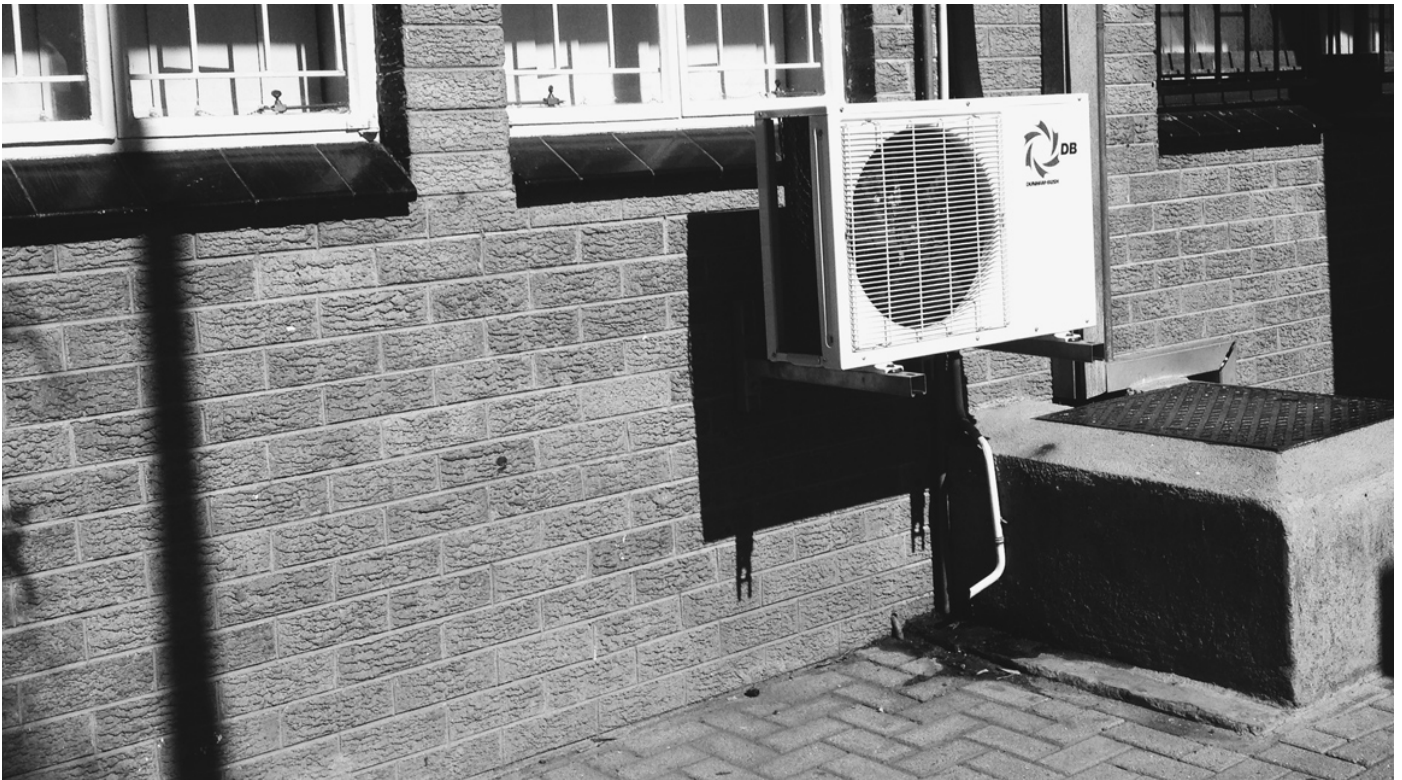




- [Interviews/](#)
- [Reviews/](#)
- [Extracts/](#)
- [Poetry/](#)
- [Fiction/](#)
- [Topics/](#)
- [Journal/](#)
- [About/](#)



FICTION: Homecoming

A story by David Cornwell

BY DAVID CORNWELL

You know when it hit me?

