



The Big Hole

By Michael O'Brien

When the senior school boys went to look at The Big Hole, Rob Davies leaned against the railing on the viewing platform and looked around casually as though standing at the edge of an immense precipice made him feel really comfortable. Dave went to stand next to him, one hand on the rail, and one in his trouser pocket. There they stood, Rob and Dave, the ones who dared. The guide rattled off the history of the hole. How it had started out as a small hill, the Colesberg Kopje. When diamonds were found, the hill had been transformed by human labour into the biggest hole ever dug into the earth. Nowadays, the mine was no longer in use and was water-filled up to about a hundred meters. That left another hundred and fifty meters up to the top, where the viewing platform was.

The circumference of the hole at the top was well over two kilometres. The first seventy meters down was a steep, funnel-shaped gradient dotted with small bushes and shrubs. Then came the sheer drop down to the grey-green water. Rob asked the guide if anybody had fallen into the hole. Yes, over the years there had been a few accidents. Once, a schoolboy had climbed over the fence to show off to his mates, lost his footing and slid down all the way into the hole. A search team with diving equipment was sent down, but his body was never recovered. The guide assured the visitors that once you're on that slope, nothing can stop you. You are going down. Dave felt that assurance was addressed to him personally. His tummy swirled and his legs wanted to move him from the fence. But he held on tight and went nowhere. Rob turned to him and said, "There are at least a hundred bodies down there." Even in school uniform, Rob was in control. And Dave, two years his junior was right there, next to him. They had a secret together. They had plans. There was going to be a deed.

Alone in his dad's study, Dave looked at his reflection in the window. He cupped his tummy in his hands and shoved it inwards, behind the belt-line. It had felt good to stand there beside Rob on the viewing platform, defying death and defying fear. Rob had spoken to him as an equal. Dave sank down in the Chesterfield, its cool leather gradually accepting his warmth and giving it back to him. At eleven o'clock, there would be no turning back.

In the biggest shelves along the bottom of the bookcase, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *The Encyclopaedia Americana* formed two arms of a mighty brown and blue leather anchor. The areas of

shelf closest to the desk were filled with jurisprudence reference books with long titles. Dave angled his head to read: *The Principles of South African Statutory Law: Criminal and Civil with an appendix on Common Law by Prof. J. B. Mulder*. On the same shelves, compendia of real crime cases: gruesome murders, innocent people wrongfully executed, unsolved mysteries. You could ask Dave about Daisy de Melker, the poisoner, or Duncan Moodie, twice convicted wife-killer, or Marlene van Rensberg, the scissors murderer. He could tell you not only what had happened, who had done what and when, but also where the murderers had slipped up and made mistakes. If Moodie hadn't concocted the story about his mother; if van Rensberg hadn't tried to borrow a gun on two occasions . . .

A warm yellow section of the bookcase housed the *National Geographic*s. Dave could spend hours flipping through *National Geographic*s. Wild natives deep in the jungles of Papua New Guinea, with bones through their noses and no clothes, just little rags or bits of grass. He opened an issue with a centre page spread of lions ripping at a zebra. The photo series started several pages earlier, with the zebra head up and alert, sensing danger, and then the chase, and the pounce, and finally the same zebra's head, a dead mask of meat and bone.

He was mesmerized by the second to last picture. The zebra had been brought down; it could not escape death. The body was twisted, one of the hind legs pointing upwards, reaching, maybe kicking, the other one digging into the soil. The back legs would like to have run off on their own, like half of a vaudeville horse-suit, leaving the guy in front to his fate. Dave looked at the zebra's face at its final moment.

He flipped through the manila folders on his dad's desk. "GTM" was written across a folder near the bottom of the pile. He opened the folder and scanned the contents. He'd heard his dad talking about the Garden Tool Murder. Two youngsters had killed, or rather butchered, an elderly man using a fork and a spade. They had been told by a crooked diamond dealer that the old man had stolen diamonds and swallowed them. A photograph slid out from between two pages. It showed a lump of something on the ground. A pile of old rubbish, with a couple of white cardboard arrows positioned on wire stands. A pair of misshapen shoes. All symmetry gone, amidst rotten clothing, a distended piece of face, a ragged knot of hair. Dave slid the picture away and stood up straight. He glanced at the door, then he sat down again and took out the photograph. In here, in this room, Dave was master of his fear. He looked at the old man, mutilated beyond anything human or animal. *People get chopped up. Why should I be scared of a bunch of Dutchmen?*

Dave had worn his new white jeans to the Friday night disco. He had danced a few times, in an abstract sort of way, maybe I'm dancing with you, and maybe I'm dancing on my own. During a break between songs, a boy in short trousers – obviously a Dutchman – came up to him and said, "My friend wants to talk to you."

