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Fuel - Novel

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ALARM

They take turns driving. Vinz during the day, Alexander at night. It gets dark early in that country, in November around seven, and from one minute to the next. Vinz suffers from night-blindness, the road before his eyes as if snuffed out. The high plain thrusting against the road. The country, until twilight a single unswerving stretch of road, that cuts through the plateau with a mountain range at its edge, which neither receded nor came any closer and, like a Fata Morgana with its deceptive promise of arrival, led his eyes along an imaginary border until the sun disappeared and the horizon line vanished. Then the hazy, serrated silhouette collapsed in on itself, shadows flooded the plain, setting its colours free to flash one last time, the brown and yellow tones of the Bushveld with the unreal, almost hallucinatory green of individual plantations, before everything went out. Be careful, Alexander said. Vinz noticed the sand drift too late, the elongated, wind-ribbed shape like a dying animal in the half-dark. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Alexander tip forward in the passenger-side seat, brace his right foot, and step on the imaginary brake. Vinz cast him a glance and hissed. Then he let the car clatter over the obstacle, the cadaver of red earth, his protest. He'd been thinking about Manuel, and he knew that Alexander could see right through him.

At the edge of the road the country receded metre by metre. Rangeland but no animals, the only thing even remotely like any herd the crooked grasses which inched closer together the darker it grew. His eyes scraped over them and sought support in the silhouette of an acacia, beneath which

night had already begun to clot, then sprung further afield to the outline of a single baobab tree standing like a grim colossus in the landscape, the squat trunk and finger-like branches of a giant condemned to loneliness, stretching its hands into the sky. It's beautiful here, Alexander said. Vinz switched on the high beams, which contracted the road even more. Almost like a reflex his foot twitched off the gas pedal, but he withstood the impulse and pressed himself against the wheel and the feeling that he was losing control of the car. He lifted his eyes to the last contours, looking for clues in the briers, the acacia, and the baobab that could tell him something about Alexander and him, about why they were here in this country, until all of a sudden he braked, steered onto the stony shoulder, and stopped to let Alexander take over.

The two of them and the car. A white Toyota Corolla from Avis, the smallest and most economical model. 90 PS, front-wheel drive, fuel consumption of 7.3 litres per 100 kilometres, picking it up already Vinz had misgivings about whether it would be the right car. In a country where only the most important roads were maintained, they might have opted to save money in the wrong place. On their travels they'd always taken the roads beyond those their atlas had marked in red, had preferred the yellow or colourless side-roads which wound up mountainsides, saddled passes, and looped and zigzagged across high plateaus before turning into dotted lines that suddenly came to a stop, like a child's naïve drawing which doesn't know what it's supposed to be. Red connected the cities and metropolises; people who take the red roads have little time and no eye for detail. The two were invested in staying power, not speed. Red only in particular situations: on the return trip to the airport, say, or if there was a great distance to overcome. Their road was to align itself to the terms of the landscape, not disrupt it.

A green accompanying line identifies a particularly exciting stretch. They were following a yellow-green into the abyss opening up at the end of the headlights. Vinz checks the speedometer over and over. Alexander brakes, shifts gears, redirects. The asphalt is cratered with potholes, the chassis rattles. A four-door exoskeleton. What keeps together on the outside when the spine's been broken. A white metallic tank protecting the soft tissues, shielding them from the malaise which is all that remains of their once great feelings, those feelings which Vinz still does not hesitate to call love, even if he too is unsure whether love can be great beyond the word at all, unsure whether it is not simply the recognition and endurance of an excess of shortcomings over the years, which, as you attempt to take responsibility for your weaknesses, make it impossible for you to lead your own life, so that at a certain point there is no other way but the shared one, a disrupted line of green, the colour of hope.

Maybe a green car would've been a better omen. We're driving a white car, Vinz thought

suddenly, after leaving the airport grounds behind them and reaching the highway that was supposed to bring them to their route. His laugh sounded forced. In a country like this one maybe the white car was their first mistake. But it hadn't been their choice, it had been assigned to them, and every third car on the road was white. The air conditioning was going at full blast, the thermometer showed 31 degrees, and the weather app said it was going to get even hotter. A black car here was simply impractical, and, in any event, the ethics of colour which had taken hold of Vinz were somewhat dubious. In the car he felt reasonably disguised.