It wasn't when I got the call from Mrs Shaw. Or even those few days after, while I delayed and delayed on talking to Phil about letting me take a few days off. It wasn't even the day before, when I woke up sweating in the freezing dark and threw all my warm stuff in a bag and just jumped in the car anyway, telling myself: *You'll call Phil when you get to Grahamstown.*

It wasn't when I drove through those sad, red hills outside Fort Beaufort, with their wreaths and crosses strung around king aloes on every second bend; it wasn't when I hit the outskirts of town and saw places and things I remembered with a sweet, stabbing pain in my chest; not even when I got out at the gate and saw that yellowed, chipped golfball mailbox that'd been there since *we'd* moved in— that thing'd survived twenty years of threats and plotting to have it taken out, and there it stood still, stuffed full of junkmail.

It was after my key'd slid through the lock, and I'd got inside and that smell'd hit me — every time I ever came home I smelt it, it made me think of the sun shining on clean laundry — it was after that and after I'd put my bag down in the lounge and I went through to the bathroom and lifted the toilet seat and saw this bowlful of days-old brown piss — and lying on the floor next to the toilet, a newspaper with a half-finished crossword and a pen without a cap on it — and resting on the cistern, the photo of me and the two of them and Cindy on my first day of school, behind some burned-out tealight candles and a crumbly pile of black matches— *that's* when it hit me, right then, the full weight of the thing sunk down deep into my stomach

*

And if I'd known what to do about it — if I could've *known* to weep, to be sick, to get angry and punch a wall, to get drunk — I'd never've just left the house, door wide open, and gone walking

And I never would've run into Fritz.

From the start — the whole thing was a kind of accident.

I did a lot of walking growing up, and I was on one of my old smoking routes — I was at the top of Ayliff Street and I could see the turnoff to the dirt track that goes up the hill and to the top of Sugar Loaf. There used to be a massive jacaranda that stood at the bottom of that path like a gatekeeper, and I guess I was staring at that

— the space that tree left behind — when I heard someone shout, “Holy shit, *Simon?*”

And I spun around and I saw Fritz standing there in the street, right in the middle of the crossroad.

“Hey, Fritz,” I said — then remembered his name was actually Frederic — but I didn’t feel like I could correct myself and so I just stuck out my hand.

He shook it and I remembered that was another thing about him. He was one of those guys who always tried to hurt you when he said hello.

“What’re you doing in town, oke? You at your folks’ place?” he said.

“Uh, ja.” And then — the first time I’d said it out loud — “My folks died, actually. Car crash. I’m just down here to sort their stuff out.”

“Shit, man,” he said. He spat in the road. “Shit. That’s life, hey?”

“Ja, apparently,” I said, and then my face started burning and I felt out of breath

“Listen — Fred,” I said, “I think I just need to keep walking right now.”

“Ja, sure. Hundreds, bru. I’ll come check you tomorrow,” he said

The words already at my back

I was already gaining speed down the hill, twisting through a side street and onto Fitzroy, staring at the trough of evening light that’d pooled in the Kowie ditch, my heart hammering, and for some reason — of all the things I might’ve been worrying about right then — the only thought that actually formed in my head was Phil, and what the hell I’d do with myself if he ever did, one day, just tell me to fuck off and never come back to the bar.

It felt like a dam was breaking. I tried to sing to myself while I walked, but I couldn’t remember any words to any songs. And, anyway, the words in my head weren’t so much of a tune as a drum beat. *Call Phil. Don’t fuck this up. Call Phil.*

*

I’m not sure when, but somewhere along the way my parents must’ve sold my bed — and I found it impossible to fall asleep in theirs and so around midnight I dragged the quilt and a pillow out into the hall and lay down there.

It was even worse out there, though. It started to feel like I was *gaining* consciousness — and then before I knew it, my thoughts’d come loose — these strands and snarls of cassette tape playing warped old tunes.

I was 16-years-old in 1989. So ja, there was a lot of stuff going on in the country at the time — I’ve read about it now, and I’ve seen pictures— but the valley kind of kept us out of it while we were growing up, and — never mind the riots and bullets and casspirs and necklacing that was going on everywhere else — I can’t say I remember life ever feeling any different to any of us.

Until they started coming back from the border. I think about it, sometimes, and I think that’s when it all started to change for me. My first taste of proper darkness. There were a few of them around town — these young guys, you only had to see them once and you knew — these guys who left home and came back way different, with scars and shaky hands and faces like masks. Mostly they kept to themselves — the story was they all hung out together up at the army base on Thursday nights — but Fritz, he wasn’t just a haunt — even from the start, he was a very real thing in my life.

