

Taking Selfies with a Sheep

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MY HOLIDAY PLANS RUINED

‘You’ve got to be kidding me!’

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. Not because I knew they would raise my dad’s blood pressure even further – I was sort of used to making his blood pressure soar. But there was one thing you couldn’t accuse my dad of – a good sense of humour. He’s a barrister. He’s always serious. Okay, maybe that’s a bit unfair. I’m sure there are barristers who are jolly and joke around all day. My dad just isn’t one of them.

‘Luke, let’s be clear about this,’ he said in that voice that could reduce witnesses to tears in court. ‘You’re in big, big trouble. I’ve decided that you’d better spend the holidays somewhere else. I’ll sort things out while you’re away.’

If my dad were a superhero, that would be his superpower. The Incredible Mr Sort-Things-Out.

My mom sighed. ‘I’ll pack your clothes.’

If my mom were a superhero, her superpower would be sighing and giving criminals the kind of reproachful look that made them feel guilty for life. Dad’s trusted sidekick, Guilt-Trip Girl.

‘But Dad, listen –’

‘Your grandmother promised she’d be here early tomorrow morning to pick you up,’ he said and reached for the TV remote. Captain Cut-It-Out.

I gritted my teeth.

Fantastic.

I had already made plans for the July holidays that had just started.

Sleep in.

Binge on PlayStation.

Watch movies.

Spend loads of time on WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter.

Hang out with my mates.

Go on a trip to the dry, dusty Karoo with my granny.

Guess which one wasn’t on my list.

Heaven knows how they came up with *that* idea. It wasn’t as if spending holidays with my grandmother was a regular thing. In fact, her name wasn’t often mentioned in our house. And the Karoo, with its endless kilometres of semi-desert nothingness, was one of the last places on earth I was planning to spend a holiday.

I went outside and sat on the garden bench. If it weren’t for the bare trees you could easily forget that it was winter. The sun was beating down on the clear blue water in the pool, the Kreepy Krauly rhythmically tzick-tzick-tzicking. Even in the middle of winter my dad kept our pool a bright blue; he was fanatic about testing the pH level once a week and checking

that there were no signs of algae or any other pool bugs.

After a while, Linda appeared from the house. She had showered; her hair was wrapped in a towel and I could smell shampoo when she sat down next to me.

‘Dad’s quite miffed,’ she said in a sympathetic voice.

I grunted. ‘Oh, really? I didn’t even notice.’

She sighed. ‘Gosh, Luke.’

She would have to watch out. If she went on like that, she would soon be sighing as much as our mom.

Linda was at university – she’s almost seven years older than me. My sister was the apple that didn’t fall far from the tree. At school she had been head girl and had scored straight As, she was studying law and her boyfriend played rugby for the university’s first team. So, anything I say about her will sound as if I was jealous or felt sorry for myself.

‘Maybe the holiday with Gran won’t be as bad as you think,’ she said, trying to cheer me up while removing the towel and patting her long blonde hair dry in the sun.

‘Maybe not,’ I said. ‘Hey, I have an idea – you can go in my place!’

She looked up and merely smiled at my lame joke.

The thing is, the trip with my grandmother wasn’t supposed to be a holiday. It was my dad’s way of punishing me for what had happened. My dad thought it would be better for me not to have any contact with Ryan and Zane. So my phone was locked away and I was banned from calling them – and my dad was

going to make sure that I couldn't get anywhere near them during the holidays. Even if it meant sending me away to the middle of nowhere with my grandmother, although he personally couldn't bear the sight of her.

Linda draped her wet towel over the back of the garden bench and combed her hair with her fingers. She fixed me with a serious look.

'Tell me one thing, Luke... What on earth got into you and those two friends of yours to do something like that?'

She had been studying law for less than a year, but she was already starting to sound just like my dad. Scary!

Staring at the pool, I thought back to the previous Friday evening. Our hushed voices in the dark. Adrenalin pumping through my veins, my stomach knotting with excitement. The sharp sound of breaking glass shattering the silence of the night. The thudding of our sneakers on the tarmac...


