

# Magnificent Boy and the Spirit of the Grey Hare

Illustrations by Pandora Alberts

LOUISE VAN DER MERWE

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To all the animals that have been part of my  
life: how immensely you have enriched me.

- Louise van der Merwe

## 1 > Hard Beginnings

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**B**oy was born in a shack village. That year the summer sun was in a merciless mood. It beat down relentlessly, heating the flat, corrugated iron roofs of the shacks with such intensity that, from a distance, the air above them shimmered. Down the embankment where goats nibbled and dusty children played was a highway where shiny cars sped past in a rush to reach somewhere.

In that shack village, Boy and his mother belonged to no-one and no-one belonged to them. As he grew, he trotted after her, in and out between the shacks, shadowing her in her endless quest to keep them alive. Sometimes it was just the smell on the tossed-away wrapping of someone's meagre meal that sustained them. On occasion, their noses led them to the fresh blood of slaughtered chickens, congealing in the dust. Then his mother would bare her teeth and snarl at other dogs who came close. Made wretched by hunger and parasites and the blood-sucking flies that fed on the tips of her ears, she would fight for survival.

Perhaps trees had grown there once, but not any more. Even the weeds that emerged from the earth in Spring, swiftly returned to dust. In the cracks of shade which they managed to find between the shacks, Boy licked the saliva that dripped from his mother's tongue as she panted away

the hours. In the evenings, if anyone had been watching, they might have seen the mother dog with her sucked-out teats, sitting perfectly still in the gathering darkness.



As the moon climbed its way into the sky, they might have cast their eyes aside rather than see her wretched, wasted body. Perhaps someone once glimpsed the quiet resignation in her face and wondered if she drew her strength from dim ancestral memories that flitted through her sub-conscious. And, all the while, her scrawny pup tugged at her ears with his sharp puppy teeth and scrambled over her bony back, willing her to play.

Then one late afternoon, when Boy was almost three months old, everything changed. As darkness fell, a sudden wind whipped up the dust, the debris and the litter that lay all around. It blew grit into his eyes and

sparks from the evening cooking fires swirled through the air like fire-flies.

A sense of dreadful unease came over him. His mother stood up, her tail between her legs, her body hunched in fear. She whined and lifted her nose, smelling the air. People began to shout and scream. They gathered their babies and cooking pots and dragged along frightened, wailing children. Another dog heaved desperately to break the short rope that tied him to a peg in the ground. Then Boy saw the flames – huge, orange flames reaching up into the sky, burning the shacks and everything else that lay in their path. He couldn't see his mother. She was lost behind the avalanche of running legs.



Smoke choked him. Terror gripped his heart. He raced down the embankment as fast as his puppy legs would carry him.

He hurtled along the side of the highway where the cars sped past with their great eyes alight. For how long he ran, who could tell?

Then a sudden flash lit up the world around him and a mighty sjambok cracked in the sky above. Heavy drops of rain pelted him like stones.

When he reached the bridge that stretched across the highway, he stopped running, safe from the pelting stones and the sjambok overhead. His heart beat in his ears and his lungs felt ready to burst. His legs buckled beneath him and exhaustion came to his rescue.

He curled into a ball – right there, under the bridge, just a metre or so from the black tyres that sped by, and he slept. Anyone seeing him would have thought he was just a dead dog.



At first light, Boy dodged the cars and crossed to where the grass was tall and yellow. He looked back — long moments — searching for the familiar form of his mother. The smell of wet ash hung heavily in the air. Then he turned for the grassland and was soon lost from sight.

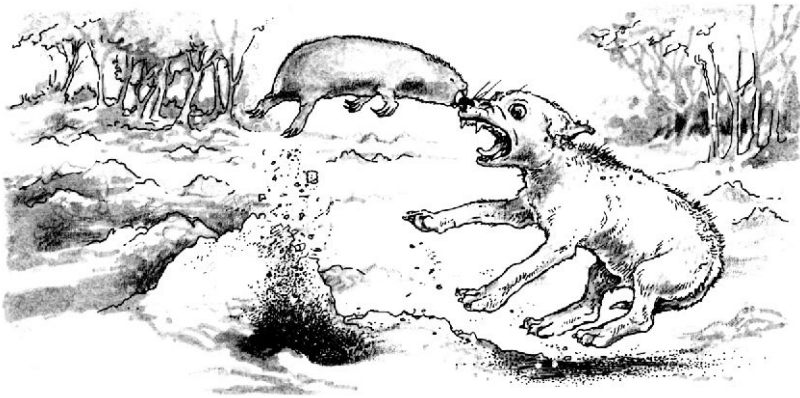
It was a small grey hare that  
taught him how to run as fast  
as the wind.

## 2 > Adventures of a Brave Heart

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A muffled scratching noise caught Boy's attention. He stood rigid. Tantalized. Yes, again he heard a muffled scraping noise, a noise that put every nerve in his body on high alert. He inched forward sniffing the earth; listening intently. A vibration from beneath the ground tingled up his leg. Rasp, rasp, rasp. Just near his nose, a small pile of soft earth was forming. The heap grew bigger, heaving as though it were alive, pushing up from below, fine soil slipping down its sides.

Locked within Boy was an ancient memory, his instinct. Now it took control. He pounced on the heaving mound of soil, madly digging with his front paws, excitedly searching for its essence. But excitement turned to shock and agony. An unbearable pain seared through his nose.

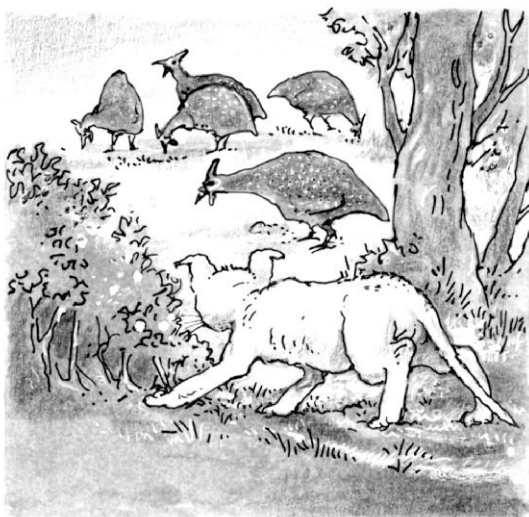


He jerked his head back and heard his own hideous shrieks piercing the air. To his horror, a big, grey mole dangled from the end of his nose, latched on by its long, curved incisors. Boy shook his head violently. He rubbed his muzzle against the ground, pawing to dislodge his tormentor. Again he shook his head violently. This time, the mole lost its grip. It flew off, landing on the soil nearby. It writhed, then turned to face Boy, its mouth open wide in a silent battle-cry. Blood dripped from Boy's nose, landing in the sandy soil in dark red splotches. For a few moments, he stood mesmerized.

Then, once again, instinct took over. In an instant, he lunged, snapping his jaws shut on the back of the mole's neck. He shook it vigorously from side to side, as his ancestors had shaken squirrels and rabbits and rats. He fixed its limp body to the ground with his paw, tore open its skin with his teeth and licked the warm blood from its flesh. Afterwards, satisfied at last, he slept a good, deep sleep in the shade of a tree.

When Boy finally awoke, he knew something had changed. He felt his tail was strong and vigorous. He felt his puppy ears wiggle, as they attempted to become sharp and alert. He trotted off, tail in air, to find his next meal. Before too many days had passed, he could recognize the noise of a mole digging underground, from ten leaps away.

The grassy veld, dotted with aliens like pines and Port Jackson, quickly honed his hunting skills. He learned the art of patience in stalking guinea-fowl and pigeons, and the precision and speed required to lunge and snatch them in the blink of an eye. His sense of smell grew so acute that he could sniff out newly-laid guinea-fowl and francolin eggs, no matter how well-hidden.



But it was a small grey hare that taught him how to run as fast as the wind. The day he first met Grey Hare, Boy had his nose to the ground, sniffing for owl pellets that had been regurgitated during the night from the tops of the slim, tall pines. Dawn had hardly broken and already the shrill cicada beetles were in full chorus, heralding the heat

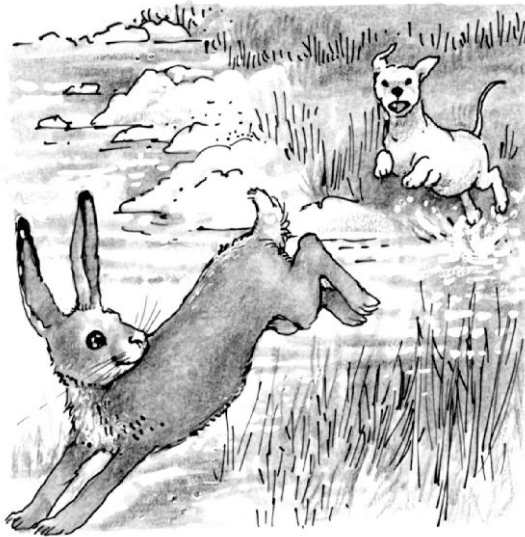
to come. The sudden puff of a berg wind stopped Boy in his tracks. He lifted his keen nose, tantalized by a scent that had not crossed his path before. Every muscle in his body tensed. Then he spotted the lean, lithe, diminutive body of Grey Hare who was busying himself with something buried beneath the mat of fallen pine needles — quite oblivious of Boy's presence. Boy's excitement was almost unbearable. Saliva dripped from his lips. His muscles quivered. Four bounds and he would be upon the hare. He crouched down, inching forward, his whole being fixated on the twitches and spurts of activity of the unsuspecting grey hare.

A rush of dust. A split second. Grey Hare sprung into the air. Splashed with Boy's saliva, he zig-zagged in a desperate escape from the hurtling menace that was upon him.

He tore through the veld, faster than the wind, leaping higher and higher in triumph as the distance between them grew longer. Then he disappeared and all that was left of Grey Hare was the exhilaration of the chase and the scent he'd left on the ground that Boy traced with his nose, back and forth and in and out, for the rest of the morning.

After that, Grey Hare taunted and teased and outwitted Boy almost daily. It wouldn't be long, Boy vowed, before he outran that hare, snatched him by the back of

his neck and shook the cheek out of him for good.



At night Boy dug himself a bed in the cool earth beneath the acacia tree, painstakingly scraping away the soil and leaves with his front paws, turning round and round, till his bed fitted him just right. Then he'd slip into a wonderful slumber while owls hooted and guinea-fowl sang their raucous evening song in the branches above.

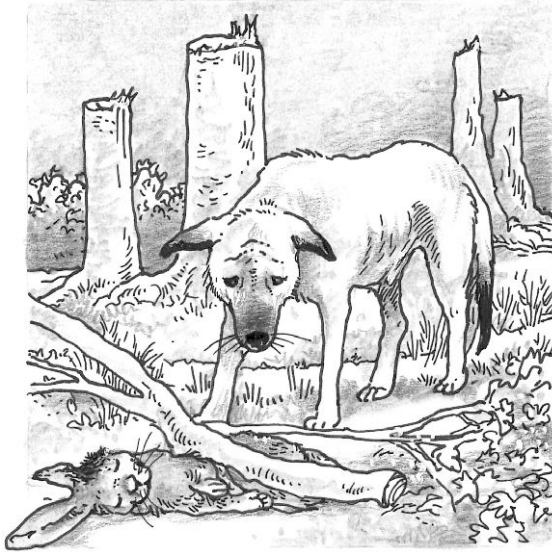
Without him knowing it at all, Boy's legs grew long and his ears finally cocked with a will of their own. His soft puppy hair was replaced by a strong, light-brown coat, tinged with black on his muzzle, the edges of his ears and the tip of his tail. His mother and the fire were all but forgotten, except sometimes, in his dreams.

Then one morning, he awoke to a harsh whining noise piercing the air. He went in search of the intrusion. Careful to stay hidden, he watched from a distance, as men in blue overalls wielded electric saws to slice through the tall pines and the Port Jackson, bringing them crashing to the ground.

Every day, the men intruded closer to his sleeping place. Panic-stricken guinea-fowl set up a raucous lament as the trees in which they had roosted the night before hit the ground in a cloud of dust. When the men left in the late afternoon, Boy emerged from his hiding place and followed his nose through the fallen branches in search of crusts and chicken bones left behind.

