same questions over and over. And arguing about whose alternator it was.

Now, remembering the story, I could only sympathise with this poor man - to have every word one says scrutinised, and dissected.

"Ja, so I poesed him," he said finally.

"Nee wat!" shouted Mr De Venter from one corner,
No ways!

"Quiet please," said Blackie Swart. "You will get your turn."

"Hy't my gevra om sy kar te poes!" He asked me to push his car, Weimaraner said quickly, just to make sure.

There was silence.

After a while Blackie Swart said, "Can we perhaps not just move forward a little. Mr De Venter can you please tell us what happened."

"Yes, Your Honour. I asked Mr Diaz if he could give my car a nudge."

"And what did he say?" asked the prosecutor before the magistrate could get another word in.

"He said it was fine. I mean he had a rubber bumper, and so did I. I told him that I would have to put the car into second gear, and that it was called a push-start. Of course I was hoping the nudge would get me moving, and then I would be able to let the clutch out to start the car."

Weimaraner nodded in agreement: "*Ja, dis wat hy gesê het!*" That's what he told me.

"Mr Diaz. What did you then do?" asked the prosecutor, determined to stick to protocol with his witness.

"Your hon-nah. I just toll you. I did what he said. I reverse the car. I start the bakkie in first gear. Then second. Then I poes him."

The penny didn't drop for a while, except it was no news to Oom Athol whose *bakkie* - truck - was se-

verely damaged.

Or to Mr De Venter.

"So, Mr De Venter. Carry on," said the magistrate.

"Well, Mr Diaz reversed. I was sitting in the driver's seat waiting for the nudge, ready to let the clutch out. I thought he had buggered off. Sorry, Your Honour, I mean driven off. I looked in my rear view mirror again, hoping to see Mr Diaz's car up against the back of mine. Instead he had reversed down the road and was coming towards me at high speed."

"Jy't gesê (you told me) second gear!" shouted Weimaraner.

This was too much for Oom Athol.

"Jou stew-pitt idiot! Hy't gevra vir 'n nudge. Nie 'n fokken collision nie!" You stupid idiot; he asked for a nudge, not a f#%cking collision!

He jumped right over the railings of the gallery for spectators, and began to throttle poor old Weimaraner right there in front of the magistrate.

The court case ended in chaos, with the magistrate ordering everyone outside.

Oom Athol went to jail for four days.

Weimaraner got a warning, and Uncle Storky spent the four days Oom Athol was in jail, telling the story to anyone who would listen in the bar, saying over and over that this is what comes from someone who was afraid to go up North during the war.

I was now worried about these papers. I started to feel that some things had been a little easier in the war I had fought in the bush, all those years ago.

I could not imagine that there might be anything

amiss with my Canadian citizenship papers.

But then I remembered she had spoken about the hospital. Perhaps it was the medical we had had in South Africa before we arrived that she was talking about.

I thought of poor old Oom Athol in jail. And I wondered whether remembering the story of Weimaraner and Oom Athol was perhaps the Universe warning me about something.

Even though the jails in Canada take all possible human rights into account, and have televisions and carpets, I wasn't sure that any nookie was worth a sojourn there.

I started to panic.

She finished texting.

"So," she said, "it's been lovely. I'd like to see you again. But without the papers we can only be friends."

I smiled broadly, but felt I was none the wiser.

"No, it's not a federal medical," said Gord the next day. "Or emigration."

I waited for it. Something worse?

"She wants you to be tested."

Tested? DNA?

I wondered if I should ask Gord whether perhaps she felt I was black because I came from Africa.

As always, he seemed to be able to read my thoughts.

"Like for STD's and stuff. Like she's saying she won't go to bed with you without you being clear."

I sat back against the wooden bench. I had heard of animals being tested for genetic lineage, or dogs

for rabies. But never potential dates for a clean bill of health.

I sighed.

The last time I had given blood I had passed out, quicker than Blikkies when he walked into Maria's wedding uninvited, but that's another story.

I wondered whether it might be better if I phoned Sharon to find out how Sparky was doing.

Or even the Little Alien.

I went for the test.

Luckily for me there is a Tim Horton's coffee shop in the hospital.

I didn't pass out, but I had to buy a coffee and two doughnuts before I could walk out of the front door, and across the car park back to my car.

