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The Rock Eater

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Behold my favourite hiking spot. Fort Klapperkop, or just Klapperkop, is a relatively small nature reserve that somehow contains an entire mountain. It's home to a surprising number of non-predatory mammals, like zebras, various antelope and small mammals, and birds that I would personally describe as predatory (I am of course referring to ostriches). They all live in relative harmony and things are looking up now that their grazing has grown back somewhat, and they don't have to worry about humans too much because they hardly touch the place.

To be honest, it's not my absolute favourite hiking spot, but I no longer have the luxury of reaching my actual favourite hiking spot and living to tell the tale. To be fair, I haven't tried, and this is rather a theory based on things being as they are, which is shot to hell—almost literally. No one knows for sure what happened. Or, if they do, they haven't figured out how to tell me personally. It's probably for the best. So, I speculate (and I quite enjoy speculating). Judging by the weirdly persistent daylight and how my skin singes when I exit the sanctuary of shade, I would say the sun has something to do with it. It happened quickly, and then slowly. I know that doesn't make sense. Put it this way: the sun had a brief bout of explosive diarrhoea, totally fucking up anything electronic—grids, satellites, you name it—and a lot else besides, and then it got insomnia.

We'll call it 'The Solar Event'. But let me be clear: the event is still unfolding; we're just adapting. It's more like The Solar Reality.

So, anyway, Klapperkop it is. The highest point available to the public—back when mere boomed-off areas and social mores prevented us from going wherever the fuck we wanted—is heralded by an old bicycle, eroded by time but painted white by god-knows-who. It's been a while and it's still there. If breezes were stronger, it would probably have crumbled into tiny particles of rust and blown away. I thought about using it for transport purposes in the early aftermath of the sun shitting all over us, but it's so far beyond repair and being saddled that it's more of a vaguely hazardous fossil than a cute vintage ride. And so, I walk everywhere, which takes longer but also means I'm rarely a target for robbery (bikes are a desirable commodity now).

There's an urban legend about the bike's origin I heard many years before the sun took ill. The legend goes that a man, for the bicycle is said to be built for one (I actually know very little about bicycles and even less about men), rode it to the top of Klapperkop one day, then went for a walk (probably needed a piss: let's be honest) and never returned, lost forever to the landscape. There were searches, but his body was never recovered. Fun little mystery, right? It gets better! Klapperkop became known among geologists for a strange phenomenon. Erosion is commonplace, but Klapperkop's seemed to happen at an exponential rate. In fact, some once argued that there wasn't breakdown happening so much as rocks just disappearing. And this is where the urban legend comes in. Our missing man was certainly a cyclist, according to the type of bike he rode; he wasn't simply getting from A to B—he was the competitive type. The type despised by motorists and pedestrians alike. He was likely very fit, wore tight shorts and occasionally used hand signals, but it seems his internal compass was a bit useless (remember, the Klapperkop Nature Reserve is fairly small) and quite possibly he didn't know an awful lot about surviving in the wild. And so, mystery junkies will tell you, while our missing man was alive, he was living off the land in a rather peculiar way—by eating rocks.

How did I find myself at Klapperkop when humans had become

too scared to go outside? Well, I'd always been industrious and a firm believer in making my own opportunities. I invented a pretty niche form of tourism—kind of the opposite of dark tourism. In my version, we would watch the rich in their houses. See, Klapperkop Nature Reserve borders a formerly well-to-do gated community comprising a veritable hodge-podge of mansions: some are objectively pleasant to look at, but many are not, adhering to the faux Tuscan look that swept through real estate developments in the early 2000s. And what exactly makes these estates real in a society that's hurtled towards the brink of free-for-all since the sun vomited over everything? The people in them, of course!

In reflective hazmat suits that I'd taken several months to construct out of foraged fabric and foil, I organised a small group to essentially go on a short hike that would take us along the perimeter of the gated community. Hiking wasn't illegal, and neither was much else actually, but not many people were up for it in our new Solar Reality. I'd been a regular before the sun entered its fugue state. Without the internet, getting people to join basically involved writing a chain letter that I hoped would boost participation—because they'd have to pay me for my trouble as their tour guide. It was a kind of pyramid scheme—the hook being that you'd pay less if you got more people to join.

The payment system had become interesting; people paid in kind, but the payment was never money, because that had become completely meaningless. Often, and in my case as an entrepreneur, you might indicate the sort of material goods you'd be willing to accept as payment. For a long time, I was very into jewellery because it could be easily traded, but I also became fascinated by particularly interesting rocks and fossils. These didn't have much trade value, unless you were trading with someone in the geological sciences. They were still around, but they'd gone back to more primitive means of excavating and analysing, when they dared go outside.