Frederic.

We called him Fritz, but we always tried to keep it behind his back. We called him Fritz because he was obsessed with war stuff, and we were learning about the Nazis at the time so for us it was kind of clever. He actively sought us out — we met him because one week, just from nowhere, he started hanging out outside the school gates and offering us cigarettes on our way home — and we kept him around because, never mind how deeply and obviously fucked the guy might’ve been, he was twenty-one years old and he could buy us booze and cigarettes and anything else, and sometimes he could borrow a car.

But Jesus, that stuff always came at a high price. I mean, when I was sixteen the furthest I’d ever been from Grahamstown was the Fish River Sun, for three nights — but even then, when I knew absolutely nothing about the world, I *knew* in my bones that Fritz was a special case. He was a phenomenon. The guy was *obsessed* with war stuff — I can’t tell you. No matter what conversation you were trying to have, and it got worse when he got drunk which was always — but he’d take control of what you were saying and he’d turn it and twist it and beat it into some nasty story from Angola every time.

That was the one side to it. The other — and I mean, I’m no expert — I’ll be thirty-three in a few months and all I own in the world is a rusted VW Fox; I live in my boss’s sister’s place where I’m not allowed to use any of the cupboards in case she comes back and I have to fuck off in a hurry; I’ve worked in a bar for eight years and I still serve drinks — but at least I’m aware, you know, that there *is* a code out there. There’s a proper way of doing things, even if I’m not doing it very well.

Fritz, though — I don’t think that sense was there. It was lots of things — how mean he was when he spoke to waitresses and cashiers and petrol attendants; how when he’d come for a braai he’d pitch up with crazy stuff, like guavas and a bag of walkie-talkies; how he’d always try to fall asleep at your place when he got hammered — and I remember, even back then it used to make me so *sad* — to think that on top of everything else, Fritz’d just forgotten, somehow, how to a live like a normal person anymore.

And then when it happened — the big thing of my life — when Cindy went missing — could you blame me? Obviously I thought it was Fritz. And I was young and I was loud about it — and my family and friends took my side — and pretty soon I was hearing the same thing from strangers around town.

But then my sister’s body turned up in a lagoon somewhere the other side of East London — and time went on, and they still couldn’t find the guy who did it and we fell out of the news and none of us took it very well — this was when my mom was drinking and taking handfuls of pills —

And one day, I took her shopping and Fritz came up to us in one of the aisles in Shoprite. And my mom just freaked out — she chucked a jar of mayonnaise at him and she was screaming so much I had to drag her outside

And I felt guilty into hanging around Fritz a bit more often after that, while my mom got better and *I* lost the thread — and I left town

And I’ve done what I’ve done since

But *they stayed here.*

They stayed here.

How’d they bear it?

I didn’t want to cry again so I tried to think of something else —

And immediately, with a feeling like ice-cold hands pressing on my insides — I remembered about Phil and how when I’d got home from my walk I’d spent an hour with the phone in my hand, too scared to actually dial the number —

And with that sense of failure starting to catch like coals in my stomach, I couldn't just lie there

And I got up and turned on the lights and dressed in layers and layers and dug in a cupboard and laid two suitcases out on the bed and started looking around for stuff to put in them.

*

The meeting with the lady from Sanlam was surprisingly brief.

I'd just finished filling out the form, then when I looked up — on the table in front of me — there it was, a small thing, standing in a ziploc bag with stickers and labels all over it.

"Jeez, are they *both* in there?"

The lady said, "With blessings." She was old and her make-up looked like pastel crayon on tissue paper. She took the urn out the bag and handed it to me.

"So this is mine now? I can do anything I want with it?"

She nodded at me.

"Um... Do I owe you any money?"

"Excuse me?"

"Like for this thing — the urn. Or the — the burning."

"No, sir," she said. "It's all done" — and then she couldn't help herself — she reached across the table and put her hand on my hand and squeezed it.