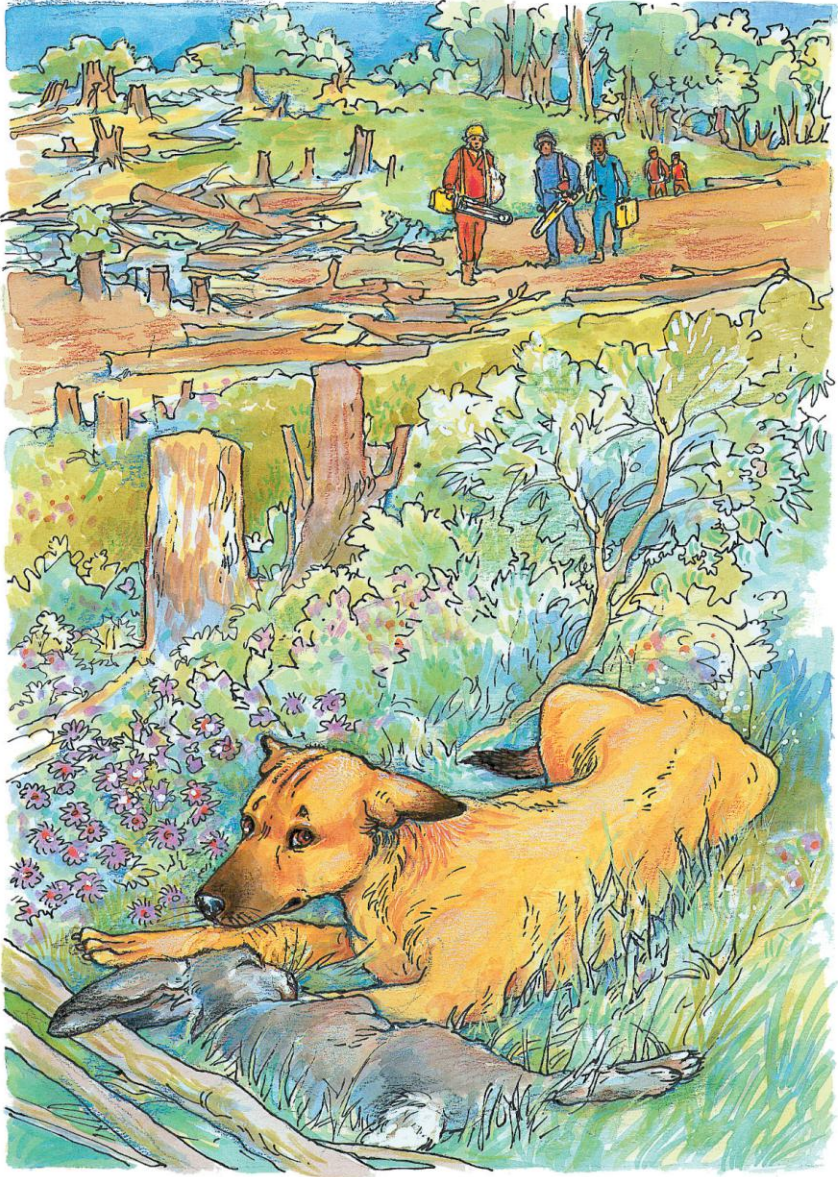


On the fourth day, beneath the wreckage of broken branches, he glimpsed Grey Hare, lying perfectly still. Boy fully expected him to leap up and speed away, like only he and the wind could do. But Grey Hare didn't move.



Boy approached cautiously. He felt sure Grey Hare was about to spring into the air. Step by step he drew closer to Grey Hare until he could touch him. He sniffed the dry blood that stained the fur around Grey Hare's long ears. He licked the fur, tasted Grey Hare's blood. He licked until the fur was wet and the blood was gone.

He prodded the small, stiff body with his paw. 'Get up,' he thought. 'Get up'. Boy whined. He wished with all his



heart that the cheek would bounce back into Grey Hare; that he would leap into the air and run like the wind, glancing back with glee because he knew Boy couldn't catch him.

Boy kept a vigil next to Grey Hare throughout the night. In the morning, when the men in overalls arrived, he slunk away, his tail between his legs.

By mid-morning on the fifth day, the men reached the acacia that had sheltered Boy during the long months of his growing up. Miserable and uncomprehending, Boy retreated, following the guinea-fowl deeper into the veld. Later he returned to scavenge for scraps. The fine acacia that had stood gloriously bedecked in yellow just a few hours before, lay unrecognizable on the ground, sawed into small logs and bits and pieces.

Each day took him further into  
the unknown in his desperate  
quest to live.

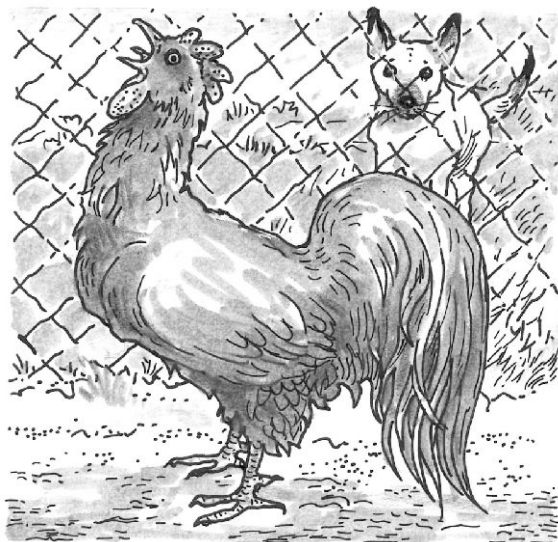
### 3 > A Legend is Born

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Winter was on its way. The chilly wind bit through Boy's coat. Food that had sustained him all summer grew scarce. The guinea-fowl stopped laying eggs. Squirrels began their hibernation. Even the moles seemed to have gone somewhere. At night, Boy slept curled into a tight ball and covered his nose with his tail. Perpetual hunger gnawed at his innards.



Each day took him further into the unknown in his desperate quest to live. He peered through the two-metre high fence. Behind him, tall pines creaked in the wind. On the other side of the fence was a pasture in which fat, round sheep huddled together for warmth, ruminating in the pale sunlight. Chickens pecked about. A fine black cockerel stood on his toes and crowed in a show of supremacy.



Boy whined. He pushed his nose through the mesh of the fence. Then, with single-minded determination, he began to dig, the claws on his fore-paws masterfully excavating and shooting the soil out in a shower behind him. He dug until there was space enough for him to wiggle and drag himself under the fence.

On the other side, the saliva of anticipation dripped from his lips. He slunk in the shadow of the fence until he was quite close to the chickens. He crouched and waited for them to lose interest in his intrusion.

Then, in just two leaps, he was in their midst. He grabbed a hen by the neck, turned and ran for the hole that he'd dug under the fence.



A loud crack pierced the air behind him. Then another. Boy didn't look back. With the limp hen in his jaws, he ran like his mentor, the hare, had taught him, desperate to find his escape. But he'd missed it. Another crack sliced through the air and from the corner of his eye, Boy saw a jeep with huge black tyres, careering towards him.

Again, a C R A C K. Dropping the hen, Boy tore along the fence in a race for his life. Some distance in front, the taut, high fence made a right-angled turn. Boy stood no chance. The men in the jeep would corner him and shoot dead the thief that had stolen their stock.

And then he did it. Summoning all the power that was left in his emaciated body, Boy leaped. As he sailed over the top of the fence, it was as if time stood still for a second



or two. He landed with a jolt on the other side and ran for cover in the pines. Hidden from view, he peered out in terror.

In a shower of dust, the jeep braked abruptly. An old man and a young man leapt out, angrily brandishing their rifles, ready to take aim at the slightest movement that might reveal Boy's presence.



“Good grief!” the old man muttered. “Did you see that?”  
The son gasped. “What was it, Pa? A dog?”

“A dog!” The farmer's voice was scornful. “You think a dog can jump like that? No ways. That was no dog.”

“A lynx?”

“Ag, please,” the father sneered. “Is there something wrong with your eyesight, man? That was no cat.”

“No flesh and blood can jump that high,” ventured the young man.

“Don't be ridiculous, man,” admonished the father. “Of course it was flesh and blood.”

“No way, Pa,” insisted the younger man. “It was a mirage – or a phantom. A phantom dog. Like one of those mythical dogs that Ma used to read to me about. Remember? The one had eyes as big as saucers.”

“Ag, you dimwit,” replied the old man angrily. He stooped to pick up the dishevelled dead body of the chicken. “Go lay the gin trap, man,” he roared impatiently to his son. “There.” He pointed in the direction of the pine trees. “Do a better job this time.”

He took aim and shot randomly into the trees. The bullet embedded itself with a dull thud in the trunk of a tree



some distance from Boy. Boy flinched. He turned tail and ran. He hoped that never in his life again would he set eyes on either one of those trigger-happy farmers.

And that was how the legend of the phantom dog began. For generations to come, the prospect of bumping into the giant phantom dog that hid in the wood, stole full-grown sheep and chickens in broad daylight and sailed over two-metre high fences, terrified the children in the area. Even adults swore that some nights, you could actually glimpse the shining eyes of the phantom staring menacingly at you through the darkness, waiting and watching. And something terrible always happened, it was said, after the phantom had been sighted.



Nose to the ground, he traced Boetie's  
smell all the way to where he lived ...

## 4 > A Friend at Last

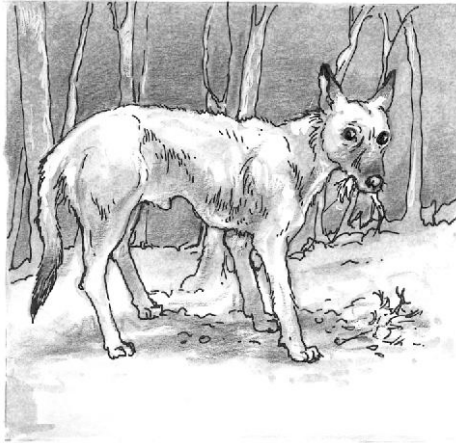


Every day after school, young Boetie headed to where the huge blue-gum that had once been struck by lightning, rose stark and charred above the rest of the vegetation. In the terrible ferocity of that lightning bolt, the great girth of the trunk had split right down the middle so that one side pointed skywards like an angry, arthritic finger, while the other side lay horizontally on the ground, its naked grey branches stretching outwards like ribs from a backbone. It was on these bleached bones of what the neighbourhood called 'Spook Tree', that Boetie climbed and played after school, while his grandfather's white goats, Klara and Heidi, browsed on the surrounding bushes and Port Jackson.

Sometimes, the goats clambered onto the fallen trunk too, prancing and balancing and high-kicking along the dead

branches, satisfying, perhaps, a genetic longing for the sheer cliffs and precarious mountain ledges that goats have sure-footedly negotiated down the ages.

Day after day, Boy was drawn, as if by a magnet, to watch Boetie play his boy games on the fallen blue-gum. He sat at a safe distance, ever-ready to retreat. Boetie had seen Boy too. He'd whistled and tried to approach the dog but as he drew near, Boy ran off every time. The ravages of winter had taken their toll on Boy. His coat



had thinned and his bones jabbed so sharply against his skin, it seemed as if they might pierce right through. The light and shine had gone from his eyes, yet still he paced relentlessly every day in search of whatever might still the hunger that gnawed so voraciously within him.

The first hint of Spring was in the air and the days were becoming longer. At sunset, when Boetie left to go home, his Oupa's goats trundling behind him, Boy ventured to where Boetie had played in order to smell his smell and the smell of the goats.



Nose to the ground, he traced Boetie's smell all the way to where he lived with his grandfather in a shack made of corrugated iron sheets.

Next to the shack was a well with a stone wall around it that reached as high as Boetie's shoulder. It was Boetie's duty to climb down the metal rungs embedded in the inside wall of the well and fetch water in a bucket for his Oupa every evening. After that he penned the goats for the night in a rickety wooden stable that Oupa had knocked together.

Boetie, the only name he'd been given, was 12 years old, but small for his age. He was the grandson of Oom Klaas who worked as a gardener for Groot-Jan Pienaar. Oom Klaas didn't do heavy farm work any more. Instead, he tended Mr Groot-Jan's vegetable garden and flower beds with his marvellous green fingers. Oom Klaas had a special secret when it came to gardening. His vegetables and his flowers grew better and more beautifully than anyone else's. On the odd occasion that Groot-Jan asked Oom Klaas to share his secret, the old man just chuckled. "What I can tell you is that it doesn't come out of a plastic bag, sir", he would say mysteriously.

In his spare time, Oom Klaas tended the dozens of flower pots on his own front stoep that made his small shack so pretty that it had once featured in a tourist brochure for the district.



Life had been much better when Mr Groot-Jan's wife had been alive and when his own wife, Sannie, and his daughter Janine, had been alive too. But Janine had died of a strange illness no-one understood, and Sannie had died soon afterwards of a broken heart, leaving Oom Klaas to bring up Janine's boy all on his own. So now it was just Mr Groot-Jan and Mr Klein-Jan up at the big house, with big, fat, friendly Grieta to keep house for them, and Oom Klaas and Boetie down at the shack.

And so it happened, as the days went by, that the barefoot boy and the starving stray watched and waited for each other, drawn together by the mutual need for a friend.