I looked at my sister and simply shrugged.

I wasn't a law student but I had watched enough American cop shows to know: *You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be held against you.*

That was exactly what I was planning to do.



GOOD COMPANY



Early the next morning I heard the deafening sound of something roaring in front of our house. I didn't need to look out of the window to know that my grandmother had arrived. Although, when I drew back the curtain, I couldn't help but smile. Next to my dad's shiny BMW and my mom's black SUV in our driveway, my gran's muddy yellow Land Rover looked as out of place as a WWE wrestler at a ballet concert.

'Luke!' called my dad from the lounge. 'Your grandmother is here. Come and greet her.'

For a moment, I remained standing in the centre of my room. My sports bag was lying on the bed, packed and ready. How weird – my room was the only place in our house where I actually felt at home, but there was little that made it feel like *my* place. I had put the *Transformers* posters on the walls when I was in grade three, my mom had chosen the curtains and duvet because I hadn't felt like going shopping with her, all the books on my bookshelf were titles that I'd read years ago, and the hockey stick and tennis racket collecting dust in the corner were from the days when I had still thought school sport was fun.

‘Luke!’ my dad called again, this time more impatiently.

I took a deep breath, picked up my sports bag and closed my bedroom door behind me.

Everyone was standing around awkwardly when I walked in. They looked like dancers who didn’t know what to do with their hands and feet while waiting for the music to start playing. My grandmother was wearing a pair of ordinary denim pants and a pale pink sweater, but she managed to look as out of place in our lounge as her dirty yellow Land Rover looked in our driveway. She smiled when she saw me.

‘My grandson, the troublemaker,’ she said and gave me a peck on the cheek. ‘Goodness, how tall you’ve grown. But I guess that’s what happens when you hardly ever get to see your grandchildren.’

I said nothing.

My dad cleared his throat. ‘Erm... have a seat, Mom,’ he said. ‘You must be tired after the drive.’

‘Not really,’ said my grandmother. ‘I spent the night in a guesthouse close by. I didn’t drive all that far this morning.’

My dad and mom exchanged a silent look.

‘But why, Gran?’ asked Linda. ‘You could’ve spent the night with us and...’

‘I like doing my own thing,’ our grandmother interrupted her. ‘You should know that by now.’

‘Uhm... would you like some tea?’ asked my mom.

‘Not if I can help it,’ my grandmother replied with a broad smile. ‘Tea reminds me too much of frumpy

old ladies at bazaars, not to mention church council and prayer meetings. I've had enough tea for an entire lifetime while your father-in-law was still alive.'

The shocked silence didn't seem to bother my grandmother in the least.

'I haven't been here for ages,' she said, placing her handbag on a side table, 'but I think I still remember where the bathroom is. I sometimes forget that I'm nearly seventy, but these days my bladder keeps reminding me. Please excuse me for a moment.'

As she went out, I noticed that my dad was clenching his teeth. I think he'd forgotten how weird my grandmother was.

I thought of the very first time I had heard the word 'eccentric'. Someone had used it to describe my grandmother.

It was difficult to say exactly *why* my grandmother was eccentric.

Maybe her red hair had something to do with it.

Or the way she always said exactly what she was thinking.

Or the fact that she was a prize-winning photographer who sometimes took pictures of people without their clothes on.

Or maybe the weirdest thing about my grandmother was that she had been married to a clergyman for years.

My mom also left the room. My dad sat down on the couch with a stiff back and stared at the dead TV screen as if watching a news broadcast that no one

else could see. I could faintly hear my mom and grandmother speaking somewhere in the house, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

'Goodness me, the atmosphere around here is thicker than cheesecake,' said my grandmother when she returned to the lounge. 'Are you ready to go, Luke?'

I just shrugged and picked up my sports bag.

Sure, my grandmother's face was covered in wrinkles, but her bright blue eyes were alert. For a moment, those questioning eyes bore into mine.