"Why, what's up?"

"I think you'll find out."

The friend himself wasn't in short trousers, but was plainly a Dutchman. The signs were unmistakable: a short crisp haircut, tanned skin, a tough wiry body, and an old-fashioned dress sense. Dave felt his own soft English legs encased in glowing fluorescent white. The Dutchman was taller than Dave and had sideburns. He was at least a couple of years older.

“Why have you been threatening my friend?”

“What? I haven’t done anything.”

“Are you telling me my friend is a liar?”

The friend had several other friends that were standing around in a circle, looking at the Englishman in white jeans who had threatened their friend.

“Why are you doing this? I haven’t said anything.”

The music started up again and another friend took Dave by the arm and led him aside.

“I think it would be a good idea for you to leave now. I think my friend is maybe going to fuck you up if you hang around. I’m just helping you.”

As Dave was leaving, the friend who was just helping him said: “You’ve got quite a fat arse, hey. Maybe you should eat less.”

On Monday during break, Dave had gone straight up to Rob Davies and said that he wanted to go with him on his next deed. Rob took a long time to react. He looked down at his shoes. Lifted one foot up onto a bench, untied the laces and tied them tighter. Then he started walking and indicated with a jerk of the head that Dave should follow. They walked out into the middle of the sports field and stood at one end of the cricket pitch.

“Meet me in the alley behind the scoreboard. Wednesday night, eleven o’clock.”

“What must I bring?”

“Just your bike. I’ve got the things.”

The Dutchman with sideburns is on the wrong side of the safety fence. He grabs at shrubs that come loose in his hands. He slides down the funnel of sand and stone, digging and clawing, trying to get a purchase. The whimpering noises and the open-throated cries grow fainter. The scenario could be played out a hundred times and Dave never tired of it. Sometimes the one in short trousers was there, scrabbling like a frightened goat, eyes bulging, begging for mercy. Sometimes Dave lobbed a stone at the Dutchman on his way down to grey-green death. There in the deep, all the Dutchmen would sink into slime, together with rusty metal junk, stray animals and a hundred other human bodies. Dave was imagining sinking down through the grey-green, towards the unutterable sludge at the bottom, struggling up but sinking down.

“OK, Dave, off to bed, hey.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.”

What you up to?”

“Oh, no. Nothing.”

“Are you up to scratch with your homework?”

“Ja.”

At ten to eleven, the house was in darkness. Dave wheeled his bicycle the first block then he hopped on. *It's not too late to back out.* He could say to Rob that his dad had nabbed him when he was sneaking out. As he approached du Toit's pan Road, he slowed down and stopped. There was no way to pass from dark to dark except through the channel of light running all the way from the city centre down to Beaconsfield. In the light he was naked. The pedals pumped fiercely in a standing-up, teeth-clenching surge that took him two blocks down du Toit's pan Road and into Milner Street, into the shadows that clothed him again, and he stopped to catch his breath. A sweet, dank smell came from the bush hanging over the fence at number three. He could have been at home, tucked in cosily. *My dad caught me. He made me promise.* Around the next corner, in the alley behind the cricket field waited Rob Davies doer of deeds, destroyer of Dutchmen. *This will be over. There will be another "now" when this is over.*

Rob's bike had narrow tyres and drop handle-bars. He didn't speed off, leaving Dave to struggle after, which he could easily have done. Rob pedalled rhythmically, just a few yards ahead. He looked back at Dave.

“Is this your first deed?”

“Yes, I've missed—”

Dave tried speeding up to get alongside him, but his foot slid off the pedal and he grazed his shin. Rob slowed down.

“Yes, I've missed out beforehand. Had something on when you, before, the last time.”

Dave cringed. Why the pathetic explanation? Was he making excuses to the teacher? *Unfortunately forgot my maths book, that's why I couldn't do my homework.* Rob nodded once. They pedalled side by side.

“Have you ever been to Pretoriuskloof?”

“Not actually into. We've driven past often.”

