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Written by Nadine Gordimer

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THE CONSERVATIONIST

NADINE GORDIMER

BLOOMSBURY

I must have been almost crazy
to start out alone like that on my bicycle
pedalling into the tropics carrying
a medicine for which no one had found
the disease and hoping
I would make it in time

I passed through a paper village under glass
where the explorers first found
silence and taught it to speak
where old men were sitting in front
of their houses killing sand without mercy

brothers I shouted to them
tell me who moved the river
where can I find a good place to drown

Richard Shelton,
'The Tattooed Desert'

PALE FRECKLED EGGS.

Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning, the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs set out before a half-circle of children. Some are squatting; the one directly behind the eggs is cross-legged, like a vendor in a market. There is pride of ownership in that grin lifted shyly to the farmer's gaze. The eggs are arranged like marbles, the other children crowd round but you can tell they are not allowed to touch unless the cross-legged one gives permission. The bare soles, the backsides of the children have flattened a nest in the long dead grass for both eggs and children.

The emblem on the car's bonnet, itself made in the shape of a prismatic flash, scores his vision with a vertical-horizontal sword of dazzle. This is the place at which a child always appears, even if none has been in sight, racing across the field to open the gate for the car. But today the farmer puts on the brake, leaves the engine running and gets out. One very young boy, wearing a jersey made long ago for much longer arms but too short to cover a naked belly, runs to the gate and stands there. The others all smile proudly round the eggs. The cross-legged one (wearing a woman's dress, but it may be a boy) puts out his hands over the eggs and gently shuffles them a little closer together, letting a couple of the outer ones roll back into his palms. The eggs are a creamy buff, thick-shelled, their glaze pored and lightly speckled, their shape more pointed than a hen's,

and the palms of the small black hands are translucent-looking apricot-pink. There is no sound but awed, snuffling breathing through snotty noses.

He asks a question of the cross-legged one and there are giggles. He points down at the eggs but does not touch them, and asks again. The children don't understand the language. He goes on talking with many gestures. The cross-legged child puts its head on one side, smiling as if under the weight of praise, and cups one of the eggs from hand to hand.

Eleven pale freckled eggs. A whole clutch of guinea fowl eggs.

The baby at the gate is still waiting. The farmer goes back to the car, switches off the ignition, and walks away in the direction he has driven from. He has left the road and struck out across the veld, leaping the dry donga to land with a springy crackle on dead cosmos and khaki-weed that bordered it last summer. Over the hard ground his thick rubber soles scuff worn scrubbing-brushes of closely-grazed dead grass. He is making for the compound; it is up beside the special paddock where the calves are kept at night. But the neat enclosure with oil drums cut in two to make feed troughs is empty; no one is about. From a line of rooms built of grey breeze-blocks the sound of radio music winds like audible smoke in the clean fine morning: it's Sunday. A woman appears from behind the lean-tos of wire and tin that obscure or are part of the habitations. When she sees him approach, she stands quite still, one of those figures with the sun in its eyes caught in a photograph. He asks where the chief herdsman is. Without moving, but grimacing as if she strains to hear, she makes an assenting noise

and then answers. He repeats what she has said, to be sure, and she repeats the assenting noise, long and reassuring, like the grunting sigh of a satisfied sleeper. Her gaze steers his back in the direction she has indicated.

He is crossing a lucerne field. The last late cutting of autumn must have been made some time that week; although the shrivelled scraps that remain (dirt-rolls rubbed between finger and thumb, or bits of bust balloon) have lost their clover-shapes and faded to grey-green, underfoot they give out now and then a sweetish whiff of summer—breath from the mouth of a cow, or the mouth of a warm sleepy woman turned to in the morning. Involuntarily he draws it deep into his lungs and it disappears into a keener pleasure, the dry, cool and perfect air of a high-veld autumn which, shut up in the car that carried with it the shallow breath of the city, he has not yet taken. Not this morning, not for a week. As the air plunges in him, his gaze widens and sweeps: down along the river the willows have gone blond, not yet at their palest, combed out into bare strands, but still lightly spattered and delicately streaked with yellowed leaves. Around them is a slight smudgy ambience, a mauvish-smoky blend between their outline and the bright air . . .

