

Chapter One

No one in town had ever seen anything like it. Well, except for that advert on TV about the bottled water. Of course, Fanus' aquarium with the exotic fish that everyone ogled over was sort of down the same line. But a lobster tank with a bright blue background and brown lobsters, their claws taped up with yellow sticky tape... Not in a million years would anyone have guessed that something like that would end up in Klippiesfontein.

At first, the supply van pulling up outside Oom Marius' General Store evoked the same kind of mild interest it did every week. Familiar stragglers hanging out on the street ambled over lazily to see what this week's load had brought. That's when it appeared. The delivery guy took his cart to the back of the lorry, hitched the forked teeth under the tank, and lowered it to street level. Interest was piqued. An excited murmur passed through the small crowd.

"Oom Marius," Lenny called, trusting the stagnant air to carry his voice all the way inside the shop, "what's this tank thingy you've got here?"

"Oh that," Oom Marius called back. "It's a lobster tank."

His voice was calculatedly casual. It was at that point that everyone knew something big was at hand. Fake-casual was simply not Oom Marius' way of doing things. Clearly, they concluded, this had something to do with Patty.

Five or six men followed the delivery guy into the dark shop smelling of washing powder and paraffin. They watched intently as Oom Marius plugged the thing into a socket and filled it with water.

"What you mean, Oom Marius?" Frikkie asked. "You going to throw lobsters in there? Aren't they going to start stinking the place out after two days?"

"Don't you know anything?" Oom Marius snapped. "You don't throw dead lobsters in there."

"You mean they're..."

Just then the delivery guy returned with another load. In his arms he held a white polystyrene box which he placed carefully at Oom Marius' feet. He handed him a clipboard and waited for the cheque.

After he'd left, Oom Marius nodded at Petrus, his faithful assistant, to start unpacking the boxes.

"This one you leave for me, you hear?" Oom Marius called, gesturing to the white box.

The mute Petrus nodded.

Oom Marius spent the whole afternoon fussing with his lobster tank. Reading the instructions, shoving a thermometer in and out of the water every so many minutes, acting as if this was what he did all day, every day. The crowd both inside the shop and outside on the blistering veranda, grew. At twenty to two school was let out and the throng filled out even more with barefoot boys in grey shorts and shirts and girls in red pinafores. They carried the smell of dust inside with them.

"*Oom, wat het Oom daar binne in die boks?*" a little one ventured.

"Come then, let me show you what I have in the box, child," he relented. Like the Pied Piper, the giggling kids followed him from counter to lobster tank where the mysterious box still stood untouched.

Taking his penknife from his belt, Oom Marius deftly slit open the tape holding the lid down. With the flair of a circus ringleader, he yanked off the lid and held it above his head. The smell of sea trapped too long inside plastic overwhelmed the children standing in front. As everyone caught a glimpse of the inside of the white box, a chorus of *aaahs* went up from youngsters and adults alike.

With the sudden exposure to light, the four lobsters started wriggling and moving about and the *aaahs* turned to excited yelps. Gingerly (though by watching him no one would've guessed he'd never touched a lobster before in his life), Oom Marius stuck his hand into the box, took hold of one of the creatures' shiny backs and picked it up. He swung it close to his audience. The thing

squirmed in his hands. Everyone stepped back. Holding it above the tank, he dropped the animal into the water. With the same showmanship, Oom Marius proceeded to plunge the other three in as well.

“You going to sell these things here in the shop?” Frikkie asked.

“Of course. Modern supermarkets all over the world sell lobsters like these. Why should Klippiesfontein be any different?” he proclaimed proudly.

“Who’s going to buy them, Oom?” young Daan’s blue eyes stared trustingly at the proprietor.

“What are you supposed to *do* with them? Are they like puppies?”

“They’re to eat, child. To eat.”

Spontaneously the group broke out laughing. The tension that had been hanging in the shop all day was broken. Oom Marius had finally provided proof that he was *mal*. Crazy. The band of kids broke loose and rushed outside to find something better to do than stare at giant water cockroaches that somebody was supposed to eat. The adults drifted away too. Only Frikkie and Lenny hung around on the veranda, smoking cigarettes and calling greetings to passersby.

It was dark and cool inside the late afternoon shop. This was the time of day Oom Marius loved best. A temporary lull in business, the only sound was Petrus’ rhythmic swishing of the broom for the tenth time that day. You could call that Petrus many things, but the one thing you couldn’t say about him was that he was lazy.

