

Those Who Would Listen

by

Laura Campbell © 2016

2347 words

“Why do you think he listens to all those hearts?” I used to ask Elsie. Maybe, I wondered, he listened because he couldn’t find one of his own. Maybe in listening to his patients’ chests he would find a heart big enough for sharing.

“*Ag man*. Don’t be *dikbek* Stephen,” she’d say. “For sure, the boy has a heart of his own; the only wondering is about how you listen to it.” On the way to her grave, I was still wondering over how to listen; she’d been ill for over a year, riddled with cancer, and he never once visited. In the confusion of morphine, she called out for him, and he never once phoned.

Elsie knew without any telling when her time drew short. “Try and be proud of the boy,” she begged. “He’s too busy to see his mother. He’s too important to take time off.”

“He’s, not a boy,” I argued as she lay thin and sore and weeping on the mattress. “He’s a full grown man and needs to be treated like it. He’s been mammied all his life. He’s no good and that’s the sad truth of it Elsie.”

“Ag, Stephen. Let him be. Don’t go all hard and huffy,” she pleaded. “The anger will eat you up alive. Take your mind from him. The farm is yours and even if you are a *rooinek* those *glansryke vroue*, with their high heels and red lips, will queueing up at the door even before I’ve settled myself into the soil.” And, she was right off course, she always was right; the ladies, with bosoms tight in their pink *valletjies voorskote*, queued at the door for a long

year after Elsie passed on. I shooed away the *babbelbekkies* with their *fluweelpoeding* and their *koeksisters* and their *knarskoekies*.

I'd gotten used to my own company. I'd talk to Elsie, asking her about this or about that, as I wandered around the farm forever fighting with the tangles of bug weed and balloon vine and lantana.

"Elsie, look here, the more I pull, the more the weeds strangle the acacias and sickle-bushes and buffalo thorns." She knew that despite the pulling and the pulling of the weeds, with my fingers swollen and throbbing, I never could forget our son. But, I gave up wondering about him; I knew for sure he had no heart and that indeed was the sad, sad truth of it all.

He arrived in a silver BMW. I was standing on the veranda as usual scanning the morning and having my coffee when I saw a car push up the dry, red dust far on the horizon and heard a sump grind painfully closer and closer across the ragged lips of the potholes.

"Pa, the driveway is a shambles," he greeted me after all those years of silence. "I didn't think it was possible for this dump to get any worse than it was, but it has.

Despite the passing of time, the map of his face has surprisingly grown blank; wrinkles that had once stretched across his forehead, as deep as the flooding of the Sabie and Crocodile Rivers, have dried up to nothing. His hair, brown as a child, has lightened like straw in the heat of the scorching summer. In the stretching of his smile, his teeth have grown whiter and straighter, like keys of the piano Elsie played at the *kerk*.

“Andre, we`re here, you can get out now,” he shouted as he brushed his way past me and entered the house. Andre, who is maybe twenty years younger than him, opened the passenger door, snuffed a cigarette into the dust and followed.

“We were so worried about you Pa,” my son said. “We phoned and phoned. There was never a reply.” I haven’t had a phone here since Elsie died. I didn’t need a phone to listen to the nattering of the insurance-man and the scolding of the lawyer and the grizzling of the bank manager and the pleading of the widow raising funds for the fete and the coaxing of the old spinster organizing the Komatiepoort` Christmas party.

“France, dear, aren`t you going to do the introductions,” asked the younger man.

“Oh, Pa, this is my ...partner, Andre.”

“So, are you also a heart specialist doctor?” I asked.

“What?”

I hadn’t spoken for so long that perhaps my voice had withered.

“You work together?” I repeated. The young man looked down towards his shoes and glanced across the room towards Francois.

“No, I`m not a doctor. I`m France`s ...friend.”

“But, Francois said you were his...”

“Pa, don’t be obtuse,” my son interrupted. “Don’t go trying to give me all that grief again. I’ve been for life-coaching. I’ve been preparing myself for this meeting for three years. Don’t you try and intimidate me.”

My listening had obviously hardened like the earth cracked in the drought.

“What?” I asked. “You`ve been to where in a coach?”

“Pa, try and be kind for once,” he said. “We are here now to try and help you.”

They had been here for hours sitting on the hard chairs in the parlor and had not helped me yet one bit. I`d fetched the water from the tank, and I`d boiled the kettle, and they`d stared at me and at the dust drifting down on the glare of the sun from the cracks in the ceiling. I`d carried through cup after cup of my coffee. They`d finished the last of my milk and the sugar bowl was emptying rapidly; I`d have to waste a pint of diesel putting in an extra visit to the *dorp* to replace what they used.

“So, you have a wife?” I asked eventually to fill in the silence.

“No,” my son replied slowly and then paced out each word as though speaking to a *dof* child, “I most certainly do not have a wife.” He sighed and looked across at Andre who fiddled with strands of his long hair as it reached down across his shoulders.

Andre sighed.

I sighed, and continued on with my weak efforts as Elsie would have wanted, “so, how are your patients? Have you managed to find a heart yet?”

“Em. I don`t have any patients at the moment. I`m not practicing at present,” replied my son.

“Oh, and why`s that?”

“Pa, don`t be horrible. Life`s been easy for you. You inherited the farm without even lifting a finger and you sit here day in and day out on the most expensive land in the country. And, all you can ever do is belittle me.”

“What?”

“His practice is a sensitive topic,” said Andre. “Stephen, let him be. He’s here now to see you isn’t that enough?”. He looked down and tugged at the white crescents of his fingernails and asked, “France, is that guy your grandad?” He pointed to the painting above the couch.

“No, that’s Paul Kruger. You know of him?” answered Francois.

