

a novel **DUST
DEVILS**
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1

Rosie Dell had come to end it. For keeps, this time. She let herself in the back way, like she always did. Walked up to his ground level apartment from Clifton beach, the sun fizzling out in the Atlantic like a cigarette in a gutter. Glimpsed her reflection – a blur of brown skin and tangled black curls – as she unlocked and rolled open the concertina steel gates that covered the glass doors to the bedroom. That’s how they lived in Cape Town, these rich whities. Behind bars.

He was waiting for her. Lying on the bed, in his suit pants and dress shoes, silk shirt unbuttoned at the collar. Face featureless in the gloom. Rosie threw his keys onto the sheet beside him.

“I can’t do this, Baker,” she said. “Not any more.” When they were alone he was always Baker. Never Ben.

He said nothing, stood and came toward her. Used his bulk to press her up against the wall, the kiss sucking away her words of protest and her resolve. Baker’s hands were under her skirt, lifting the cloth above her waist, sliding her panties down her legs. He shed his shirt and she could feel the hot weight of his flesh. She thought of Kobe beef fattened on beer.

When they were done it was night. Rosie sat down on the bed, still dressed. Baker stood over her, silhouetted against the light from the corridor. She heard the teeth of his zipper meshing.

“Pick up the keys,” he said. She felt the cool brass beneath her fingers. “Put them in your pocket.”

Did as he said. Her wedding band clinking on the metal. Thought she caught the flash of his smile in the dark.

Rosie watched him walk down the corridor into the brightly lit sitting room, shirtless, the pale skin of his back streaked red from her fingernails. His naked torso was hard with fat, like a seal. *Not even my fucken type*, she thought, as she always did. Whatever that meant. But when he was near, some kind of fever took her. Something beyond reason. It wasn't his money. That she would have understood. Worst thing was, she knew she'd be back for more.

Baker was standing beside the Picasso sketch of a bull, pouring Scotch from a decanter, when the two men came in from the direction of the front door. Black men, dressed in blue overalls. There had been no sound, so they must have had a key. One man was big, young and nervous looking. The other small and older. Calm. Both held guns.

Baker set the decanter down on the polished chifonier and raised his hands level with his shoulders. Spoke in the assured tones she'd heard him use many times at boardroom tables. "Okay. Let's keep this cool. Whatever you want. No problem."

The small man shot Baker in the chest, the gun coughing through a silencer. Baker dropped his hands and went down on one knee. He was turning to look at her when the next bullet entered his right eye and sent part of his skull onto the wall behind him. The man shot Baker once more as he lay on the carpet and his body jerked.

All this took maybe five seconds. Rosie sat in the dark. Frozen. Then the older man looked into the bedroom and saw her. She pushed herself up from the bed and slammed the door, turned the key in the lock. Heard a pop and the wood splintered beside her hand as a bullet bored through and buried itself in the mattress.

She jabbed the panic button on the wall. No sound in the apartment but it would be ringing in a control room somewhere, bringing men with guns. Bringing paramedics. Too late

for Baker. She ran out onto the patio, into the night. The security gates were locked in the sitting room, holding the men.

She heard them kicking down the bedroom door as she crossed the tiles. Heard the thin wood tearing. Hurdled a flowerbed and hit the pathway to the beach at a sprint. Leaving her sandals behind as she ran, the paving rough on her bare feet. Feeling for the keys in her jacket.

Heard that coughing sound and something spat next to her foot. The pathway twisted round shrubbery and she was at the gate. High wall. Humming strands of an electric fence. A motion-sensitive spotlight kicked in, pinning her. Battled to get the key into the lock, fingers shaking like a Friday night boozier. Heard the drumming of footsteps.

Fok, fok, fok. Her tongue finding the Afrikaans of her childhood. Fingers finding the slot.

Opened the gate and she was through. Slammed it locked as the men came into view. The older one lifted his pistol and a bullet sang past her head. She chased her shadow into the darkness of the beach, felt the sand gripping her feet. Fought on toward the water's edge where she could run more freely, her breath coming in rasps, louder than the surf. Sprinted from Second Beach to First.

Rosie saw a group of teenagers in baggies and hoodies, on their way up to Victoria Road, bodyboards under their arms. She fell in with them as they climbed the stairs, zigzagging between beach bungalows that sold for millions in dollars and euros. The boys were sharing a joint, a firefly dancing from one face to another. She was older than them by fifteen years, but they looked at her with interest.

One of them said, "Hey."

She said "Hey" back and he held the joint out to her.