As far as anyone in town knew, Petrus had never spoken a word in his life. Of course, no one had bothered asking Petrus’ mother because, at the time he came to work for Oom Marius twenty-two years ago, white people didn’t bother asking black people much. Barking commands was more the order of the day.

It had been at the time Oom Marius was looking for someone to clean his shop, help unpack the shelves, and do his bidding

and calling. He'd taken pity on a scraggly black woman who spent her days struggling around town asking people for spare change so she could feed herself and her idiot boy. One look at the wretched woman and Oom Marius knew he couldn't have her standing in the shop. She'd chase away the customers with that malnourished look of hers.

He walked up to her, "Hey you, what's the child's name?"

"This is Petrus, Baas," she answered.

"How old is he?"

"He's eight, Baas."

"Is he strong?"

"He's strong, Baas."

"Have him here at seven tomorrow morning so he can start work. And make sure you bath him tonight. I don't want him smelling of wood fire."

"Thank you, Baas. Thank you, Baas," she tried to grab Oom Marius' hand.

"Go home now. And here, take this," he grunted, shoving a plastic bag with a loaf of bread, a block of bright orange cheddar cheese and a litre of milk into her hands. "Now don't tell anyone where you got this from, you hear me?" he barked. "Or else I'll have every bastard from the township on my front step tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Baas. No, Baas, I won't say anything."

As the afternoon wore on and the hour hand ticked closer to five, Oom Marius became more agitated like he did every afternoon round the same time. Petrus noticed the glances at the wall clock and quick spurts from behind the wooden counter at the back of the store out to the veranda to peer down Main Street were more frequent today, more frenzied.

It had to have something to do with Missies Patty, Petrus concluded. At five o' clock the school bus would pull in from Springbok where she worked as a secretary for the high school. The students would spill out onto the pavement in front of Baas Botha's Butchery in their green and white uniforms. Then Missies

Patty would step off the bus in that deft way of hers and cross the road to the General Store for her and her husband's cigarettes. This, as everyone in town knew, was Oom Marius' favourite part of the day.

No one could remember when it became public knowledge – the way Oom Marius felt about Missies Patty. It seemed it had always just been that way. Of course, Oom Marius didn't tell Missies Patty how he felt and she pretended she didn't know. In fact, the pretending in this town was so good that even Missies Patty's husband, Shawn, and Oom Marius' wife, Tannie Hettie, pretended they didn't know. It was a good town for pretenders, this Klippiesfontein.

Even though no one could remember *when* he started feeling this way, everyone knew *why* he did. It was because Missies Patty had lived in the big city for many years and knew big city things that no one in Klippiesfontein knew. It was because Oom Marius had always dreamed of living in the big city himself and learning big city ways. It was like it always is in life. One person has something that another one wants. And normally they'll go far to get it. At least, that's the way Petrus saw it. Missies Patty had big city ways. Oom Marius longed for big city ways. And now there was a lobster tank inside the shop.

At five to five Oom Marius barked at Petrus, "Go sweep the veranda and tell me when you see her coming."

With patience born from years of servitude, Petrus nodded, collected his broom and ambled slowly out onto the shaded veranda.

Swish, swish, swish went the rhythm of the broom. From force of habit, Petrus took in the details of the slow happenings of the crossroads. On the veranda of the Royal Hotel, white men, usually the same white men, sat drinking their cold beers. And they said that black men were lazy, Petrus scoffed. On the opposite side of the street, a farmer was parked at the petrol pump with his *bakkie*, filling jerry cans with red diesel for his tractor. And at Henk Coetzee's Hunting and Fishing Store, he could see the owner staring out the window, probably thinking

about some or other animal he'd shot over the weekend. *Swish, swish* went the broom.

"Petrus," came Oom Marius' slightly frenzied voice from inside. "Where's that yellow lappie? There are kids' fingerprints all over this bloody tank."

Leaning his broom against the wall, Petrus ambled inside and went into the small storeroom at the back of the store. He emerged with a bottle of Windowleen and the yellow duster which he proffered silently to Oom Marius.

"Who's keeping an eye on the bloody bus if you're in here?" snapped Oom Marius.

Dragging his feet, Petrus went back outside, picked up his broom and continued his sweeping. He heard the *spssht, spssht* inside as Oom Marius sprayed Windowleen on his precious tank. Then he heard the heavy gears of the bus moaning their way up the road. Leaning on his broomstick, he watched the usual faces disembarking, holding up hands in casual salutations, shouting goodbyes and crossing the street without looking for cars. Klippiessfontein wasn't the kind of town where you had to pay too much attention to cars. At last he saw Missies Patty coming down the bus steps. She rubbed her palms over her thighs to get the creases out of her pencil skirt, tossed her blond hair over her shoulder, and headed for the General Store.