A whole clutch of guinea fowl eggs. Eleven. Soon there will be nothing left. In the country. The continent. The oceans, the sky.

Suddenly he sees the figure of the black man, Jacobus, making for *him*. He must have come out of the mealies on the other side of the road beyond the lucerne and is lunging across the field with the particular stiff-hipped hobble of a man who would be running if he were younger. But it's *he*

who's looking for Jacobus; there's a mistake somewhere—how could the man know already that he is wanted? Some semaphore from the kraal? The farmer gives himself a little impatient, almost embarrassed snigger—and continues his own progress, measuredly, resisting the impulse to flag the man down with a wave of the hand, preparing in his mind what to say about the guinea fowl.

Although it is Sunday Jacobus is wearing the blue overalls supplied him and although there has been no rain and none can be expected for five months, he has on the rubber boots meant for wet weather. He's panting, naturally; but stops, as if there were a line drawn there, ten feet away from the farmer, and goes through the formalities of greeting, which include a hand-movement as if he had a hat to remove. The farmer approaches unhurriedly. —Jacobus, I was coming to find you. How's everything?—

—No—everything it's all right. One calf he's borned Friday. But I try to phone you, yesterday night—

—Good, that's from the red cow, eh?—

—No, the red cow's she's not ready. This from that young one, that ones you buy last year from Pietersburg—

Each is talking fast, in the manner of a man who has something he wants to get on to say. There is a moment's pause to avoid collision; but of course the right of way is the farmer's. —Look, Jacobus, I've just been down at the third pasture, there—

—I'm try, try to phone last night, master—

But he has in his mind just exactly how to put it: —The children are taking guinea fowl eggs to play with. They must've found a nest somewhere in the grass or the reeds and they've taken the eggs.—

—There by the river . . . You were there?— The chief herdsman's lips are drawn back from his decayed horse-teeth. He looks distressed, reluctant: yes, he is responsible for the children, some of them are probably his, and anyway, he is responsible for good order among the dependants of the farm workers and already the farmer has had occasion to complain about the number of dogs they are harbouring (a danger to the game birds).

—It's not as if they needed them for food. To eat. No, eh? You've got plenty of fowls. They're just piccanins and they don't know, but you must tell them, those eggs are not to play games with. If they find eggs in the veld they are not to touch them, you understand? Mustn't touch or move them, ever.— Of course he understands perfectly well but wears that uncomprehending and pained look to establish he's not to blame, he's burdened by the behaviour of all those other people down at the compound. Jacobus is not without sycophancy. —Master— he pleads —Master, it's very bad down there by the river. I'm try, try phone you yesterday night. What is happen there. The man is dead there. You see him.— And his hand, with an imperious forefinger shaking it, stabs the air, through chest-level of the farmer's body to the line of willows away down behind him.

—A man?—

—There—there— The herdsman draws back from his own hand as if to hold something at bay. His forehead is raised in three deep wrinkles.

—Somebody's died?—

The herdsman has the authority of dreadful knowledge. —Dead man. Solomon find it yesterday three o'clock.—

—Has something happened to one of the boys? What man?—

—No. Yes, we don't know who is it. Or what. Where he come to be dead here on this farm.—

—A strange man. Not one of our people?—

The herdsman's hands go out wide in exasperation. —No one can say who is that man.— And he begins to tell the story again: Solomon ran, it was three o'clock, he was bringing the cows back. —Yesterday night, myself I try sometime five time— he holds up his spread fingers and thumb —to phone you in town.—

—So what have you done?—

—Now when I'm see the car come just now I run from that side where the mealies are—

—But with the body?—

This time the jutting bearded chin as well as the forefinger indicate: —The man is *there*. You can see, still there, master, come I show you where is it.—

The herdsman stumps past. There is nothing for the farmer to do but follow. Why should he go to look at a dead man near the river? He could just as well telephone the police at once and leave it to the proper channels that exist to deal with such matters. It is not one of the farm workers. It is not anyone one knows. It is a sight that has no claim on him.

But the dead man is on his property. Now that the farmer has arrived the herdsman Jacobus has found the firmness and support of an interpretation of the event: his determined back in the blue overalls, collar standing away from slightly bent neck, is leading to the intruder. He is doing his duty and his employer has a duty to follow him.