Rosie took it, sucked on it, felt the familiar heat in her lungs. She released the smoke and handed the joint on. They were up at the road now and she scanned the area. Dog walkers and joggers. No men with guns.

She left the kids at a rusted mini-van and crossed to where the silver Volvo was parked under a streetlight. A car guard in a cap and a day-glo green bib gave her a wave. He was an engineer, a refugee from somewhere in Africa. She always tipped him. Not tonight.

Rosie sat behind the wheel of the car. Numb. No shoes. No panties. Felt the stickiness between her legs as she started the engine and drove home to her husband and her children.

2

“I busted Nelson Mandela’s black ass. You’re looking at the reason he got sent to prison. I changed the course of history, and that is no word of a goddamn lie.”

Robert Dell, head thick with lunch wine, slumped in the passenger seat of the Volvo – not asleep but not fully awake either – haunted by the memory of his father’s voice from deep in his childhood: loud, overbearing, marinated in Jack and Coke and unfiltered cigarettes. Defiantly West Texas, like Tommy Lee Jones in a lesser role. He hadn’t seen his father in twenty-five years, but his voice was right there in the car, unwanted fragments of Dell’s past circling him like bats.

He sat up. Glanced at his wife, concentrating on the road as she steered into a sharp bend, heard his children laughing in the rear. Dell looked out at the sun. Let the bright light burn the bad shit away.

They were driving over a narrow mountain pass, road switchbacking its way down to a far valley, a sheer drop falling away to Dell’s left, the small town where they’d eaten lunch lost behind them. Franschhoek, an hour out of Cape Town, always reminded Dell of a movie set: vineyards encircled by mountains, gabled white houses built by Huguenot settlers god-knew when, gift shops and pretentious restaurants with French names. Over lunch Dell had flattened a bottle of red wine, trying to blur the edges of a fucked up couple of days. Not surprising that his father had spoken to him, after yesterday’s news.

“You okay?” Rosie asked, eyes on the road.

“Ja. Too much vino.”

“Hell, you were really hammering that bottle.” Shot him a smile. Smart schools and college had smoothed out the guttural accent of Rosie’s childhood, but he could still pick it up on the roll of the ‘r’ – the slight bray of the Cape Flats that was almost Spanish. *Rrreeely. Hammerrring.*

“Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be. It’s your birthday. Relax.”

His birthday. Jesus, how the hell had he ended up being forty-eight anyway? Dell ran his fingers through his long sandy hair, streaked with gray. Two weeks’ beard itching on his face. Mostly silver. Time to thin it out. His wife said his stubble was sexy. Or she used to.

Dell turned to look at the twins in the rear, strapped into kid’s car seats, side by side. Mary and Thomas, five years old, sucking fruit juice through bent straws. Tommy saying that Ben 10 was way cooler than Pokemon. Mary disagreeing. Tommy emphatic.

Mary said, “Tommy, you’re a complete and total idiot.” Sounding middle-aged.

The sun haloed their wild hair, halfway down their backs in dark corkscrews. Their mother’s hair. They had her skin, too. Exactly the color of caramel.

Dell put a hand on his wife’s leg, feeling her warmth through the denim. “And you, Rosebud? How’re you holding up?”

Rosie worked on another smile but it didn’t take. She was doing her best to give him a treat on his birthday but her heart wasn’t in it. She’d been in a dark, interior place since he’d walked in on her two days ago, huddled on the sofa, hugging her knees, watching the early morning news on TV.

Saying, “Ben Baker’s dead,” as Dell saw images of cops around a luxury apartment on Clifton and heard the TV anchor announce that Baker had been killed in a home invasion the night before. A robbery gone bad. All too common in Cape Town. Only reason it made the news was because Ben Baker had been one of the richest men in the country. His loot had

endowed the arts foundation Rosie headed. He was the reason they were driving in this shiny new Volvo.

“I found myself looking in my pocket for a smoke just now,” Rosie said. She’d quit when she fell pregnant with the twins. “What does that mean?”

“Means you’re stressing.”

Ben Baker dying meant that she’d be out of a job soon. Leaving them both unemployed. “It’ll all work out,” he said. His words hollow.

He touched her hand on the wheel. Elegant, beautiful fingers ending in long nails. Manicured, these days. When he’d first met her, the nails had been kept short, her fingers stained by the oil pigments she’d used to make her giant abstracts. But she’d stopped painting when she became a bureaucrat. He missed the smell around the house. Turpentine and linseed oil.

