

Jacob creates an illusion

I will now attempt to write a story to improve my mood ...

Jacob has now been at his sister's apartment in Pretoria for three weeks, waiting for something to happen so that he can go – away, to a foreign land. (His sister is the financial manager at a local construction company. She lives in a studio apartment – one bedroom, living room, kitchen – in Arcadia, a neighbourhood of apartment complexes near the business district. As the oldest, she's learned to be patient with her two younger siblings, especially since they don't seem to have a clue about what to do with their adult lives. It's the second time in three months she's had to offer her spare mattress, bedding and space on her living room floor to one of them.)

Standing back from the whole situation, Jacob can see it for what it is: him waiting for something bigger in life, something that may just provide him, too, with a place in the sun. He also knows the current situation is simply the next chapter in his story, a continuation of a phase in his life that began the day he wrote his last paper at university. The time had come for him to decide what direction his life will take, since his varsity girlfriend, Jane, convinced him to postpone his ideal of becoming a hermit – to let his hair and beard grow, and to only now and then open the curtains to see what season it is. (Of course, even hermits need an income these days.)

A few months before graduation he had decided to shift the inevitable lifelong struggle for money, house and children into the background – until further consideration. He would first go travelling for a few months. He knew that would not necessarily give him a place in the sun, but as he explained to someone over a beer one evening, the landscape of a foreign country would hopefully give him a shot of courage for mainstream life and perhaps some inspiration.

So, he would go to Europe, work a few months somewhere, travel to a few countries, and then on a bright spring afternoon return to surprise his younger sister in

Stellenbosch. He would await her at Bakoven on her way back from school. Then he would spend the afternoon telling her of all the things he had seen, and all the fascinating people he had met. She would listen like one whose world would widen with every word, right in front of her eyes.

He would come back with shoulder-length hair and a beard, and people wouldn't even recognize him. He would be a pilgrim who had suddenly returned home.

Five weeks after he had left for Europe – not long enough to make much of a difference to the hair or the beard, he was back. To the few people who asked, somewhat bewildered, “Already?” he replied with the same illusion with which he tried to overcome his own disappointment: He only returned to “get his things in order.” He was planning to leave again “within the next month or three.”

Months of hardship and increasingly fading hope followed.

When people asked him why he was still in Stellenbosch, he replied with another half-truth: He had decided to help his sister through her final high school year since their parents were by now living in a different part of the country.

By Christmas, he was broke. His sister had already left for KwaZulu-Natal. He stayed behind in the municipal flat with months of unpaid electricity bills, and rent that was steadily heading in the same direction. To stay alive, he sold the furniture, until he was left with only a few blankets and pillows, and a borrowed black-and-white TV set. The power – as he had expected – was cut off early in January. He spent the evenings in darkness on his bedding on the otherwise empty living room floor.

“My life has started to stagnate,” he thought to himself more than one night. That he had to come up with a plan to get out of the mess he was in, was clearly not in doubt.

A month after Christmas he packed up his personal belongings, stored a few boxes with a friend, and offered for sale in the local newspaper his 1967 Wolseley that had been

accumulating leaves and bird droppings for almost a year. A few days after he had sold the car, he took the train north. This year would be different, he told himself. He was ready; indeed, he was hungry for new things.

Not long after arriving in Pongola, in Kwazulu-Natal, he got a call from a South African teacher living and working in Seoul, South Korea. He immediately recalled the day in December when he saw the advertisement for English teachers in the *Cape Times* (“Teach in Korea,” the headline said, with a name and a number). He also remembered how enthusiastically he rushed back to the apartment to respond to the ad. The person asked him if he were still interested. “It will take about five weeks to finalize all the arrangements,” the voice promised. Jacob was assured he was first on the list of new teachers.

His place in the sun, the answer to all his problems, had finally arrived!

Five weeks are now fast becoming three months. In the meantime, he waits, mostly on the couch in his sister’s apartment. He sleeps on the living room floor, smokes the cheapest cigarettes on the market, drinks coffee and eats sandwiches. He reads about fashion and relationships in his sister’s magazines, tries to follow what’s happening in the world on a TV that shows more lines and dots than anything else, and walks to the OK Bazaars every morning – for exercise, but also because sometimes it’s better to go anywhere than to go nowhere.

Jacob has come a long way since graduating from university. Perhaps, he believes, it would do him good to go for a walk through the familiar landscape of the town of his birth ...

Okay, so it’s not a masterpiece ... and it’s not entirely fictitious. Maybe I should go and have coffee somewhere to create the illusion that I am not spending the entire day in my sister’s living room.

(Thursday, 18 April 1996)

NOTE:

THIS DOCUMENT CONTAINS TEXT FROM
**“THIRTEEN MINUTES – NOTES, HALF-TRUTHS
AND A FEW INCIDENTS”**
BY BRAND SMIT.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT
ASSORTEDNOTES.COM

YOU ARE WELCOME TO DISTRIBUTE COPIES OF
THIS ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT AS LONG AS THE
CONTENT REMAINS UNCHANGED.

© 2015 BAREND J. L. SMIT