My dad got up and motioned me aside. 'Now behave yourself, Luke,' he muttered as if we were having one of those inspiring dad-and-son conversations people have on TV. 'And use the time to pull yourself together.'

Then it was my mom's turn.

'Don't worry,' she whispered, hugging me tightly. 'Your dad is good at this kind of thing. He's already made an appointment with the school's governing body... and... he'll handle it.'

I nodded awkwardly and quickly pulled away from my mom's embrace when I saw that she was getting weepy.

'Take care of yourself,' said Linda, also with a small sob.

'Heavens!' said my grandmother. 'What's with all this snivelling? I thought you were glad to get rid of him for the holidays? Come on, Luke, let's hit the road.'

We left the house. Outside the early morning sun was blinding on the canary yellow bodywork of the old Land Rover.

‘Put your bag on the back seat,’ said my grandmother and turned around to greet my parents and Linda.

‘Are you sure the Land Rover is still up to a long haul?’ I heard my dad ask.

‘Are you sure that’s any of your business?’ asked my grandmother. ‘If it conks out, I’ll call a tow truck. Or we’ll hitch-hike to the nearest town. I’m sure someone will give us a lift – a poor old lady and her grandson with the curly hair and the baby blue eyes.’ She grinned wryly and looked at me. ‘Even though these days those eyes are more of a grumpy blue.’

My dad opened his mouth to say something, but I saw my mom shooting him a pleading look. He kept quiet.

My grandmother was small and skinny, but she slipped in behind the steering wheel with surprising ease. She leaned over and unlocked the passenger door for me. When I opened the door, I saw something that looked like a smallish silver flower vase on the seat. I picked it up and got in.

Our peaceful, rich suburb seemed to shudder when my grandmother turned the key in the ignition. Maybe it wasn’t just my imagination because as the engine started to growl, my mom hugged herself tightly, her arms crossed over her chest, as if she was suddenly cold. The Land Rover roared and shook like a

prehistoric animal waking up from a nap. Linda put her hand on my mom's shoulder, and they waved goodbye as we headed out of the driveway. I caught a last glimpse of my dad shaking his head and saying something. In the rear-view mirror I watched my family disappear in a cloud of diesel smoke.

Slowly I let out a breath.

Through the window I stared at the well-known landmarks of our neighbourhood as they slipped by. The small park, the sports field, the café where we bought bread and milk on Sundays.

'I can understand why someone like your father would want to live in a place like Bloemfontein,' my grandmother said to no one in particular.

It was still early morning, so the traffic was quiet. Before long, the houses made way for factories, nurseries and places where old car wrecks were stacked on top of each other, and then open fields.

Suddenly, my grandmother slammed on the brakes.

It was so unexpected that I grabbed my seat. The safety belt tightened over my chest. Gravel shot up against the bodywork of the Land Rover and the vehicle came to a halt in a cloud of dust, right up against a farm fence. On the other side of the fence, a curious cow was watching us while chewing the cud.

I looked at my grandmother in surprise.

'We're going to have a talk first,' she said. 'I can take you back home. But if that's what you want, you have to tell me right now. I'm not your father. I'm not going to force you to come with me.'

I hesitated.

‘The thing is, you’re twelve, Luke, and twelve-year-old boys often mean trouble,’ she said in a calm voice, as if we were merely having a nice little chat. ‘You may be my grandson, but I’m sixty-eighty and I don’t feel like trouble. So let’s make this easy for each other. If you’re planning on giving me trouble, it will be better if I take you back to your parents right away. So, are you planning to give me trouble?’

I felt my cheeks starting to burn, as they always do when I get angry. *All right, I felt like saying. Take me back home. What can my dad do about that anyway? Lock me up in my room for the rest of the holidays so that I can’t see anyone and stay out of trouble? I’m fed up with everyone preaching to me.*

The cow next to the road shook off a pesky fly and kept on chewing while gazing at us intently, like someone eating popcorn while watching a particularly suspenseful movie.