Andre nodded. “He’s the guy that started the Park...But, isn’t the Park why you’ve dragged me all the way here?”

“Be quiet,” responded Francois and Andre pursed his lips and the dust continued to drain a slow, steady way through the long afternoon air and settle into a recurred silence.

“He spent the night here once, Paul Kruger,” I volunteered into the emptiness of the conversation.

“I never knew that, Pa.”

“Your Ma told you of it often enough.”

“She talked and talked until I got too tired to listen.”

“Maybe if you’d listened, she’d have told you something interesting,” I said softly into the vacuum of his memories. “There are some letters of Kruger’s upstairs in her old box.”

Francois stared at the portrait until he turned to look at me, “Pa, do you ever read the newspapers?”

“Na. Never read them; there’re only full of rubbish. Why?”

“There was an article recently about Kruger and the Millions. Someone thought they’d found the gold on a farm in Ermelo. All turned out to be hoax.”

“Kruger and the Millions?” asked Andre.

“The scoundrel stole all the gold he could and hid it somewhere in the veld. It wasn’t in Ermelo so it’s never been found. So, Pa, you don’t read the papers, that’s good,” said Francois.

“Er, what time are you planning on leaving?” I eventually asked as they made no motion to move from my chairs. “It’ll be dark soon. The Swazi border is already closed. You won’t make it back the whole way to Pretoria this evening.”

Andre coughed slightly and moved towards Francois. No reply and so I continued:

“There’s only a small piece of chicken left in the pot. Only enough for one. I’m sure there’s a space for you to *doss* in those new hotels on the way into Maputo.”

“We....”

I strained forward. “What? Speak properly; I can’t hear you. I hate it when you mumble.”

“I said we are staying here,” shouted Francois. “We have some things to sort out with you. And, by the way, I don’t mumble, I just wish you’d listen.”

“Staying here? Staying where? There’s only one spare bed.”

Andre again coughed and ran his fingers across the dust that had settled down on the windowsill. “Is it always so bloody quiet here? There isn’t a sound. This will drive me to utter insanity.” He stood up to pace around the room.

Please leave now, I begged inwardly; the sun would be settling soon over the river and the choruses of the warblers, the whistles of the cuckoos and the bells of the shrikes would fade for the day. And when the bats began to ring out their nightly squeaks it would be too late.

“Oh, my God. Oh my God...What the fok are those?” shrieked Andre suddenly leaping back from the window.

It’s now too late, I thought. My son stood up, placed a hand on Andre’s shoulder, and together they peered out into the gathering dusk.

“Oh, how could I have forgotten them?” whispered Francois.

“God, they are the ugliest things I’ve even seen,” whined Andre. “What are those disgusting things?”

“Why they`re pangolins. They may look uglier than the devil,” my son seemed to pull Andre close to his chest, “but they are worth more than gold.” I saw him smile into the fading light. “When I was young the farm was full of them. Pa,” he called out to me from over his shoulder, “how many of these do you still have?”

“Very, very few,” I stood still in the shadows waiting to see if he`d heard the lie.

“Can we go and look for them?”

“You know they hide in the dark and don’t ever make a noise. I don’t know how to find them.” They do make a noise. They make a soft, lonely huffing sound only to be heard by those who would listen with care.

“Francois, this place completely freaks me out. It’s just too filthy and too spooky. And, I’m not setting a foot in that jungle,” complained Andre. “I simply cannot be expected to stay here. There`s not even a toilet; I had to piss outside in a filth pit.”

“And, tell me, where are we to go?” hissed my son.

“Come on Francois, I’ve had enough. We`ll make a plan,” said Andre pulling my son by the sleeve and they left with an unwanted promise to return.

It's Tuesday morning and because they've cleaned me out of milk and coffee, I'm here in Toby's.

"Your son found you yesterday then," asks Toby as he packs the groceries. "He was wondering if you'd be on the farm. It's not Friday I told him, so your Pa will be there."

"Aye, he found me."

"So, you're alright with it all?"

"Alright with what all?"

"Well, alright with him and his boyfriend coming to live with you?"

I say nothing.

"I'm glad you've accepted it all now. Elsie talked about him and about you. She said she tried and tried to tell you about Francois and him being that way but you wouldn't listen."

"Well, I don't know about any of that."

"Stephen, you know why he's moving back?" I shake my head. "It's 'cause of what was all over the papers last month. Didn't you see?" asks Toby. As I shake my head again in not knowing and Toby continues; "the municipality are buying land along the Crocodile. Your son wants to sell the farm."

"Ag, don't worry about that. He can't sell the farm. It's been long since donated to the Pangolin-Protection-People. Francois is getting nothing from me."

"Oh, and what about those Kruger's Millions that Elsie used to tell him about?"

Again I shake my head. “He doesn’t remember a thing about it. Elsie told him and told him again and again that Kruger’s gold is buried here. She told him and she told him the whereabouts were mapped in black and white in the letters in her box. But Francois, he would never listen.”

“Well, it’s all is a bit sad for Francois. He is a good and kind boy. Always did his best despite...despite everything.”

I say farewell to Toby and begin to make my way home. The gate needs oiling as it creaks to close. The potholes seem less and less forgiving as the *bakkie* bumps a way through the dust. I climb the stairs and Kruger’s letters are there, still wound up in Elsie’s pink hair-ribbon, in her box. The map of the buried gold is among them.

I walk down the stairs and cross the path to Elsie’s grave. There, under the shade of the Mopane, I snuff letter after letter into the earth until they are ragged and torn. While I scrape up the rough gravel to bury them, the choruses of the warblers, the whistles of the cuckoos and the bells of the shrikes are still calling out. The pangolins will be asleep protecting their scales from the burning heat of the sun. Their huffing is silent for now; there is nothing to be heard, even for those who would care to listen.