He is only a hand's-breadth away from Alexander. Closer to him than he had been in months. Sometimes Vinz feels him, but it's really more of a hint, almost a threat, of touch when Alexander downshifts and in so doing brushes him. Vinz closes his legs, Alexander's hand slips off the gear stick, hangs for a moment between the two of them, then returns to the steering wheel. The Smartphone is lying in the tray. Vinz reaches for it every five minutes, which, in that darkness, on a road that could break off at any moment, last longer than anywhere else in the world. He's got to control himself, not hold on to it constantly, protectively, like a helpless creature. Once, when he was a child, he'd brought a tiny blackbird that had fallen out of its nest to his mother. Naked and ugly, its large eyes dimmed by a milky veil, it had a short, disabled beak. In it he saw the mouth, the gurgling throat, mortal fear. It emitted feeble sounds. The feel of it disgusted him, he found the tiny body cold and slippery, though the young bird was dry and warm, or maybe neither cold nor warm at all, he couldn't remember. The eyes were eerie. Still blind, they had seen nothing of the world and would open no more. The bird had been born in darkness, and it was dying in darkness, on the tips of its wings and beneath its throat it was already black, a thin, somehow mangy, pitiful feathering. He held the shivering animal in the hollow of his hands. His mother sighed and pointed out the place in the garden to put it so that the blackbird's mother would see and hear its child. He pulled up some grass, gathered some leaves with his hand, and laid the body between the roots of a cherry tree. The blackbird sat in the crown and called. He went and hid behind the currants, from where he had a good view of everything. Nothing happened. The blackbird mother did not come down; the child rhythmically stuck its screeching hole of a beak into the air. In a crouch, his foot fell asleep. He waited another five minutes, then lost interest in saving the little life. He peeled himself from the bushes and went inside. The blackbird mother continued to sound the alarm; the whole afternoon long he heard her out in the garden, her lament for her dead child.

Now he wants to order his hand over to Alexander. Enclose the knee beneath the seam of his shorts, curl his fingers into a fist in Alexander's lap. Alexander would close his legs, pressing Vinz to his penis with the forceps of his thighs, brake and slow down through the strength of his calves alone, on through the night, kilometre after kilometre, with the tenacious obstinacy of the two decades Vinz has already been caught inside him, it was as if he had grown into his middle, his two-metre-long body the extension of Vinz's all too short life, just like how they used to travel together on their first trips, until Alexander would pull into a rest area, relax his legs, let go of Vinz, and they would release their excitement.

Next to the Smartphone was the notebook. His plan is to keep a kind of logbook, sketches of places, landscapes, encounters, to help him recover a rhythm, a new direction for the story he'd been writing for ten years: Alexander and Vinz, from A to Z, the subject of two novels already, the two figures life-size, if not always entirely true to life, and there, where they can indeed be seen naked and in close-up, literarily cloaked, suddenly he was interested in art, not pornography. Or was he? In the original meaning of the Greek word a pornographer was someone who wrote about prostitutes. The book-market loved exhibitions of all kinds: the borderline case, the family father and his struggles, the haemorrhoid-plagued moderator, and the hooligan all brought their inner excrescences to the fore and simulated veracity. Among the auto-fictional confessors, he, Vinz, was the transparent queer, the one who through his descriptions of his coming-out in the country up through marriage allowed insight into the interior nature of his relationships, »with unsparing candour«, as a blurb from his publishers noted, those publishers who'd just recently enquired if the story with the two would go on. They still didn't know a thing about Manuel, about the author's struggle to find a still valid language for his love, if the writing crisis he'd been experiencing for months had anything to do with being unhappily in love at all and not unhappiness itself, the unhappiness of being unable to love or even write about love, that kind of happiness that sets in when both are in the right proportion.

For the moment the ultimate scene of their story is at the kitchen table. The last time he had touched Alexander was forty-eight hours ago, on the other half of the globe. Vinz had been sitting across from him, the massive oak slab between them the least distance. They had booked the flights the previous year, neither of them doubting that the trip would take place. Up until then they had always planned their holidays for the year-to-come with the same matter-of-factness as booking a trip to the theatre the following night. There had never been a reason for any kind of precautionary measures.