One day, after Boetie had gone home, Boy found an old plastic margarine tub, full to the brim with warm frothy goat's milk that the boy had left behind.



Boy lapped the milk with relish and licked the tub dry. The next day, Boy watched as Boetie squatted next to the big pink udder of the nanny goat and once again, squish-squished the two teats till the tub was brim-full. Next to it, Boetie left a pile of chicken gristle and a crust of bread soaked in fish oil.

Boetie named the dog Boy. For the dog's part, a sense of devotion was kindled within him that would make Boetie the centre of his being and fire in him a loyalty and love beyond anything that he had ever known.



... he leaped to his feet, the hackles on his back bristling. He lifted his lips and snarled a warning.

## 5 > Splotches of Red Paint

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One day, three bigger boys walked past Spook Tree on their way across the veld to a one-man general store that had recently set up business. Boetie had made a flower box out of a few scrap planks and he intended giving it to Oupa for his birthday. His teacher had given him a paint brush and a half-cup of powdered red paint to take home with him so that he could paint the flower box for Oupa. Boetie mixed the paint with water in a jar and he sat at Spook Tree, painting Oupa's gift-to-be, while the goats browsed. Boy sat a few paces away, paws out front, tongue lolling out of his smiling mouth, keenly watching Boetie's every move.



“Hey, Boetie, what are you doing?” shouted one of the boys. Boetie kept his head down. He knew the boys from

school, although they were in a higher class. He knew the biggest one was called Pietman.



“Where're your shoes,” shouted another boy. “Haven't you got money for shoes?” The boys sniggered among themselves. Boetie stared steadfastly at the ground.

“Where's your mother?” jeered the third boy. “Haven't you got a mother? Maybe she ran away from you.”

The first boy picked up a large stone. “Mind,” he yelled at Boetie, “it's a bomb!”

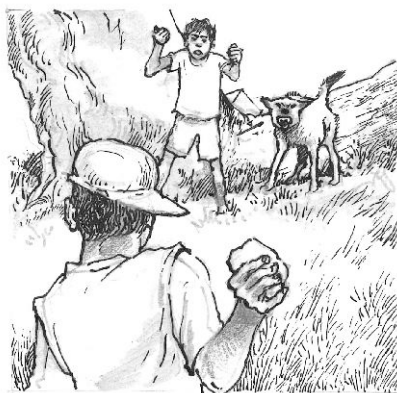


The intruders whooped in glee as the big stone landed right on target, smashing onto the jar of paint, splattering red splotches in every direction. Boetie kept his head down. The second boy picked up a smaller stone.

“Watch out Boetie. The next bomb's going to blow you up!” he yelled. With perfect aim, the stone zapped Boetie right on the top of his head. He clenched his teeth and swallowed his cry of pain. Up till this point Boy had been puzzled by the aggression of the intruders. But now, he leaped to his feet, the hackles on his back bristling. He lifted his lips and snarled a warning. The boys were startled.

“Tell your dog to shut-up,” yelled the second boy.  
“Otherwise we'll put poison bait down for him. Then you won't have a dog anymore.”

The big boy, Pietman, picked up another large stone.



This time, he took aim at Boy. “Tell your dog to shut up or I'll hit him on the head too,” he sneered.

“Don't you dare,” Boetie yelled, standing up, ready to fight.

“Voertsek!” Pietman shouted at the dog. “Voertsek!” A low growl rumbled in Boy's throat. He snarled and bared his teeth. Sudden fear of the dog gripped Pietman. He threw the stone. It hit Boy right between the eyes. Boy yelped, but he stood his ground. Tail straight out and rigid, his hackles high and his ears drawn back, he snarled menacingly.

The boys' bravado of a few minutes ago, was replaced by panic. “Voertsek! Voertsek!” they yelled. “Boetie, call your dog off or we'll smash his skull.”

Boy smelled their fear. The deep rumbling in his throat grew louder. “Get your dog away,” shrieked one of the boys, and then in unison, they made the fatal mistake of running away. In five big bounds, Boy had Pietman's shorts in his teeth. He shook them as he would shake the life out of a mole.

The flimsy, thread-bare material ripped open, revealing the boy's naked bottom. Boy grabbed the rounded flesh and nipped it hard.



Screaming in terror, the boys ran for all they were worth. Boy turned back to Boetie. “You’re going to pay for this Boetie,” screamed Pietman from a distance. “I’m going to kill your dog.”

But Boetie thought it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen and he and Boy rolled on the ground, laughing and tussling and playing rough games together out of sheer joy.



Oom Klaas's face creased into a smile. He was pleased his grandson had remembered his birthday.

## 6 > Goat's Milk and Flowering Bulbs



**B**oy had found his purpose in life. Boetie and he were family. He shadowed Boetie as he walked across the veld each morning to board the bus for school. He waited anxiously each afternoon to greet Boetie as he stepped off the bus, his tail wagging frantically, his body wiggling in delight. Boetie knew his Oupa wasn't fond of dogs and somehow Boy understood this. So, in the afternoons Boy waited at Spook Tree, anxious to hear the bleats that heralded the arrival of Boetie and the two nanny goats trundling beside him, their pink udders swinging rhythmically from side to side.

“Come closer, Boy,” urged Boetie as he took one of the nanny's teats and deftly squirted it straight at Boy's face. Boy licked the warm, sweet milk that trickled down his muzzle. Time and time again Boetie played this wonderful game with him until they mastered the art of Boetie

squirting jets of milk right into Boy's wide-open mouth.



When the rains arrived, and the dry river bed came alive with frogs and geese and reeds and birds, Boetie and Boy swam and splashed while the goats sipped from the water's edge.

It seemed the fun could never end.

Each year, Oom Groot-Jan fetched the ram for Oom Klaas. The ram arrived standing on the back of Oom Groot-Jan's bakkie, a rope tightly tied from each of his wildly curling horns to the side bars of the bakkie, effectively immobilizing him for the journey.

Whatever discomfort the ram may have felt, fastened as he was in this way, was soon forgotten as he spotted the two nanny goats awaiting his arrival. Reeking in pheromones, and magnificently decked with flowing chest

hair and goatee beard, he set about fulfilling the task at hand with single-minded devotion.

On Saturdays, sometimes, Oupa dusted off the pretty blue and yellow cart he had made out of old planks and discarded bicycle wheels, harnessed the ram to it, loaded it with pots of flowers, and sent Boetie on a short-cut across the veld to the suburbs to sell the blooms.

Boetie walked alongside the billy-goat, Boy at his other side, through the criss-cross of suburban streets, calling out “Flowers for sale. Hanging baskets for sale!”

Housewives were delighted. With babes in arms and young children in tow, they came out of their small gardens. They would chat to the barefoot boy and encourage their children to stroke a real live billy-goat gruff. They patted Boy and told Boetie he was a true entrepreneur and that he should come back soon so they could stroke Billy again and buy more flowers.

In the Spring, snowy-white goat kids were born and were soon prancing and leaping and back-kicking in mid-air next to their mothers, climbing onto the great fallen blue-gum, balancing sure-footedly in impossible places. When they were three months old and the precocious little rams started making a nuisance of themselves, they were sold.

Oupa painted his shack the colours of Madiba's flag and

Boetie graduated into the next grade.

At night, Boy slept in a shallow pit he moulded for himself, just inside the tree-line of the pines that had protected him that day from Farmer Groot-Jan's bullet. Vigilant in every fibre of his body, the slightest movement or sound would waken him and set him off sniffing around, making sure all was well.



Only once had Boy come close to Boetie's Oupa. In the gathering dusk, Boetie's grandfather sat in a rickety chair on the stoep of his shack, smoking. His voice was harsh, as was often his way. "Whose dog is that?" he rasped.

“That's my dog, Oupa,” replied Boetie.

“Nonsense,” rasped the old man, getting up from his chair with difficulty. He bent down to pick up a stone.

“Voertsek! Go!” Though his back was bent and his throw was weak, Boy ran off, tail between his legs.

“Don't Oupa,” Boetie squealed. “Don't hurt him!”

Boy watched from a safe distance and what he saw made the hackles on his back bristle. The old man reached for his sjambok and gave Boetie a nasty crack on his shoulder. Boetie screamed in pain.

“Don't you argue with me,” warned the old man. “What are you thinking of, bringing that dirty dog back here? He'll steal our food and eat Mr Groot-Jan's chickens. Voertsek!” He spat out the word in the general direction of where Boy stood watching. Again, he stooped to pick up a large stone and threw it in the direction of Boy.

“Dirty flea-taxi!” he muttered, aiming another sharp cut at his grandson.

But Boetie ducked and ran off to put away the goats for the night. When liquor and old-age befuddled and bewitched the old man's mind, like it did this night, the goats' broken-down stable, with its friendly, flatulent, deep-snoring ruminants, became Boetie's refuge.

“Where's the water, you bliksem?” Oom Klaas shouted. Boetie bolted the half-door of the goat shed and ran to the well. Once upon a time, this well had yielded the purest, sweetest water. But that was fifteen years ago before Boetie was born, before industry had intruded into the farmlands and before the big metal recycling factory had heaved into action, spewing out clouds of noxious brown smoke and polluting the water table with its excretions.

Gradually and by degree, the water in the well had turned brown. Before she died, Ouma had often complained about the water up at the big house, and experts from the university had arrived to do tests. Apparently it was deemed 'fit for human consumption'.

“Where's the water, you bliksem?” shouted the old man impatiently.

“I'm coming, Oupa.” Boetie's voice was muffled as he climbed down the ladder of metal rungs cemented into the inner wall of the well. It was pitch black down there.

Standing on a rung beneath water level, and hanging onto a higher rung by one arm, Boetie leaned over to submerge the bucket till no more bubbles came out. Then, with a strength beyond his years, he climbed up again. He was adept at his task, having performed it every day of his life since he could remember.

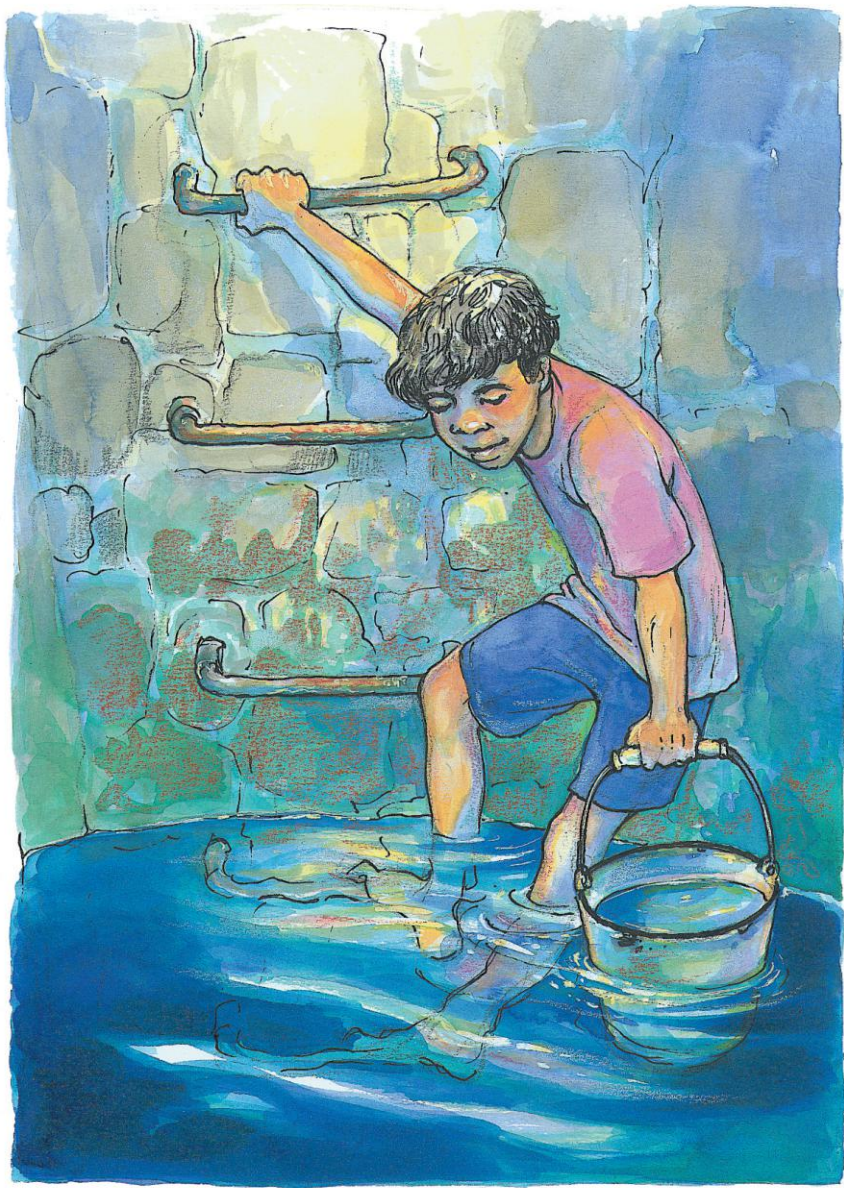


Boetie set the bucket down next to his Oupa. Then he tipped the bucket so that water poured into a bowl in which Oupa could wash his hands. Boetie did the same.