Dell looked away from his beautiful wife. Today he was feeling the age difference more sharply than he ever had. He watched the road. The cultivated land had fallen away. Gone were the fruit farms and the vineyards. In the last week a fire had attacked the mountains and torched the fringe of indigenous bush, leaving a post-apocalyptic landscape of rock and gray ash, some of it still smoking. Dell stared over the edge, down to where a dry river bed lay in a narrow gash of a valley. He felt a rush of vertigo and closed his eyes. Too much wine.

Dell opened his eyes and spoke before he could stop himself. “He’s out, Rosie.”

“Who?”

“My father. He’s been released.”

His wife’s hands tightened on the wheel. She looked away from the road long enough for him to see distress in those big dark eyes. “You’re kidding me, right?”

He shook his head. "I got a call from a talk radio station up in Jo'burg yesterday. Bloody ambushed me. Wanted a comment."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Jesus, Rosie. You've had the whole Ben Baker thing to deal with."

Her eyes flicked across to him, then back onto the road. "When did they release him?"

"A few weeks ago, apparently. Let him out the back door, which is why we didn't hear."

"I thought life meant life?"

He shrugged. "In this case it meant sixteen years."

"Think he'll contact you?"

"No way, Rosie. Don't worry."

"He's their grandfather." She glanced at the twins in the rearview, still caught up in their TV debate.

"He knows better than to come near me. And even if he did, you think I'd let him within a fucking mile of them?"

Mary's radar ears caught this. "Daddy said a bad word."

Dell turned in his seat. "Yes, Daddy said a very bad word. And Daddy's sorry. Okay?"

"Where is he?" Rosie's voice edgy.

"Dunno. I imagine his Right Wing buddies have taken him in."

"Jesus, Rob . . ."

"I know, I know. It was rough when he did what he did, being his son. Now, its all going to start up again, isn't it?"

"You're not your father, Rob." Rosie's eyes were on the road, but she reached out a hand and touched his face.

“No. I’m not.”

He’d taken his mother’s surname. Spoke with her South African accent. Practiced a leftist brand of politics that had made him his father’s enemy. Sired mixed–race children. But sometimes, when a mirror caught him unawares, he glimpsed the older man staring back at him.

There was a commotion in the rear. Tommy trying to get Mary’s drink, spilling juice over her. Mary shouting, Tommy shouting back.

Dell turned, yelling. “For Chrissakes, you two, can’t you bloody behave!”

His outburst left a vacuum that was quickly filled by Mary’s bawling.

“Okay, okay, okay. Take it easy,” Dell said, fumbling in the glove box for a container of wet wipes. He unclipped his seatbelt and turned around to face his daughter, kneeling on his seat, reaching into the rear to dab at her damp T-shirt. “Relax, Mary, its only juice.”

“Daddy shouted.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to.”

The girl clung to Dell and he buried his nose in her hair. She smelled of coconut shampoo. He could feel her ribs beneath his hands, small bones shaking as she sobbed. Heart pumping. There was little physical sign of Dell in the twins, but he believed Mary had his nature. Pensive. Sometimes sad. Tom was more volatile, like his mother.

The boy was sniffing now too, so Dell freed his left hand and embraced his son. Holding the two of them. Back when he was working, when he was away from his family, lying alone in a hotel room or sitting in the darkened tube of a passenger jet, Dell had caught himself repeating the names of his wife and children in a silent mantra. As if that would keep them bound together in an unbreakable unit. *Rosie, Mary, Tommy.*

Tom was wriggling and Dell let him go. But Mary held on. “I love you, Daddy.”

“And I love you too, my angel.”

Finally his daughter's small fingers released him and Dell, still kneeling, lifted his face from her hair and saw the black pickup truck, a four-wheel drive with smoked windows and bull bars, coming up behind them. Fast. He watched it grow in the rear window, waiting for it to swing out and pass. It didn't.

The bull bars smashed into the trunk of the Volvo. The car yawed, and Rosie fought to keep it on the road. The children screamed and Dell was shouting at the truck, as if that would stop it.

The black fender and fat nubby tire loomed up next to Rosie, who cursed in Afrikaans, fighting the wheel. She lost control when the truck rammed them from the side, edging the Volvo toward the skinny silver guardrail. The truck hit them again and the car leapt at the crash barrier, tearing free the short wooden uprights that tethered it to the edge.

The impact of the collision sent Dell, unrestrained by a seatbelt, through the windshield. He went out backwards, in an explosion of glass, like he'd been ejected. Hanging over empty space for what seemed like hours before he hit the earth, landing on his side, on the narrow strip of coarse grass that grew between the torn and twisted steel and the endless drop.