And so when I went into the bank I was still feeling like it said something about me, about my whole fucking *look*, being mothered like that by the Sanlam lady — and even though I sat down and started speaking to the guy in the office, I wasn't really there at all. The conversation was far past me before I started hearing what he was saying — and so in the end, along with the bad news, I also had to deal with his pissy attitude while he ran it all by me again.

The whole morning was so bad, when I got home I ended up calling Phil just for something else to think about. It rang and rang. I hung up and tried again. Same story. I waited ten minutes then tried two more times and then realised he was probably punishing me — he did that — he loved it when you were squirming

And I was considering busting open the liquor cabinet in the lounge — it was still part of my mom's thing that my dad kept the only key to it — I was staring at the thing and wondering how hard I'd have to kick it

When I heard this voice saying, "Knock knock" — and then all of a sudden there was Fritz standing in the light spilling through the front door.

"Do you still drink, Fred?" I asked him.

"Simon." He laughed. "Do birds still fly?"

*

Fritz and I were on New Street for ten hours. Just three places, I think. I think I've pieced most of it together now — but there're still long stretches of the thing I can't remember, and I doubt I'll ever get them back.

The first place was good for me. It was just some pub with cheap food and a couple of pool tables, but I was feeling so ugly inside and angry and sorry for myself, and Fritz was pretty good at being commiserative. We'd been there for hours and then after some vodka shots I started to get a bit teary, and then halfway through a story about the last time I was in town — when my mom made her big pitch to me about moving back in — I started crying, properly. Fritz didn't say anything. Didn't put his hand on my shoulder or do anything at all. He just let me finish. Then he gave me a cigarette and he said to me, "Crying's good, hey. People don't always say so but think about it. You're a rock out there in the ocean and all day there's just waves crashing on you, crashing and crashing. And you repel most of that shit, but obviously some water gets in through the cracks — and it's salt water, and if it doesn't come out sometime it's going to eat you on the inside."

So when we left that place — sure, I was drunk — but I was also feeling safe and buoyed up, and sort of stitched together in a way that I hadn't for a while. I remember feeling like I'd already got what I needed from the night. And when we walked down New Street, with the streetlamps like liquid and the trees with their storybook shapes stamped out in black against the purple sky — I remember feeling like all I wanted to do, really, was keep walking home

But not Fritz.

He was just warming up, and the second place we went to — it was a new place — and Jesus, it was like a fucking midnight carnival'd come to town. A freakshow.

My memory's a bit ragged — actually, more like, I remember it the same way as a bad dream —

I couldn't believe you got places like that in Grahamstown —

The bass in the speakers knocking your heart around in your chest, and those club lights and so many people with black makeup on their eyes, and people doing drugs just right there on the tables in front of everyone else and there was a stripper pole and just ordinary, normal girls would get up and have a go, not always with their clothes on

And I started seeing something wolfish in Fritz — then he started grabbing people at the bar

And I got us out of there and I'm not sure if we went anywhere else but I know for sure that we ended up in a booth in the corner of Champs. I don't know how long we sat there — I might've napped, briefly — but eventually we got a kind of second wind and they were selling cans of Black Label for R7 so I bought and we sipped them and we didn't speak much.

And then there was some noise at the door, and a bunch of guys came in — a few of them I knew, the rest were friends of theirs — and they were carrying Daryl into the bar. Daryl had MD or MS or one of those terrible diseases — he was paraplegic and his left arm was permanently bent at the elbow and the wrist — but his right arm was steady, and the guy loved to drink. We'd been carrying him around to parties since we were fourteen and it was a good moment to see them coming in like that, and they came over and sat down with us and looked at me a little funny — there was this general question just hanging in the air, *What the fuck is Fritz doing here?* — but then they got over that and soon we were talking and laughing and I ploughed straight through my second wind in no time flat.

I was drinking bits of everything, and I remember — the last thing I have that's distinct — I remember the bartender bringing over a tray of shots and me telling myself, *If you drink this, you might die* — and drinking it anyway

*

And then, the next thing I know, everyone's gone home except me and Fritz and Daryl.

I don't remember walking back down to New Street — even though we must've carried Daryl — or getting into Fritz's car. I don't remember heading off and — whichever way we got there — driving up the slope to Daryl's digs on Hillsview.

