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## A grand boyhood

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## DENNIS WALDER

### A Grand Boyhood

1

“Yodel-ay-ee-ooo! Yodel-ee-ay-oooo!” It is Swiss National Day, and old Emil is sitting in the corner of the cottage with his guitar. He frowns as he sings, and shows his teeth. “*Isch luschtig, gel?*” he says, in his deep voice. He means it’s good, hey.

The cottage shakes as a train rumbles and screeches slowly by on the rails at the back. I am scared it will fall and crush us. At night when I say my prayers my eyes are shut but I can see the trains leaning over as they crawl out of the station with their striped yellow and black faces, their insides humming. I would not like to live in the cottage with old Emil and the girls, next to the railway line.

Swiss National Day is a big day. It is the day we all go to Franschhoek in our motorcars for a picnic. There is an egg-and-spoon race, and I drop my egg at the start. Then there is a tug-of-war, and Daddy puts me in front of him, but I can’t hold the rope, it is too thick, and I slip and fall. Later I take a dip in the river and it makes me feel better, though the water tastes strange, like tin.

For lunch we get rolls with little Swiss flags on them and *würstli* inside. Our canton flag is blue and white. The sunlight between the dark tall trees shines through the smoke rising from the *braai*. I can hear old Emil playing the accordion. He is

singing now: *In des Himmels lichten Räumen / Kann ich froh und selig träumen!* It's about dreaming in the sky. This must be because of all the mountains in the sky where the Swiss come from. The grown-ups join in the singing, but Zoë and me run off to play hide-and-seek in the trees.

Zoë is my best friend. Once when we were running along the path at the back of the hotel towards the cottage and I was carrying the tin oven for our play kitchen under my arm, I tripped and fell down, and the back cut into my armpit, and I began to cry.

“Ach no man, don't cry, man,” says Zoë, her freckles crinkling up around her wide grey blue eyes. But there is blood running down my arm, I feel it run off my elbow and I see the drops in the dust when I stand up. Zoë puts her arm around me. She's not like her sisters. They always sing at me: “Cry-baby, cry-baby, who's a cry-baby.”

There are three of them, and old Emil is their Dad. They have no Mom.

“Where has she gone?” I ask.

“Killed in the Kruger,” says my Mom. “She jumped out of the car. She thought they were going to crash, but she made a mistake. Now Emil looks after the girls. He is a good father.”

At night in bed I can see the car swerving, and I hear their Mom cry out as she leaps from the car and falls and rolls on the hard ground, and then lies still. A baboon comes over and sniffs her, then gallops off on its two hairy legs, its arms swinging in that funny way they have. I once saw a baboon in the Kruger, its hind leg torn open and bleeding. That one must have been caught by a leopard, leopards go for baboons. It limps as it runs alongside the dusty road. There is a funny smell inside our

*rondavel*, Mom says maybe it is baboon droppings. When do the baboons come into the *rondavels*? At night? Are they scared of the moon, like me? The baboon moon.

2

There is a moon in the picture in the hotel. I see this picture on the wall of the lounge when I go through to the dining-room for my meals. In the picture there is a man in stripy pyjamas lying on his side on the beach. He has a stick, and a bottle, and a banjo. There is a lion standing over him, but it is not doing anything. I have never seen any lions around here. Is the man a fisherman, like the ones I see pulling in their nets on the beach? Or maybe he is a Coon? The men at the Coon Carnival wear silk stripy coats and trousers, and they play banjos, and sing in the streets at New Year, they sing *Hier kom die Alybama, Hy kom oor die see-ee*. The song is about an American ship that came to the Cape once. I follow the Coons when they dance along the Main Road, I dance and sing with them, and it is wonderful. Then Oo-ah comes and finds me and takes me back to the hotel.

The picture shows how the beach goes off to the mountains far away. The mountains are called the Hottentots Holland. Do the Hottentots come from Holland? Is the sleeping man a Hottentot? Why doesn't the lion bite him? Sometimes I see the lion in the night, with his spiky whiskers, and I can smell his breath like something rotten. He has little hard glassy eyes, like marbles.

At Miss Kemp's kindergarten, we play with marbles in the sand behind the church. Cat's eyes, goonies, stonies. You flick them with your thumb, and if you get it right, you hit a little pile in the circle and collect them all for yourself.