Getting around was hard without GPS, so I targeted people who were familiar with the area. People who had maybe hiked there or cycled there once upon a time and kind of missed it. People who

could also never live in a big mansion unless they had the resources to build by hand because of the times (in other words, if you weren't already living in a big house, you probably weren't going to anytime soon, or ever). Basically, the people in the area I was targeting were theoretically unopposed to eating the rich. Of course, the plan wasn't to *actually* eat them. Society hadn't yet reached that point, as far as I knew. We would consume the rich in *other* ways—through observing them in their natural habitat, and maybe commenting loudly on their clothing or activity choices, as viewed through their massive windows.

My stint as a tour guide was annoyingly short-lived. Everyone had arrived more or less on time, not that anyone was really keeping track, and we'd all donned our hazmat suits and taken the windy path down the mountain towards the start of the perimeter. Gazing at the mountaintop from way below, you'd notice a deep fissure, formed over millennia and indicative of a cavern, continuing to take shape in its own time. Some days it almost looked like the mountain was vaping. I'd taken videos of it, back when such whimsies were possible and I could share them on my silly little social media accounts with dumb captions and too many hashtags, and I remember thinking that the cloud didn't look like it was 'passing', it looked like it was 'emerging'. But no one on the tour was particularly interested in exploring the possibility. They were just there to eat the rich, so to speak.

That day I learned that community policing was pretty much an epidemic, but very covert because no one wanted to leave the house. Also, it was hardly communal and more a case of every-person-for-themselves. Turned out a lot of rich people moonlighted as hunters in the recent past and were adept at pointing their rifles through slightly ajar windows while shouting loudly at anyone trying anything. And although we were trying only to watch them (and hurl the occasional insult), it was enough for one of them—and that's all it took—to open fire nearby and send my modest group of paying clients scattering.

Ahead of all of us were the ones who were used to running, like the joggers and a former Springbok. He wasn't alone in being

formerly employed; a pretty big chunk of us—whether formally or informally—had become a former something. Anyway, I think the tall jogger was called Mike and I'm pretty sure one of them had been a radio DJ (I didn't recognise his face, but I felt an incredible sense of déjà vu upon hearing his voice when he shrieked). The former day-hikers comprised a gaggle of giggly girls who'd personalised their hazmat suits with tulle and sparkly stickers and who screamed loudest of all when the shots were fired. If things had been very, very different, I'm one hundred per cent certain they would've been taking selfies. And finally, off fucked the two timid teenagers I'd coaxed out of hiding with my chain letter; I'd found out that they'd effectively been abandoned by their parents who were visiting the Cape when 'it' happened. They ran hand in hand.

I never saw any of them again.

As everyone sprinted away, the mountaintop beckoned me. Half running, half crawling, weighed down by my bartered jewellery, I made it to the top of the mountain and wondered what the hell to do next. Walking always helped me think, and so I kept walking. My compulsion to shout "Hellooo!" down holes—any holes—found me Makatso. That day, I tossed down a piece of jewellery with every hello, as a sort of offering to the possibilities beneath the surface. I suspected that the smaller holes were spider holes or snake holes, while the larger ones were porcupine or dassie holes. Whoever was down there, they were getting some jewellery; it could've been a ring, a bracelet, a necklace—really, whatever came to hand, down a hole it went. One time, it was a Makatso hole or, more accurately, Makatso's hole—though of course it had been there, more or less the same size and shape, for literally millions of years. It wasn't dug into the soil, it was a hole in bedrock—a fracture like a chimney the size of Makatso. Some experts in the field would have labelled it a deathtrap—but one lost cyclist's deathtrap is another lost cyclist's grand entrance. And Makatso was very much alive, or so I initially thought. Down went a pearl necklace.

When I heard "Hellooo!" come back to me through the chute, I thought it was an echo, and being delighted by small things, I shouted "Hellooo!" again and got the same response. And then,

because I'm an idiot, I yelled "Fuuuuuuck!", and the echo paused. I plunged into the earth, not stopping to consider how I'd get back out again, or if the voice inside might in fact have belonged to a serial killer. Slipping down the chute felt a little like re-entering the womb, or how I imagine it would; it was slippery, tight, and if the plates of my skull hadn't fused a few decades ago as expected, it probably would have been a bit easier to navigate. In spite of myself, I made it down.

The cave reeked of dassie and bat shit. Not the worst smell in the world, when you got used to it, as I had by my fourth or fifth visit. The dassies and bats were Makatso's friends, neighbours, and occasionally his meals. Makatso was not a serial killer. He was too weak for that and very much in his own world, although he seemed to experience moments of lucidity. He was skin and bone and spoke with the voice of a man who hadn't spoken in a very long time, but I soon learned that that was just his voice. He actually spoke to a lot of things—animals, insects, reptiles, rocks, and spirits. And also himself. After our initial hellooos through the chute, the first thing Makatso said to me when I uncrumpled myself from the foetal position I'd landed in was, "Jesuuuuuu!". I quickly corrected him, but told him I could see why he might've thought me the second coming.