Alexander was staring at an article in the paper that his eyes weren't reading but that his quivering lids assessed, as if looking for a message with a meaningful progression of thesis, argument, and proof. At some point Vinz turned away from the imminent decision. Letting his gaze escape

through the kitchen door and hallway he saw a bit of sky in the square of window in his study, a cloudy image full of rain and low-stratus clouds beyond the shared apartment he always evoked in his novels whenever he, whether as narrator or figure, got stuck. Dave, the Labrador, padded inside and, sensing trouble, whimpered. Then Vinz got up and moved to stand in front of Alexander, who also stood up, reluctantly and a few seconds behind. Vinz put his arm around him and mechanically stroked his back, affirmation of his body's belonging to his, until Alexander moved out of the embrace and Vinz realized that now he was the one looking at the paper. He had never saved a life, the young blackbird his first failure already. So let's drive, he said, the words sounding as if they'd been read. They were far away from a question, for at all costs he had to nip Alexander's "no" in the bud. It would have amounted to the cessation in the rhythm of their hearts, which, though they no longer beat exclusively for each other, still beat at the same time, the blood pumping in a shared and, in their union, vital cycle, Vinz the sick heart, Alexander the pacemaker, one dialysis, the other the poisoned blood, and they still hadn't shattered any dishes, out of a lack of passion for fighting or due to Alexander's regard for even the cheapest of their Ikea glasses. But then for real, Alexander said, and Vinz nodded gravely. Then they each went to their own room to pack their suitcases, a good moment to put a stop to the situation.

At the airport he informed Manuel of his decision by app, secretly, in the bathroom. He was afraid of Alexander's questions, his doubtful glance which would reveal to him how little he himself believed in his own steps. He sent the message and stared at the now irreversible words. Manuel came online just a few seconds later. Vinz tried to imagine the look on his face when reading the lines. The emptiness in his mind sucked up the light of the display; he squinted. By the time he opened them back up to normal, Manuel had left the chat. He knew that he didn't have to wait for any other response. The force with which he'd closed off the way back was like a blow to a hidden organ whose existence he only perceived through the pain; it was even deeper than the heart, it was behind it, there where the incurable diseases of the emotions slumber.

He ran out of the toilet and into the departure lounge in a panic, thinking that boarding could already be complete, he'd struggled with the words for so long in front of the sink. Alexander was sitting in a chair reading, he raised his head and cast him a worried glance. A queue had already formed at the gate. From that point on there were only the yellow-green roads in a country he only knew from the map and a few stories. Alexander stood up and joined the line. The movement with which he turned from Vinz and moved into the crowd streaming into the jet bridge had something peremptory about it. Vinz found it violent, but he wasn't entitled to receiving any pity. Once there,

Alexander would be able to feel how closeness can grow out of consolation and, out of the knowledge that there is nothing you can do to help the inconsolable, forgiveness. He moved up next to Alexander in the queue. It'll be beautiful, he said and nodded at him encouragingly. It always has been till now. Vinz lifted the corner of his mouth in the hopes that Alexander would see the honest intention behind the mask into which he felt his face had frozen. In the meantime his chest throbbed with the necrotic feeling his message to Manuel had left, with the desire to take back his decision. Smiling coldly the members of the ground crew wished them a pleasant flight. Then the metal maw swallowed them whole.

He opens the chat. He knows that Alexander's face grows hard the second Manuel appears between them. He stares into the borderless space produced by a circuit board the same way one watches a run-over animal, waiting for it to die. Its eyes already hard and glassy, only its chest continues to rise and fall calmly. The message-window breathes, expands; Manuel could come online at any moment. At a distance of nine thousand kilometres they are separated by only a simple swipe of the screen. The analogue route to him, on the other hand, leads along the Trans-Sahara Highway, where the Toyota would at some point get stuck in the sand. First they would run out of food, then water. A sleepless night in the car, in the dead silence of the desert. In the early morning they would be scooped up by a caravan, spend days and nights on the back of a camel, lean exhaustedly onto the shoulders of two men whose eyes could only be seen through the slit in their cheches. In the evenings the chameliers would sit around the fire, handing the two water and millet gruel. They'd hand over the last of their euros, with their European looks and the guilty conscience of their generation. They were loading their failing relationship onto the continent, traveling like figures out of the novel by Paul Bowles, which, prior to leaving, Vinz had reread to get in the mood for what might await them. They were their own topos, he knows what a cliché they are, how ridiculous he has made his characters seem at the start of the trip already. Traveling through the night as if the darkness were an allegory. Manuel remains offline. Vinz knows that he constantly checks his Smartphone, posts comments and pictures all over the place, but he still has not reacted to his message. The app shows I_manu as having last been online at 6.51 p.m. Vinz missed him by ten minutes. The animal is dead. He hears a sound in his throat, something like despair, or maybe just the final discharge of an electronic circuit board.