In silence the two of them sat on the stoep, with just the oil-lamp burning and the stars above, eating chicken and 'stywepap'. Oom Klaas's mood seemed to mellow.

"You're eating too much these days, Boetie," the old man observed. "I've noticed you're getting greedier by the day." Boetie shook his head in denial. "I'm growing, Oupa. That's the trouble."

The old man chuckled. He nodded. "That's the trouble." Boetie breathed more easily. He was glad he'd made his oupa chuckle. With any luck, Oupa would fall asleep shortly and Boetie could scrape some of the food into the empty margarine tub for Boy.



The old man sat back and rolled a cigarette. “Tomorrow, Boetie, you must plant the Clivia seeds, like Ouma used to do. She always said Clivias are like children — they take a long time to grow up.”

“Tomorrow's your birthday, Oupa,” ventured Boetie.

Oom Klaas's face creased into a smile. He was pleased his grandson had remembered his birthday. “Tomorrow, you must turn the compost heap, then bring some compost here in a plastic bag,” he said. Ouma always planted the Clivia seeds on my birthday.”

And so it was that although Boy kept well out of Oupa's way, in his mind Oupa and the goats belonged to Boetie and as such he guarded them too.



... a terrible misery descended upon Boy.

## 7 > Stock Theft

A week before the end of term, the class teacher gave Boetie a letter in a sealed envelope to give to Oupa. She called Boetie Pietersen and Gabrielle O'Connor to the front of the class.

“You've done very well this term, Boetie,” the teacher smiled at him. “And you too, Gabrielle. Give these letters to your parents so they can come and see you get your prizes at the end-of-term ceremony tomorrow night.”

Oom Klaas took the letter up to the big house to show it off to Mr Jan. Big, fat, motherly Grieta met him at the kitchen door and he waited patiently as she waddled off to call Groot-Jan. Oom Klaas felt proud that he had raised Boetie to be such a clever boy.



“Boetie's a good boy. And clever!” Oupa shook his head as he marvelled at his grandson. He handed the school's letter to Mr Groot-Jan. “His mother would have been proud of him.”

Groot-Jan took the letter and read it. “Yes,” he smiled. “That's very good. It'll be dark and it's going to rain tomorrow. I'll tell Klein-Jan to take you and Boetie in the bakkie and to fetch you again afterwards.” Oupa thanked Groot-Jan. Like himself, there was a kind side to Mr Groot-Jan too.

So Oupa put on his jacket which Ouma had mended so deftly for him when she was alive. It seemed to hang on his old bones. He polished his shoes and put on the hat he wore for church occasions. Klein-Jan dropped the two of them at the school gate and Oupa found himself a spare seat in the big school hall, with all the other proud parents and grandparents.

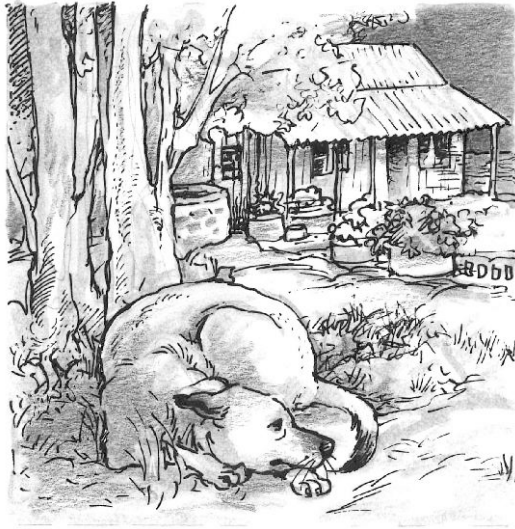


While the choir stood on stage to sing the school anthem, Boetie waited in the wings, ready for his teacher to nudge him to walk on and receive his certificate from the principal. Gabrielle O'Connor stood next to him in her neatly ironed uniform. Her long, brown hair was tied in two pigtails, each with a shiny, green ribbon made into a perfect bow. Although they were in the same class, they had never spoken to each other. It seemed to Boetie that Gabrielle was far too fancy to befriend a boy like him. "Scary," whispered Gabrielle in his ear. Boetie nodded.



Meanwhile, back home, a terrible misery had descended upon Boy. He had watched uncomprehendingly as Klein-Jan, a man who had once tried to kill him for catching a chicken, arrived at Oupa's shack in his bakkie. He had loaded both Oupa and Boetie into the front seat, and driven away. Fear gripped Boy's heart. Boetie and Oupa had never gone away at night-time before. Why had

Boetie gone into the darkness without him? Why had he gone with Klein-Jan? Would Klein-Jan try and kill him too? Miserably, he chose a spot not far from the shack where he could sit and wait for Boetie's return. Long minutes turned into long hours and finally, he fell asleep.



He leaped to his feet with a start. A flash of jagged lightning ripped open the night sky, followed by a crash of thunder of such might and force that terror gripped Boy's heart. Heavy drops of rain began to pelt him like stones. He ran into the darkness. He ran and ran.

When day dawned, the storm had moved on and the world shone in the early-morning sunlight as if it had been freshly washed and polished. Boetie did not know of the

terror that Boy had faced alone. He had received his certificate from the principal and Oupa was pleased with him. They arrived home and he went straight to bed. For him, the thunder and the lightning that lit up the sky and the sound of pelting rain on the thin corrugated iron roof-sheeting of the shack, was exciting and awesome.



But, next morning, Boetie noticed immediately that there was no Boy to greet him on his way to school. On his return home, Boy wasn't waiting at the bus-stop either. Later on, at Spook Tree, he whistled and called and watched, expecting to see Boy come bounding across the veld to him, smiling all the way.

By dusk, foreboding and dismay etched itself on Boetie's face. What if Boy, at that very moment, trembled and

quivered in agony with one of his legs broken and useless, snared in Oom Groot-Jan's trap? Everybody knew never to walk next to the fence where the sheep grazed on the other side. That's where Oom Groot-Jan sometimes laid his trap. Once Oom Groot-Jan's own dog had got caught in the gin trap and the big farmer had had to shoot him – right there where he lay, snared and broken, yelping pitifully.

Hidden from sight, Boetie had seen it all. Oom Groot Jan had shot his own dog in the head. For a moment, Boetie squeezed his eyes shut and winced as the shot exploded in his memory.



He knew his Oupa would bring out the sjambok if he discovered Boetie intended going near where the sheep grazed, to find Boy.

Luckily Oupa had been drinking and it wouldn't be long before he fell asleep. As soon as Oupa's snoring became rhythmical, Boetie slipped out of the shack. He took with him the sturdy walking stick that Oom Groot-Jan had given Oupa as a Christmas present the year before. If Boy was caught in the jagged jaws of a steel trap, Boetie would have to prize it open using Oupa's walking stick and all his might.

Boetie entered the wood. He felt his heart thumping. What if the Phantom suddenly dropped from the branches above his head, onto his back and savaged him to death? What if the Phantom had got Boy already?

“Boy!” Boetie called. He paused to listen. “Are you here, Boy?” He wished that the incessant “du preez, du preez, du preez, du preez” of the roosting guinea-fowl would shut up just long enough for him to hear clearly. Darkness was coming too fast. A shiver of fear passed through him and his knees knocked together.

Suddenly, above the raucous evening song of the guinea-fowl, he heard the bleats of a sheep. Startled, he leaped behind a pine tree.

As he cautiously peered round the side, what he saw terrified him. Pietman, the big boy whose pants Boy's teeth had ripped open to reveal his bare bottom that day, stood on the other side of the fence. He had just

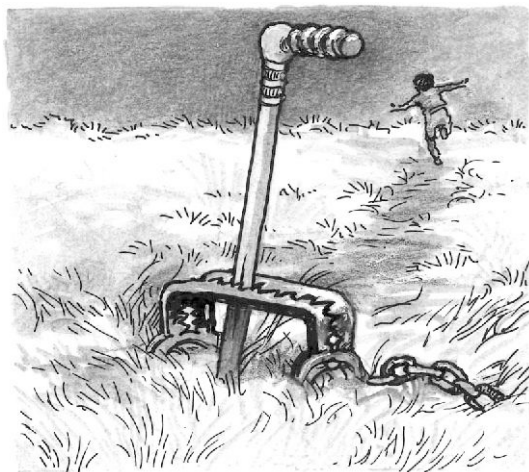
slaughtered a sheep. Its big body lay bleeding at his feet. Pietman glanced around. Boetie held his breath. Stock theft was a serious offence. Pietman could go to jail for that. If Pietman saw him, he would surely kill Boetie too, because dead men tell no tales. Pietman crouched at the fence through which he had cut a flap. He pulled himself through and then reached for the sheep's hind legs to drag her through too.



Deftly, he closed the flap, twisting wire by wire till the fence looked completely whole again. Boetie's mouth was dry with fear. Pietman was heading towards him, dragging the dead sheep by one leg. The only way open for Boetie to escape was across the very ground where Oom Groot-Jan always placed his trap.

In terror, Boetie turned to flee. Using his Oupa's walking stick, he prodded and poked his way forward, every step a triumph over the gin trap that lay buried like a landmine. He was almost past the danger zone, when the ground in front of him suddenly erupted. With a metallic thud, it snatched the walking stick right out of his hand.

There, the sturdy gift from Oom Groot Jan to Oupa stood, almost bolt upright, in the jaws of the trap. Boetie ran for his life.



Boy did not know of the fate  
which awaited pound dogs.

## 8 > Death Row

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**B**oy was trapped all right. In the municipal pound. Along with all the other dogs for whom the sand in the hour-glass was fast running out.

Boy, of course, did not know of the fate which awaited pound dogs. In a long narrow building, he was one of 70 or more dogs, locked in rows of small wire-meshed enclosures, each with two or more dogs inside. The stench of Jayes Fluid burned his nostrils and eyes.



The small, once-white Maltese who shared his enclosure, had pressed herself as far up against the back wall as she could, and trembled unceasingly.

Whether he looked left or right, all Boy saw was dogs of

all shapes and sizes, all anxious to be set free, all unknowingly inmates of death row. But they had all received food and water and for those who were little



more than skin and bone, the pound must have seemed like a piece of heaven. Most of them went quite willingly down the passage when their time was up. They would leap and wag their tails and lick the hands of the angels of death who came to take them, naively believing that at last someone had come to befriend them.



The dog next door urinated on the fence that separated him from Boy, and the yellow liquid trickled along the cold cement floor all the way into Boy's enclosure and into the next one too.

Boy sat pondering the calamity that had befallen him.

The door opened at the far end and a well-dressed woman entered, together with the old retired gentleman who served as manager of the pound. The small Maltese in Boy's enclosure remained shaking and shivering, pressing up against the back wall. But some of the other dogs lurched forward to see the visitor, jumping up against the front of their enclosures, yelping and barking in a deafening cacophony of excitement.

A fight broke out between two dogs in one of the cubicles and the old man quickly extinguished their hostility with a jet of water from a hose pipe that was ever ready for that purpose.

“Malteses,” the old man was telling the woman, “are the ones we get plenty of. Once they're not cute any more, people don't want to be bothered with the upkeep of their coats. It's a nuisance and expensive. Anyway, I always say, better dead than neglected and abandoned. Sometimes they're sold to sailors in the harbours, for food.”

The woman started weeping and pulled a tissue out of her handbag to dab her eyes and nose. In a trembly voice, she called: “Mishka, Mishka – where are you? Mishka?” She turned to the old man. “I don't know how she got out of the gate. Fow all I know she was stolen.” The woman began to sob.

“You should have put a tag on her collar with your telephone number,” admonished the old man. “Then we could have telephoned you and told you that we'd found her. Saved you all this unhappiness.”



The man stopped in front of Boy's enclosure. “Anyway, this is the one I thought might be Mishka.”

The woman peered past Boy to the cringing little rag of a

dog in the corner. She crouched down. “Mishka?”

She shook her head sadly. “That's not Mishka. Mishka would have run to me. Anyway, I can tell it's not Mishka.” She looked at Boy. “And this dog? Are you going to put him down too?”

“All of them, Ma'am,” replied the old man. “They've got nowhere to go. No-one wants them.”

“But where did you find him? He's beautiful. Surely somebody will come for him?”

