

## **My Father and the Cars**

### **Car 1.**

**Car 1's a photo,  
black and white. 1955.  
My mother and my father  
in winter coats  
and the Peugeot.  
My mother's very Greta Garbo.  
I'm frowning at the sun.  
“Don't be a Kellas”  
she tells me.  
The little girl  
with the little curl  
right in the middle of her forehead.  
I'm very very good  
so I can't be horrid.  
“Don't frown.”  
“The wind might change.”  
“Shoulders back.”  
“You look like Auntie Tantje when you frown.”**

### **Car 2.**

**My father's green car.**

**Car 3.**

**My father's beige car.**

**Car 4.**

**Car 5.**

**Lots of cars.**

**Something to do with being a salesman,  
getting a new car every year.**

**And replacements when they crash.**

***Death of a Salesman.***

**But that's later.**

**For now it's time to play:**

**I stamp and stamp and stamp pink paper in my father's office  
sideways on the page:**

**URGENTLY REQUIRED FOR IMMEDIATE MINE USE.**

**Car 6.**

**Car after car my father sails  
across the cosmos-lined  
highways of the Highveld.**

**And the “platteland” –  
the flat lands of the veld –  
selling for Scaw Metals –  
makers of steel and vanadium,  
train bogies,  
mine equipment,  
things that will not rhyme.**

**Across the land the power stations  
grow cooling towers  
billowing out their clouds of smoke  
over the sheer gold veld  
from one end of the Reef  
to the other. The Rand. Witwatersrand.  
White Waters Ridge.  
My father rides the highways  
every day, for miles.**

**URGENTLY REQUIRED FOR IMMEDIATE MINE USE.**

**Car 7.**

**Mrs Chandler's bubble car's  
a Messerschmitt  
little bigger  
than a Singer sewing machine.  
It's blue, shaped like a shoe  
with an umbrella roof.  
If I were one of her seven children  
I'd be her standard-bearer  
shielding Mrs Chandler's head from sun or rain.**

***You're my Punkhawallah, my mother smiles***  
**as I fan her on hot days,**  
**bedridden in her pink haze.**  
**And yes, I am her willing little slave.**  
**She pays me a wage to tickle her feet.**

**Or go to the opera.**  
**But that comes later.**

**Car 8.**

**Kenau Carter drives a giant snail**  
**grey, round-shouldered, slow.**  
**She calls it Mary Jane**  
**because all cars are female, you know.**  
**She lives alone and very carefully**  
**with library books and Lexington**  
**and a malevolent black cat.**  
**“War widow”. Wears her hair in a halo**  
**round her smiling face;**  
**holds her breath so long.**  
**Exhales.**  
**Gives me *The silver curlew*.**  
**Dies alone.**  
**I learn the word “Angina”.**

## **Car 9.**

**I grow up in the back seat like an only child,  
My brother's nine years older, elsewhere,  
and it's miles and miles to visit Granny.**

**If my grandfather were an elephant  
my granny'd be the fly. I never hear her speak.  
Their little Morris never comes our way.**

**My Caledonian grandfather's a stern Scotsman  
in a kilt – they're stranded Highlanders  
in another land's high country,  
in an African town called Springs –  
Nadine Gordimer's home town.**

*Thistle Cottage* on their door.

**They too keep turkeys in their yard,  
tend roses in the front.**

**Jock never speaks to girls: tells my brother all the stories  
of the Foster Gang he'd captured  
in the caves near Crown Mines.**

**My granny knits fair-isle waistcoats for my father,  
and her apron smells of scones. Her shortbread's known for miles.**

**She shows me how to balance orange flowers  
in a China saucer, and teaches me “nas-tur-tium”.**

**It's a silent journey**

**home again**

**through all the back roads of the East Rand:**

**Benoni. Boksburg. Brakpan.**

**“Poor Jimmy,” my granny’d said,  
when she first met my father's bride-to-be.  
“Poor Jimmy's marrying a mad-woman.”  
“Don't be like the Kellas clan,” my mother hisses,  
bites her lip.  
“Remember your family tree.”  
“And don't be fey,” my mother tells me.  
The doll my granny's given me languishes, neglected.  
But I remember exactly where I stood,  
on her granolithic pathway  
in my tartan skirt  
when she gave it to me.  
And how she'd loved me.**