Makatso had fire, the old-fashioned way. He'd been using the twigs that blew in through the various chutes and crevices, the roots of trees entwined in the rocks, and the remains of small creatures. I suspect he'd also used his clothes, as he wasn't wearing any. In fact, the only thing he had on was my pearl necklace offering. I gave him my hoodie when I met him and he put it on. Although it was oversized, it didn't quite cover his willie, which was mildly distressing to me as I'd managed to avoid willies all my life. Spending most days with Makatso, I soon acclimatised. It also helped that I would bring him more clothes for his body and kindling for his fire, in addition to any extra food I could scavenge. He kept his fire burning in one of the smaller caverns of the cave system that was his world. Although the circumference of the cavern was small, it seemed to stretch up to forever, and right at

the top, not quite in the centre, was a pinprick of light that let the smoke through.

Not having very much going on in my own life as a surface-dweller, I visited Makatso most days. He didn't seem to mind. Over a period of weeks or months (neither of us was counting), Makatso showed me around the cave system that had become his home. He didn't make use of all the caverns, but each one that he did use had a specific purpose. He slept in or near his fire cavern, and further away was his cavern for ablutions, containing a puddle. Further still was another cavern that he babbled about at length, but never let me enter. He pointed to the carvings on the wall leading into it, and I understood that it was sacred to him, and that it had been sacred before him. He introduced me to bats and dassies and other drawings that he'd carved into the cave wall beside drawings that had been there a lot longer. The most unusual of his images depicted a being holding a rock, and then raising it to its mouth and seeming to swallow it. The rock became part of the figure, and the figure seemed to dance.

I'll never forget the first time I watched Makatso consume a rock. It seemed so natural and surreal at the same time. I imagine he must've eaten his first rock out of desperation or psychosis (or both), but now he appeared selective. A sort of sommelier, he sniffed and tasted rocks before making a seemingly informed decision to ingest one. And when he did, there was a chance that nothing would happen except for some marginal weight gain and digestive discomfort. But sometimes, it would result in strange wonders. The rocks spoke through him and lived with him—*in* him. Just as his drawings depicted a being dancing after swallowing a rock, Makatso would become animated by what I supposed was a sort of residue in the rock.

One small rock very obviously coated in bat shit led him to flap his arms and make high-pitched shrieks that echoed against the walls of the cave and sent all the other bats flying. The more fossilised-looking rocks were hard to watch him devour; I wanted them for myself. When he swallowed them, he would reanimate those fossils through his body, becoming creatures I'd read about but never seen

before. And some of them were people—or nearly people. They communicated in ways I couldn't understand. Through Makatso, they would all take me by the hand to the edge of that sacred cavern. They would all stop me from entering. When Makatso had exhausted the ghosts of aeons past from his system, he would curl up by the fire.

I would leave him as the sun attempted to set. It became a ritual. I walked the long tunnel to the cave mouth. There was a rope leading the way, evidence of adventures from another era. It wouldn't hold a person's weight if they slipped, but it would guide them to the exit like a long tactile arrow. I held it very loosely, and I stepped very carefully. I always glanced back as the rope ended and I set foot outside the cave, hoping to see Makatso treading quietly behind me. I never saw him once I'd reached that point. He refused to follow me out and screamed the one time I tried to drag him towards the light.

One day, Makatso showed me a cave drawing I hadn't noticed before. It might have been new. In it was a figure with hair like mine leaving the cave and locating a rock, which it brought to the being waiting inside the cave, who swallowed it. I took this as a directive and ventured outside the cave earlier than usual. I picked up the first loose rock I came across and brought it back to Makatso, happy to have accomplished the task he set me. He shook his head. He led me to the cave drawing again, and I noticed a second line of 'instructions' that I'd initially missed, so eager was I to be useful. These instructions were under the image depicting the figure with my hair leaving the cave. They depicted the figure—me—holding the rock to their face but not ingesting it. I thought I understood. As I turned to leave the cave again, Makatso gestured that I should go far in my search for a rock. I got the feeling that he required a rock that didn't come from the nature reserve—a rock not of this particular land.

I made a pilgrimage back to where I'd spent too many years taking myself too seriously. I'd gone all this way figuring that geologists love to collect rocks, and maybe I'd locate a collection with rocks from somewhere else. Once open to the public, and then very much closed off, I was happy to see that anyone could enter the

university's gates now, although I doubted there was any education happening. The campus resembled a ghost town. Muscle memory took me to the part of campus that housed the Geology building. Unsurprisingly, the lecturers' offices had been looted. For a moment I scolded myself for not having thought of it first—the specimens I could've collected!—but then bent my head to the task at hand: investigating the backs of cupboards and drawers for any samples and specimens my looting forebears might have missed.