“He was making a nuisance of himself, Ma'am,” replied the man. “He's probably one of those strays from the farmlands. You can see he's thin. He came right into the suburbs here. The night of the big hail storm. Started pestering a woman whose Labrador was on heat. Leaped straight over her fence. She threatened to poison him if we didn't come and get him.”

“Good heavens,” exclaimed the woman. “What a thing to even think of doing! Was he easy to catch?”

“Yes Ma'am. We baited this trap here.” The old man tapped his hand on top of a big wire trap nearby. “You put the meat at the far end – he walks in, steps on this part here and the door snaps shut behind him. No problem.”

The woman stared at Boy. “He's beautiful,” she mused. “Look at the nobility in that face.” Tears welled up in her eyes again. “I can't stand it,” she said, turning to go back down the passage. “How do you walk away from all these eyes?”

“Why don't you take one of these dogs, Ma'am – to replace Mishka?”

“But what if I find Mishka?”

“Then you'll have two dogs, Ma'am.”

The woman stopped at the door. She didn't turn around.

“I can't look at their eyes,” she murmured.

“What about the big one ma'am? The one you like so much?”

She shook her head. “He's too big. I live in a townhouse complex with only a small garden.”

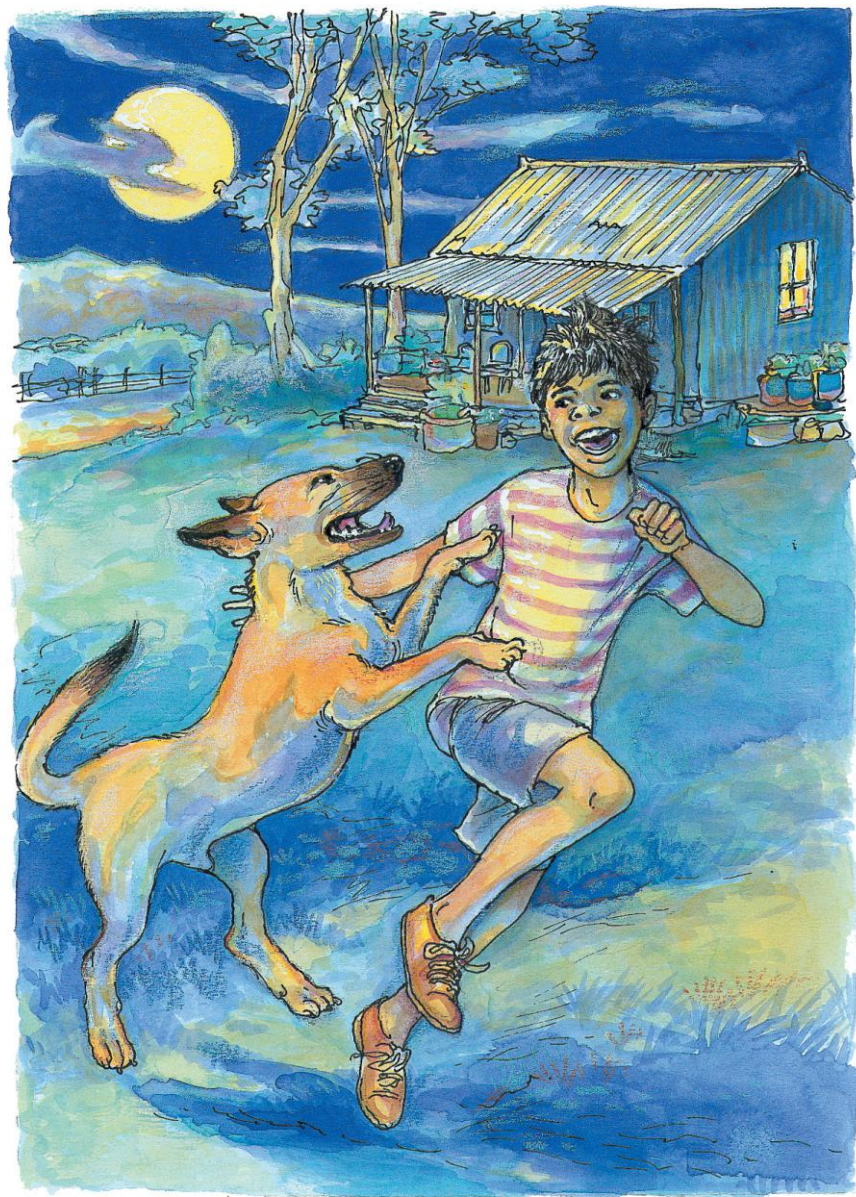
“What about one of the small ones?”

Long moments passed. “Bring me the Maltese that's in with the big beautiful one,” she said at last. Then she opened the door to go out while the man returned to Boy's enclosure.

Boy saw that the woman had left the door leading to the outside, open. He rose to his feet, frowning quizzically. He whined. When the old man unbolted the gate of his enclosure to get to the little Maltese at the back, Boy took his chance. Almost knocking the man over, he leaped past him, bounded down the passage, through the open door, past the well-dressed woman, across the busy road and was out of sight before anyone managed to recover their senses.



It was dark by the time he saw Boetie's shack in the moonlight. In the shadows of the moonbeams, he ran right up to the shack. Oupa was snoring as usual. He scraped with his forepaw at the spot where Boetie lay, on



the other side of the corrugated wall. He whined and scraped again.

“Boy?” he heard Boetie whisper.

Boy ran round to the shack door, ears cocked, waiting. Then joyfully, he bounded to greet Boetie, whining in pleasure, giving small sneezes of delight, prancing in a delirium of excitement.

Boetie felt his heart might burst with joy. The two of them started to run – run for all they were worth in the moonlight, exuberant, laughing and made silly by the sheer pleasure of their reunion. When, at last, they returned, tired and yawning, Boetie tiptoed into the house, relieved that Oupa was still snoring. He took his blanket to the rickety old goats' shed where he and Boy curled up on the straw, next to Heidi and Klara and their respective twin kids, and slept.



The sight of the man who had once chased him in his jeep and fired shots at him, struck terror in Boy's heart.

## 9 > Calamity at the Shack

The next day, Friday, started normally enough. Boetie set off for school and Oupa, as he did every day, went to count the sheep before walking up to the big house to tend Mr Groot-Jan's vegetable garden.

With a heavy heart, Oupa knocked at the kitchen door of the big house. He was afraid that the bad news he was about to bring would cause Mr Groot-Jan to have a heart attack. So he tried to sound very calm.

“There was a burglary last night, sir, sorry to say... Only 39 sheep, sir. I counted three times. One sheep is missing.” Then Oupa beat a hasty retreat into the vegetable garden as Groot-Jan lost his temper.

“I'll find that dirty bliksem if it's the last thing I do!” Groot-



Jan roared. Together Groot-Jan and Klein-Jan loaded their rifles, bristling with single-minded intent. Then they jumped into the jeep and drove fast down the hill to where the sheep grazed. On the other side of the fence was the wood where Klein-Jan had set the gin trap. Groot-Jan slammed on the brakes in a cloud of dust and the two men leaped off the jeep.



“How the devil did the thief get through the fence?” roared Groot-Jan. “Find the hole, man. Find it!”

“The gin trap!” Klein-Jan's face lit up. “Maybe.... With any luck...”

They leaped back into the jeep and took the road that would bring them to the other side of the fence. What met them at the site of the trap was enough to send Groot-Jan over the edge of reason. Big as he was, Klein-Jan still trembled when his father was like this.

Back at the big house, Groot-Jan marched up to Oupa who was kneeling on the ground in the vegetable garden, transplanting lettuce seedlings.

“Is it you who are trying to play jokes on me?” he demanded, towering over the wizened old man.



Oupa stood up, non-plussed. Groot-Jan always made him nervous, even when he was in a good mood.

“No sir,” replied Oupa, quite dumb-founded at the allegation being lodged against him.

Groot-Jan thrust the walking stick at Oupa. “Is this the stick I brought back for you from Amsterdam? The one I gave you for Christmas last year?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Oupa perplexed as to how his walking stick had suddenly found itself in Groot-Jan's large hands.

“And you just threw it away? You don't like my present?”

“No, sir,” objected Oupa. “I love my stick.”

“Maybe you thought it funny to stick it in the trap?”

“No sir,” repeated the poor, dumbfounded old man.

“Well then, how did it get there? Standing bolt upright in the gin trap?”

“I don't know sir,” Oupa lamented. “I would never do such a thing, sir. It's crime that's taken over our land, sir.”



That afternoon, after Groot-Jan had disagreeably handed him his week's wages, Oupa went straight to the new general store and bought a whole 'kraantjie' of wine to calm his tattered nerves.

Klein-Jan too had taken refuge from his father's curses, and was lying on his bed reading the TV guide. He started as the door of his room burst open. "Get yourself down there man," Groot-Jan snarled. "I don't want to see you in this house without the thief in your hands."

"But it's nearly dark, Pa," objected Klein Jan. "I can't go down there now."

Groot-Jan clenched his teeth together and breathed heavily through his nostrils, staring fixedly at his son. Obediently, Klein-Jan got up from his bed. "What if it's the phantom that's doing all this? I can't go there alone," he pleaded. But one more look at his father changed his mind. "Okay, Pa," he said. "Okay."

So Klein-Jan loaded his hunting rifle. He found his miner's helmet with its built-in headlamp, made himself a sandwich and filled the thermos flask with hot coffee and plenty of sugar. Then he set off for the wood near the sheep pasture and sat down with his back against a pine tree, preparing himself for what might become a very long night.

Overhead, the guinea-fowl sang their raucous evening song and he wished he'd brought his birdshot cartridges with him. That would give him something to do and he enjoyed roast guinea-fowl.



At about the same time, Boetie returned to his shack from his afternoon excursion to Spook Tree. His oupa's drunken snoring resonated through the air as far as 20 metres from the house. Good, thought Boetie. With Oupa asleep already, Boy could come home with him for once.

Boetie busied himself settling the goats in their stable for the night, but the young ones were spirited and full of high jinks. Suddenly, one of the kids jumped up onto the wall of the well, happily defying – indeed relishing, as only goats can – the long drop down into the well. Careful not to startle the kid, Boetie was about to lift her off, when a shot pierced the still evening air. Startled, the kid leaped randomly into the air — and disappeared with high-pitched bleats and a frantic flailing of legs down into the blackness of the well.

Without a split-second's hesitation, Boetie started his descent down the metal rungs into the long dark shaft, the sharp bleats of the frantically kicking kid became muted, as water engulfed her. Steadying his feet on a rung, knee-deep below the surface of the water, Boetie clung to a higher rung with his left hand, reaching down into the water with his right, to haul the young kid up, and under his arm. Spluttering and coughing, she was alive!

It was only then that Boetie realized the impossibility of ascent up the sheer wall of the well, with only one arm.

“Boy,” yelled Boetie. “Boy! Call Oupa. Call Oupa, Boy!”

Frowning, ears cocked, Boy stood up against the well's stone wall with his front paws and tried to discern Boetie in the darkness below. He heard the urgency in Boetie's voice. He heard the bleating of the kid. He knew full well



that Boetie was in trouble. Oupa? Where was Oupa? Again he heard the muffled echo of Boetie's voice... "Call Oupa, Boy."



What did it matter if Oupa had his sjambok ready to strike him? He would duck. Where was Oupa? Boy went to the shack door and barked. He barked again and again, and again and again. But the old man was deep in his drunken slumber and was not to be roused.

Boy ran back to the well. This time, he jumped onto the well wall, peering downwards in search of his beloved friend. He whined, pleading for Boetie to climb back up to the top again. Boetie's arms ached. The kid kept wriggling and the icy cold water was making his legs numb.

Boy knew he had to get help. He didn't know how or who to turn to. He ran this way and then that. He thought he heard a noise in the wood. Perhaps there was someone there who could help.

Meantime, Klein-Jan was whiling away the time, sitting with his back against the pine tree. Earlier, he'd fired a shot into a tree-trunk five metres away – just to amuse himself and to make sure his aim was good. Now, he decided, it was time for a cup of piping-hot coffee from his thermos flask.

Boy saw Klein-Jan before Klein-Jan saw Boy. The sight of the man who had once chased him in his jeep and fired shots at him, struck terror in Boy's heart. Every fibre in him wanted to run as far away from Klein-Jan as possible. Instead, Boy stood his ground.

Klein-Jan sipped his coffee. Suddenly, he cocked his head to the side and held his breath. He listened intently. He thought he'd heard the faint rustle of fallen leaves on the ground, like someone changing their weight from one foot to the other. Klein-Jan switched on the head-lamp of his helmet and moved his head slowly around, beaming spots of light onto the trees, one after the other. As the beam hit Boy's eyes, making them reflect like the eyes of a cat caught in a car's headlights, Klein-Jan sprang to his feet, spilling his coffee down his front.

