

THAT CARAVAN FEELING

A caravan is a romantic thing. You can go wherever the road takes you with your home following close behind.

Milton Schorr's spirit stirs whenever he sees one...

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**



Clara looked at me. “Why don’t we go to Knysna next week?” she asked. She was smiling, her eyes lit up with some fantastic idea. I knew that look; it’s the look of someone thinking about adventure.

“Why?” I asked, carefully.

“Igor’s band’s playing next Thursday. It’s the last time they’ll play this year.”

“But I have to work. I can’t take time off now.”

We both sat, thinking. It was a Monday evening. Clara shook her head, frowned and began tapping away on her laptop. “Look,” she said.

I leaned over. There was a caravan on her screen, parked under a spreading pine; a caravan that had taken root in a forest with a porch and a braai and a lake sprawled out in front of it.

“We could stay here for R300 a night,” she said. “For both of us.”

The caravan was an old model, maybe a Jurgens, and it transported me back in time...

When I was 15 I lived on the West Coast, where the landscape is big and open and the ocean is cold. I had a friend named Louis, and he had a caravan. Well, his parents had a caravan, but Louis lived in it. It was also an old Jurgens, nearly stripped out, but it still felt like a caravan. There was a stovetop but no gas. There were cupboards for plates and crockery with none inside; instead, an old hi-fi wired to mismatched speakers. There was a toilet compartment, but it was stuffed with magazines and blankets for when a buddy came to crash.

Every weekend and every holiday we lived in that caravan. It was the centre of a beautiful high school rebel life. After long nights of adventuring – whether it was hitting bars underage or fishing undercover, the sea glittering beneath the moon – we sat at the dining room table in that caravan talking and thinking until the sun rose.

My mind wheeled away from Louis to another time, this year. I was at the Imhoff campsite in Kommetjie near Cape Town, just for one night, passing through. I was standing outside the ablution block in the twilight with a towel around my waist and my toiletry kit in my hand, and I was staring.

There were caravans, seemingly permanent caravans, and they were beautiful, decorated with twisted driftwood, old sea ropes and buoys threaded through gardens teeming with growing things. There were rusted metal sculptures and a lovers’ swing chair made from a tractor tyre piled high with cushions.

These caravans were established. They had extra

rooms and tents wandering off into nooks; a Jetmaster chimney pointed at the sunset. These, I thought, were the houses of free men and women.

“**What are you thinking about?**” asked Clara, poking me in the shoulder. She knew she had me. “Let’s do it. Come on.”

We left Cape Town early, in the dark, through streets of red, white and orange lights. We were in Swellendam by mid-morning and took a stroll down Faure Street – an avenue of trees next to the river. Another life tugged at me. Houses in Swellendam are cheap; the price of a tiny flat in the city.

We stopped in Mossel Bay where the wind was howling and the locals hurried along sideways. We walked in the wind ourselves and sat down at a Cuban-themed café, watching white horses galloping across the bay. I wondered about a Mossel Bay kind of life, whether we’d live in a flat by the sea or further back, in a suburb with fynbos gardens.

Finally, that evening, we climbed a hill behind Knysna to a place where the forest and the matted scrub stretched to the horizon.

Now here’s a twist in the tale, a moment where life comes clattering into the dream. We didn’t end up renting that caravan. Although it would have been the perfect salute to Louis, in reality there was a little cabin on the same property that was bigger and better for both of us, for only R50 more per night.

The next morning the lake steamed in the rising sun. I dived in, imagining fish scattering as my body whooshed into the cold. I lay on my back with the hot sun on my face, and I saw it: the caravan, the one from Clara’s computer screen days before. It stood under the spreading pine looking down on the lake; a Sprite, not a Jurgens.

I went up. The door was unlocked. I went inside and I heard it – that hollow sound a caravan makes, the same sound that rang out

every time I stepped into Louis’ caravan all those years ago, my big army boots crunching down. I looked around: There were the bunk beds; there was the table; there was the gas stove and the cupboard.

I felt it. That simple, warm feeling a caravan conjures of having won against all odds. It’s a home you can take anywhere; a snail snug in its own shell while all around nature crouches in the dark.

Houses don’t have this feeling. They’re built for the same purpose but they’re not the same idea. Bricks, concrete and steel push the wilderness away. In a house you can hear plumbing and the beeping of the fridge. In a caravan you hear frogs and the rustling of trees. I sat down at the empty table in the empty caravan and I imagined Louis sitting opposite me with a night of adventure ahead.

I was home.

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