They go back over the lucerne field and down the road. A beautiful morning, already coming into that calm fullness of peace and warmth that will last until the sun goes, without the summer's climax of rising heat. Ten o'clock as warm as midday will be, and midday will be no hotter than three in the afternoon. The pause between two seasons; days as complete and perfectly contained as an egg.

The children are gone; the place where they were might just as well have been made by a cow lying down in the grass. A coyly persuasive voice blaring a commercial jingle is coming out of the sky from the direction of the compound . . . YOUR GIANT FREE . . . SEND YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS TODAY.

The two men have passed the stationary car and almost reached the gate. The tiny boy in the jersey bursts from nowhere but is disconcerted at the sight of the herdsman. Hanging from his plump pubis his little dusty penis is the trunk of a toy elephant. He stands watching while Jacobus unhooks the loop of rusty wire that encloses the pole of the barbed fence and the pole of the gate, and the gate, which is just a freed section of the fence, falls flat.

The road has ruts and incised patterns from the rains of seasons long past, petrified, more like striations made over millennia in rock than marks of wheels, boots and hooves in live earth. There was no rain this summer but even in a drought year the vlei provides some moisture on this farm and the third pasture has patches where a skin of greenish wet has glazed, dried, lifted, cracked, each irregular segment curling at the edges. The farmer's steps bite down on them with the crispness of biscuits between teeth. The river's too low to be seen or heard; as the slope quickens his

pace through momentum, there is a whiff in the dry air (the way the breath of clover came). A whiff—the laundry smell of soap scum. The river's there, somewhere, all right.

And the dead man. They are jogging down to the willows and the stretch of reeds, broken, criss-crossed, tangled, collapsed against themselves, stockaded all the way to the other side—which is the rise of the ground again and someone else's land. When it is not a drought year it is impossible to get across and the cows stand in midstream and gaze stupidly towards islands of hidden grass in there that they scent but cannot reach. The half-naked willows trail the tips of whips an inch or two above the threadbare picnic spot, faintly green, with its shallow cairn of stone filled with ashes among which the torn label off a beer carton may still be read by the eye that supplies the familiar missing letters. With the toe of his rubber sole the farmer turns, as he goes, a glint where the bed of the river has dropped back; someone lost a ring here, last summer. The blue overalls are leading through dead thistle, past occasional swirls of those swamp lilies with long ragged leaves arranged in a mandala, among the amphibian tails of a patch of tough reeds that keep their black-green flexibility all winter. The two men plunge clumsy as cattle into the dry reeds, exploding a little swarm of minute birds, taking against their faces the spider-web sensation of floss broken loose, by their passage, from seeding bulrush heads. There lying on his face is the man.

The farmer almost ran on to him without seeing: he was close behind his herdsman and plunging along doggedly.

The dead man.

Jacobus is walking around the sight. There is a well-

trampled clearing about it—the whole compound must have been down to have a look. —How is happen. What is happen here. Why he come down here on this farm. What is happen.— He talks on, making a kind of lament of indignation. The farmer is circling the sight, too, with his eyes.

One of them. The face is in the tacky mud; the tiny brown ears, the fine, felted hair, a fold or roll where it meets the back of the neck, because whoever he was, he wasn't thin. A brown pinstripe jacket, only the stubs of button-shanks left on the secondhand sleeves, that must once have been part of some white businessman's suit. Smart tight pants and a wide belt of fake snakeskin with fancy stitching. He might be drunk, lying there, this city slicker. But his out-dated 'stylish' shoes are on dead, twisted feet, turned in stiff and brokenly as he was flung down. Except for the face, which struck a small break or pocket between clumps, his body isn't actually on the earth at all, but held slightly above it on a nest of reeds it has flattened, made for itself. From here, the only injury he shows is a long red scratch, obviously made by a sharp broken reed catching his neck.

The farmer bats at something clinging at his face. No mosquitoes now; bulrush gossamer. —He was dead when Solomon found him?—

—Dead, dead, finish.— The herdsman walks over delicately towards the object and bending, turns his face back at his employer and says confidentially, rather as if he had been listening —And now already is beginning to be little bit . . . He wrinkles his nose, exposing the dirty horse-teeth.

