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## Luvandwar

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## **Abstract**

Our reporter at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings in the Western Cape today has confirmed the TRC's continued intention to thoroughly investigate the claims of all applicants for blanket amnesty in the wake of widespread protests following the TRC's latest findings. Closer to home, fires continue to rage out of control in the Boland, where the highest temperatures in fifty years have been measured. A fire warning has been issued to people living in the Helderberg area and many electrical services have been rendered useless by massive blackouts in the Cape Town metropole. A spokesperson of the principal electrical supplier explained that burning ashes on the main cables are thought to have played a role. Linda Botha is on the spot bringing

ROSE RICHARDS

## Luvandwar

*Our reporter at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings in the Western Cape today has confirmed the TRC's continued intention to thoroughly investigate the claims of all applicants for blanket amnesty in the wake of widespread protests following the TRC's latest findings. Closer to home, fires continue to rage out of control in the Boland, where the highest temperatures in fifty years have been measured. A fire warning has been issued to people living in the Helderberg area and many electrical services have been rendered useless by massive blackouts in the Cape Town metropole. A spokesperson of the principal electrical supplier explained that burning ashes on the main cables are thought to have played a role. Linda Botha is on the spot bringing you an eyewitness report....*

Above and below the crackling battery-radio signal, the evening is January hot, the ashy residue of a scorching day in which I have stayed in my shoes, in my clothes, in my office, in my smile. The sky has burnt itself out through cobalt, through hyacinth and jacaranda to lilac and bleached hibiscus. I am sitting barefoot on my stoep in Macassar Street now, drinking lukewarm tea and listening as night pads into the Cape of Good Hope, chasing out the cicadas and the non-indigenous colours of the day.

Drinking tea as I am, alone, instead of taking it as you do in public, still requires the ceremony of kettle and pot, cup and saucer, sugar and milk the way I used to make it for my mother. Luckily I managed to set up the ceremony before the mains tripped out once and for all. As I reach again for the plastic milk carton, I consider that I might have been the reason the house's mains shorted. After all, I was at the computer when it happened. I started with small energy surges, shortly after my mother died, making static on the radio and gradually moving up to snowstorms on TV and computer screens hanging whenever I tried to draw up the Liquidation and Distribution Account for her Estate. And, most recently, since my father started phoning me from the States, my light bulbs have been popping, especially the hall light above the telephone where he catches me unawares.

*And now for a word from our sponsors....*

Africa hums with electricity and commerce, brighter than television, crackling with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, satellite news and biodegradable plastic shopping bags. It has recently discovered capitalism, the middle classes and luvandwar. But things look different in the light of the fire. Daylight is a thin

and glossy coat, like jolly tabby stripes unwisely applied to the back of a sleeping lion. A coat so easily taken off. Speaking for myself, my daytime life is a semi-lucid dream compared with my boiling night-sea aflame with the summer evening of my mother's death.

*Tune in later this evening with me, Mike Collins and radio K9, for our documentary on tribal rituals in Mpumalanga. There will be an in-depth report on the success of the Witchcraft Commission in that province and this will be followed by a discussion on the use of ash in initiation rites.*

There are ashes in everything. I was initiated into adulthood with my mother's ashes. They sit in front of me in a brown cardboard box, between the milk and the ant-proof sugar bottle. I am going to take them with me tonight. The fire roars on the mountain behind my house. No one knows how it's got into the Nature Reserve. It may as well have leapt out of the ground. That acrid bitterness in the air is fynbos burning — the fall of the sixth floral kingdom.

*We will continue to keep Capetonians posted about the fires in their region. At present the major threat is posed by smoke inhalation, especially for asthma sufferers. Any asthma sufferers should be aware that the emergency units at all major hospitals are on standby, but please don't wait until your condition is out of control before taking action. Now, back to the music....*

The sun spreads into burnt treacle. Birds become bats that swoop and chirp on naked wings. I look towards Orion and the Southern Cross — but I cannot see them through the haze. The streets are silent now that the cicadas have gone. I pour more tea into my willow pattern cup while my mother's reflection glints from the teapot, haranguing me for not changing the light bulb at the front door while it was still day. 'Now you'll have to come home alone in the dark,' she says. The electricity is off, I remind her. Burning ashes on the cables, the radio says. Could be off for hours. It is real night — solid darkness except for the ruddy glow over Franschoek across the mountains.

*Please be careful if you start a fire and be particularly sure that your cigarette butts are out before you throw them into any brush. Remember — when it comes to fire, prevention is better than cure....*

I light a candle. For days, helicopters have been flying with drums of water clutched under their bellies to dump on the flames. But now that their whine is gone, along with the cicadas, we can hear the fire growl and rumble and snap its jaws. For five days, we've beaten it back, for five nights it's savaged the fynbos and torn at the trees. Our town lies below, dark and silent. The fire tosses its mane in the smoky air and roars. It's still hungry and the lights are still out. The sixth floral kingdom is almost gone and now the rocks must stand alone. The radio sings about sex and luv. I scowl it into static.