As soon as they landed, in the airport he went directly to a telephone shop. I need internet, he said, as

if expressing a fundamental need that just had to be filled. I need internet like »I'm hungry«, »I've got to take a shit«, »I want to die«. An employee sold him the most expensive flat-rate plan there was, with guaranteed internet service throughout the country. He watched the man's fingers as they fiddled with getting the SIM card out of the plastic and then handed it to Vinz, who at the moment found his own hands rather German. In the novel he remembers them looking small and pale on the first cock he'd ever grabbed other than his own, at eighteen, in a toilet stall at Filou, a club on the outskirts of the small town nearby where the US army was still stationed at the time. It was pretty bent, he writes, reptile-like, with a tongue-coloured tip that, thanks to its pronounced hole, really made it look like he was sucking on the forked tongue of a lizard, while his own sex, which didn't seem to interest the other man at all, remained a frightened worm until the animal shot its salty secret into his throat and, just as quickly as it had jutted out, once again disappeared into the fly, but before it did, glimmering wet and somehow grinning, it dragged a thread of saliva from his lips, an image that settled into his head during the week of his graduation exams and guided his hand beneath the sheets at night until the image, just after he emptied himself, disappeared in a feeling of deep alienation. But the following day it would reform and jump up at him in arousing detail from the task sheet over which he was bent, with a glimmer of the neon light on the quivering strings of saliva or sperm, so that he could barely wait for Friday night when he could go back to the hip-hop club, as he would every weekend thereafter, but where he never saw the soldier again.

The clerk made no effort at all to help Vinz as he struggled with the SIM card and Smartphone. His hands shaking after the long internet-withdrawal of the flight, Alexander simply watched the crowds, those excited tourists all driven by the same need to the counters where assistants were ready to set free the crucial connections to all the Smartphones behind handed to them. Then the clerk turned to an American woman who was pleading with him in a reprimanding tone, as if speaking to a child. When the little plastic card fell to the ground, Alexander glanced at Vinz tiredly and bent down. Took the Smartphone out of his hand, stuck the card in, handed it back, and said: Better now? Then he left Vinz alone and disappeared into the crowd. Vinz unlocked the screen with the combination of his birthday, the passcode to life. Even over the last fourteen hours I_manu had left him no messages. He checked Facebook, where the evening before Manuel had posted a photo showing him arm in arm with two guys at some party. His patently good mood had the effect of a cynical comment on Vinz's message, which he must have received only a short time before. Manuel looked radiant, really really good. The drill in Vinz's chest started up again. He scanned Manuel's body, enlarged the places where the two other men were touching him on his display with his thumb and index finger, his shoulders

and hips, as if there, in the hazy image, he might decipher the hands' intentions, discover a clue as to how the night played out. Alexander was waiting outside with a package of aspirin for their headaches after the long flight. Vinz pressed two tablets out of the blister pack and swallowed them dry. By the time they reached the rental car office, the drilling feeling had turned into a fire and Vinz knew that, from then on, the phantom pain would accompany him along every single kilometre of the trip.

The following day the blackbird child under the cherry tree was shredded apart by his father's lawnmower. In the evening the blackbird mother called and defended her territory. The light from the display goes out. The space closes; the world turns three-dimensional again. Alexander swings the wheel, the car lurches from one side to the other, Vinz yells: Look out! The headlights plough five metres into the night. The potholes jump at them from the edges, black craters like monsters with raging mouths crouching along the motorway. It occurs to him that they did not sign up for any insurance for the tires. The potholes spring and snap; hitting one, Alexander's head bumps against the ceiling lining and the Smartphone tumbles out of Vinz's hand and slides under the seat. If the axle breaks, their trip will be over before it has even begun. Alexander steers into the opposite lane where the surface is better, then steps on the gas.

North of the metropolis the country slowly emptied out. The noise from the access roads and bridges began to thin, the six-lanes first went down to four, then two, which were separated by a perforated yellow line. In the columns of left-hand traffic on the city expressway Vinz had gripped the steering wheel in a panic, but now he relaxed his hold. He focused his eyes on the separation line, a kind of protest against his body that was instinctively urging him to move towards the right.