He raised his rifle and took aim, but Boy leaped away and ran a short distance in the direction of Boetie. Then he stopped, looked back and barked sharply. Klein-Jan gave chase. He should have brought his cell phone to call for back-up from his Pa. Who knew what this bliksem looked like in daylight. Again, his head lamp caught Boy's eyes shining in the dark. Again, Klein-Jan stopped to take aim. But Boy was gone and only his barking gave Klein-Jan the direction that he should follow.



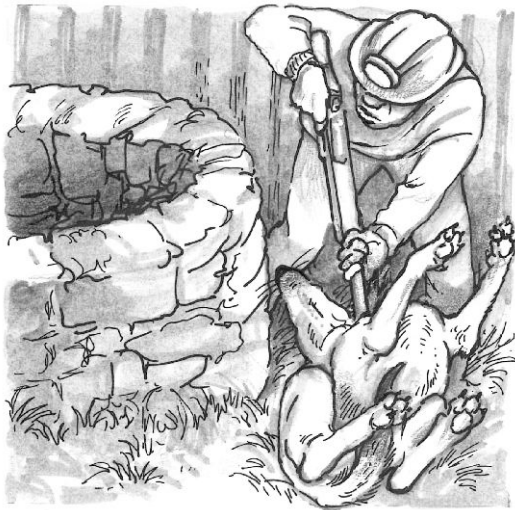
The well was in sight and Boy had to run across a narrow stretch of open land where no trees could hide him. He stopped once more to make sure Klein-Jan was following. Then he bolted across to the well, leaped onto the wall and barked down into the dark hole, to Boetie.

Klein-Jan stopped at the edge of the tree line. He adjusted his head lamp until the strong beam fell on Boy standing

on the well wall. He lifted his rifle and took aim. He squeezed the trigger slowly. The shot pierced the still night air like a giant fire cracker. Boy yelped as it hit and knocked him clean off his feet. He hit the ground next to the well while the guinea-fowl flapped and fluttered in fright on their night perches and set up a raucous lament.

“Got him! I got him!” Klein-Jan ran in triumph towards the well to claim his kill. Boy was still alive. He tried to scramble onto his feet, but he fell back every time.

“Good grief!” exclaimed Klein-Jan in surprise, as he looked at Boy. “It's just a no-good scavenging dog!” He moved closer and took aim once more. This time, for Boy's head. But in that moment, he heard Boetie's frantic calls for help from the depths of the well.



He had cried as blood seeped  
out of a wound in Boy's side.

## 10 > Unsung Heroes

**B**y mid-morning the next day, everyone in the town knew about Klein-Jan's heroic rescue of the young farm boy from the well. Right after breakfast, Klein-Jan decided he needed sheep dip at the co-op and spent the next two hours telling all the other farmers about how he had descended to the depths of the well to rescue the farm-hand's grandson – and the goat kid.



By lunch-time, a young woman journalist from the local newspaper drove up to the big house, with notebook and camera, in order to interview Klein-Jan. Once again he told the story, embellishing here and there so that he was indeed a courageous hero. Even his Pa, Groot-Jan, for once, seemed to be very pleased with him. Then Klein-Jan took the reporter down to Oom Klaas' shack so she could interview Boetie too and take a photo of Boetie standing next to Klein-Jan at the well.

“Open your mouth properly when the lady speaks to you and stop looking at your feet,” Oupa cajoled Boetie.



“He's just a bit shy,” Oupa explained with apparent affection, in an aside to the reporter.

“That's okay,” said the reporter pleasantly. “Tell us, Boetie. Tell us how it happened in your own words.”

Boetie tried to explain that he was putting the goats in the stable for the night when one of the little ones jumped onto the wall of the well. Then a rifle shot had gone off somewhere in the wood and the kid, in fright, had fallen down the well. Then he had climbed down to rescue it and couldn't get up again.

“And where were you, Oom Klaas?” asked the reporter.

Boetie looked at Oupa. “I was still up at the big house,” Oupa fibbed. “I was working late because I had transplanted the lettuces and I still needed to check on the sheep.”

The reporter turned to Klein-Jan. “How did you know to come here to the well?” she asked.

“Because of Boy!” piped in Boetie. “It was Boy who brought Mr Klein-Jan here!”

“Boy?” enquired the reporter. “Who's Boy?”

“My dog!” exclaimed Boetie again. “Boy is my dog and he went to find help for me.”

The reporter looked at Oupa and Klein-Jan. “So how does the dog fit into the story?” she asked, perplexed.

“Ag,” said Oupa dismissively. “It's just a rubbish dog that hangs about here sometimes.” Then he turned to Boetie.

“He's not your dog. Boetie. Don't lie.”

“He is my dog,” said Boetie. “And he saved me.”

The reporter frowned. She turned to Klein-Jan. “What can you tell us about the dog, sir?”

“Ag,” replied Klein-Jan, “you know how kids are. He's

talking about a stray that scavenges around here sometimes. We suspect he's responsible for some of our stock losses.”

“He's not,” said Boetie earnestly. “He doesn't eat your sheep or your chickens. I know because I feed him. Every single day.”



Oupa struck Boetie on the head sharply. “Don't lie,” he scolded. “I will get the sjambok if you lie.”

The young reporter felt uncomfortable. She didn't like seeing Boetie struck on the head like that.

“It doesn't matter whose dog it is,” she said. “It's just a question of how the dog played a role in the rescue.”

Klein-Jan was hasty to explain. “Ag well, I saw this dog in the distance and I followed it because it's been eating my father's sheep. I took aim and shot it and it fell here at the well. So I came to inspect and that's how I heard Boetie's shouts for help.”

The reporter seemed shocked. “Did you kill the dog?”

“Naaa,” replied Klein-Jan. “I just aimed to nick it — to scare it away from this area, you know. Just a flesh wound. But Boetie was all upset and crying so I took it to the vet. In the middle of the night. I had to take that bliksem dog down to the vet in the middle of the night!”

“Is the dog all right?” asked the reporter.

“Ag, yes,” replied Klein-Jan as if the subject was beginning to irritate him. “He's fine.”

“He was bleeding,” said Boetie. “And whimpering all the time. He yelped when you tried to lift him up.”

Unwelcome tears welled up in Boetie's eyes again. Last night he had cried for the first time ever that he could remember. He had cried as blood seeped out of a wound in Boy's side. While Oupa had snored right through the entire drama, he had begged Mr Klein-Jan to take Boy to the vet. He had knelt next to Boy, fondling his ears and head while his tears had splashed onto Boy's face.

In all his life, Klein-Jan had never seen distress like that for an animal. “It's only a dog,” he'd told Boetie. “You can get another one.” But Boetie's distress was so deep that finally Klein-Jan had agreed to take Boy to the vet.



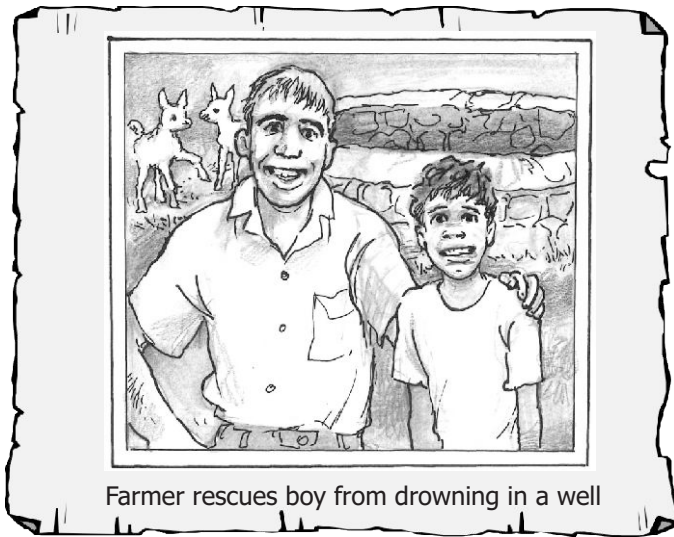
He'd fetched the jeep, ordered Boetie to lay newspaper at the back so the blood wouldn't make a mess, and had then driven away. Boetie had climbed into the back with Boy, but Klein-Jan had ordered him to get out and Boetie watched wretchedly in the darkness at Klein-Jan's tail-lights grew dimmer and dimmer until they were gone.

It was the echo in his head now of Boy's yelps of pain that made Boetie cry all over again. He wiped his tears with the back of his hands. Nothing in his life, not even the beatings Oupa had sometimes inflicted on him with the sjambok, had ever made him feel as he did now. “Please take me to him.” He looked at Klein-Jan.

“I will, I will,” said Klein-Jan with irritation. “Tomorrow. Now stop crying, man! The reporter wants to take a photograph of someone glad to have been rescued.”

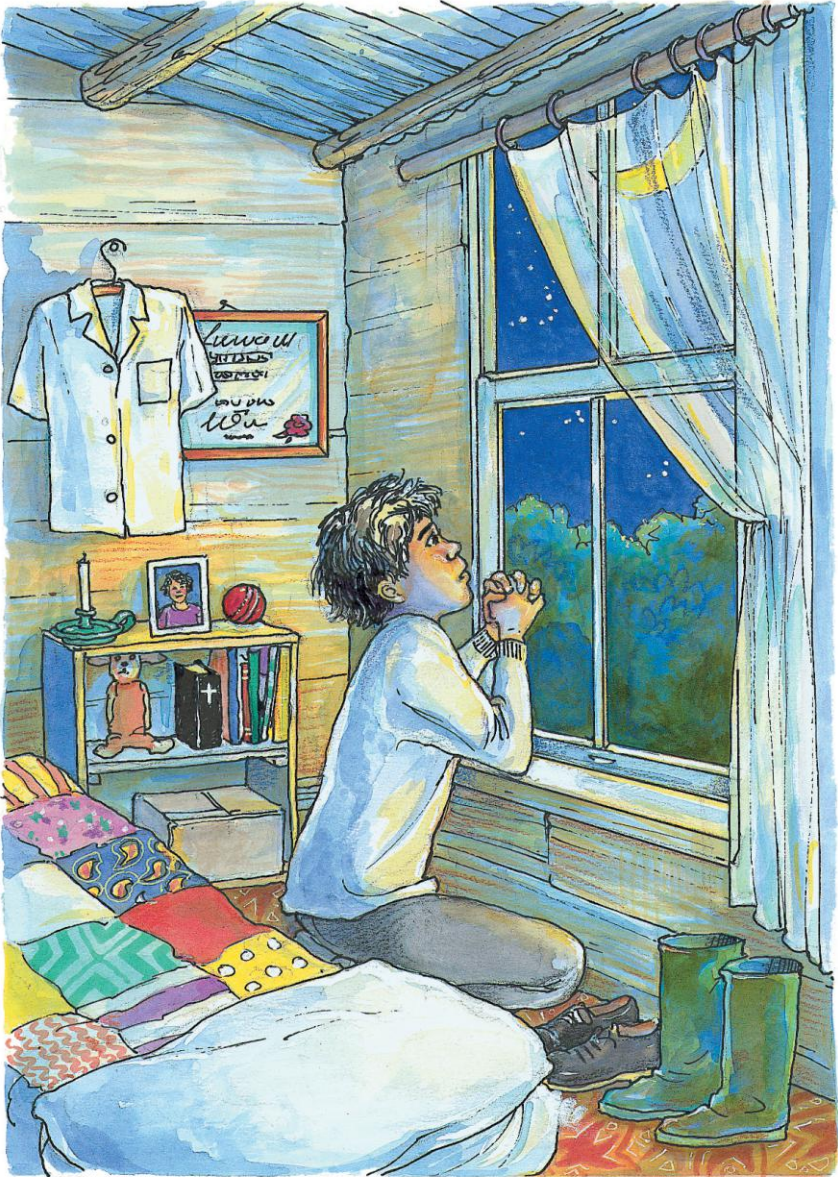
“Yes,” agreed Oupa. “You should be glad you’ve been rescued from drowning. Look at you crying like a puppy.”

So Boetie had to stand beside Klein-Jan next to the well, and Klein-Jan put his heavy, hairy arm around Boetie’s thin shoulders and the reporter told them to say “cheese”.



But that night, Boetie knelt beside his thin sponge mattress on the floor and clasped his hands together till his knuckles were white. He stared out of the window at the

starry sky and prayed with all his heart that God would hear him. “Please, dear Lord, take care of Boy and bring him home safely. Please, dear Lord.” He said his prayer over and over again.



... he had to be half-dragged, half-carried by the Adoptions Manager, to the back of Mrs O'Connor's car.