“Dutchmen are weird. They come out into their yards and talk to each other over the fence. Always about the Kaffirs. They look around like Voortrekkers in their laager waiting for the Kaffirs to attack.”

Dave let out a snort of laughter. Rob could hit the nail on the head. He had muscles everywhere; even his jaw was corrugated with muscles. Together they were strong. They were of one purpose. They cut through the dark evening chill. Dave thrust his face into the rushing air. His inner thighs rubbed against the saddle.

They passed the open field marking the boundary between Glendale and Pretoriuskloof. They were in Dutchman country. Rob could almost pass for a Dutchman. His bronze skin, his square jaw, his short pants in all weather. He glided down Krywagen Road, a lion. Dave was getting short of breath. The moment they turned into Pretoriuskloof, Rob was focused like a hunter, scanning the area with a steady, roving gaze. It was too dark to see if there were any Dutchmen in their yards, leaning over fences. There could be any number of them, maybe hundreds standing in the dark, hissing to each other over their fences, about the Kaffirs. The lights seemed to be out everywhere. But up ahead Dave could see one Dutchman in a tank vest, standing on his porch, smoking. The houses were surprisingly close to the road. No sprawling front gardens as in Carrington Road. In one of the little houses Dave saw another Dutchman moving about. His dressing gown was open and he was scratching his belly.

They approached a Cortina with all the typical Dutchman paraphernalia: GT-stripes, lime green fur on the dashboard, furry steering wheel cover, miniature rugby boots dangling from the rear-view mirror, a nodding doggy behind the back seats and a plastic orange on the aerial. Rob pulled up alongside the car. He glanced left and right and snapped off the aerial. The plastic orange he popped back onto the broken stub. Dave was stunned by his cool efficiency. He wanted to laugh at the little orange wart on the Boer-mobile.

A door opened across the street and a small dark-haired man stepped out. "Jy daar!" *You there.* He meant Rob and Dave. "Vok jy oom." *Fuck you, uncle.* Rob smiled a skew smile and peddled calmly away. Dave's foot slipped off the pedal and he was hopping forward like a puppy waiting to get his arse kicked. The Dutchman was at the gate now. He had little monkey eyes. "Jy daar!" Dave's legs had a life of their own. They pumped as never before, furious pistons of flesh. "I can't speak," he blurted out, as though the monkey man maybe wanted to have a little chat about the ups and downs in the diamond market. With the air rushing at him, exhilarated, he called to Rob.

Rob stopped, but he didn't answer. In enemy territory, he was stealth and efficiency embodied. *Vok jy oom,* a concise insult delivered with military precision for the purpose of showing who is in control. The monkey man was now a distant figure in the road still looking in their direction, but not moving. Finally he went back into his yard.

Behind Rob's saddle was a small bag of tools. Rob could fix a puncture faster than Dave could change his pants. He pulled out a Swiss army knife and folded out a spike. When he closed his fist around the knife, the spike stuck out between his knuckles. They pushed their bikes down a side road. Rob gave Dave a reassuring half smile as if to say, *you ok, rookie?* He pulled his bike over to the pavement and sat down beside a VW Beetle, tying a shoe lace, looking around as he did so. His back rocked gently as he worked away at the shoe-laces and then in a seamless transition of movement, he was unscrewing a valve cap on the VW. He poked the spike into the valve and air started hissing out of the tyre.

Dave looked around and placed himself beside the next car, an old grey Austin with rust around the fenders. There was no valve cap to unscrew, but Dave didn't have a tool like Rob's. He poked a twig at the release pin inside the valve and felt a stream of air in his face. The twig slipped and broke, but he found a nail on the pavement and soon the air was streaming out of the tyre again. Rob replaced the valve cap, folded out a knife and shoved it into the rubber of the flat tyre. He stood up quietly and looked at Dave's progress. It struck Dave, seeing Rob leaning against the Beetle, glancing up and down the road, that it may have been stupid to go for the car right next to his. Rob didn't need to say anything. It was stupid. You do a deed quickly and efficiently and move

on. You don't hang around waiting to get caught. And you don't make it obvious that the place is being hit. One flat tyre is bad luck. Two in a row starts to look like bad people. *Remember Duncan Moodie; remember Marlene van Rensburg.*

They cycled up and down the streets of Pretoriuskloof, on the look out for deeds waiting to be done. Rob decided the time and the place and let Dave do every other deed, guiding him by means of gesture and glances. Once Dave got tangled up trying to snap off an aerial. It wouldn't break off and Dave was struggling to stay cool. Rob got out a pair of pliers from his bicycle bag, clipped off the aerial and threw it like a javelin into the nearest hedge. In all they flattened about ten tyres, ripped off seven or eight aerials and put dog shit in five letter boxes.