Townships passed. A sprawl of cities made of sheet metal and slat walls, seldom a hut out of concrete, laundry here and there, children dangerously close to the passing traffic. Women in parking bays selling fruit under the shade of trees, a single kind, piled in heaps, brown avocados, puny bananas, fist-sized pineapples. Wood carvings. He looked away. Poverty didn't interest him. The route he had worked out eschewed cities and metropolitan areas, people especially. In the previous weeks he had brooded over travel guides and maps like a difficult homework assignment, a self-imposed compulsory exercise he hoped would provide him with some kind of inner clarity, which is what he wanted. Through the internet he booked hotels and reserved the car, on the homepage the Toyota was a metallic silver, Alexander had left his credit card on the table. Any further commitment he made through a click of the mouse tied the corset of the impending decision tighter, and the

enthusiastic descriptions of the attractions just increased his inner affliction; even the most spectacular of natural wonders would turn out to be the greatest disappointments should Vinz's hopes not come true: Blyde River Canyon with its waterfalls and the world-famous rock formations of the Three Rondavels, always shot in the evening sun, chipped, rust-red prongs, as if encrusted with blood. God's Window, an overlook where, if you believe the name, the visitor can gaze across a perfect example of creation, one that could never have been shaped by the hand or mind of man. And the creation story of Bourke's Luck Potholes affected him like the evocation of a higher power that had devoted itself to the creation of pure beauty solely to heal. Over millions of years at the confluence of the Blyde and Treur Rivers sharp pieces of gravel caught in the swirls of the waterfalls had bored deep into the rock; just like how, over the years, Alexander had engraved himself into Vinz with emotional scraping movements, leaving his relief. It'll be beautiful, he thought of Alexander's words. He doggedly kept the car to the left and sped on towards the mountains.

In the distance the cooling towers of a power plant towered into the sky. The air was yellow and smoky, a black crust covered all the road signs, the letters almost illegible beneath the coal dust. For two hours they zipped past grasslands and the fields of the Highveld, a plateau so unpromising that Vinz's apprehension of having made a mistake grew into serious distress. Kilometre after kilometre the road bisected eucalyptus plantations, and telescoped one's eyes into a kind of tunnel. At irregular intervals a warning sign would appear, a red triangle with exclamation marks and the words: *Crime Alert. Do not stop.* The sight of the militarily organized rows of trees with their pale-green tops, their forms reminiscent of oversized candle flames, was so impressive that Vinz held his breath as if he were in hiding and had to remain concealed at all costs. No vegetation grew in the dark of this forest, no undergrowth, not even a single blade of grass thrived at the roots of the imperious trees, there'd be nothing to hide them if they had to run off in an emergency.

Alexander had fallen asleep. Vinz felt abandoned, alone with the left-lane traffic and the dangers of the foreign country. He was ashamed of feeling jealous of Alexander's sleep, that innocent omission of the world into which he had fled. Only after the navigation system told him to leave the highway after two hundred endless kilometres did the landscape half-heartedly rear up. The secondary road was in considerably worse condition and s-curved along the spur of a mountain range before running over a bridge and then dipping back down. The mountains, which could barely continue to be referred to as such, moved away from one another, and on one side melted into the haze, crouched red beneath the sun. It stood in the north and made him uneasy, gave him the feeling of an inverted world, a sense of instinct that had grown useless. This northern sun was a kind of new orientation he

was seeking, the about-turn upon which everything now depended. They had left that part of the earth which looked towards the south, towards the origins of his culture. Where he was used to seeing the sun at its zenith, there was only an empty sky. As the car bumped over a hole in the asphalt, Alexander awoke with a start, wiped a bit of saliva from the corner of his mouth and looked at Vinz questioningly, as if he didn't know where they were any longer; and if there was a reason to still be together somewhere, why there.

Every ten or twenty kilometres they came across villages. Wherever the fence of a farm or a game reserve flanked the road all of a sudden there were people. Women in colourful clothes, one raised her hand. A wave-like movement towards the ground, the extended index finger pointing downwards. He sensed that there were others hidden in the bushes at the edge of the way, maybe their husbands and sons too. On the internet he'd read a number of cases about tourists being tricked: a fake breakdown, hitchhikers pulling out a knife as soon as they were in the back seat, even people lying in the middle of the road in a pool of chicken blood. In the rear-view mirror the woman dropped her hand, then disappeared from view. At the crest of the road a number of huts appeared. The crowd of people at the side of the road grew thicker, he saw children in school uniforms on their way home, pedestrians carrying bags full of goods, some of them simply seemed to be walking along the road without any particular reason or aim, just to pass the time. A jumble of market stands, with the usual fruit, the same avocados and pineapples. Then, from out of nowhere, all of a sudden there were rows of cars. In front of them was a swerving van stuffed full of cargo, while pick-ups overtook them with dangerous manoeuvres, young men in the beds, their t-shirts fluttering in the wind. Vinz noticed Alexander stare after them for a long time. He checked to see if the doors were locked. A filling station was followed by a shopping mall, the country around it open, then car parks with the abandoned shells of wrecked cars. A supermarket, a clothing discounter with stands out front, fast-food restaurants. Then the village, or maybe more of a town, which sucked up the hill. A dull sea of corrugated sheet roofs, strung laundry, and billows of chimney smoke from woodfires and brick ovens, a rubbish bin aflame, Alexander turned off the AC and said: Africa. After a couple kilometres everything was gone. A few more fraying dirt roads, some neglected gardens with cracked earth and stunted seeds, the skeleton of another mall being built, an excavator, kids playing in its bucket. Then no one. The grassland with its fences and areas of scrub moving closer, uniform, disembodied, amnesic, as if the village, the town, the town-village, had only been an illusion. Vinz took a breath and accelerated. The road grew more narrow, the surface rose and split. The potholes opened their mouths wide.