The last thing he saw before the world went black was the Volvo with everything he loved inside it, turning in the air, tumbling forever, as it fell toward the jagged rocks below.

3

Inja Mazibuko was hungry. He hadn't eaten since he'd shot the fat white man. His fast an attempt to starve the dark thing that ate his strength, and a penance to appease the ancestors, a plea to them to lead him to the woman who had escaped. The one who had seen his face. The half-breed. Now, watching her car smash into the rocks, exploding in a ball of dirty orange fire, he felt his appetite stirring.

The Xhosa idiot at his side laughed, pointing down at the car. "Yoh, yoh, yoh!" A braying donkey who never shut up.

Inja shoved the Toyota truck into gear and started down the pass toward distant Cape Town. He was a Zulu by birth, his home nearly two thousand miles away, up the East Coast, past Durban, where he was an *induna*, a headman, in the service of his chief. He'd flown in to kill the rich white man and he was anxious to leave, now he'd cleaned up the mess. He didn't like this place, full of half-breeds and Xhosa fools. Like the boy yapping at his side.

Inja had recruited the youth in Cape Town, one of the animals running wild in the shack settlements that festered around the city's airport. He didn't know the town and needed a local to guide him. He hadn't let the boy out of his sight for three days and he was growing weary of his empty-headed babbling. Inja tuned him out and thought of food. He was lusting after a sheep's head, the way it was cooked in the ghetto townships, his mouth heavy with saliva.

At the bottom of the pass the empty road flattened and ran straight toward a dam that lay like a mirror in the blackened veld. Inja slowed and turned off the asphalt, drove a little way up the gravel path that led to the dam wall.

“Why are we stopping, *baba*?” The idiot calling him *father* in deference to his greater age. He’d never shared with the boy his clan name. Definitely never shared the nickname that had haunted him since his childhood in Zululand. *Inja. Dog.*

“I need to pass water.” He opened the door and stepped down. “Get me a Coke from the back.” Inja, skinny and black as a stick of licorice, walked a few paces from the vehicle and stopped beside a tree trunk that lay singed and twisted in the ash.

While he pissed, Inja saw the boy open the flap of the camper shell and climb into the rear of the Toyota, on his hands and knees, rooting in the Coleman cooler. Inja shook himself and zipped. Opened his check sport coat and took the pistol from the holster at his hip. Not the weapon he used to kill the white man. This was the one he’d given the boy to carry. Still unfired. He found the silencer in his pocket and screwed it on while he walked back to truck. Nobody for miles, but better to be careful.

The Xhosa’s fat buttocks bulged out toward him. “There’s no Coke, *baba*. Only Pepsi.”

Inja leaned in and placed the gun barrel against the base of the boy’s skull, where the skin furrowed like the rear of a bull. Pulled the trigger twice. The fool slumped forward, his backside still in the air. Inja reached up a gray belted loafer and shoved the ass until the boy sprawled flat. Grabbed the tarp that lay on the metal bed of the truck and covered the body. He slammed the tailgate closed and locked the camper shell.

Then he took the intimate garment from his coat pocket, held it between thumb and forefinger. Regarded it. The panties that he had found in the white man’s bedroom. Tiny,

immodest. The underwear of a whore. If he caught his wives wearing something like this, he'd take a horsewhip to them.

Some people would say that he had tracked the colored slut via the e-mail correspondence – of a sexual nature – that he had found on the BlackBerry he'd taken from the fat man's apartment. But Inja knew better. Those panties, soaked with the half-breed's juices, had allowed the ancestors to guide him to her like she was carrying a homing beacon. To the house in the suburbs of Cape Town, where he had been ready to go in and finish her, before she and her family drove away in the silver car and presented him with a neater alternative.

Inja dropped the panties to the ground, and used his loafer to cover them with ash. He didn't like them, coloreds. Impure people. Neither white nor black. But the unfaithful woman had got what she deserved. He slid behind the wheel of the Toyota and bumped out onto the blacktop.



Dell opened his eyes. A glare burned into his brain and his head hurt. Flashes of memory burst like grenades in his skull. The black truck. The Volvo smashing through the silver rail. His wife and children screaming as the car tumbled.

Jesus.

He looked to his right and saw the drop down to forever. Saw oily black smoke boiling from the tiny crumpled Volvo that lay on its roof, burning against the rocks and the ash.

Dell closed his eyes. Tried to rewind and erase the nightmare. *Rosie, Mary, Tommy.* Wings flapped and he opened his eyes as a bird landed. A Cape Vulture with a bald head,

hooked beak wobbling on a skinny pink neck, dusty wings like an undertaker's coat.