Dave laughs when he sees me practising with the marbles. "You get good, master." Dave is the Indian tailor. He has a room at the back of the hotel, in another

house. His blankets are folded on the end of his iron bed, where he puts his shoes upside down on top of the blankets. There is an oily smell in there, like the stuff you put on your hair. Dave has straight hair, but the waiters have crinkly hair. Dave keeps an old phone in his room. Sometimes he picks up the phone speaker, and talks into it. He winks at me when he does that. He says he is getting tips. But the phone has no wires.

Dave gives Daddy tips for the races. Sometimes he carries me on his shoulders, through the dark passage past Daddy's office. Daddy is the Manager, and I hear him shouting at somebody when we go past. Once when I run down the passageway making a noise he comes out and catches me, takes me into the office and puts me over his knee, and spanks me. This is unfair, and I will not forgive him.

But I am safe up on Dave's shoulders. "Gee up!" I yell. Dave laughs and whinnies as he gallops down the passage past the laundry-room where the Englishwoman with the grey hair works.

"Do you want to go and see Jan?" Dave asks.

We ride out into the sun, around to the outside bar on the corner. Jan is an African Grey. African Greys can live to a hundred, and the men ones don't like men. On the way round I see across the Main Road the big black gun I like to sit on, aimed at the hotel.

There are men in uniform inside the bar. They are from the War. Mom says, "They're a rough crowd, leave them alone." She says some of them are Ozzies. "Ozzies pee outside, on trees, lampposts, anywhere they like." Once I saw a man in white uniform hold his thing out like a sausage between the V of his fingers, and a stream of yellow pee splash against a tree. He must have been an Ozzie.

We don't go in the bar, we are not allowed. But Jan is in his cage outside the bar. He grips his perch with his black claws and looks at me sideways. He has a black tongue and a big black beak like steel cutters. "Fork!" he says, and takes a bite at a bar of his cage. "Bar steward!" he screams. "That is bad language," my Mom says, "he learnt it from the Ozzies."

3

My Mom likes the English. But Daddy is not English, he has a foreign name, Jean. It sounds like a girl's name, but it is not. It is also my second name. My first is after the French Consul, but he had only one en in his name. Mom says Daddy wanted me to have a name that was more English, so they gave me the two ens. Or was it because he didn't want me named after that other man? Somebody said that. And who is the French Consul? There is a Swiss Consul, I know, who comes to parties at the hotel. The Swiss Consul says the Grand is like a Swiss hotel, it is clean and has good food. When he says that, Daddy smiles, he shows the gap between his front teeth. He says, "The heart of a good hotel is a good chef." Old Emil is the chef, Daddy sent for him from Zürich. Emil smiles too and says, "A good chef is some-vun who can make a good omelette."

Sometimes I visit the kitchen, where the huge oven doors clang open and show the fire inside. The cooks have white hats and white jackets with shiny buttons. They shout and run. So do the waiters, until they come inside the dining room, when they slow down, like dancers. The waiters have black jackets and black bow-ties, their trousers have a shiny stripe down the side, and their bums stick out as they glide through the dining-room, where I eat alone, like on a stage. When they set the tables the waiters make clever hats with the serviettes. For breakfast I have paw-paw, then a

plate of hot *mabela*. *Mabela* is dark brown, and I pour the milk out to make swirly patterns on it. When I get an omelette I don't like the bacon that comes with it, I will eat only the rinds, which curl up nicely, like the curls of butter floating in bowls of water on the white tablecloths. Samson shows me how to make the butter curls with a little wooden paddle that has ridges on one side. "Hold him in the water, like so," he says. Samson is clever. He is my friend. When it is war between my knife and fork the knife stabs the fork, goes right through him, yay! But one day the fork sticks me in the thumb and I run out, the fork hanging down. "I'm thinking you was in a *dwaal*," says Samson, when I come back and sit down, my thumb in a big plaster.

I am not allowed to run or go barefoot through the lounge, where the big chairs and the picture with the man and the lion are. Lying in my soft bed in Daddy's flat at night, I hear music and singing coming from downstairs. "Blue moon, you saw me standing alone, without a dream in my heart..." I see the dancers moving slowly across the floor, whispering and clinging to each other, the ladies' silver dresses swinging as they sweep along, the men's strong black trousers striding and bending, their shoes clicking as they do the quick turns, their hands held high. They do not look at the picture of the dead man and the lion. They stand about, smoking cigarettes in long holders. Pall Mall most likely. Daddy has left a box of them on a copy of *National Geographic*, the box is red with silver stripes, and my sister picks it up and takes a cigarette out and says let's smoke one, but when I try I can't breathe and almost choke. She laughs and puffs out a cloud of smoke. She is naughty, she'll get caught. "Nobody can catch me, and I don't care anyway," she says.