## **Car 10.**

**It's 8 hours to the seaside  
from the Highveld to Natal.  
Through farming towns,  
the Drakensburg,  
the mountain passes,  
leading down to plains of green and sugar cane.**

**8 hours to the seaside  
– but 6 hours if you're my dad.**

**His record:  
never overtaken once.**

## **Car 11.**

**These holidays we're heading east.  
Hill country. To the Bushveld.  
Lion country.**

*The Lion in Winter.*  
**But that comes later.**

**Right now I want the car to stop  
so I can fill my arms with cosmos  
growing wild along the highways  
and fill the cooling tower vases  
with their giant stems.**

**But my father never stops.  
Past Barberton  
we're in the mountains, near waterfalls,  
the Blyde River Canyon.**

**At last: Sabie, near White River,  
a little village where my mother'd lived  
outside the Kruger National Park.**

**Uncle Len owns everything in Sabie.  
Hotel, bottle store, the corner shop.  
All weekend my father's champing at the bit  
to drive us home.**

**Auntie Tantje's coming with us  
and her baggage will not fit.  
She wants to bring the turkey.  
My father says *Just tie it to the bumper  
and let it run behind us.***

**A joke to all but me.**

**Turkey fear.**

**Something to do with Christmas.**

**Things aren't explained to children.**

**It's lucky he has whisky**

**to fire up the engine**

**when it falters on the mountain pass.**

**I quickly check for turkeys**

**pulling up behind us.**

**Car 12.**

*Built for a country like ours,*

**an Australian car for the African outback,**

**my dad's new Holden's strong as iron.**

**Just as well, as he crashes it into a train.**

**He concertinas the bonnet**

**to the steering-wheel**

**and comes home dazed.**

**He says the train stopped.**

**His knee's not quite the same.**

**Car 13.**

**It's Easter.**

**Another trip to Sabie.**

**This time we drive by night.**



***Jimmy!* screams my mother  
as we skitter in slow motion  
down the mountain pass.  
*Sorry Floss, Sorry, Floss!* he shouts.  
Then silence as we climb out into night,  
shivering, the headlights pointing into dark  
beyond the cliff edge, into sky.  
The rear wheels hang on tight.**

**I have no memories  
of how we found our way  
to a tiny mountain town motel  
or how we spent time waiting  
for my brother to drive down  
to rescue us  
in Mr Prophet's Citroën  
or Mrs Prophet's Riley.**

#### **Car 14.**

**In Mrs Prophet's Alpha Sprint  
we're heading for the ballet.  
My mother's made a deal: for every crash  
my father gives her cash to go and buy herself a record.  
*Recordia*, a shop in Eloff Street  
is very grand. And gets to know us well,  
sells us *Don Pasquale, Rigoletto*.  
I learn the story of *Il Trovatore*  
and the yellow label saying *Deutsche Grammophon*.**

**I grow up with *Callas*. *Jussi Björling*.**

**and so begins a love of opera  
shared with Mary Prophet.**

**Our journeys to the ballet and the opera  
always end with watching how the Civic Theatre car park  
empties all its cars out to the wealthy north.**

**Only ours turns south,  
towards the mine dumps of the satellite towns  
around Johannesburg  
full of migrant Scots and English folk.**

### **Car 15.**

**Mrs Bell's car's strangely fitting for a lady  
with such thin legs  
and so much pain  
and so much sorrow in her gentle face.**

**It gets her from her mansion at Glebe House  
with its giant oaks and tennis court  
down her driveway, down the road  
to our place.**

***Don't let her in.***

**My mother's in her room  
with the curtains drawn.  
Brown satin curtains  
and her soft pink lamp  
despite the day outside.  
Books piled up around her.**

Mrs Bell and Mrs Bysshe – yes, she says, related –  
(and Mrs Johnston, who talks of how she washes smalls)  
are all in grief. Post-war. All trying hard  
not to die of boredom in our mining town.  
My mother has them round for tea and chocolate cake.  
It's the Punkhawallah's job to bake.  
But not today.  
I turn the gentle Mrs Bell away.