Wrinkled gray talons scuffed through the ash toward Dell.

He sat up, shouted and waved an arm. His skin was patterned with blood and one sleeve of his shirt was torn away at the shoulder. The bird made a sound like an old man coughing and lifted off, suddenly graceful as it fell away into the void and found its wings.

As Dell shouted, blood bubbled from his mouth and fragments of shattered glass glittered like diamonds when he spat onto the sand between his feet. He saw his shoes were gone. And one sock.

Dell stood up and the world spun, nearly sending him over the edge. He heard an engine straining up the rise, in low gear. Staggered out into the road, waving a bloody arm. A small green Japanese car came straight at him. As it braked Dell saw a man driving, sun catching his freckled hands on the wheel. A woman sat beside the driver, her face blank with shock.

Then the car accelerated and veered around Dell, speeding away. Two blond children stared at him through the rear window as the car disappeared behind a shelf of torn rock. He was unsurprised. This was South Africa where good Samaritans were gunpointed at fake accident scenes.

Dell found his cell phone in his jeans. The glass face was cracked and when he tried to dial an emergency number the phone stayed mute. He dropped the useless thing back in his pocket and started to walk along the road that snaked down to the dry river. Down to his family. He didn't get far. The blacktop rose up and smacked him in the head.



Inja drove for an hour, toward Cape Town. He smoked a fat hand-rolled spliff, heavy with the potent weed of his home. Durban Poison. Famous the world over for its almost hallucinogenic power. Not a drug in his culture. A medicinal herb. The weed that had sent Zulu warriors into battle against the Boers and the British, eyes red with blood lust.

Durban Poison grew green and profuse on the rocky red hills of Inja's home, and he had made a fortune out of it over the years. Using the locals to tend and harvest his illegal crop. Shipping it down to Durban for export. It was his first smoke of the day and he felt that familiar sense of his own strength. His own power and invincibility. A feeling he thought he had lost.

Inja was on the freeway into Cape Town, the flat-topped mountain in the distance, when he saw an exit leading to a gas station and a diner. His rumbling belly demanded he stop. It would be white man's food, tasteless and without nourishment, but it would hold him until he could get a sheep's head later.

Inja whistled as he left the freeway and parked the Toyota outside the diner. He walked in and took a seat in a booth by the window, with a view over the car park and the gas station. Ordered a double cheeseburger, fries and well-done eggs on the side.

His order came and he fell to. Ignored the looks of the white and half-breed families as he shoveled food into his mouth. He waited for his stomach to rebel, his appetite to turn itself off like a faucet, leaving him sweating and sick, the curses of the ancestors bouncing off the bones of his skull. But the food stayed in his gut and the plate was nearly empty before he started to feel satisfied. Slowed down. Burped. His stomach swelling happily against his belt. The warmth in his belly spreading down to his testicles.

He reached into his pocket and removed his wallet, flipped it open to reveal the snapshot inside. A beautiful virgin from the Zululand hills, her bare breasts like buds. Sixteen

years old. Inja would take her as his bride one week from today. His fourth wife. He stared at the photo as he chewed.

Inja heard a dog bark and looked across to the parking lot. A cop car had stopped next to his truck and two uniforms, one white, one half-breed, stepped out. The white cop let a police dog – a big thing on choke chain – out the rear. It led him to a patch of grass and drilled a stream of piss against a dead tree. The half-breed leaned his elbows on the roof of the car and lit a cigarette, watching a woman in tight jeans fight her way down into a convertible.

The white cop walked the dog back after it was done. It stopped at the tailgate of Inja's rental Toyota, its long snout sniffing. The uniform pulled at the dog's chain, but it wasn't to be moved. The white cop ran a hand over the tailgate, inspected his fingers, said something to the half-breed who flicked his smoke onto the pavement and joined his partner. The two men looked into the back of the truck. Tried the camper shell, found it locked.

The cops spoke to a pump jockey who pointed to where Inja sat, in the window booth. They shut the dog in the car and walked into the diner, sidearms drawn, spooking the other customers, who ducked for cover beneath the tables.

Inja dipped one of the fries in ketchup, chewed on it, watching the cops approach, Z88 service pistols locked on him. "That your truck?" the half-breed asked. Inja nodded.

"Keep your hands where we can see them," the white cop said.

Inja looked at them, still chewing. Reached for the wallet, lying open on the table, their guns following him. He held up the wallet, so they could see his ID in the plastic window beside the photograph of his betrothed.

"Agent Moses Mazibuko," he said. "Special Investigation Unit."