The sun was hot on Boy's coat. In the hazy distance of his dream, Boy thought he saw Boetie – far away, across the veld. He cocked his head, listening intently. He heard Boetie calling his name. Boy whined in excitement. Then, like a race horse finally released from the starting box, he leaped into action and ran like the wind, ears back and mouth wide in greeting, bounding and leaping through the dry grass like Grey Hare had once taught him.

Trembling with joy, he jumped up against Boetie's chest with his fore-paws and together, as if in slow motion, they fell to the ground, rolling and squealing and yelping in a frenzy of excitement.

The girl's voice penetrated Boy's consciousness. "Look at his legs twitching! He's dreaming!" She laughed. Boy lifted his head. The warmth of the sun made him sleepy.

He lay back again, closing his eyes.

It was two years now that Boy had lived with this family in their neat suburban home. A mere 7 kilometres separated him from the farmlands where he and Boetie and the goats had all belonged to each other. But it may as well have been a world away. So much had changed.

Back then, Klein-Jan had finally heeded Boetie's pleas and taken him to the vet to visit Boy. But Boy was no longer there. After the operation to remove the bullet from Boy's side, he'd been sent to the Animal Welfare kennels to recover and hopefully, find someone to adopt him. After all, Klein-Jan had told the vet the dog was a stray.

“I'm looking for a biggish dog,” Mrs O'Connor had told the Adoptions Manager at the kennels. “A guard dog, really.”

The manager had led Mrs O'Connor towards the compound where all the stray, lost and abandoned dogs were kept in fenced units. Almost immediately, Mrs O'Connor had spotted Boy. “What a beauty!” she exclaimed. “How did he land up here?”

“I'm not sure,” the manager had replied. “He's a stray, I think. Been making a nuisance of himself on one of the farms.”

“What a beautiful face. Is he friendly?”

“He's friendly enough. Doesn't bite.”

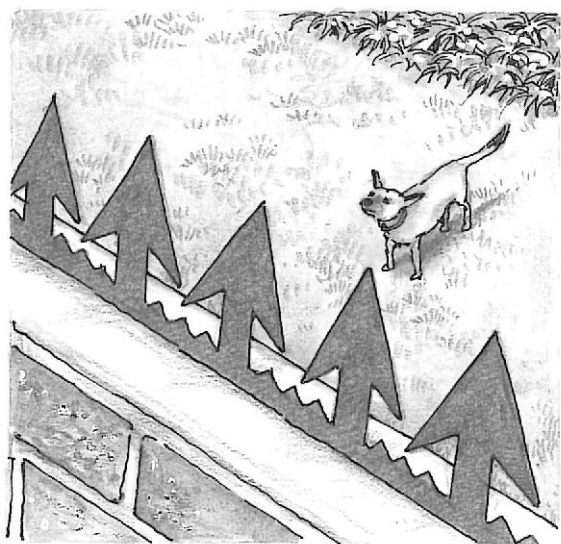
“I'll take him!”

But Boy didn't want to go anywhere. Anxiously, he had waited out the hours that had turned to days and nights, firmly believing that Boetie would come and get him. Or, perhaps, like he'd done once before, he'd grab a chance to escape.

Now, as the woman entered his enclosure and came towards him, he slunk to the back. She reached to put her hand on his head and fondled his ears. “Hello,” she said. “Hello Caesar.” Then she put a collar and lead around his neck and he had to be half-dragged, half-carried by the Adoptions Manager, to the back of Mrs O'Connor's car.



So Boy became 'Caesar'. The wide open spaces became a small suburban garden with neat flower beds and immaculate lawn edges. A high white wall with short, sharp metal spikes across the top, shut out the world. Boetie and the goats were gone.



Boy sniffed in every corner of the small garden but, in truth, there was nothing much to smell.

## 12 > A Broken Heart

Gabrielle O'Connor was elated to find Boy already in the garden when she came home from school.

“Oh Mom, what a beautiful dog,” she exclaimed. “How clever of you to choose him.” She put down her school satchel and spoke gently to Boy. “Hello. Hello beautiful doggy.” She stretched out her hand to fondle his head and ears.

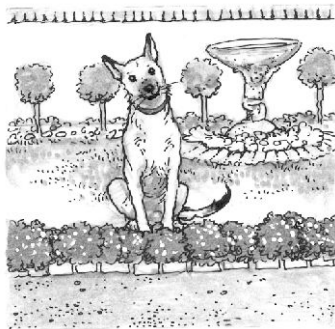


“What do you think of the name 'Caesar'?” asked her mother.

“He's handsome enough to be an emperor in dog terms,” laughed Gabrielle. “Okay. Let's call him Caesar!”

Later, Mr O'Connor, Gabrielle's father, arrived home with a big, wooden kennel with a red roof that he placed on the stoep outside the front door. He also brought two new dog bowls. One was for water, he said, and the other for the dog pellets. The family was glad that at last they had a guard dog who could protect their property while they were away at work. Mr O'Connor got out his electric drill and screwed a big sign 'Beware of the Dog' onto the wall outside.

Where was Boetie? Boy sniffed in every corner of the small garden but, in truth, there was nothing much to smell. In the long hours he spent alone, he sat on the grass, frowning, ears cocked, listening intently to the noises in the street outside. People walking past. Cars starting up and driving off. He began to pace up and down along the high garden wall, back and forth. Back and forth. He was glad when the family came back in the afternoons and evenings, but mostly they went straight into the house and stayed there.



One night when the moon was full, deep ancestral memories flitted through Boy's mind. A yearning and a sorrow beyond his understanding took hold of him and he raised his head to the moon and howled – long, primordial, grief-stricken howls. The lights in the house switched on and Mr O'Connor, in pyjamas and slippers, emerged wielding a cane. “Shut up,” he ordered. “Shut up.” Tail between his legs, Boy slunk towards the garden wall. He looked back miserably at Mr O'Connor.

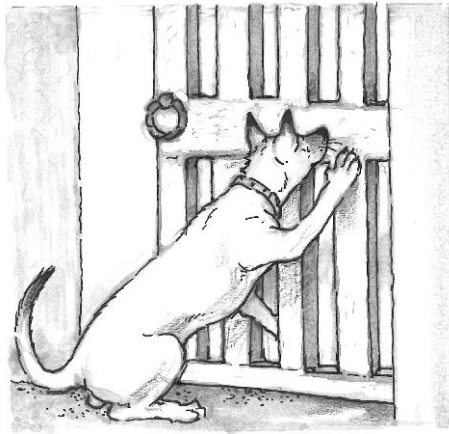


Mr O'Connor returned into the house, switched off the lights and had just settled back into bed when Boy's lament started all over again.

This time, Mr O'Connor stormed out of the house, thrashing the air with his cane menacingly. “Shut up, you stupid dog,” he commanded. “Shut up. You'll wake the neighbours.”

Boy slunk into the corner of the wall but Mr O'Connor

continued coming towards him, thrashing the air in a warning. At first Boy cringed. Then he stood firm with hackles raised, facing his accuser, his lip lifted to show his teeth. Mr O'Connor backed off. "You dare!" he sneered. "You just dare." Then he went back into the house cursing his wife for choosing such a "low-bred dog with vicious tendencies".



The next day, Boy paced back and forth along the garden wall in a mindless sort of occupation. He sniffed at the wooden gate that was built into the garden wall. It had a strong spring on it that made it bang shut on its own accord every time someone passed through it. When Gabrielle returned home from school in the afternoon, he was glad to see her and greeted her with wagging tail and smiling mouth.

Sometimes, he got a faint whiff of Boetie when Gabrielle came home. He couldn't understand that.

The terrible irony was that Gabrielle and Boetie were in the same class at the school in the village, but he knew as little about her life as she knew about his. How could she possibly have known that her dog called Caesar was the same dog that had helped rescue Boetie from the well. Everyone knew about that, because Boetie's picture had been on the front page of the local newspaper.

“When I come home in the afternoons, can Caesar come into my room and sit with me while I do my homework?” she asked her mother one day.

But her mother shook her head. “You know your father doesn't like dog hair in the house,” she said.

The months passed and the days grew longer and lonelier for Boy and although Gabrielle and her mother were always kind to him, Mr O'Connor said he disliked the dog and ignored him altogether.

Boy's finely-honed muscles began to lose their shape. He paced along the wall and slept. Then paced and slept again. The seasons changed, but still Boy never used his kennel. He dug himself a shallow hole in the earth next to the garden wall and wrapped his tail across his nose to keep out the cold of winter.

One morning, he lay sleeping in the gentle sunlight of a Spring day when a familiar scratching sound penetrated his consciousness. Instantly Boy leaped to his feet, ears cocked. How well he knew that noise. With two leaps he was on top of the mound of sand that was erupting from beneath the soil. Expertly he dug for the mole, grabbed it in his jaws, shook the life out of it and returned to the patch of green grass to devour his tasty meal.

But when Gabrielle returned home, she was utterly dismayed at what she saw. “Oh my goodness, Caesar,” she exclaimed. “Dad's going to be cross with you. Look what you've done to his flower bed!”



She knelt down and propped the wilting flowers back into holes in the soil and then watered them, hoping they would revive enough for her father not to notice.

Later, she told her mother in hushed tones about what Caesar had done to the flower bed. Mrs O'Connor went

to inspect. “Oh my goodness. What on earth did the dog do this for!” she exclaimed. Mr O'Connor emerged from the house. “What's wrong?” he asked.

Gabrielle stood next to Boy, unconsciously resting her hand on his back protectively. Boy sensed something was wrong. He looked on, not understanding why the atmosphere was suddenly so charged with anger and fear. He whined quizzically.

The recollection of what Gabrielle witnessed next, would make her shudder and recoil for the rest of her life. It was as if a black cloud settled on her father's face. Gabrielle knew that face. When he wore it, she knew he would punch her mother before the day was out and her mother would stifle her screams so that the neighbours wouldn't hear.

Terrified, she watched. Without a word, her father marched into the house and came out with his cane. Gabrielle's heart thumped in her chest. “Dad, don't. Dad, please don't.” But her father grabbed Boy by his leather collar, dragged him to where he had dug up the mole, twisted the collar to choke him, then he beat him mercilessly. Holding her hands across her ears, Gabrielle screamed. She screamed and screamed until Mrs O'Connor pulled her by the arm inside the house and shut the door.



Finally, the terrible choking yelping from Boy stopped and Gabrielle sank to her knees and sobbed. Boy's pain and terror was her fault, she thought. If she hadn't told her mother about what Boy had done, perhaps her father would never have noticed. She wished she could have put her body over Boy's body and saved him from her father's terrible beating.

She sat at the supper table, her stomach in a knot. She tried to swallow her food.

Finally her mother said she should go and have a bath. Gabrielle waited until her father had settled himself in front of the TV before she slipped outside. She found Boy in the far corner of the small garden. He'd squeezed himself behind a spiky bush that grew there. He looked at

her anxiously, ready to run. She sobbed into his coat and begged him to forgive her.

After a day or two, life returned to normal again in the O'Connor household. Mrs O'Connor and Gabrielle were pleased that Mr O'Connor was in such a good mood. Each day, Gabrielle quickly inspected the garden when she returned home from school. When she was sure Caesar had done no digging, she could breathe freely again and say hello in a proper way to him.

One morning, after Boy had knocked over the dirt bin during the night, spreading rotting food and litter across the garden, Gabrielle arrived at school tear-stained and with a pain in her tummy. She was unable to concentrate on her school-work and kept looking out of the window.

“What's wrong, Gabrielle?” the teacher asked kindly. But Gabrielle just shook her head. How could she let anyone know what her father sometimes did to the dog?

Boetie looked across the classroom at Gabrielle. It seemed strange to him that a girl with such nice shiny shoes and a brand-new satchel with pockets, seemed so sad.

When she returned home that day, she immediately noticed muddy paw prints on the side of the white garden wall. During the morning, Boy had jumped against the wall in an effort to reach the top.





“Oh my goodness, Caesar, you mustn't do that,” Gabrielle tried to explain to him while stroking his head. She ran to get the garden hose to wash off the prints. What if her father came home early and saw what she was doing? Again and again her father's words played through her mind – “How else do you expect the dog to learn?” “How else do you expect the dog to learn?” She began to cry again.

Later, when Mr O'Connor returned home, the wall was clean as a whistle and he didn't notice a thing. But when he walked into the garden after supper, Boy watched him from behind the spiky bush. As Mr O'Connor glanced at him, Boy lifted his lip and snarled a warning. “Bite the hand that feeds you! Just try it, you filthy mongrel,” Mr O'Connor muttered under his breath.

Boy had made a new bed for himself. Nowadays, he slept outside Gabrielle's window. He could hear when she was



awake and when she slept. Very often, Gabrielle slept badly. She lay in bed wondering how she could make her father's cane disappear. He kept it behind the front door. Where could she hide it so that it could never be found again?