Broom up against the wall again, Petrus walked back inside. He crossed the floor until he was standing right behind Oom Marius who was still polishing the tank. He touched his shoulder.

Oom Marius spun round, "Is she there? Is she coming?"

Petrus nodded.

"Come. Get out. Take out the rubbish or something. Come on. Get a move on, you lazy bastard."

Petrus heard this line spoken to him every afternoon when Missies Patty was crossing the road on her way to the General Store. Other men, they might have been angry to hear words like this spoken to them but Petrus... he didn't get angry. Petrus understood Oom Marius' excitement at seeing Missies Patty. Petrus felt the same way when he saw Precious. Maybe he'd also

swear at anyone hanging around if she ever walked up to him.

Petrus carried the rubbish out to the dark, narrow alley between the General Store and the video shop next door.

He heard the bell above the door ring as Missies Patty walked into the store.

"Afternoon, Oom Marius," she called with her voice full of music.

Oom Marius laughed his pretend-shy laugh, "How many times must I tell you Patty, just call me Marius."

"OK," she answered. Friendly, like Missies Patty always was. "Can I have a pack of Bennies and Hennies and some Camel Filters for Shawn, Marius?"

Petrus heard a rustle from behind the counter as cigarettes and money were exchanged.

"Is Tannie Hettie feeling better today?" Missies Patty asked.

Petrus knew what was coming now. The only thing Oom Marius couldn't stand of Missies Patty was when she mentioned his wife. And Oom Marius wasn't much good at hiding things he couldn't stand.

"Better? What's she got to feel better about?" he snapped.

"I saw her coming out of Doctor Brown's office yesterday afternoon," Missies Patty explained.

"Ag, it was just her routine check-up, Patty. It was nothing. You know Hettie, she likes to be on time with these things. But tell me, why were *you* at the doctor's off..."

"No, Oom. She was crying when she came out. There was definitely something wrong."

"Hettie? Crying?"

"Yes, Oom. She was crying."

Oom Marius stood quietly for a few seconds. Petrus knew he was thinking about Missies Patty's words. He spoke again, "It's probably just some of this depression thing going around. You know, women and doctors are very fond of it," he said. "I'm sure if Hettie was sick she'd tell me."

"If you say so, Oom. Look, thanks for the ciggies," she called. Her departing heels sounded on the wooden floor.

“You see what I got today?” Oom Marius’ called rather desperately after her.

“What have you got?” Petrus could hear a smile in her voice.

“Look there, in the corner,” he replied proudly.

“Oh my God, Marius,” Petrus heard her squeal in obvious distress. “That’s just awful. Where did you get that from?”

“From the sea, Patty. They’ve got divers and metal cages and they go down really deep to catch them. You used to live by the sea. Why do you say it’s awful?”

“Marius, it’s terribly cruel. They throw them live into pots of boiling water and you hear them scream as they boil to death. Oh I can’t stand it Marius. Promise me you’ll get rid of them?”

“Of course, Patty. Of course. I didn’t know. I genuinely didn’t know.”

Petrus heard the tapping of Missies Patty’s high heels grow fainter as she headed for the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Oom Marius,” she called.

“How many times must I tell you, just call me...”

But he never finished his sentence.

Petrus waited for the sound of his name.

“Petrus,” came Oom Marius’ gruff voice, “get inside here and pack out those bloody pilchards. That box has been standing here since this morning.”

Petrus let the lid of the rubbish bin clang shut. Shrugging his shoulders, he headed back inside.

Chapter Two

“Jissus God, wat gaan ek nou met die blerrie goed doen?” Oom Marius called after the delivery guy.

Jesus, God, what am I going to do with these bloody things now?

Oom Marius watched him cross the dusty veranda, take the three steps down to road level and head for his supply van parked out front under the Acacia for the bit of shade it so sadly offered.

Acacias, or thorn trees, as they were generally known, were just about the only things that grew here in Klippiesfontein. And grass. Of course, there were vast plains of arid, yellow grass interspersed with outcroppings of haphazard rock piles and lonely steel windmills trying to suck what little moisture there was out of the red earth. Space – that’s how most people would describe the area. There wasn’t much more that could be said about it other than that it had a lot of space. Oom Marius hoped the delivery guy would have an especially hot and long journey back to the closest town, Springbok, one-hundred-and-sixty-seven kilometres to the east.