She makes me think of Punch, who has a big nose, and never gets caught. We watch Punch and Judy shows in the Snakepit on the beach. The Snakepit is where all the people from Jo'burg come on their holidays. They smear themselves all over with

oil and lie on the sand with hankies on their heads. Zoë and me sit on the sand, and watch how Punch hits everyone with his hard stick. Punch is a trickster, he asks the hangman to show him what he'll do to him, and then when the hangman shows Punch how he will hang him, he hangs himself! Punch laughs in that squeaky tinny voice of his, and we laugh too, but we are a bit scared.

There is laughing from the bar, and shouts. The men fight and somebody gets thrown out of the bar. I am not allowed in, but one day Daddy takes me and puts me on the shiny wooden counter where they serve the drinks. He says "Look! My boy! Isn't he handsome?" But my Mom says he didn't like the way I looked when I was a baby. She says he said I looked like a fat Greek Jew. I feel bad when I hear this, but she says never mind, I am a lucky boy, born on Sunday, *ein Sontagskind*. She says I remind her of Tyrone Power, the film star.

When I try and get down off the bar counter, Daddy won't let me. The men are staring, and laughing, and some are lifting their glasses. My Mom says to be careful of the men. When we go to Stuttaford's shop in town to buy some new clothes for school, she says, "Look out for that one." The man assistant is tall and smiling, with shiny black hair and a smooth round face. He is smart and friendly, and I smile back at him. Mom holds my hand tight and takes me away quickly after we have bought my new grey short trousers. I will wear them with my belt with the snake buckle.

One day Zoë and me play doctors. We are alone in the car in the parking place at the hotel. We go below the back seat and she takes down her *broekies* and shows me. She is smooth there, and it is pinkish-red inside, and slippery. She wants to see me too, but I am shy. "I'm the nurse and I'll fix you up," she says. She slides her hand in my shorts and tickles me. It feels nice, but I wriggle away. She grins and her eyes crinkle up. She is wearing the dress with little wavy lines across her chest.



All the sisters wear the same dresses with little wavy lines across the chest. They swing on the old iron gate near their cottage, and sing at me. “What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice. What are little boys made of? Slugs and snails and puppydog tails.” Zoë is singing with them. But she is meant to be my friend. So I run away.

4

My Mom is off getting married to Jimmy, and I am staying in the hotel with Daddy. Minnie is looking after me.

I have met Jimmy. He is tall and thin, and he has a squashed pink nose. He is English, but he is not good-looking like Daddy. They were friends before, when Daddy worked in the Mount Nelson. Jim has come back from the Western Desert. He shows me a big brown book with thin paper between some of the pages, where there are pictures of men in robes and headdresses. The book is about a man called Lawrence, and his friends the Arabs. The Arabs are Jimmy’s friends, too. He tells me he used to share a bedroom with one who kept a big curved knife under his pillow. He always made sure the man was asleep before him.

Jimmy tells me about the German planes trying to bomb him in the desert. He is in a car with an open roof and an Arab driver and an Arab man is standing on the back seat to look out for the planes. Neeeyeaow! At-at-at-at! Their car skids and stops. Jim and the Arab men run for the sand dunes. They dive on the hot sand. They lift their heads and watch as the German planes scream past. I would like to fly a plane and have adventures too, like Rockfist Rogan of *The Champion*.

Now Jim works for an airways, called Pan Am. He and Mom are going all around the world, in a silver Pan Am Flying Clipper. Before they go, Jim gives me a

round blue and white cardboard disk with a bit in the middle that moves around, and that shows the different times at the same time in the world. It says PAA Time Selector round the hole in the centre, and one half is night, the other day. I sit and turn it around and around, but I can't tell what time is it where they are.

While Mum and Jim are gone, Oo-ah comes to the Grand to visit. She's not looking after me any more.

*"Hoe gaan dit, my boy? Is you a good boy now?"*

*"Ja, Ooh-ah. When are you coming back?"*

She just says *"Ja, you was always goed, you're my boy,"* and she hugs me tight.