I thought about my room. The *Transformers* posters that I had stopped liking a long time ago. The books I used to love, but could hardly remember. The duvet and curtains that I had never chosen. The hockey stick and tennis racket that I no longer used.

Slowly I shook my head, a wordless *no*.

‘Very well then,’ said my grandmother. She leaned over and took out something from between the two seats. A packet of multi-coloured sweets. ‘Jelly Baby?’ she asked and held the packet out to me.

Again I shook my head.

She shrugged and popped a little red jelly man in her mouth before putting the Land Rover in gear. Its wheels crunched over the gravel, back to the road. The cow kept staring at us as we drove off.

My eyes fell on the weird little pot that I was still holding tightly on my lap. My grandmother must've seen me looking at it, because she smiled.

'That's your grandfather,' she said.

I was so shocked that I nearly dropped the pot. Bloody hell! She could've told me that I was holding my grandpa's *ashes*!

'I hope you don't mind, but I invited him along on the trip. And so far the two of you have been equally good company.'



3



THE DEFINITION OF BORING



Next to the word *boring* in the dictionary there should be a picture of a long, straight stretch of road through the Free State province. As far as the eye could see, yellowish-grey grasslands extended, with patches of ploughed red soil like raw grazes in between.

Since we had left home that morning, I had done the following:

- Counted telephone poles.
- Counted crows on telephone poles.
- Tried to sleep.
- Listened to horrible, brain-numbing country music on the Land Rover's ancient cassette player for about three hours.
- Cursed myself about ten thousand times for forgetting to bring my old iPod. The latest music was on my phone, but at least I wouldn't have had to listen to wannabe cowboys sounding as if they were going to chew off their own arm because they missed a girl so desperately.
- Cursed my dad about ten thousand times for thinking that it would be a good idea to send me away with my grandmother.

I could just imagine Ryan and Zane's reaction when they found out that I was on a road trip with my gran. With my dead grandfather's ashes in a small silver pot on the back seat – where I'd quickly put it that morning after discovering what it was.

Thanks to my dad I had heard nothing from my two best pals for an entire week. I wondered how their parents had reacted to the mess. I was sure Ryan's mum and dad wouldn't have kicked up such a fuss. They couldn't be bothered with that kind of thing – they were too busy with meetings and parties and overseas trips. And Zane's mom had probably long given up on him and his elder brother – she was a nurse who worked long hours, and she had to take care of Zane and his brother on her own. The previous year, Zane's brother had been expelled from his third school. He seemed to be trying his best to get expelled from every high school in Bloemfontein.

In a way, Ryan and Zane and I were as different as night and day. But they were my best friends. My only friends.

I gritted my teeth.

My dad was so flipping unfair.

How was I going to survive the holidays without my phone?

'Are you ready to cross the Orange River?' my grandmother asked and slowed down.

I shrugged, completely unimpressed by her lame effort to get me speaking, or at least teach me a bit of geography.

She just smiled. If my stubborn silence was irritating her, she wasn't letting on. Well, I wasn't going to show her how much that wry little smile of hers was grating on me either. It was a real I-know-something-that-you-don't smile.

The road ran up a steep hill, and on the other side continued along the wall of a giant dam. The sign by the roadside announced *Vanderkloof Dam*. The water was glistening peacefully in the afternoon sun. My grandmother stopped at one of the parking spots next to the road. There was a lookout point, and white-washed concrete picnic tables. She got out, stretched and groaned. Then she opened the back door of the Land Rover, rummaged in a bag and took out her camera. She started fiddling with the lenses and I got out as well. A sign pointed to toilets close to the parking spot. Without saying anything, I headed there.

I considered hitting the road, like a prisoner fleeing from the police. The bushes next to the road were dense. My grandmother would definitely not find me. I could hide in the veld for the entire school holidays and live off edible wild plants. *Yeah, right, Luke. Remember, McDonald's burgers don't grow on bushes.* I could hear Ryan's mocking voice in my head.