In the absence of electricity, the darkness bleeds out of everything — the houses and roads and people. Especially the people. Their hopeful windows are swallowed up in night. The radio squeaks defiantly and pops something about a big bush fire out of control near Franschhoek before the signal is lost in an electrical blizzard. Something is burning nearby with inhuman hunger. Something big.

Ssssss....

Last year, on a smoky night like this, time ended, and began and luvandwar melted in the furnace of my heart. That was the year the fire ate my Mother. She collapsed in the garden on a luring evening. She couldn't breathe and then her heart burst. She was quickly taken by luvving hands to a crematorium on the outskirts of dusty Industria in a pauper's coffin and cranked into the furnace under a purple cloth, then given back to me in this shoebox. Nothing but ashes. No one speaks of her now. She never did fitin and her death was the final gaffe.

I was there that evening in the garden when my mother fell, but I was not strong enough to catch her. Her body slipped through my arms like a fish and fell to the ground, while her soul flew off like a bird. And I was left alone in between to explain to the ambulance men, to the doctors, to the police. The doctor 'was not prepared' to sign a death certificate. He had not witnessed her death. It had not been according to form. I thought of having to look for her missing spirit in the dark and how it would elude me as I tried to catch it and bring it to show him that it really had got out. Even if I managed, how would he force her quicksilver back into her body and make it stay there? She had wanted to fly away above the oncoming fire and water for a very long time, ever since losing at luvandwar.

But she came back to see if I was all right and I caught her by the tail. So now our house is a home again. I trapped my mother's face in the gleam of the teacups and her hair in the musk of the dried hydrangeas in the front room. I keep her sighs in the chimney. I smell her tomato stew on the stove. I made some for supper, before remembering I was eating out.

'Let me go,' she begs in the chimney, but I've made sure I've tied her down properly this time.

She may be ready, but I am not.

After her death my father started to call. He had disappeared to America with his new wife who luvved us as if we were her own. She is a very luvving woman who does her best to make up for all the luv he didn't get from my mother. Seems things are different in America. The electricity is on always and there are no ashes in the air. People don't get eaten by lions. Not only did my father call, but my stepmother also wrote to tell me how she understood my loss. Her parents (still alive) sent their luv too. Now my father's back in Cape Town on a conference and has decreed that I am to make time for him one night. Tonight. Ashes whirl down on me.

'Go and see your father,' my mother cajoles, 'didn't I tell you he'd warm to you after I died? You must have a relationship with him — he's all you have left.'

The bricks are hot beneath my feet. On the mountain leaves scream and rocks burst.

So I steel myself for the Reconciliation gulag and for the smooth, foreign language of *luvandwar*. I shall have to fight the snow-sickness while my stepmother explains that my father worked his finger to the bone and that my mother and I got our just desserts. That I would have got more money and a start in life if only I had been more *luvving*. My father and stepmother are always careful to show that all's fair and not to dwell on the war. You take the child; we'll take the business. You take the bread; we'll take the wine. We'll take the *luv*; you take the war. Who shall get the Truth, who shall get the Reconciliation? As I'm waiting for their decision, after the dry hugs are doled out and the cold table napkins fall onto numb laps, I shall feel my extremities growing heavier and duller. The coldness shall creep up my limbs through my blood vessels until it leaks into my heart. Then I shall go to sleep forever.

My mother would not fit in or be part. She did not play the game. She did not believe in *luvandwar*. Especially not in *luv*. But other people did. She would not have short, curled hair and prominent eye shadow. But other people did. She would not buy timeshare or remarry or make small talk or work from nine to five. So she lost out in *luvandwar*. How could she win against a native speaker who had Neat Handwriting and put circles above her I's, like little haloes on toothpicks, who laughed a successful-woman laugh — hoo hoo hoo — like the clucking of fowls and painted her eyebrows onto her doll-smooth face? My mother's reflection in the mirror is still trapped in misery — her soft face sagging, her legs unshapely, wearing her age like a disgrace beneath her men's shirts.

'I don't want to get old,' she said once while watching a programme about Alzheimer's on TV.

She died at fifty nine.

'But I'm still here,' she says wearily, 'long past my expiry date'. And her ghostly laugh sounds like the wind snagged in a tree.

— *Where is the country going, I ask? What is to become of the youth of today?*

— *Yes, thank you, Myrna from Paarl. Next up is Jodie from Stellenbosch and hallo Jodie....*

Last year, someone with a shotgun shot all the road signs between Cape Town and Grabouw. The 'C' of Cape Town was blown away and now we go to 'APE TOWN'. The darkness is thickening. The air is muggy. On the radio, fire warnings and progress reports remind us that the lion is stealing up on the farms and wine lands. Domestic animals cower before his hot breath that reeks of savage captivity too long unfed. He won't play by the rules. He doesn't believe in *fairsfair*. He has no respect for *luvandwar*.