The farmer breathes quite normally, he does not take in the deep breaths of dry clear air that he did up on the

lucerne field, but he does not reduce his intake either. There is nothing, really nothing; whereas, up there, that sweetish whiff.

—You'd better not touch him. You're sure nobody here knows him? It's got nothing to do with any of you here?— He looks very deeply at his herdsman, lowering his head and hooding his eyebrows over his eyes.

Jacobus puts a hand dramatically on his own breast, where a stained vest shows through the unbuttoned overalls. He swings his head slowly from side to side. —Nobody can know this man. Nothing for this man. This is people from there—there— He points that same accusing finger away in the direction of the farm's southern boundary.

The skin of the palm of a hand is too insensitive to detect the gossamer but still it clings. The farmer projects his lower lip and blows sharply, upwards over his face. And now he notices a single fly, one of the lingering, persistent kind, hovering just above the neat brown ear down there. The fly is on the side to which the head is fractionally turned, although it is full-face in the mud, the side on which the mouth must be close to being exposed. The fly hovers and lands, hovers and lands, unmolested.

—Just leave it as it is. The police must come.—

—Ye-e-es Master— the herdsman says, long-drawn-out in sympathy for the responsibility which is no longer his. —Ye-e-es . . . is much better.—

There is a moment's pause. The fly looks as if it ought to be buzzing but cannot be heard. There is the customary silence down here among the reeds, broken by the rifle-crack (so it sounds, in contrast) of a dry stalk snapped by the

movement of some unseen bird. The seething of the wind through the green reeds in summer is seasonal.

They turn and thrash back the way they have come, leaving the man. Behind them he is lying alone on his face.

The farmer takes the car to get up to the farmhouse and Jacobus accompanies him, sitting carefully with feet planked flat on the carpeted floor and curled hands together on neat knees—he has the house-keys, anyway, so that he can always get in to telephone if necessary. The house is closed up because no one lives there or uses it during the week. They enter through the kitchen door and the farmer goes straight to the telephone in the living-room and turns the little crank beside the receiver. The party line is busy and while he waits he frees from the thin tacky mud on his soles the slivers of dry reed that are stuck in it. He prises one sole against the other and the mud wrinkles and blobs, like droppings, to the shiny linoleum patterned with orange and brown roses. The table is laid ready with hardware for a meal, under a net weighted at the hem with coloured beads; an authoritative refrigerator, placed across the angle of a corner, hums to itself. The ring that he is waiting for makes him start. The line is free now and the exchange connects him with the police station.

He always talks the white man's other language to officials; he is speaking in Afrikaans. —Listen, Mehring here, from Vleiplaats, the Katbosrand Road. You must send someone. There's a dead man been found on my farm. Down in the vlei. Looks as if he's been dumped there.—

There is a blowing noise, abrupt, at the other end, air is expelled in good-natured exasperation. The voice addresses him as if he were an old friend: —Man . . . on Sunday . . .

where'm I going to get someone? The van's out on patrol at the location. I'm alone here, myself. It's a Bantu, ay?—

—Yes. The body's lying in the reeds.—

—Your boys have a fight or what?—

—It's a stranger. None of my boys knows who it is.—

The voice laughs. —Yes, they're scared, they'll always say they don't know. Was it a knife-fight I suppose?—

—I tell you I've no idea. I don't want to mess about with the body. You must send someone.—

—Hell, I don't know what I'm going to do about that. I'm only myself, here. The van's in the location . . . I'll send tomorrow morning.—

—But this body was found yesterday, it's been lying there twenty-four hours already.—

—What can I do, sir? Man, I'm alone here!—

—Why can't you get hold of some other police station? Let them send someone.—

—Can't do that. This's my district.—

—Well what am I to do about a dead body on my property? The man may have been murdered. It's obvious he's been knocked on the head or something, and dumped. You can see from his shoes he didn't walk a step in that vlei.—

—There's injuries on the head or where?—

—I've told you, that's your affair. I don't want my boys handling someone who's been murdered. I don't want any trouble afterwards about this business. You must get a man here today, Sergeant.—

—First thing in the morning. There won't be any trouble for you, don't worry. You're there by the vlei, just near the location, ay? It comes from there, all right, they're a terrible lot of kaffirs, we're used to that lot . . .—

The farmer replaces the receiver and says in English, *Christ almighty*; and snorts a laugh, softly, so that Jacobus shall not hear.