It's only this

And I'm lying in the backseat and laughing about something. Why the hell *I'm* in the backseat, I can't tell you — but that's where I am, and the passenger seat's tilted way back and Daryl's in front. He leans back and slaps me on the chest and says goodbye with a big smile on his face. I try sit up and say goodbye properly, but I can't — I'm that fucked.

Fritz goes round the front and opens Daryl's door. I'm watching through the gap between the front seats. The cabin light's on — and I watch all of this happen

And I swear to god I try, but I can't stop it — I promise, I just can't *move*.

Daryl leans out the car and puts his arms out, like he's going to be picked up. But Fritz just looks at him. Daryl laughs and sits there with his arms out and Fritz tells him to get out the car. Daryl laughs again, and he looks back at me, but there's something about it all that has me spooked, and I start to sweat and get nauseous and I'm trying everything just to *sit up, sit up, sit up* —

Fritz pulls Daryl out the car. I swallow and struggle and then shout at him, and he leans in through the passenger door and tells me to shut up and — god — there's something there in his face that I've never seen before in my life

And I see him turn round and kick Daryl so hard something cracks. I see Daryl start to crawl away, and I see Fritz get down on his knees and start screaming stuff right into Daryl's ear. I get my door open and I stick my head out the car and throw up. I'm trying to fall out the car but my arms and legs are so heavy I can't do it, and then Fritz climbs back in and tells me, "Check here — watch." He turns the brights on and he starts laughing and he keeps telling me to sit up and watch and somehow I do it

I get myself out the car and I can see Daryl with the brights on him dragging himself up the driveway to his house, crying, with the dirt from the road swirling around in the lights in the cold air and he looks like he's lost in a blizzard. I start to go to him but I throw up what's left in my stomach — and then everything disappears.

*

When I come round my clothes are soaked with cold dew. It burns my skin and I get to my feet, and I can see the rim of the valley's gone bright blue already. Almost like a gas ring.

I look up the steep driveway to Daryl's house, and even though the whole place is dark I know the right thing would be to go knock on the door

But I can't — I can't do that.

Instead, I start walking home down the hill.

To my right, I can see those huge orange pylons in the township — they're still there, that hasn't changed — and in the bit of fog that's rising up from the valley floor, it looks like there're fires burning on the hillside. I walk and walk, and I don't see one car. Just guys sitting on chairs at the petrol stations and a few dogs sleeping in a pile under a vent outside the Graham Hotel.

I think about Phil, and how the hell I'm going to maneuver myself when I get back. I already know I'm going — I'm going to get in the car as soon as I've got home, had a shower and zipped up those suitcases. *Maybe I'll just tell him everything.* I'll go straight in to see him and I'll start at the top and I won't worry about crying and I'll tell him everything — and I'll tell him something happened to me while I was back home, and I can feel it — the numbness I've been feeling is gone and I'm *here* now, and I've got a house to save and I'm ready to work more shifts and start taking things more seriously.

I've got a house to save.

When I get to the train tracks the sun's broken out over Makana's Kop. The air's clear and pale and the stanchions are dripping bright, shiny water. As I go over the footbridge, I can smell the rust on the tracks — that sweet smell — and the whole way home after that, it's weird, but I'm sort of talking to myself — maybe even to my folks — saying over and over again: *Watch me, watch me save this.*

I round the corner and our road's still full of shadows. It's almost like slipping underwater. My mind goes to that tiny urn with my folks' ashes in it, and right away I think about a few nice things to do with it — Sugar Loaf, Mountain Drive, maybe even Fish River — then I think, *You'd better not rush it. You get so few chances in life to do your best.*

At the top of the driveway I think about Daryl again, how he was *crawling*, and I shake my head and as I do my eyes fix on the mailbox. I clench my teeth and kick the thing as hard as I can, about halfway up — and a sharp pain goes right through the base of my foot and up to my knee

And the thing creaks back in the cold earth. I have a quick look up and down the street to check if anyone else is around, then I go to the other side of the mailbox and squat on my haunches and link my arms around the ball — like I'm helping to birth the hideous thing from the ground — and I lean back and I pull and I pull.

Like { 32 } Tweet { 3 }

7

Comments

2 comments