Dinner at the Entrecôte with my father. Just like old times. Prawns, steak, imported wine. He will shovel his hardearnedrewards into his frog-lipped mouth with his cold smooth surgeon's hands. Eat, eat, he will say, have a dessert. Yourfather, my stepmother will say, dissecting her roll with long red talons, has worked hisfingerstothebone. I shall try not to hear the echo of her thoughts about my mother. I shall be escorted, wide-eyed, to the buffet table mountain of verdant salad forests and bready outcrops and instructed to dig in. I shan't be able to choose — at home I am unused to such variety. I shall want to make the best of all the food, but will be overwhelmed by it and forced to remember, when they tell me how little I deserve their generosity, how my father fell in sex with my stepmother, how she fell in mealticket with him, how they both called this new state of affairs luv and how much of our lives they were prepared to sacrifice for their freedom. Crisp napkins and tablecloths will froth around us. Sleek glossy waiters will glide in shoals; soft music will wash over us while the food comes wave on wave and I will feel myself dwindling beneath the plenty.

*Do you think, professor, that the high incidence of zombies in Mpumalanga has any relation to so-called witches or is it a crisis reaction caused by ideas imported from the West meeting ancient African customs?*

Luvandwar will fall in perfect snowflakes and cover everything. I will come full of thistles and burrs to the feast, as a fierce, feral child full of rage and hunger and leave empty, unable to eat, because of what I will have to swallow with the prawns and steak and crème brûlée. Luvandwar will snuff my fire and my angry tongue will die dumb in my ashy mouth. I may not have the strength to drag myself out of the snowy depths before I die snow-blind and hypothermic. I am tired of luvandwar and of my stepmother who has hair of spungold and a perfect manicure. I am tired in my bones.

*A quick reminder to our listeners not to travel anywhere tonight if you do not have to — visibility is poor. Several people have already been reported missing in the Helderberg area. If you know their whereabouts, please call your nearest police station. They are as follows....*

I wonder what will happen if they can't control the fire, where it will go if it isn't stifled. It may leap over the mountains and the TRC, across the dusty grainlands of Mpumalanga, freeing up the witches and bringing the zombies back to life, then on to our arid neighbours, and eat and eat its way north, snarling and devouring ancient Egypt, Turkey, Greece, growing bigger and fiercer and hungrier the more of luvandwar that it sees. I see it making a meal of Europe, then poisoning itself to spring across the sea and gobble up rare rednailed stepmothers and lesser-spotted fathers.

*Yes, folks, this is the hottest summer in fifty years....*

Snug with their Entrecôte reservation in APE TOWN, while the world is burning down, my father and his wife order dinner. Perhaps they have already started to eat. I was expected an hour ago and yet I cannot stir. Instead, I pour another cup of tepid tea to ease the rasping in my throat. Bringing the cardboard box was my only weapon against luvandwar. I wanted it at the table. I wanted to see their faces, when I revealed its gritty contents. Something deep inside me growls at the thought of steak then stops. What if my father and stepmother think I'm asking for their help in scattering the ashes? The light has turned grey and yellow. Big, black cinders whirl around me. The major roads leading to the city are declared hazardous and the minor ones are impossible. Well, I guess that's that, as far as APE TOWN goes. I haven't had my driving license a year yet. I'll tell them I wouldn't feel safe driving into a disaster. The radio remarks that the phone lines are dead now too.

In the blackness of the burning night, the mountains behind me are rimmed with rage in the smoke and the moon rises red, looming through a caul that would have hidden the sun, until it hangs before me, gory and unnatural. Cat-face and lion's blood. What is wrong with the night? The radio said nothing about this. This is definitely not my doing. Ashes whirl down on me like swarming killer bees. My head hums with electric pain. I can hardly breathe. I hear a panting sound all around me. Dry, dry, dry. A lion's rasp in a lion's throat in a land where all the lights have gone out. Unclimatic thunder grumbles over Grabouw and hangs sullen over Gordon's Bay. Foxfire flits along the Strand beach in the ruddy light like jackals before a lion. The land around me holds its breath. Hot foetid air roars towards APE TOWN. This is what Hell is —waking up.

Aeons roll round and, when they stop, I am older —much older. I feel my mother speeding away, faster and faster, glowing, blazing, expanding with ecstatic light too fervid for luvving eyes. There's life in the old girl yet. I feel it all around me in the air, in the fire, in the agonised earth. I see angels where I used to see spaces, but not wearing curls and frilly nightdresses. My angels' lion faces are ringed with fire and their wings are ardent flame. Their pugmarks are around my heart. They soar incandescent in the face of luvandwar and the word that roars out of their furnace hearts is not 'reconciliation'. It is resurrection. Lightning claws the sky open. The hidden stars fall down as icy meteors of rain. The lights go on in Macassar Street. And I am as cold and wet as the newborn day.

The sun is rising on the morning after the purging of my heart. Sacred ibises will fly above the arum lily vlei. The Helderberg's scars will be greened with ashes and syringa blossoms will fall like stars. The radio tells me I am a Missing Person too. I switch it off. I want to hear the guinea fowl chuckle and the rain fall. I shake the cardboard box out on the stoep and watch the ashes melt into the rain.