Damn him, thought Oom Marius. Now he was stuck with it. With them. The four leather-coloured creatures staring out of their prison at him all day long. What was he going to say to Patty? What about the rest of the townsfolk? Oom Marius was no longer a respected businessman of Klippiesfontein. No. Now he was its laughing stock. Lobster babysitter. That’s what his rash decision had reduced him to. He didn’t even know what the damned things ate, but one thing was sure, if he let them starve to death, Patty would stop talking to him.

Oom Marius heard the door between the shop and his home creak open. He should tell Petrus to put some oil on the hinges, he reminded himself. He turned round to see Hettie, his wife, shuffling into the shop. He raised his eyebrows. Hettie never came into the shop. If she wanted anything she invariably sent Anna, her domestic, to ask for it.

“*Dag vrou,*” he said.

Good day, wife.

Hettie had never been much of a looker. Even when he married her thirty-nine years ago. Yes, she'd been young and soft and round. She'd had that shy giggle about her that some girls had that made things move down there for a man. But most importantly, she'd been approved of by his father, his mother, and the dominie. And in those days, that was the best reason to get married.

Now his parents were long gone. And so were Hettie's. Also her shy giggle and any hint of prettiness had left their marriage many years ago. She was a stout, strong Afrikaans woman. She'd borne him three robust sons and had the hips to show for it. Once a week she went to the hairdresser who set her hair in a halo of earthquake-proof curls. She wore wrinkles under her eyes, a faint moustache on her upper lip, and green eyes that still twinkled youthfully, making up for the rest of her features. Hettie was his wife and a wife was there until death did you part. That's what it said in the Bible.

Tannie Hettie had been born sixty-three years ago to a karakul sheep farmer and his wife. She was their fourth child and a girl at that. Marrying an upstanding young Afrikaans man from the district was her inescapable fate and that's exactly what her mother prepared her for. From the age of four, Tannie Hettie was trained in the vital skills of cooking, baking, needlework and bossing around black servants.

The young girl did well at school, achieving marks at the top end of her class, but her parents took little notice of such an irrelevant detail. As long as she could read the *Huisgenoot*, a national magazine which provided as good as compulsory reading matter to any self-respecting Afrikaans housewife, and balance the household budget, she had no further need of an education. Although, as a girl, Tannie Hettie had harboured dreams of becoming a teacher or a nurse, she'd never voiced these out loud. A young woman going away to study was hardly an acceptable convention in small-town Klippiessfontein, unless,

of course, it was as a ploy to catch a husband with respectable prospects. But Tannie Hettie wasn't in the business of catching respectable prospects. She believed, naively enough, in ideas like love and romance, so she stayed put on her father's karakul sheep farm and waited for the right boy to come along.

Marius was two years older than Hettie. He was both blond and strong and it could be said that the old saying, the one about necessity being the mother of invention, was particularly relevant when it came to him. His entrepreneurship did not stem from an inborn sense of business like many people thought, but rather from the very practical issue of being the third son. His eldest brother would inherit their father's small *rooibos* tea farm, while his second brother had taken over their paternal grandfather's sisal processing plant close to De Aar. There was nothing left for the young Marius to do besides become inventive. Inheritance had been ruled out. There was no talk of further studies after Marius' less-than-shining high school career. Finding a cushy office job in some government agency, as was the practise in those days for many white South African men, was just about as attractive to him as taking a swim in the Limpopo River with all its crocodiles. No, being resourceful was the only way Marius was going to earn a living.

Townfolk and local farmers had been used to, up to that point, buying the goods which their land couldn't provide like coffee, sugar and Marie Biscuits from the delivery truck that pulled into the centre of town every week. Marius had been given the chore to drive his mother to Klippiesfontein so she could collect her weekly supplies. Soon after he'd helped her load the groceries onto the back of the bakkie, they watched the truck set off back to Springbok. On their way home to the farm, Marius' mother remembered that she'd forgotten to buy soap powder. She sat next to her son, practically in tears because she'd be unable to wash her family's clothes in time for church on Sunday. That's when the idea had first taken hold in his head. The idea of supplies being available all day long, every day, except of course, on Sundays.

“Imagine if you could buy a box of washing powder whenever you ran out,” Marius had suggested to the young Hettie that Sunday after church. “A man could make some real money doing something like that.”

Hettie had nodded fiercely, terribly impressed with this strapping man’s business visions.