I wonder where was she when I was with my Mom in the train, that time we were travelling through the Karoo, before Jimmy came. And where was Daddy then? I was high up in my bunk when I woke up in the morning and looked over the edge. There is a lady on the other side, and her whole soft white bosom is out, she is feeding her baby. I slip back down on my bunk, my face hot. I am not supposed to see that. It is like when Mom takes me with her when she has to go. I have to stand against the door inside and hold my hands over my face, so I can't see, but I can hear. When we stay somewhere, I sleep in the same bed as her. We are travelling all around, just the two of us. Mom shows me how to hold my hands together to say the Lord's Prayer with her. First I must remember to ask God to look after everybody, my sister, Zoë, Minnie, even Daddy.

We say prayers at Miss Kemp's too. I go to Miss Kemp's in the mornings with Minnie. Minnie has frizzy hair and she loves me, but not as much as Oo-ah, I think. She wears a shiny black dress and a white collar that pokes my ear when she holds me up against her. She has a woody, smokey smell that I like.

Miss Kemp's school is behind the big church on the hill in St James. It has a red tin roof that creaks in the sun. This is where I learn to read and write. I am in Sub A. I am the youngest, Mom says, because it is best to send me away from the Grand. Miss Kemp takes me on her lap and we read the words together. I like that. I can feel her bony legs as she holds me close against her scratchy jersey. She points at the fat black letters below the pictures. There are small people in the pictures—no, they are rabbits wearing clothes. I have seen a Cape Cobra up on the hillside, sliding quick as a whip over a rock. But I have never seen rabbits in clothes. They live in another country, where the time is also different.

The sharp nibs we fit on our pens are coppery clean and shiny, then they get covered in blue-black ink. We have deep inkwells in our desks, and we have to be careful, because sometimes the ink slides off to a blob on the paper, and then you get into trouble. Miss van der Merwe will make you stand in the dunces' corner. She is big and fat and has thick grey stockings that hang over her shoes. But her voice is warm and friendly, and she smiles.

5

Minnie takes me to Kalk Bay in the train. We watch the swimmers on the beach while we wait on the station. Today you can even see Seal Island, in the middle of the bay. The southeaster is blowing the sand about, and the waves have white tops. The rusty Zambuk sign squeaks against the wire fence. I hold my cardboard train ticket tight so I do not lose it. Minnie bought it from the office on the other side of the railway lines, where we also looked at the timetable. I like timetables. They have rows of names, rows of tiny purple numbers, and lines between, so you can tell when the train is coming. They control the trains.

At last the train comes and we get inside and sit on the green leather seats. The conductor blows his whistle, the engine's humming gets louder and louder as we go past the corner of the beach where the waves splash right up against the railway. I see the waves smash up against the old black pole on the rock that Mom says was a Diaz cross. Minnie gives me a fishpaste sandwich from her brownpaper bag, and I watch the surf come onto the rocks and beaches as we rattle past. We can see people swimming in the pool at St James, then we slow down for Kalk Bay, the steel wheels screaming again as the train slowly leans over the beach before coming to a halt.

“*Kyk!*” Minnie shouts, pointing through the window. “There is fishermen down there.” The fishermen are sitting on the sand, fixing their nets, and the smell of dead fish blows in through the window.

“We are going to the bioscope,” says Minnie. We cross the Main Road and go upstairs with lots of other people. “Downstairs is for white people,” says Minnie. A whole row stands up to let us through to sit in the middle. Minnie squeezes my arm when the film starts. The big screen shows a poor woman with long hair in a storm. The wind is booming as she tries to get down the hill to shelter. I get hold of Minnie's hand and hold it tight. The poor woman is very wet in the rain, she is coughing, and I am worried for her. The people around me are clucking and saying “Shame.” The woman has a baby, and a fat man with a booming voice names it, a funny English name. Then we see a boy, in a big hall with lots of other boys who stare at him. He is very lonely, he has to eat on his own, and when he asks for more, the big man is terribly cross. Then one day he meets another boy and his gang, who look after him and make jokes. They have a creepy Dad with a bent nose like old Emil's, long stringy hair and bad teeth, who shows the boys how to steal, but then the police catch him and I am scared for him, sitting in gaol on his own, shivering. Suddenly everyone

in the bioscope is yelling. There is a smell from their breath like the smell in the hotel bar. At last the boy is rescued from the terrible robber with the dog. I want the police to catch and kill that robber. When he tries to escape on the roof and falls, I scream out loud. But everybody is screaming, so it is okay.

