

Lisa Gruenberg
from *Keiskamma*

They say the Indian fisherman was carried off by a rogue wave, but his body was never found. Back when Justus was still with me, we'd see the fisherman on our morning walks, casting his line in a wide arc over the surf.

I returned before dawn from my night shift at the hospital, driving the last fifteen miles down the dirt road to our village. The broad South African sky shrunk me to nothing and the upside-down constellations made the stars strange. The moon silvered the Keiskamma River as I passed the turn-off for the church in Bodium. The ocean crescendoed and faded, like an orchestra that never turned melodic.

The Xhosa say that owls are bad luck, but I still felt graced when one flew along with me, past our nameless village and up our drive, its wingspan wide as the hood of our rattletrap Kombi. Justus and our boys stood waiting for me at the door, their silhouettes backlit by the bare bulb that hung over our kitchen table. Our two old dogs threw themselves off the deck, and banged against my thighs in their rush to squeeze through the rusty gate, that gate that came off its hinges long before I arrived in this country.

Our older boys, Adam and Neo, followed the dogs, touching my shoulder on their way by. Then came our youngest. I grabbed Drew for a hug when all he wanted was to catch up with the older boys; he wiggled free after giving me a sloppy kiss. At any other time of day, Drew's chatter filled any silence that settled around the rest of us. But on the morning walk, he seemed to sense that quiet was what was required.

Justus kissed me and took my hand. The boys' flip-flops and the dogs' nails sprayed the gravel on the road ahead of us. Justus and I walked onto the wide beach as

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the sun lit up the dunes. Drew waited for us with both his hands up, and we took his arms and swung him between us. Then Justus started his run down the hard sand at the water's edge and the older boys and the dogs ran after.

Like a still life, the Indian fisherman stood with his rod balanced against his thigh. He was long-limbed and poised on one leg, like the Goliath herons stalking fish in the marshes near Josay's bar. Drew and I waved to him, but the fisherman kept his gaze fixed on the end of his line held taut by rip currents. Even under winter skies, he was always barelegged.

Drew and I turned away from the fisherman to follow the others. Drew skipped ahead of me and his blond curls glinted in new sunlight. The dogs peeled off halfway down the beach. Their names were translations from Xhosa, words I found impossible to pronounce, although our boys threw off the mid-syllable clicks and clucks without effort.

The dogs were rude. They bit. The leader, a cross between a Saint Bernard, lopsided retriever and God-knows-what wandered into the dunes. The other had a barrel chest and the face of a manic coyote. Her black fur was matted with sand and burrs. She came back and took my wrist gently in her jaws, and we walked on together.

Justus stood at the river mouth, his arms wrapped around Adam's thin shoulders. Drew caught up and took hold of Justus's other hand. Neo, our adopted son, waded out in the surf and did a soft-shoe on the shore, tossing an imaginary hat in the air and catching it behind his back. Muscle flowed under skin the color of dark toast.

Unlike me, hoping to find the lucky shell surviving at the tide line, Justus and the boys went further away from the surf and dug down to pull up perfect cockles,

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periwinkles, conches, zebra shells and albacores. We walked back down the beach loaded down with our treasures, past the fisherman and up the road to our home.

The dogs sprawled under the lanai and the boys sorted the shells into hand-woven baskets and mahogany bowels lining the edges of our rooms. When these vessels overflowed, Justus would use the shells to create a patio off the veranda, and as the shells broke with foot traffic, he would replace each one, even though he knew they would only be shattered again.

Justus lit a cigarette and rolled out a canvas on the concrete floor. The fisherman came onto the porch and stood at the threshold but came no further.

“How much today?” I asked him through the screen.

“Ten rand.”

“Seven?”

“Ten.”

I opened the door and handed over the bill.

Justus lit up his second smoke and walked around his canvas. He held the pack out to the Indian without looking up. The fisherman’s head bobbed up and down instead of left to right.

“No thank you,” he said with the distinctive English of an educated Coloured.

The fisherman left the porch while I dumped the fish in our refrigerator and reattached the electrical tape that stood in for the exhausted rubber seal of its door. Through the windows I watched the fisherman disappear beyond the Coral tree at the end of our drive. Justus sat on the floor next to his canvas, inhaled the last of his cigarette and left our world for his.