So he’d gone ahead, fuelled by the enthusiasm of the karakul sheep farmer’s daughter. He took out a small loan from the bank in Springbok and opened up the General Store. A year later, when it appeared as if his venture would provide a decent income, he proposed to her and, another year after that, they were married in the Dutch Reformed Church of Klippiesfontein.

Tannie Hettie’s arms, thick and freckled, were wringing a dishtowel she’d brought with her from the kitchen. “Marius, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Have you spoken to Andre today?” he interrupted, a fresh idea having taken hold in his head.

“No, I’ll phone him tonight. I wanted to speak to you first.”

“Hettie, go back inside and phone him. You need to ask him something for me.”

“He’s at work now, Marius. I don’t like to disturb him there.”

“You’re his mother, for God’s sake. You can disturb him any time of day or night and he should be grateful for it.”

Tannie Hettie smiled. She loved it when Marius exaggerated the boys’ duty to her like that. “Alright, I’ll phone him. What do you want me to ask?”

“Ask him what lobsters eat,” he said.

“I thought you were going to send those things back with the supply truck?”

“They don’t want them back.” Oom Marius looked down at the floor.

“And now what?” she demanded.

“And now you’re going to ask Andre to look up on the internet what I’m supposed to feed these things. Charlie tells me there’s nothing you can’t learn from it. It’s like the library of

the world...”

“I’ll ask him Marius, but I just want you to understand one thing here today: I don’t want those creatures anywhere near my house. Do you hear me?”

Oom Marius nodded. It was true that a man should make the decisions in the household. But then it was also true that there were times when a man had to listen to his wife. And one of those times was when he bought a tank with four lobsters in a town where people thought fish fingers were exotic.

Tannie Hettie shuffled back through the door. “When I come back we need to talk, Marius,” she called over her shoulder.

Oom Marius didn’t hear her. He was on the look-out for something to release his frustration on. The pots and pans in the kitchenware aisle had been polished. The shards from the broken plate swept up. On the opposite shelf he saw the mops and brooms standing proudly in a row, the dusters and dishtowels stacked neatly, one on top of the other.

“Petrus,” he yelled.

Petrus came into the shop.

“How many times have I told you to oil the hinge on that door?” he shouted, gesturing to the squeaky culprit.

Never, thought Petrus. But he shrugged and started moving towards the storeroom to fetch the small oilcan.

“And while you’re in there, bring out that cardboard advertisement for washing powder that we used last year. I want you to put it there in the corner. And move that bloody tank behind it! Do you hear?”

Oom Marius saw the back of Petrus’ head nodding.

Taking the calculator and the heavy black ledger out from under the counter, Oom Marius busied himself with the VAT returns for the month. He heard Petrus moving around the shop. First he worked on the squeaking door. Then he moved to the darkest corner, between the counter and the storeroom, and positioned the large cardboard cut-out in front of the lobster tank.

Oom Marius caught sight of himself in the mirror behind

the counter. Just like they'd done with Hettie, the years had taken their toll on him too. Gone was the tall, muscular blond man he'd once been; the one staring back at him, although still tall, sported a serious *boepens*, potbelly, that strained at the buttons of his checked shirt tucked into a leather belt. His arms, though they could still lift a small sheep, looked flabby and depleted, just like the jowls of his leather-brown face. Though thankfully he didn't have a receding hairline like his late father had had, his temples were grey and his blond mane was substantially thinner. When he'd been younger, depending on the angle and the observer, it had been possible to describe him as handsome but the word hardly applied to him anymore. Perhaps it was nothing more than sheer vanity to expect to be handsome at sixty-five. Just like a woman, he thought. He shook his head, irritated at his momentary lapse of self-inspection, and returned his attention to the books.

Two customers came in during the next twenty minutes. One was Lenny. At first he dawdled in the toiletries aisle, touching the bottles of deodorant without much interest, before he came up to the counter to fetch the dirty magazine he ordered from the city each week. He'd obviously been keeping an eye out to see when the supply van drove past his house, on its way out of Klippiesfontein. The other was Agnes, Sarie's domestic, sent to buy five kilos of self-raising flour. Sarie was Hettie's oldest friend.

There'd been a time, back in the day, when Oom Marius had thought about marrying Sarie. She'd been a lot prettier than Hettie. But then the dominie pointed out that Sarie had a cousin who had fallen pregnant out of wedlock. She'd been shipped off to live with a spinster aunt to avoid the *skande*. The shame. It was hardly Sarie's fault, Oom Marius had thought at the time, but he'd known better than to voice his opinion out loud. It was a dangerous thing to have the dominie's anger directed at you.