And between the villages the abandoned cars. Most of the time light trucks packed with furniture, building supplies, balls of plastic. They stood at the edge of the road, halfway onto the asphalt, halfway onto the sand. Vinz recognized the group that had overtaken them some kilometres back. The men had been crouched on the bed, on their way to a job or on their way back home, now they were leaning against the car, sitting in the open cab, or aimlessly walking back and forth, staring out into space and waiting. In the rear-view mirror he saw one of them watch them go, neither disappointed nor angry at the fact that they hadn't stopped and offered to help. What are they doing? he asked. Alexander turned around one more time but didn't say a word, as if the answer were his secret.

At a certain point they had to leave the car. They bought the fuel they needed at a Shell filling station: petrol, Coca-Cola, and Nestlé chocolate so that they could focus on the traffic. Marlboros, which they smoked in ten-minute intervals, against the endlessness of the road. Chaos reigned at the Chicken Inn. A radio blared, voices zipped back and forth, babies screamed. Vinz didn't understand the system governing how the orders were handed out; there wasn't any line or any numbers. Everyone was just standing around, or coming and going, at the counter trays were pushed from one person to the next, the check-out girls shuffled back and forth between the register and the serving hatch, in the back the grease sizzled next to the cooks dressed in dirty shirts and flip-flops. They called out jokes, laughed, or flirted with the women, who swished their hips. Their slow ways and lewd steps made Vinz angry, but he didn't know what it was about their bodies that bothered him so much, he stood next to Alexander in the corner, ready to jump. He wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible, back to the car and onto the road, into the monotonous rhythm driving their trip and determining their speed, the pauses that protected them, how often they smoked and drank, shared sweets, stopped to pee, always in unison, their common pulse. Alexander calmly watched all the comings and goings, on his forehead the v-shaped red spot that always flared like a warning when something wasn't right. Did you lock the car? he asked all of a sudden. Vinz nodded, but now he wasn't so sure. He reached for the Smartphone in his pocket, fingered it, ultimately left it alone. Felt his wallet, his keys beneath the material of his trousers, the material itself, prepared to have already lost everything, unable to hold on to anything any longer. As his thoughts hurried out to the car park, his eyes got stuck on a small child crawling over the ground between fallen chips and trampled Bonus cards. He had never found a child that repellent. It was unbearably hot, the sun was beating down on the glass façade, the grease fumes wafted in waves over from the deep-fat fryers, sweat was pouring down his temples. No one

paid any attention to them. They seemed to be invisible: Alexander, who towered over everyone, and Vinz, with his Mediterranean looks, which his dark beard emphasised; back at home he was sometimes mistaken for being a Turk or an Arab. Outside of a couple of tourists and the crowd back at the international airport, he hadn't seen anyone who would have identified him as a foreigner; he knew how absurd and German the thought was, there in a country made up of immigrants. What exactly did a foreigner look like, and what made him any different? Suddenly Alexander raced forward, took some plate or other from the counter, and hurried outside.

They ate standing up. Next to a rubbish bin, wolfing it down, like predators with their prey, around which the hyenas were already circling. At the street market they bought a few miserable pineapples and a bunch of plantains. After the chaos of the Chicken Inn Vinz found their purchase comforting and reassuring; it made him feel like he was doing something good for himself and for the country as he placed the coins in the old woman's calloused hand and refused the change. Revealing themselves to be inedible, he tossed the plantains into the next bin; later on in the car the pineapples gave off a sweet, musty smell. The other market women had seen them purchase something – they had intuitively chosen the oldest of the women in the assumption that she was also the poorest – and now all the rest were noisily peddling their wares. People pushed spinach into their hands, the brown avocados, woodcarvings. A young guy waved two fist-sized hippos in front of Alexander's face: How are you, my friend? Alexander stopped; that was a mistake. In a matter of seconds he had the wooden animals in his hand, an elephant in his right, a lion in his left, while Vinz was attacked by an antelope with gracefully formed white horns, ebony and ivory, echoing in his ears. Everyone wanted to make him a »good price«, no one heard his pained »No, thank you«, begging for mercy.