Fortunately for me, tmany rock specimens are a bit boring to look at. These were ignored by the first looters, which meant more variety for me. Some of them looked like rocks I'd find in the nature reserve, others looked vastly different. I found a small field guide on rocks and minerals in southern Africa and compared each find to the pictures inside. I took my time—reading, blowing away dust, turning over each rock, trying to *feel* something. Makatso's carved instructions had indicated that the rock had to mean something to me, and so I was trying to find a point of connection. This was especially difficult as I am not a sentimental person. In the process of finding this special rock, I had to *learn* how to be sentimental. About a rock. Sedimental? Eventually, I noticed that one of the smaller rocks, although bite-sized, vaguely resembled Makatso's cave system. It seemed to have an entrance, and then a network of caverns and the tiniest pinprick of a hole at the top. Recalling Makatso's carved figure holding the rock to its face, I brought the rock to mine. I closed my eyes and focused on what I was feeling. What I felt was recognition and familiarity. I hoped this would be enough. It wasn't.

When Makatso returned the rock to me, I took it as failure. Shocking all parties present, I started crying. In my defence, they were tears of exhaustion. The search had taken longer than I'd hoped, and overall it had been a punishing trip on foot with little sustenance, and I hadn't slept much lately. Makatso smiled when he saw my tears, he grabbed me by the hand holding the rock and held it to my leaking left eye. I understood then that this was the last requirement: I had to connect to the rock by imbuing it with my essence, so to speak. This could've been disgusting, depending

on my approach, but Makatso had shown me what was required and I was glad to oblige and ensured my tears didn't go to waste. Into the tiny caverns of my rock I wept. When I was done it looked like a waterhole for ants. Being salty, and being almost eternally warm and sunny since—you know—the tears quickly evaporated and their precipitation formed something akin to flowstone on the surface of my tiny rock. I presented my offering to Makatso. He smiled again and uttered the most comprehensive string of words I'd ever heard him say.

"I can die now."

When Makatso ate my rock, he began by licking it. I imagined it tasted salty first, with granular notes of dolomite and a hint of rust. He held it in his mouth and sucked on it like the hardest lozenge in the world. I imagined his tongue probing the tiny cave, almost in the centre, the way it probably probed all the wounds in his gums. I was glad he didn't try to chew it with the small rotting mounds he had left for teeth. Then he swallowed.

Nothing happened for the longest time, and Makatso and I just stared at each other. Then Makatso took himself to his fire cavern. He removed every item of clothing I'd given him, as well as the pearl necklace, tossing them into the burning pit one by one. The flames sputtered and danced, fuelled by the PolyCotton blend. He curled up next to the fire and started shivering. I was about to offer him my hoodie, as I had when we'd first met, when he started shaking violently and something told me that this must be the end—or close enough.

Makatso understood that I'd located him, that I could return to the surface and back. Did he think it was a superpower? I couldn't convince him that *he* wasn't lost—that he wasn't physically stuck in his cave system. The half-life of his belief was without end, and the only way out was through death. Either that or he felt a massive sense of responsibility for the cave system. Maybe he wasn't afraid of the world outside, it just wasn't important to him. He'd been in there a long time, though, and I wondered how he would have made sense of a world that had evolved so much and then almost come to a complete standstill since his initial misadventure.

When Makatso finally expired, I dragged his body to the entrance of the sacred sub-cave he had shown me before. I'd never been inside until that moment, and even then, I was really only on a ledge, heaving his heavy mass over the edge. To be clear: Makatso was rake thin, but he definitely had not passed all the rocks he ate in his lifetime, and so this contributed to his heft as a corpse. My night vision had been improved by the time I'd spent with Makatso, but I was not above a makeshift torch of flaming twigs. I held the flame over the precipice of this cave-within-a-cave and it illuminated a pile of bodies in various stages of decomposition. It was cool down there, and the walls had the cinnamon-scarlet tinge of mercury sulphide, which I'd learnt about in my search for the special rock. I imagine it took years for the bodies to do whatever it is they do when they stop being alive. I saw more willies, but I no longer cared. I saw faces that looked like ours, and faces that were no longer faces.

Objectively, it was a horrifying sight, resembling the piles of death camp corpses in our high school history books. But after meeting and spending time with Makatso, I was seldom surprised by anything. It all felt inevitable. Maybe there had always been rock eaters, and in facilitating Makatso's likely overdue death, I'd just witnessed the end of the line. I wasn't sure how to feel about that, and so I didn't. I started making my way to the cave's entrance, loosely gripping the guiding rope.

Exiting the cave, I glanced down for what I thought was the last time and spotted a quartz. I wiggled it free from the earth and briefly considered its dusty exterior before I spat on it and wiped it against my jeans, revealing an almost pure whiteness. I popped it into my mouth where I held it for a while, tasting nothing and possibility. Then I swallowed.