So he'd settled for Hettie instead. Thirty-nine years married, until death did them part and all that stuff. She didn't deserve a husband reminiscing about her best friend's good looks forty years previously, Oom Marius reprimanded himself. He felt

himself blush – just like a bloody teenager, he thought.

He heard the door between the shop and his home open, this time with significantly less creaking, he turned to face his wife. Luckily for him, Oom Marius' skin was so brown and leathery from the remorseless sun that Tannie Hettie didn't pick up on his blush. It would surely have raised a question from her.

"What did he say?" Oom Marius demanded.

Tannie Hettie crossed her arms and stared at her husband, "Don't you want to know how Andre is? And Suzan and the little ones?"

"*Lieve God* Hettie, these bloody creatures are starving and you want to talk to me about the children? Do you know how it's going to stink in here if they start dying?"

"It's already smelling, Marius," she answered.

"Just tell me woman, what do lobsters eat?"

"Crabs, sea stars, sea urchins, plankton, and small fish. They can turn into cannibals when they're kept in crowded conditions, Andre says. Sometimes you even find partially eaten animals in the live-tank. Do you have any idea what you've started here, Marius?"

Oom Marius ignored his wife, "*Jissus*, where am I going to get those things from?"

Then he had another idea. "Petrus," he barked.

The black man, still busy with the tank in the corner, looked up.

"Petrus, your people eat lobsters?" Oom Marius barked angrily because, of course, he already knew the answer.

Petrus shook his head.

"*You* want to eat the lobsters?" he continued. "Fancy people in the city, they pay hundreds of Rands to eat these things."

Again Petrus shook his head.

"Uneducated fool," Oom Marius muttered.

He looked back at his wife.

She continued, "They'll eat any type of saltwater seafood, Andre said. They especially like chunks of fresh fish and squids."

"*Jissus* Hettie, the way you talk it sounds like I can just walk

over to the fridge and take out a couple of squids. How am I supposed to feed these things?”

Tannie Hettie was smiling. “Andre couldn’t stop laughing when I told him. I had to hold the phone away from my ear for a whole minute. He says to say thank you. He hasn’t laughed that much in years. He also said you should tell Petrus to dig a hole out back and throw them in there.”

“I’m not going to bury them alive, Hettie. They never asked me to bring them here.”

“I think Andre is right,” Tannie Hettie pushed on.

“Who asked you to think, woman?” Oom Marius snapped. “Now, how am I supposed to feed these things?”

“Are you asking me to think again now Marius?”

“Ag, you’re right Hettie. You know I didn’t mean it. You got any ideas?”

“I’ve got some I&J hake portions in the deepfreeze. I could defrost them in the microwave for you. Then you just make sure you tell the delivery guy to bring you some fresh seafood next week. Are you going to keep their claws taped up like that?”

“You heard what Andre said. They start eating each other up when they’re kept in confined spaces. So, no, I’m not going to let them tear chunks out of one another.”

Tannie Hettie nodded, her expression turning serious again, “Do you have time to talk now?”

“What’s with you today, woman? All you want to do is talk? Can’t we talk tonight in front of the TV?”

“No Marius, we can’t.”

He nodded.

“Go outside and sweep the stoep, Petrus.”

Both watched as Petrus disappeared out the front door. They waited until they heard the familiar *swish-swishing* of the broom.

“I went to the doctor two weeks ago for a check-up. He took some blood. Then he phoned me and said I needed to come in for more tests. I went back yesterday for the results, Marius. I have the cancer. I have to go to a hospital in Cape Town for treatment.”

Oom Marius looked earnestly at his wife. He saw the mother of his three sons staring up at him with her twinkling green eyes. He saw a woman for whom, through no fault of her own, practically all feelings of attraction had been eroded by almost four decades of marriage. He saw the karakul sheep farmer's daughter who had chosen to love a third son with no inheritance. His Adam's apple moved up and down. He swallowed a little pool of saliva that had formed beneath his tongue.

"I'll find someone to look after the shop for me while we're gone," he said.

Tannie Hettie nodded.

Oom Marius nodded.

Until death did them part. Like it said in the Bible. And that was just the way it was. After thirty-nine years there was nothing more to say.

"You think you can put that fish in the microwave for me now, Hettie? I'm going mad thinking about these lobsters."

Tannie Hettie turned round and went back inside their home.