Alexander came away with a baby hippo; Vinz almost dropped the antelope out of nerves. The man caught it and shoved a wooden mask between his fingers, which grinned sardonically. They paid. After all, they needed gifts, at least that was done with. But their purchases seemed to have set off a chain reaction. On their way to the car a jewellery dealer was hot on their heels. Whispering obsequiously, in the end with pleas that shot out of his mouth like orders, he tried to convince Vinz to pick up a gift »for your girlfriend«. He crept around him and hung a shell necklace over his little finger. Matches with blond, he said, as if he knew that for a fact. He had poor teeth and an odour. Vinz pushed him away. The man shifted and came from the other side. She will love this one, he said, and presented him with one of corals. Vinz stopped. He wasn't interested in jewellery or women, he said and grabbed Alexander by the arm. Alexander dragged him to the car, tore the keys from his hand, pushed him behind the wheel, ran around the front of the car, jumped into the passenger seat, and locked the doors. Are you nuts? his eyes said. The necklace dealer jangled his things against the

windscreen. Vinz's entire body shook. Shit, he moaned, it sounded snivelling and much too weak to be a curse. He stared out at the car park; the cars were strewn all over the place, they started up and pulled in to spaces, in the middle of everything were mothers with shopping carts and small children, groups of stylishly dressed girls, their hands full of paper bags from boutiques and big cups of soft drinks. At the edge of the scene the colourful stands with the market women behind them, motionless as if made out of trunks of ebony themselves. People in orange vests ready to clean the windscreens were standing in front of the petrol station waiting for work. A guard was leaning against the tail of a car, his foot on the bumper, tossing a coin into the air and catching it, tossing and catching, without cease. Vinz waited for the coin to hit the ground at any moment. That small failure would change everything, it would liberate the whole, which was damned to repeat itself on an endless loop, and turn it into something else that would seem less arbitrary; suddenly the people would be pygmies or the aboriginal inhabitants of an as of yet undiscovered island, maybe even an ant colony or a dinosaur in a prehistoric and rocky landscape, something that would justify his feeling lonely, threatened, and disgusted, would make him feel as if he were on the right side of humanity. But the coin didn't fall. There before the concrete lump of a shopping mall with its advertising banners it just leapt into the dusty and blind sky that was stretched taut over a slice of daily life, without any profundity or meaning, at the edge of a yellow road; they were just somewhere in the world. We need to take care of each other, Alexander said suddenly. But I won't see him again, Vinz answered numbly, after seeking an answer for a long time but not finding one. The idea of having to do without Manuel, to no longer be able to desire him as a result of having chosen this trip, was absurd; it seemed like the end of his ability to think, a ravenous hole. For who would he still be, without the right to his longing? We won't manage this here otherwise, Alexander said, as if he hadn't heard Vinz at all, and pointed outside. Vinz cringed at the gesture. As if in slow-motion Alexander stretched the panorama out before his eyes, the one he wanted to write about: the shopping mall with its chicken hell, the overflowing car park, the crowd, the voracious street merchants with their kitschy goods, the worthless fruit, the market women's poverty which, when it wasn't being inspected by tourists, was simply tiring. The rubbish in their car and the refuse of his thoughts, everything about their story that they'd brought along and dragged about, no longer needed him, from now on it would write itself. His novel would come about as soon as they left that place; for, as Vinz did not know a thing, it was the story of what never happened. His only contribution would be to endure it all.

As soon as Vinz started the car, the guard grabbed the coin out of the air. He got off the bumper and hurried over to help direct them out of the space. They tossed their things onto the back seat and buckled their seatbelts. Suddenly the jewellery man was back. He knocked on the window, bared his teeth, and waved the ivory. Vinz stepped on the gas so abruptly that the guard jumped to the side in

fear. With a spinning of wheels, they shook off their pursuers.