In the train back I wonder if maybe somebody will steal me, too. I don't want to join a gang. I want somebody to take me to an island far away, where I can live on my own, maybe with a cat and a parrot. Like the man in the other story who lived on an island for a long time. He had to make everything for himself, his clothes and everything. Maybe Samson could come with me. Samson shows me how to make paper planes, and how to fly them across the hotel parking place. We have a race with them, and mine lands in the big cactus with the stripy, floppy leaves, like elephants' tongues. Samson lets me win.

One day Samson tells me about the *tokolosh*. I think he is not afraid of anything, but he says the *tokolosh* is too bad. He is reading the Good Book in his room, about the murderer with the mark on him, he says, and he says how it makes him think about how he would like to murder the one bad master he knows. This is Mr Koegelenberg, at the station. Mr K calls him a *kaffir*, and tells him not to hang around the station with his girlfriends.

“We is only talking, master,” Samson says he says.

“*Voetsek* with your talking!” says the stationmaster. That is a rude word you say to dogs, and I feel angry for Samson.

“So we goes out from the *stasie*, man, and Sara she goes back to the Bay View. And I'm mad, man, I'm going to *steek* him, I go fetch a *mes* from the *kombuis*, but the boys there stop me from picking one up, they says hold it, man. So I goes to the garage at the back and looks to see what I can find there. And I finds a *hamer*

there, a big one. But now I am cooling, and I think of the cops also, and I jus' throws it down again."

I am very glad of this. "But where's the tok—tok-thing?" I ask.

"Wait. You know what's happening in the night?"

"No, Samson, what? What?"

"After I goes asleep, I has this *droom*, man, and this creature is coming for me, it has *groot vleuels*, and they is going flap, flap, flap, and it coming from over the berg, down to me here, in this room, and it has a *gesig* like the devil, eyes like *blikke* and a *groot mout*' with the *bloed* coming out, and *stok*-legs like a locus', and I feel something heavy is sitting on me, *op my ches*', so I can't hardly breathe. And I gets such a helluva *skrik* I..." Samson pauses, looking at me hard. I am holding on to his leg and I can't move.

"But the *tokolosh* has gone, phew! Like that, out the *venster*." He grins, showing the crooked yellow stumps in his gums. "I was lucky that time. Maybe it comes again, master, who knows?"

6

It is my birthday, and Daddy writes some music for me. I like music. I like especially "Ghost Riders in the Sky." In the film, you can hear it getting louder and louder, and you can see the ghost cowboys up there, riding, riding, through the clouds. I see them also at night, when there is a big moon, and the clouds are pouring over the mountain. Somehow they don't fall right down on us. The riders are riding over with the clouds, and then they disappear, too, like the clouds.

Daddy plays lots of music, and when he plays the piano, he shows the tip of his tongue through the gap between his teeth in front. He also plays the trumpet, you

can hear him all around, tooting louder and louder. He is happy then, I suppose.

Maybe because he is seeing his friend.

Daddy's friend is English, she is called May, and her hair is tied back so hard it looks sore. She lives at the Blue Moon in Lakeside. Blue Moon is from the song. I have never seen a blue moon, except the one in the picture in the lounge is maybe a bit bluish. I hardly ever see May, until one day I am taken to visit the Blue Moon. May is in bed, which makes me a bit shy. She lies there like the man in the striped pyjamas in the picture, kind of stiff on one side. She has very pale blue eyes. She looks tired, and she tries to smile, and holds out her hand. I don't know what to do. That is the last time I see her, except sometimes I see her in the sky, with the riders, her hair loose at last and spreading out behind her in the wind and the clouds.

Daddy is playing the piano again, everybody is talking, and I am cutting out pictures on the floor with the big shiny scissors. I lean forward, and the scissors go right into my knee, and blood sprays out. My sister laughs. I don't cry, it feels like it is happening to somebody else. The blood soaks into the carpet, it joins the other red marks on the pattern. To make me feel better, Daddy gets the round heavy glass crystal with the houses and mountains in it. I turn it upside down, so I can see the snow falling. I turn it round again and again. I wish I was in there, in the little houses, in the soft white snow.