The herdsman is waiting in the kitchen. —They'll come early tomorrow. I've told them everything. Just keep people away. And dogs. See that no dogs go down there.— The herdsman doesn't react at all although he has no doubt thought the farmer didn't know that the dogs which were supposed to be banished from the compound have quietly reappeared again, not the same individual animals, perhaps, but as a genus.

—Excuse, my master— he indicates that he wants to pass before him into the living-room and tramps, tip-toeing almost, across to a piece of furniture that must have once featured as the pride of a dining-room 'suite' but is now used as bar (a locked cupboard to which Jacobus has not got a key) and also repository (unlocked drawers) for farm documents, and pulling out one of the stiff drawers by its fancy gilt handle, feels surely under the feed bills tossed there. He has found what he apparently had hidden for safekeeping: he brings in the bowl of his palms a huge, black-dialled watch with a broad metal strap, and a pair of sunglasses with a cracked right lens. He waits, indicating by the pause that his employer must put out his hand to receive, and formally gives over the property. —From him?— And the herdsman nods heavily.

—All right, Jacobus.—

—All right, master.—

—Send Alina up about one to make me some lunch, eh— he calls after him.

So they have touched the thing, lifted the face. Of course

the dark glasses might have been in a pocket. No money. Not surprising; these Friday murders are for money, what else. Jacobus took the objects (the Japanese-made steel watch is the kind of stolen goods black men offer surreptitiously for sale on street corners) into safekeeping to show that the people here've got nothing to do with the whole business.

Going to the drawer Jacobus has just shut, he finds a foolscap window-envelope, already franked, that has carried some circular. The watch with its flexible steel-mesh strap wrapped close fits in easily, but the glasses prevent the flap from closing. He doubles a rubber band over his fingers and stretches it to secure envelope and contents. He writes on it, Watch and Glasses, property of dead man. He adds, For the Police, and places the envelope prominently on the table, on top of the net, then moves it to the kitchen, putting it on the draining-board of the sink where it cannot fail to be in the line of vision as one walks into the house.

Outside the kitchen door he distends his nostrils distastefully at the smell of duckshit and three or four pallid kittens whose fur is thin as the bits of duckdown that roll softly about in invisible currents of air, run from the threatening column of his body. *Psspsspss* he calls, but they cower and one even hisses. He strides away, past the barn, the paddock where the cows about to calve stand hugely in company, and the tiny paddock, where the old bull, used less and less now, with the convenience of artificial insemination available, is always alone, and he continues by way of the mealie fields the long walk around the farm, on a perfect Sunday morning, he was about to begin when he drove down to the third pasture.

The matter of the guinea fowl eggs has not been settled. He's conscious of this as he walks because he knows it's no good allowing such things to pass. They must be dealt with. Eleven eggs. It would have been useless to put them under the Black Orpingtons; they must have been cold already. A red-legged partridge is taking a dust bath where it thinks it won't be spied, at the end of a row of mealies reaped and ready to be uprooted. But there are no guinea fowl feeding down in the far field where they usually come. Those bloody dogs; their dogs have probably been killing them off all summer. Eleven freckled eggs, pointed, so different from hens' eggs made to lie in the standard depressions of plastic trays, in dozens, subject to seasonal price-fluctuation. Soon there will be nothing left. No good thinking about it; put a stop to it. The hands of the child round the freckled eggs were the colour of the underside of an empty tortoiseshell held up to the light. The mealies are nearly all reaped, the stalks stooked in pyramids with dry plumy apexes, the leaves peeling tattered. Distance comes back with these reaped fields, the ploughed earth stretching away in fan-shaped ridges to its own horizon; the farm grows in size in winter, just as in summer as the mealies grow taller and thicker the horizon closes in, diminishes the farm until it is a series of corridors between walls of stiff green higher than his head. In a good year. If there is going to be a good year, again. A tandem harrow has been left out to rust (no rain, but still, the dew can be heavy). Now is the time to clear the canker weed that plagues this part of the field, near the eucalyptus trees which have made a remarkable recovery,

he can scarcely notice, for new branches, the stumps where they were always chopping them for firewood until a few years ago.