A neighbour came to speak to the O'Connors. She didn't want to make trouble, she said, but in all honesty, Caesar's continual barking during the mornings was becoming a disturbance in the neighbourhood. Mr O'Connor looked very gloomy.

At the supper table that night, he said: "That dog's been a let-down since he got here. Best we put the darn animal down. Better for him. Better for us."

"Oh, please don't," said Gabrielle alarmed. "Please let's at least try to find him a new home."

"There are thousands of dogs needing homes," retorted her father. "How do you think you're going to find a

home for him? Specially with all his behavioural problems. Who'd want him? Take him down to the vet in the morning," he told Mrs O'Connor.

But Mrs O'Connor felt embarrassed about taking a healthy dog to be put down. People might think that she was a bad owner. So the matter of getting rid of Boy was put off on a daily basis. Perhaps tomorrow, she'd say.

... somewhere out there –  
under the same stars and under  
the same big, shining round  
moon – was Boy.

## 13 > Sorrow and Joy

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Just a few kilometers away as the crow flies, Boetie and Klein-Jan put the last clods of earth on Oupa's grave. Groot-Jan's farm had its own graveyard with weathered headstones dating back to the 1700s. Now Oupa lay next to Ouma, and next to Ouma lay Boetie's own mother who had died when he was just a baby. At Oupa's head and at his feet, Boetie placed flower-pots of glorious freesias. They had been Oupa's favourite flower.



“You're growing up now, Boetie,” said Klein-Jan as they stood beside the grave. “It's time to start earning your own living. You must work hard to pass your exams and also take over the vegetable garden at the big house and do other things to earn yourself some money. And Pa has something to tell you. You must come up to the big house tonight in your best clothes. Six o'clock sharp.”

So Boetie put on his school clothes and walked up to the big house. Never in his life before had he been summoned to the big house. Grieta met Boetie at the kitchen door and led him into the sitting room.



“Good evening, Boetie,” Groot-Jan greeted him affably. “Sit down. Make yourself comfortable.” Boetie sat on the edge of a fancy chair with fine green upholstery.

“Your Oupa was a very good man, Boetie,” said Groot-Jan gruffly, getting straight to the point. “And he did a very good thing for you. Before he died he came and asked me to give him title to a portion of this farm that was rightfully his because that land was always in your family for generations. It used to belong to your

Oupagrootjie before it was expropriated by the government. Do you understand, Boetie?”



Boetie nodded although he wasn't really sure what Groot-Jan was trying to tell him.

“Anyway, Boetie, the long and the short of it is that in the new South Africa, land can be restored to families who should rightfully inherit it. You know? Land restitution? You understand? So, Boetie, now that your Oupa has passed on, you are the rightful owner of that land that stretches all the way to beyond the wood. Your Oupa left it to you in his will.”

Boetie couldn't believe his ears! Groot-Jan stretched out his hand to shake Boetie's hand.

“Good. Well, that's it, then,” he said. “Work hard, Boetie.

Farm your land. Make something of yourself.”

That night, amid the scent of Oupa's pots of flowering bulbs, Boetie stood on the stoep of the shack, staring unseeing into the darkness. He marvelled at how he was now the proud owner of the beautiful land on which he had grown up. Oupa had planted his freesias and ixias, chinchinchees and babianas, before he became too sick to get out of bed. Boetie hoped that somehow, Oupa could smell them and see their blaze of glory from where he was now.

“Thank you, Oupa,” he whispered into the darkness.  
“You'll see.... I'll make you proud.”



In the pines, the guinea-fowl started up a raucous evening song. Klara and Heidi cuddled in the rickety old stable, patiently awaiting the births of the snowy-white infant kids they were carrying. Oupa's old chair stood empty. Out of reverence and respect for the old man, Boetie did not sit in it. He would keep it free for Oupa to sit in, in case he ever came to 'visit'. Boetie knew he would not sleep that night. In the peace and in his aloneness, he stayed there on the stoep – a tiny speck of consciousness in the mighty universe.

He wanted to believe that somewhere out there – under the same stars and under the same big, shining round moon – was Boy. Boetie lifted his face towards the heavens and shut his eyes.

Boy ran along the streets ...  
unaware of everything except  
the yearning that drove him  
forward.

## 14 > Escape

Boy was restless. Perhaps it was the influence of the full moon again. He began to pace up and down along the well-worn path he'd made next to the garden wall. Gabrielle and her parents were asleep. The house was in darkness. The street lamp outside daubed its light onto the sharp metal spikes that criss-crossed along the top of the wall. Boy scratched at the garden gate. He began to chew at the bottom edge of the gate, gnawing it away, spitting out splinters of white-painted wood.

From her bedroom window, Gabrielle shone her torch into the garden.



“Oh, my goodness! Caesar, stop!” she whispered. She had to stop him before her father woke up too. She tip-toed to the front door and went outside. “Caesar,” she whispered. “Caesar, stop!”

She shone the torch onto the damaged garden gate. Boy glanced up at her.

“What are you doing up at this time of night?” Gabrielle started at the sound of her father's voice behind her. He switched on the outside light.

“Nothing, Dad,” she said quickly. “I was just checking.”

“Checking what?” demanded her father.

“Nothing, Dad. Honestly. Nothing. I'm going back to bed now.”

Roughly, her father pushed past her and looked outside. Gabrielle saw his face contort with rage.

“Don't Dad,” she shrieked. “Don't hurt him, Dad.”

Still fumbling to put on her dressing gown, Mrs O'Connor appeared. “What's the matter?” she asked in consternation. Gabrielle started sobbing. “Dad's going to beat him,” she shrieked. “Stop him, Mom.”

Mr O'Connor's breathing was heavy. He intended taking the dog to the garage, out of the ear-shot of neighbours, to beat some discipline into him.

“Mind out of my way,” he snarled at his wife and daughter as they begged him to calm down. But Gabrielle

slipped past her father. She ran down the short pathway to the garden gate, pulled back the bolt and held it wide open.

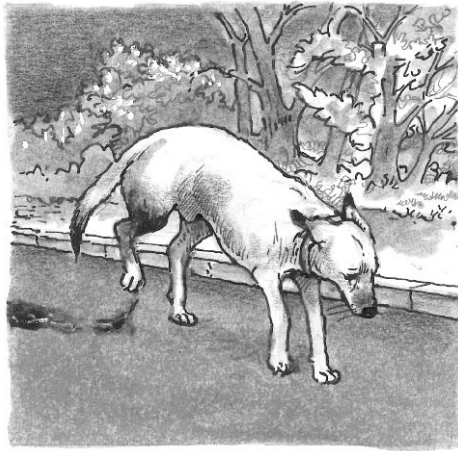
“Go Caesar,” wept Gabrielle. “God bless you, dear Caesar.”



Years later, she would recall that it all happened as if her body had been acting out a role in a play and that she herself had watched it all unfold from a distance. She remembered feeling Boy brush against her leg as he ran into the street outside. He'd stopped in the light of the street lamp and looked back at her. In that moment, they had connected so profoundly that it awoke in her a consciousness that she hadn't had before. As her father's painful grip on her shoulder wrenched her back, she caught a last glimpse of Boy bounding down the street into the darkness. Nothing mattered except that he had

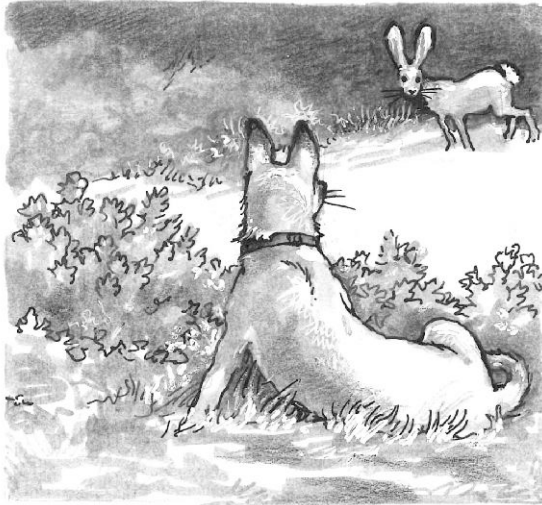
escaped her father's wrath.

Boy ran along the streets of the sleeping suburb. He felt no fear as he dodged between cars with blinding headlights. A car struck him. He stumbled and fell, but he felt no pain. He heaved himself up, oblivious that his hind leg dragged and that he was leaving a trail of blood in his wake; unaware of everything except the yearning that drove him forward.



When at last he reached the veld, he smelled the pines and the francolin eggs. He breathed deeply and slumped to the ground. He flinched. For the first time, he felt the searing pain in his leg. He was surprised that the hair all the way down his leg was shiny wet in the moonlight. He licked the deep gash on his thigh. He tried to lick up the

blood that trickled continuously from the wound. He felt very tired and lay back to sleep.



In the moonlight, something caught his eye. There, in the long grass in the distance, he thought he saw Grey Hare. Boy struggled to sit up. He frowned. True enough, in a shaft of moonshine, he glimpsed Grey Hare running like the wind, zig-zagging in and out of sight. Boy rose unsteadily to his feet. His head was dizzy. Grey Hare stopped and looked back at him, willing him to follow. Then Grey Hare flitted across the veld, teasing Boy, taunting him, challenging him to run like the wind.

... over near the pines, he saw  
a dishevelled dog ...

## 15 > Footsore

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The morning star was alone in the sky. On Oom Groot-Jan's farm, cocks stood on their toes to crow.

Birdsong filled the trees. Hadedas cried to each other overhead as they made their way to their feeding grounds for the new day. Boetie was already hard at work. He'd swept out the goats' bedding and given them their morning rations. Now, pitchfork in hand, he deftly turned the compost heap behind the shack. Then he stood back to watch the steam rise from the heap into the cool morning air.

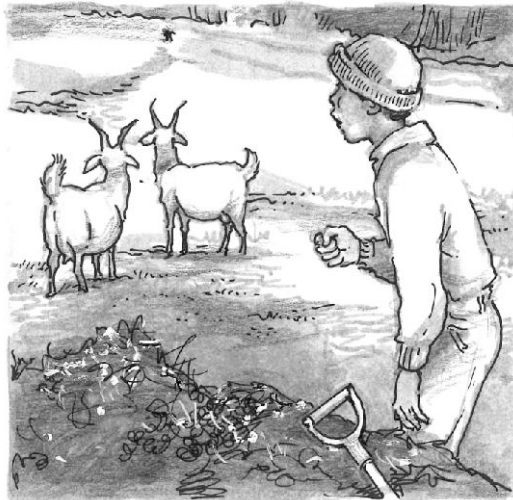
When he had been a small boy, Oupa had told him to stick his arm into the compost. Oupa had laughed when he'd withdrawn it quickly, exclaiming "Jissie, it's boiling hot, Oupa!" As he stood there, he thought fondly of his Oupa.



For Oupa, 'digging for treasure' had meant helping him to lift potatoes out of the ground without damaging any one of them through carelessness. In those days, when Ouma was still alive, Oupa had had a good sense of humour. Only afterwards, did he become so moody and gruff.

Boetie wished he could have done something to make his shrunken old Oupa's hands and feet warmer as he lay in his bed during those last few days. They remained icy cold even with Boetie's own blanket on top. Now, as he turned the compost again, he knew that he would use all the little bits of knowledge that Oupa had given him over the years to make this beautiful farm of his into the talking-point of the town.

Klara and Heidi bleated. Boetie looked up.



He understood those bleats. They were the bleats of greeting. Boetie followed their stare. In the distance, over near the pines, he saw a dishevelled dog, limping unsteadily towards him. Boetie dropped the pitchfork. Disbelieving his own eyes, he began to run. He ran faster. “Boy?” he called. “Boy?”

Boy began to bay a heart-wrenching greeting of overwhelming emotion – a yodelling that tore through the crisp air. Boetie ran. Boy hobbled. Then Boetie reached him and dropped to his knees on the sandy soil, drawing the dog to his chest, burying his face in Boy's hair, holding him, caressing him, saying his name over and over.

Then, carefully, he lifted Boy into his arms and carried him home.



The end

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## Louise van der Merwe

Managing Trustee | The Humane Education Trust

Director | Nature-Based Education Cape Town, South Africa

Mobile | 082 457 9177

Email | [education@naturebased.online](mailto:education@naturebased.online)

Website | [www.naturebased.education](http://www.naturebased.education)



Magnificent Boy and Boetie - even the grey hare - lived in the farmlands between Kuils River and Stellenbosch in the Western Cape, South Africa, during the 1990's.

At the time, author, Louise van der Merwe lived there too and watched events unfold.

Based on fact, this novel is her tribute to the awesome friendship between Boetie and Boy and their tenacious will to triumph against all odds.