As they turned back into Krywagen Road, a cat came sidling down the pavement. Rob hopped off his bike. He moved closer, went down on his haunches and tried to call the cat. It was a rough-looking grey thing, with half an ear missing. It was not impressed by Rob's gentle whispering and finger clicking. Rob went to his bike and got some tape out of the tool bag.

"Give me a hand here."

Dave moved in front of the cat and held out his hands. The cat shrunk down low, tail erect, back arching. Every move the cat made, Dave parried. It was cornered between a wooden fence and the two boys. Suddenly the cat darted to one side, but Rob slammed his foot on it, pinning it down by the back legs. There was an angry shriek. Rob pressed down even harder as he bit off a length of black tape, leaned down and wound it round the cat's front legs. The cat hissed and Rob gave it a slap on the head. He bit off another piece of tape and tied up the rear legs. Finally, he taped the mouth shut. Then he picked it up and poked it into his bicycle bag. He shoved down hard and tightened the straps, then wiped his hand across his trousers. He was bleeding from a deep scratch.

On the way home, they took another route, past Chan Yan's Groceries and the South End Cemetery, skirting around the Big Hole. Rob hopped off his bike and wheeled it across the scrub towards the perimeter fence. He leaned the bike against a thorn tree, opened the tool bag, took out the cat and tossed it over the fence. There was a squeaky thump when it landed in the dirt, like a concertina dropped to the floor. The little body, trussed in tape, began to slide down the slope. This triggered a kicking and scratching in the limbs, loosening more dirt, which travelled downwards together with the cat.

All of a sudden, one of the front legs pulled free, and then the other. For a few moments, the cat stopped sliding. The back legs jerked and kicked to get free, but they were too firmly bound, and the movement loosened more dirt. As it started sliding, its front legs splayed out wide to get purchase and again, it stopped moving.

"Fuck off, Dutchman cat!"

Rob took up a stone and tossed it at the cat. The stone landed wide of the cat, bringing down a trickle of dirt, but leaving the cat unmoved. For a while it was still. Then it began to haul its rear end up, like a cripple on crutches. Rob picked up two stones and handed one to Dave.

"Come on, let's finish it off."

Rob threw his stone with a flick of the wrist. It landed close to the cat, but had no effect. Dave stood with the stone in his hand, looking at the grey cat with half an ear missing. Its neck was fully extended as though to counterbalance the weight of its lower body. The front paws changed position, adjusting to the slope and slide. Inch by inch it moved upwards. Rob picked up another stone.

“Come on then.” “I’m just thinking. How I should.”
“Don’t think too much.”

The stone in Dave’s hand was smooth and heavy. He held it in front of him, rocking it gently, as though judging how it would travel through the air. The cat had clambered its way several meters up the slope. Its form of locomotion involved moments of utter stillness interspersed with moments of broken scabbling. Somehow it worked. Dave felt a swaying beside him and Rob’s stone was in the air. This time it landed directly in front of the cat, knocking it over, and starting a rush of sand and stones. The cat tumbled, scrambled, scratched and flailed and was gone.

“Ja. Gotcha Dutchman!”

They cycled homewards. The deed was done. As he turned off at Dutton Road, Rob gave a James Dean smile and a two-fingered salute. Dave carried on home, pedalling steadily. His posture was compact, short-necked. He tried to whistle “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da.” Nothing but air came out. The darkness between street-lights was darker, impenetrably dark as a deep sea cave. Dave found that he was holding his breath and pedalling as though to keep himself from sinking. Like a small body sinking through the black that was grey-green when the sun fell upon it.

After matriculating from CBC Kimberley (1973), **Michael O'Brien** moved to Cape Town, South Africa and studied drama, English, and philosophy at the University of Cape Town. He also attended UCT Drama School and went on to work as an actor and director. He left South Africa in 1982 for political reasons and moved to London. He married a Swede and moved to Sweden in 1986. Since then, he has studied film studies at the University of Stockholm up to postgraduate level. At present, his doctoral is on hold. In 1996, he started as a high school teacher (theatre/film/history of ideas/programming). He is now Head of Programme and Developer.