

Once Upon a Time in the Great Karoo by Harry Friedland

Once upon a time when I was about ten years old my father took the family on a road trip which went through the Great Karoo. We did those road trips annually. They were a feature of our lives and they provided a lifetime of memories - such as this one.

To be honest my brother and I were lucky because I learned later that our wealthier friends mostly did not go on holidays with their parents – the kids were lodged with other family or friends in town while their parents went to places which were not child friendly. My parents would have found that unthinkable.

If we were going cross-country we would take two or three days to get to our destination so the trip demanded preparations. Bookings for en route stop-overs had to be made in advance. The car had to be serviced. My dad had to arrange “locums” for his work. He had to get “travellers cheques” (ever heard of those? – contact me if you need an explanation) for cash while away. Being medical people, my parents insisted that we kids have GP checkups before departure. We had to be pronounced “fit for travel” before departure. Food hampers were packed and stored in accessible places in the boot for lunch stop-overs at those roadside outspans along the way. Ever eaten a white bread sandwich with grated cheese, onion and chives? – To this day I associate those with these epic holidays. Biltong was stashed and rationed. We were read the riot act about fighting in the back seat. There was an imaginary line that you could not cross without consequences. We were regularly admonished to “stop fighting and look at the beautiful scenery”. There is fuck-all to see in the Karoo. My mother regaled us with tales of her own youth: my grandfather had been a “railway ganger” all his life, on the Karoo line, and since that line was ever-present alongside our car, it all seemed very real. Those tales became the legends of our youth. The characters were giants, Greek gods, heroes and villains. The Great Trek and the Boer Wars were constant and living themes. She spoke of these things with a reverence which was palpable. She told us how she was taken to school on the handlebars of her big brother’s bicycle. She never, ever told us how she was abused and she carried the nickname “Dolly” her whole life. Some pain is buried so deep that you just never go there.

But I digress. This story is about the Great Karoo and the incident (a non-event actually) that I experienced there.

It was very early in the morning. We were pulling out of Beaufort West, heading up North-East, right into the heart of the Great Karoo. I don't remember where we were bound but it doesn't matter. The air was ice cold and we gave off steam when we exhaled. The air was so dry that there was no ice on the ground but there should have been.

As we drove the sun rose through the windshield. It started off as a thin grey line on the horizon and grew stronger until the whole sky was the reddest of blood red, and the empty red earth of the Karoo answered it. The earth is littered with large black boulders scattered far and wide. Why black? – Because each in it's random turn over the centuries has been struck by lightning. I was told that there is a high percentage of iron in the rock. I can believe that.

We were the only car on the land. We were the only human beings on the face of the earth and we moved through it with the reverence of silence. And then it struck me: there was no sound besides the sound of our engine and tyres. It amused me. I asked my dad if he would stop the car and switch off the engine so that I could hear it: hear the silence, that is. So he pulled over and killed the engine and I got out. I needed to get away from the car to be sure that I was hearing it properly, so I walked away – 100, 200, maybe 300 metres. All I could hear now was the crunching of my own footsteps.

Eventually I stopped to kill that sound too.

And then there was – nothing. Nothing at all. I had never heard nothing before.

After a while I realised that I could hear the sound of my own heartbeat And the sound of my own breathing. So I held my breath. I wanted to hear the nothingness of existence. Now it was just my heartbeat, but that was as far down as I could go.

Then I heard the crunch of my dad's cars tyres on the road shoulder. The moment was over.

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**Once upon a Time in the Great Karoo by Harry Friedland-written in 2023**

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