

## The Truck by Harry Friedland

My uncle Koos had a large farm which included a mielie plantation just outside Amersfoort in the old Transvaal. He had to deliver a cargo of freshly harvested mielies to the local co-op, and invited me to come along. (In farmers' terms, "local" could - and in this case did - mean a fair distance away).

When the truck was fully loaded, we pulled away. We crawled up the long Transvaal hills in first gear, talking about anything to take our minds off the blistering Transvaal heat. Then we would get to the top of a hill and the truck, propelled only by its own momentum, would roll on slowly with its five-ton load - and then Koos would shift into neutral, and we would start to pick up speed. Koos said we'd go faster with the gears disengaged. These were long hills, gently levelling out in the distance before curving up into the next hill.

"Watch mooi", he says with his characteristic mixture of English and Afrikaans, a devilish glint in his eyes and his mouth curled into an evil grin. He eases himself deep into the battered upholstery of the driver's seat, hunches over the wheel and grips it tightly.

The truck is rolling faster now, picking up speed like a charging bull at the beginning of its run. The tread on the tyres starts to hum and the hot, still air outside gets scooped up and sucked into the cab by the slipstream coming off the windscreen. The landscape starts to slip by faster. This is a regional road, not a freeway, so it does not have that mirror-smooth finish of a freeway, and the truck starts to pitch and roll on its groaning ancient springs. He has to keep making quick jerky corrections with the steering wheel. Faster and faster, faster and faster we go. The hum of the tyres has turned into a whining sound, and we have to shout to each other to be heard. Then we start shouting at each other like kids on a rollercoaster. Our words get torn out of us by the hot howling wind that lashes us and pulls our shirts up around our armpits. The landscape becomes a blur.

"This is better than sex!" I yell at him, but he can't hear me now. It's my last attempt at speech. Some mad urge wells up in me and I start to howl and then I realise that he's howling too, and there we go, howling like two mad banshees, in a juggernaut that bucks up and down and jigs from side to side and then it occurs to me that at my back I have five tons of cargo and if this truck hits - you know, if this is the classic unstoppable force that hits an immovable object - we won't even end up being wet spots on the tar - we'd just be vapourised, and no-one will know where we went.

Koos is a conservative old-style Afrikaner and he never swears. Faintly over the cacophony I hear a demonic voice - "Fuuuuuuuuck!"

Red hot Transvaal wind rips through the cabin and howls like a predator. Suddenly the ground falls away under us and then we soar, hearts lifted, chests and lungs held together by sheer will. Pale olive green earth and pale blue sky feed out of infinity and come together just ahead of us, then we bang down onto the road, back wheels first, and the springs of this tortured beast reach maximum compression, groaning and shuddering, and then the front wheels hit the tar and I think, this can't hold, this can't hold - but it does. I steal a glance at Koos. He's not smiling now. I think he overdid the jump this time and

gave himself a fright. We're on the edge of the envelope here. I'm gripping the edge of the dashboard with white knuckles so tightly that my forearms are aching.

Now the truck is slowing down, we're at the foot of the hill, and a gentle curve breaks the demonic momentum. And then there we are, at the bottom of the hill, in the lap of Buddha, with a great hill ahead of us, and another at our backs, and Koos lets the truck roll onto the red earthen verge, and still roll on a bit more, till it comes to a stop on its own.

There's no wind - everything that we had heard and felt was generated by the movement of the truck. The engine cuts out, or perhaps Koos turns it off, I don't know. And then suddenly, complete silence descends. In the distance I can hear a couple of biesies, but that's all. A delicious, cool silence cloaks us. It enters through the skin behind your shoulders, creeps up the back of your neck with a teasing, tickling sensation, dips under your scalp, moves forward, down under your eyelids, into your eyes, cooling, making you close them. A great weariness, a very, very great weariness weighs you down. Your arms are too heavy to lift. Your legs too...

“Jirre, ou Herrie, ons gaan laat wees!”

Who knows how much time had passed? I opened my eyes. A lonely tree swam into view just in front of the bonnet. The heat was incredible, and the air shimmered above the engine cowling. We were sweating like pigs. We were parked beside an ocean of yellow, sun-bleached vegetation with red earth peeping through. Heat. Heat upon heat. More heat. Jesus!

The engine roared to life, we trundled back out onto the melting tar, and began the next ascent.

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