When I returned, my grandmother was busy taking pictures of the dam. She was concentrating so hard that she didn't seem to notice me. I walked to the safety rail next to the road and gazed out over the dam. In the distance a motorboat skidded over the water; you could hear the engine droning far away.

The clicking of my grandmother's camera made me turn around. She was taking pictures of me. She simply raised her eyebrows when she saw my annoyed frown, as if waiting for me to say something. Nice try, but I wasn't going to break my silence that easily.

You have the right to remain silent.

'Well then, time to see how clean the toilets are around here,' she said and walked off to go and find out.

A silver passenger van slowly approached and stopped a couple of parking bays from us. Something was written on the side, but the door slid open before I could read the words. Only the letters *PE* and *CER* were visible. I caught a glimpse of a girl getting out. She had long chestnut brown hair that curled loosely over her shoulder, and a milky white skin that looked like even the mildest winter sun would burn it red in a flash. A pair of large binoculars was draped around her neck and she had a book in her hand.

Embarrassed, I grinned and quickly looked away when she waved at me. Dammit, she had definitely seen me staring at her. I walked off and pretended to look at the dam again.

'No wonder there's a sign that says you're using the toilets at your own risk,' my grandmother said at the top of her voice when she returned. 'I think it'll be more hygienic to wee by the roadside.'

The girl with the curly hair laughed. 'Thanks for the warning,' she said.

I moved a little further away. Hopefully she

wouldn't think that I was family of the weird red-haired old lady.

My grandmother was looking for something in the back of the Land Rover. After a while, she appeared with a plastic bag. She placed it on one of the dirty white picnic tables and started unpacking it.

'Sorry, the only provisions we have are fruit juice and sandwiches,' she said. 'I bought these at the garage before we left Bloemfontein. This evening we can look for something more substantial to eat.'

We sat down at the table. While we were eating, my curiosity once again got the better of me, and I glanced in the direction of the van. The girl's mom had also gotten out in the meantime. She had very short hair and also gave us a friendly wave. While chatting away, they took a lot of stuff out of the van. I was surprised to see them setting up a table next to the road, spreading out a tablecloth and starting to unpack all kinds of food and drinks – bananas, sandwiches and bottles of energy drinks. The girl stepped back and took a picture of the table with her phone camera. The woman lit a small gas stove and started boiling water on it while getting their coffee mugs ready. 'Did you remember the towel, Emma?' she asked.

My grandmother unexpectedly cleared her throat, startling me.

She smiled and put her empty juice box back in the plastic bag. 'Are you ready to go?'

I nodded and tried not to show how disappointed I was. Now I would probably never know what Em-

ma and her mom were up to. When I went to the rubbish bin to throw the plastic bag away, I saw the woman sitting down at the table and looking at her watch. The girl had made herself comfortable in a fold-up chair and was reading her book, but every now and again she raised her binoculars and looked at the top of the hill. I tried to see the title of the book she was reading.

Suddenly, she yelled excitedly. ‘Here he comes!’

Her mom jumped up and joined her.

They clapped hands and cheered excitedly when a cyclist crested the top of the hill. As he slowly approached, I saw that it was a man. He didn’t look anything like the sporty, streamlined cyclists you see weaving through the morning traffic on the way to school. His neon pink cycling shirt stretched tightly over his slight tummy, his legs were burnt red, and sweat was streaming from under his helmet. He arrived with a smile and came to a wobbly stop while releasing the catch on his helmet with one hand. The girl ran to him, still taking pictures with her phone.

‘Well done, Dad!’ she shouted.

‘Thank you, thank you!’ he panted.

Rather stiffly, he got off his bike and pushed it to the van. The woman handed him a towel and he rubbed his face and neck dry before taking a long gulp from the bottle that she held out to him.

The Land Rover roared when my grandmother switched on the engine.

I opened the door and got in.

As we left, I saw the girl wave at us.
I never managed to see what book she was reading.