Although he had no sign of it when he set out this morning, a Saturday night headache is now causing pressure on the bridge of his nose; closing his eyes against the light he pinches the bone there between thumb and finger. He feels pleasantly, specifically, thirsty for water. He makes for the windmill near an old stone outbuilding. The cement round the borehole installation is new and the blades of the windmill are still shiny. He puts his head sideways to the stiff tap and the water sizzles, neither warm nor cold, into his mouth. The windmill is not turning and he releases the chain and arm that brake it in order to set it going, but although it noses creakily, it does not begin to turn because there is no wind today, the air is still, it is a perfect autumn day. He sets the brake again carefully.

A little after one, passing the servant Alina's room beside the fowl-run, on his way up to the house, he sees Jacobus talking to her. He and the herdsman do not seem to see each other because they have seen each other before and no greeting is exchanged. He calls out: —You'd better take something—to put over, down there. (His head jerks towards the river.) A tarpaulin. Or sacks.—

MEHRING WAS NOT A farmer although there was farming blood somewhere, no doubt. Many well-off city men buy themselves farms at a certain stage in their careers—the losses are deductible from income tax and this fact coincides with something less tangible it's understood they can now afford to indulge: a hankering to make contact with the land. It seems to be bred of making money in industry. And it is tacitly regarded as commendable, a sign of having remained fully human and capable of enjoying the simple things of life that poorer men can no longer afford. As the chairman of an investment fund, of which Mehring was a director, said —You get a hell of a kick out of a place like that, don't you? I know that when I go off Friday afternoon and find a nice field of my hay being baled, I haven't a worry in the world. Of course, if hail arrives and batters the young mealies, the end of the bloody world's come— A special boyish grin reserved for the subject of farming showed how remote that disaster was from any reality that might originate in the boardroom in which they were chatting.

Mehring went to his farm almost every weekend. If he had put his mind to it and if he had had more time, he knew he could have made it pay, just the same as anything else. But then there would be an end to tax relief, anyway; it would be absurd. Yet land must not be misused or wasted and he had reclaimed these 400 acres of veld, fields and vlei that he had probably paid a bit too much for, a few years

ago. It was weed-choked, neglected then (a dirty piece of land, agriculturally speaking), yet beautiful—someone who was with him the first time he went to look at it had said: —Why not just buy it and leave it as it is?—

He himself was not a sucker for city romanticism and he made sure the rot was stopped, the place cleaned up. A farm is not beautiful unless it is productive. Reasonable productivity prevailed; he had to keep half an eye (all he could spare) on everything, all the time, to achieve even that much, and of course he had made it his business to pick up a working knowledge of husbandry, animal and crop, so that he couldn't easily be hoodwinked by his people there and could plan farming operations with some authority. It was amazing what you could learn if you were accustomed to digesting new facts and coping with new situations, as one had to do in industry. And as in the city, you made use of other people—the farmers round about were professionals: —I'm not proud, I'll go over and sit on the stoep and pick their Boer brains if I need to.—

He took friends to the farm sometimes at weekends. They said what a marvellous idea, we adore to get out, get away, and—when they debouched from their cars (the children who opened the gate at the third pasture the richer by a windfall of cents)—how lovely, how lucky, how sensible to have a place like this to get away to. There would be a sheep roasted on a spit rigged up over the pit and turned by one of the boys from the compound, and bales of hay to sit on, lugged down on instructions over the phone to Jacobus. The wine was secured to keep cool in the river among the reeds at the guests' backs and the picnic spot was carefully chosen to give the best view of the

Katbosrand, a range of hills on the north horizon, over which, once or twice at least in a lazy Sunday, a huge jet-plane, travelling so high it seemed slower than the flights of egrets or Hadeda ibis, would appear to be released and sail across the upper sky on its way to Europe. To people like those on the grass drinking wine and eating crisp lamb from their fingers, the sight brought a sensation of freedom: not the freedom associated with a great plane by those who long to travel, but the freedom of being down there on the earth, out in the fresh air of this place-to-get-away-to from the context of stuffy airports, duty-free drinks and cutlery cauled in cellophane.