### Car 16.

Weekend drives to Randfontein  
are petrifying, with shortcuts through the mines,  
and what used to be Sophiatown  
before the bulldozers came and smashed it down.  
Near Soweto, we skirt new townships filled with smog.  
Sharpeville's in the headlines.  
The roads seem dangerously full.  
Dangerously full because my father's driving fast.  
My mother winces at every turn.  
A man looms up on the pavement at my window:  
pedestrians on their weekend off,  
all in their Sunday best  
up close.  
I'm in the back seat, sliding,  
bargaining with God:  
*If we see an ambulance, it means we'll die.*  
We see an ambulance. We don't die.  
It must be because I saw a cat.  
*If I see three cats, we'll be OK.*

**I scan the landscape scudding by.**

**No cats.**

**Just painted crosses on the roadside.**

**X marks the spot. I start to count the crosses.**

**It's a two-hour drive to Randfontein  
and already**

**I'm up to 20 crosses.**

**Perhaps I'll count red lights instead.**

**That's two red lights.**

***If we go through three red lights we're dead?***

**OK ... I'll count the yellow ones.**

**21 crosses. 22 crosses...**

***"That one's turning yellow!"* screams my mother.**

**My father puts his foot down.**

***"That light was red!"* She's almost crying.**

**24 crosses. 25 crosses.**

**Car 17.**

**I'm 10, my brother's 20 when my mother gets a Noddy car.**

**It's something French.**

**A Renault R8.**

**She's learning how to drive.**

**To drive dangerously by mistake.**

**Foot down on the petrol instead of the brake,**

**we rear like a wild horse up one pavement**

**then another**

each green poplar tree wide-angled  
at the narrow miss.

It's all my brother's fault somehow.  
He's teaching her to drive  
so she won't learn dad's bad habits.

My mother gets her licence.  
She's allowed to drive the Noddy Car,  
to visit Kenau Carter.  
I'm scared: she's driving there alone.

*It's only up the road...*

I climb the tallest tree  
so I can see her progress:  
past the Germans,  
down Rhodes Avenue,  
out of view  
near where the Hugos live,  
across the road from Kenau Carter's flat.

**Car 18.**

I'm 16 when my father gets a giant Chevrolet  
complete with fish tails.  
It's ice-cream pink, cream on top,  
with seats wide enough for a cinema of people.  
We can float!  
We can glide!  
I'm wearing a pink silk dress at a teenage party  
when my dad rocks up to fetch me,  
Cinderella at midnight,

**in a Chevrolet.**

***My God*, says Nigel,  
whose chestnut eyes,  
though they never meet mine,  
wrench my heart. Nigel,  
whose mother drives a Wolseley.  
Whose father drives a Jag.  
(Works for the mines, a Hugo boy says.)**

***My God! Whose car is THAT?***

**Car 19, 20.**

**When I learn to drive  
in my mother's Simca  
a fear grips me.  
Mostly I catch trains,  
and walk to university  
through the city traffic.  
Wits, the scene of protests in the 60s  
is tame now.  
And so's my father.  
Desk-bound, my father makes odd sallies to the Indian quarter  
where he buys his suits. Enjoys the colour.  
Drives me to town, drives me to friends  
in what are now quite smart,  
but second-hand cars.  
Drives quietly now.  
Drives us to the library in Johannesburg,  
waits for us in the car,**

**listening to Billy Graham.**

**Carries our books for us:**

*Equus.*

**The Sun King.**

**Car 21.**

**VW. Blue. New. 1975.**

*It's yours! My dad*

**gives me the keys.**

**Cape Town**

**is a journey**

**of a thousand miles.**

**CODA**

**Years later**

**when I'm married – to one of the Hugo boys –**

**my father picks me up from work one day.**

*You must know where your brother lives.*

**Somehow we've fallen out with him**

**but my father's stayed in touch.**

**He drives me south, ambling, floating on the highway**

**past Speedy's Drive-In on the Airport Road,**

**heading south beyond Scaw Metals,**

**through the hills of houses growing in the veld.**

*See? Here.*

**I make a note. 34 Kuhn Road.**

**He drives me home again.**

**That night**

**a bat**

**flies through our open window**

**and lies there dead on the mat.**

**At dawn: the phone ...**

**but I already know, before I hear my mother's voice.**

*Your father ...*

*Intensive care unit.*

**My brother has no phone.**

**Which way to go?**

*Intensive care unit.*

**The hospital or home?**

*Intensive care unit.*

**The car decides.**

**URGENTLY REQUIRED**

**FOR IMMEDIATE MINE USE.**

**Screaming across the city highways**

**heading south, I know the way**

**to my brother's door.**

**Anne Kellas**