I sat there savouring one with honey dipping, wondering how I had fallen from grace.

After a short culinary career, here I was minus most of my blood, eating processed doughnuts.

I presented the papers to Andréa. She looked down at the results with her glasses perched on the edge of her nose.

"HIV?"

I looked dead ahead.

"HIV is also part of the whole thing; I wonder why they didn't test you for that," said Andréa putting the paper(s) down.

Right there, sitting with Andréa on the deck at Hemmingways, in White Rock, and looking out across the bay with the sun's heavy afternoon rays starting to dance in the water, I felt ashamed that I almost wished for Sharon to come down in her Bel Air.

Had she done so, I might have jumped over the railings myself, just like Oom Athol in the court that day, and right into the back of Sharon's car. I imagined myself turning around, and waving to Andréa as we grumbled down the strip away from her.

Instead I summoned the waitron and ordered another pint of Innis & Gunn, with rum finish. This was a slightly different taste, with them maturing the beer in barrels of rum, rather than barrels of whisky.

Darker, and more ominous.

I felt I needed something more complex to contemplate the way forward.

I wondered whether *any* nookie was worth bleeding all over the place. Again.

I sighed.

"I am sorry," said Andréa, looking almost gracious. "But we don't know each other, do we? I mean, you could have been anywhere, in any country. It is the same for me. I am separated, but haven't been with anyone since my husband."

I smiled dutifully. Yes, Your Honour, I thought.

The waitron returned with my beer. I took a sip and was on the verge of asking whether she had received papers from her husband on a regular basis, but then I thought better of it.

I returned to the clinic the next week, after spending some hours on *pof* and *match.com*. Sadly I found few, if any good looking women without large dogs, small dogs, or cars.

I bled again.

Now I had two sets of papers and far less blood inside of me.

Andréa disappeared.

Apparently the separation with her husband was not going well.

We did speak on the phone a few weeks later.

She said she was delighted that I had thought enough of her. Of us.

And that she was hoping that in addition to the HIV, I had also remembered to get a result for hepatitis.

I said nothing.

I thought of poor old Mr De Venter sitting in his car back then, and waiting for a nudge.

For some reason I felt strongly that any more negotiations with Andréa and I would end up, not on the couch with any kind of nudge, but probably with some form of collision damage.

Perhaps with me coming off even worse than Oom Athol's bakkie that day.

After serious thought, I decided to go back to cooking as a means to find someone and leave Andréa to her own legal devices.

After all I had my bobotie recipe under my belt in more ways than one. I just needed to find a woman who loved food; again.

I told Gord I was finished with lawyers. He said nothing.

I think in his mind he was far busier with his move to Kelowna.

When Merle heard about my resolve, she was delighted.

"Jus leave the chillies out this time. Stick with the bobotie. It's simple, man. They will love it..."

I agreed.

And when I tell this story, of my brush with the law, to some of my friends both in Cape Town and even in Canada, I always tell them what happened to Weimaraner because I feel it is the right thing to do.

I had to return to that same magistrate court in Wynberg, where Blackie Swart had been the magistrate. And where Oom Athol had been convicted for disrupting the proceedings, and where he had been sent to jail.

Some years later my father had had the need for the delivery of some important legal papers to the magistrate's office and he had asked me to take them.

Inside the entrance of the building I ran into Weimaraner.

He had sobered up entirely.

He now held the position of Assistant to The Messenger Of The Court, who was known to the locals as *Haasie Hendriks* - Rabbit Hendriks. I had heard Oom Athol talking about him.

One of Weimaraner's primary functions was to serve papers on members of the public required to appear before the magistrate.

He walked with me to Blackie Swart's office that day, and when I had delivered the papers, he took me to his own little office.

He was so proud of the fact that he had one.

It was a tiny space, perhaps just the size of a large closet.

I noticed in the corner against the wall, there hung a rabbit.

"Haasie Hendriks loves rabbits!" he said, winking at me.

After all those confusing questions Weimaraner had to endure in the courtroom that day, and his own brush with the law, he had finally found his place in the world.

And now thinking of that story I wondered whether, in my bid to find a companion and my new resolve to go back to cooking, I would ever find mine again.