Sometimes he went out alone on weekdays. It was an easy forty-minute drive at most, even through the five o'clock traffic. Once out of the city, there was another industrial area to get through, one of those Transvaal villages whose mealie fields had disappeared into factories with landscaped gardens, and whose main street was now built up with supermarkets, discount appliance stores and steak houses, but it was useful to be able to stop for cigarettes or delicatessen at the Greek's on the way. After that it was a clear run beside the railway until you reached the African location, where they were inclined to come hurtling out of the gates—big, overloaded buses, taxis, lorryloads of people, bicycles and children all over the show. The location was endless; the high wire fence, sloping inwards and barbed at the top, cornered the turn-off from the tarred main road and followed the dirt one. The rows of houses were not yet built up to the boundary. In fact, on this side, they were still far across the veld, ridge after ridge of the prototype shelter that is the first

thing little children draw: a box with a door in the middle, a window on either side, smoke coming out of a chimney. In the evenings and early mornings this smoke lay over them thick and softly; from one of those planes, one wouldn't be able to make out the place at all. Then the road did a dog-leg away from the location. In the angle, old Labuschagne and his sons had their house; their cowsheds, fields and labourers' shacks spread on both sides of the road. There was a windmill like a winged bird they never repaired. The next landmark he would tell his Sunday lunch-party visitors to look out for was the Indian store about two miles up, on the left. An enamel sign on the roof advertising a brand of soft drink long off the market, a wire stand with potatoes and withered cabbages on the verandah. From that point on, you could see the farm, see the mile of willows (people remarked that it would have been worth buying for the willows alone) in the declivity between two gently rising stretches of land, see the Katbosrand in the distance, see the house nobody lived in. No one would believe (they also said) the city was only twenty-five miles away, and that vast location just behind you. Peace. The upland serenity of high altitude, the openness of grassland without indigenous bush or trees; the greening, yellowing or silver-browning that prevailed, according to season. A landscape without theatricals except when it became an arena for summer storms, a landscape without any picture-postcard features (photographs generally were unsuccessful in conveying it)—a typical Transvaal landscape, that you either find dull and low-keyed or prefer to all others (they said).

THE FARMER AND JACOBUS and young Izak, who is good only for holding things steady, are repairing the pump. Jacobus said over the telephone, yes, the police had come—but now something was wrong with the pump and the Japanese radishes that were being grown for winter cattle-feed were drying up. Jacobus is pretty conscientious, really; he was even able with some difficulty to spell out the name and number of the new part needed for the repair.

It is dark and dank in the pump-house near the eucalyptus trees and they work in the intimacy of light from a gas-lamp, exchanging nothing more than instructions and occasional grunts of effort as a bolt refuses to yield. They emerge holding filthy hands away from their bodies, the afternoon sun touches their faces, and the rock pigeons that the farmer sometimes amuses himself by shooting are beginning to fly.

—So there was no trouble? On Monday?—

—Yes, was no trouble. They say to me I know who is this man. I say—me, I don't know who is, the master tell you nobody here can know. The master tell you already. Then they ask me, who is find him? And I bring Solomon and they ask him, same, same, you know who is this man? Solomon he say, no, I can't know. I give them that things in the kitchen, I tell them if you want you can phone master— (Mehring nods in approval towards his boots) —you can phone master in town.—

—Nobody phoned.—

—No, I know. Then the white policeman he go down there with the van.—

—Good. So they took everything away. And they didn't say you must come to the police station— he makes the gesture of signing a statement —that's fine.—

Jacobus stops, with the effect of making the farmer turn to him. Jacobus is frowning, he stands a moment forgetting to walk on.

—He's *there, there*. The white one send the native policeman to find me in my house, he's ask for spade. They dig and they put him in, down there where we was, Sunday. Then they go away. They don't see me, they don't tell me nothing.—

As so often in dealing with petty officialdom, again the first reaction is derisive. Good God, should one laugh, or get angry? Does one want to bang their thick heads together or hand it to them—a shining example of the splendid pragmatism of laziness, the cunning of stupidity, cutting through red tape with the dirty penknife idly used to take the black line from beneath fingernails? The supremacy of ignorance, confusing audacity with authority, the policeman in khaki gaberdine with the blindfold lady? Who do they think they are? As a story (already, at once, it has become a story to be told over drinks and at the dinner-table) really it is in the same class as the chestnut about the dead horse dragged from Commissioner Street to Market Street because the policeman couldn't spell Commissioner.