The impact makes him smash against Alexander, stronger than they'd ever come together over the last number of months. The darkness bursts into the car at one hundred kilometres an hour, presses their time together into a single point from which everything now runs. The blackness at the end of their headlights is the only direction that remains. His hands now everywhere, he grabs Alexander by the arm. And in between tatters of the outside world, the dashboard, the door casing, the steering wheel suddenly stuck like a wedge between them. Smells collapse onto them: Alexander's sweat, the stress of the last twenty-four hours, a hint of the plane's stuffy air clinging to their clothes or to their memory. The menthol-like smell of the eucalyptus plantations streaming through the air. Then something sharp, biting, like burnt rubber. At last he sees Alexander's face, the wide-open eyes, the accusation. It's your fault. Or is it in fact the look of the lover who, seeing the end, forgives everything so as not to die alone? The car comes to a stop. He can hear the motor running then realizes it's the blood in his ears. At some point Alexander says: Well, that's that.

The car lies diagonally across the road. Alexander switches on the hazard lights. They click red in the silence. The darkness glimmers at intervals, casts a ghostly paleness across his face. Vinz sinks back onto the seat, looks at the speedometer, the needle down at zero. It's just about ninety kilometres to their destination in the mountains, an hour and a half here. In his head he continues on to their lodge in the national park, comfortable and tastefully decorated wooden buildings in a spacious and on the internet site paradisiacal-seeming garden run by Aneke and Willem Viljoen, an old married couple, who had responded to their booking request that sadly all the cottages were already taken except the Honeymoon Hut; Vinz had taken that as a sign and reserved. The photo gallery showed a kitschy canopy of blue material stretched across the bed. He'd sent the link to Alexander with the subject line: Sex? :-). But when by afternoon they hadn't even managed to reach the halfway mark, he knew that he had miscalculated. Some couple friends of theirs had travelled through the country some months earlier, or at least the touristy southern coast. When they got together, Bernd and Alf proudly presented the map that the travel agency had prepared for them; the routes were calculated precisely, even marking their approximate arrival times at the hotels. That's beneath us, Vinz had said to Alexander on the way home.

Do not stop on the open road and do not leave your vehicle, the foreign office's website warns. Lock your doors at red lights. Keep valuables out of sight. Avoid driving secondary roads at night. Then the list of recommended vaccinations, which they had servilely adhered to, for three days after his typhus shot Vinz had felt ill.

Alexander undoes his seatbelt, opens the door, gets out. Vinz watches his tall frame in the glow of the headlights. He disappears but a few seconds later is back in the car, pulling the door shut and saying: Completely in pieces. Vinz has to think of all the abandoned cars they saw at the side of the road; suddenly he understands that they had been warning them. We'll call Avis, he says and reaches for the Smartphone, as if finally having a reason. But we're still alive, he adds. In the flashing light he sees Alexander raise his eyebrows, as if to counter: Really? The mirror's gone, he says instead. Only now does Vinz see the stump on the passenger-side door, the torn-off joint. Alexander turns his face towards the wall of night, which arises and again goes out in the blaze of the hazard lights. Then he kicks open the door and disappears outside again. Vinz feels the breeze, it's filled with the smell of burnt rubber and petrol, while behind it the Bushveld floats into the car, the spicy smell of warm grass. He closes his eyes. He wishes he could fall asleep in the wooden hut for lovers, before that a warm evening meal, two glasses of wine, a few cigarettes on a terrace with a view into the valley where the lights of the scattered villages glow like fires. Alexander would be sitting next to him, his »beautiful« on his lips, which he wouldn't have to say, Vinz would simply feel and see it in the glimmer of his eyes. He'd left the Smartphone back in their room, actually managed to have forgotten it for a few minutes, the first time in months. Vinz reaches out his hand towards Alexander, who takes it and places it between his thighs. From the valley comes the howling of jackals.

Instead he hears the hatchback open. Alexander lifting the luggage out. Dropping it back down. The body creaks. Steps moving away. Then silence. It is so thick that Vinz thinks he can hear the night crackling, as, compressed by the abrupt braking manoeuvre, it unfolds over the car. Suddenly a drawn-out, whimpering sound, probably from some animal out in the bush. There are certain birds, Bernd and Alf had told them after coming back from their trip, that scream like tortured children during the night.

A few seconds later, Alexander is back in the car. He is wheezing, and slams the door. His eyes are out of their sockets, his face white, only the stress spot on his forehead that stretches from his nasal bridge to his hairline blinks in the light of the hazards. Something's lying on the ground, Alexander says, then louder, almost yelling: Someone's lying on the ground, oh God! At that moment, however, God was far away and the last eucalyptus plantation, the last crime-alert sign, a few kilometres behind them. As if by reflex Vinz pushes the power door locks, which snap shut. He gasps for air, and a dry sound rattles out of his throat: Dead?