Who the hell do they think they are? He *is* angry; his farm isn't a public cemetery. If they don't want to be bothered to find out who killed the man, let them at least dispose of him themselves. But no. Just dig a hole and

shovel him in, out of the way. On someone else's property. It's no good phoning that idiot. Better go to police headquarters at John Vorster Square and see someone responsible.

The days are getting shorter. Giant shadows of the eucalyptus lie felled across the road. Now that the sun is down a cellar-chill comes up from the river, there is no stored warmth from the day to hold it back. He opens the gate of the third pasture (the children do not usually appear for people on foot) and goes down under the yellowed willows. He pictures the place as very near, to be picked out from the banks of the picnic spot, almost. But light is going and he doesn't find it. The cows trample everywhere; there are so many places flattened among reeds and bulrushes leaning this way and that. The strong, shrill, sleepy chattering of the weaver-birds surrounds him. He hears his own crashing footfalls as if he were being followed. A pair of partridge hear them, too, and stop, necks lifted, far up in the field where they have been pecking their way slowly on their way to roost. Up at the kraal, Jacobus and Phineas are surrounded by the young calves in their paddock, and he stands leaning on the wooden crossbars a while, stared at by small stupid creatures with their legs planted defensively and wide-spaced eyes glinting backwards. One of them has cut itself on barbed wire and Jacobus is anointing the place with salve. He swings his legs over the palings and helps hold the little beast down. The white faces and other varicoloured red markings of the calves make a new pattern of blotches of light and dark in place of the fading outlines of their bodies. He takes the opportunity to speak to Jacobus about guinea fowl eggs, emphasizing that he has

seen very few of the birds on the farm recently. Jacobus stands up, hands on his hips, done with the calf, and laughs, assuring expansively —Plenty, plenty guinea fowls here on the farm, early in the morning I'm see them where we plough those mealies, every morning . . .—

But *he* isn't there early in the morning. Or rarely.

Of course—no investigation means no time wasted for Jacobus and Solomon at the police station, no policemen sticking their noses into the kraal bothering people and asking questions. There is always some poor devil whose pass is non-existent or irregular whose illegal status would come to light if the police started kicking over stones. And if there were to be a court case, the next thing, he'd find himself dragged in to give evidence, since this is his property—a day or even days wasted hanging about the bloody magistrates' courts waiting to say he knows nothing. The poor devil—that other poor devil—is dead anyway. In that enormous location these things happen every day, or rather every weekend, everyone knows it, they are murdered for their Friday pay-packets or they stab each other after drinking. A hundred and fifty thousand of them living there. He opens a can of beer up at the house before going back to town and while he drinks it telephones the sergeant at the local police station again, after all.

—What's the idea? Is my farm a dumping-ground or cemetery or what?— It is no good talking to them on any other level.

—No man—it was just a—you know, for health and that—it's not healthy to leave a body lying there, and the van from the mortuary couldn't come. We'll fetch him properly, maybe even tomorrow.—

—Before the weekend?—

—Oh yes, don't worry, it's just the mortuary van couldn't . . .—

He does not want to hear the whole explanation over again. He has to get back to the city and change before going to one of the dinner parties for which, as a man in the age group of married friends but restored to bachelor status for some years now, he is much in demand.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Nadine Gordimer's many novels include *The Lying Days* (her first novel), *The Conservationist*, joint winner of the Booker Prize, *Burger's Daughter, July's People, My Son's Story, None to Accompany Me, The House Gun* and *The Pickup*. Her collections of short stories include *Something Out There, Jump* and *Loot* and she was most recently the editor of the short story collection, *Telling Tales*. In 1991 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. She lives in South Africa.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

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Occasion for Loving
The Late Bourgeois World
A Guest of Honour
Burger's Daughter
July's People
A Sport of Nature
My Son's Story
None to Accompany Me
The House Gun
The Pickup
Get a Life

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AS EDITOR

Telling Tales

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