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The Matter of These Hours

Paul Rawlins
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by Paul Rawlins

Wus does it like this, first day back. First day. Two hundred kids bumping, squalling like sheep in a kraal. Prefects in their new coats the color of plums, with name badges, handshaking and pointing directions down the yellow halls. Wus does this.

He sniffs, sticks his nose up by them right there, and he says, "Kak."

They're looking at him, down, like it's the disgustingest thing, dirt on their sleeves. Wus drinks at the fountain, cold water, and he pokes the corners of his mouth with the cuff on his jacket.

"I'm gonna die," Wus says.

We're in school.

We have to go, Wus always says. This year and then one more. We have to go to get some jobs, some like we want on the railways. Or Wus says maybe keeping shop, somewhere in Hillbrow, in town, Johannesburg, not here. Anything but on the mines. But now Wus says he's not getting any of those jobs.

Wus has got sick, don't know how. I don't know how. He says he got it, AIDS.

We're backs up to the wall, and sharp, looking up and down the girls, short-skirted and no makeup with their uniforms, all their legs gone pale, the bone color of their tight-tucked blouses.

"Got it," Wus says, "makes the only difference. Got it, and I'm dying standing here talking to you."

And Wus wants a fight. Wus, they called Wus that when he's little, and he's still little, only now he's little and he's mean. He beats
up big guys. He beats them up in pieces, chops them like trees. He keeps that name they called him, Wus, keeps it for a dare: you believe it? right here, right now.

If he can wait, he'll beat up my landlord. He'll beat him up for what he does to my dad. My dad's the old man who's sick now and can't feed himself, and he goes naked outside sometimes. He says to me, "I don't know who you are," and he holds his own hands by the window.

Wus'll get my landlord for him, the one who's saying, always, "Tell your old man to get out of the window." Who says, "Get your old man off the steps, he's pissed himself again." The one who says now my dad's in hospital, "You're too young to hold a lease."

But Wus isn't going to wait. Tomorrow he can beat up my landlord, maybe tomorrow. He wants a fight now here in the commons, where there's the lunch crowd, and maybe he doesn't want to get away.

"Sit over there," he says. I don't fight with Wus. He doesn't need my help. "You get in the way," he says. He tells me to stand where I don't get hurt.

I sit over where he tells me. I nod at the girls over the back of the booth.

"Watch this," I say. "Watch over there." And they look at me like I'm a snake's head, and why do I talk to them.

"Watch," I say. I tell them, "Watch what he does."

Wus knows the guy; he knows him at the end of the table, with his hair oiled back and a grey school jersey, and he knows what he's said about Wus.

Wus says to him, "What are you saying about me?" And the guy looks at Wus and doesn't answer him, so he can smile at his class buddies and chew with his mouth open.

Wus asks him, "You say I'm a queer? Get up and ask me."

His buddies say, "Get up and pound the little suck." They say, "Beat his ass," and the jersey boy's smiling, standing up.
“Don’t turn your back on him,” his buddies say.

“What have you been telling people?” Wus says. And the guy who’s smiling, he’s always smiling, shrugs.

I tell the girls again, “Watch now. Watch it, what happens.”

Wus hacks on him, a loud sound like a rock’s cracked. He spits on his face, down his cheek.

“Now you’re going to get it and die,” Wus says. And then that boy, jersey boy, isn’t smiling. He puts his fists up like he’s on a chinning bar, but he only gets one punch, and Wus gets three. When Wus brushes jersey boy’s punch away, that doesn’t count. But Wus gets him a knee in the stones to fold him over. And the right hand’s coming up backwards for knuckles in the breastbone, and the left, the fist, coming to the back of the head to knock him down, leave him grunting on the tiles like a hog.

The girls keep watching now. I hear a whistle blowing somewhere, and everybody leaving their food, standing up and saying, “Hey, hey!”

And there’s two more jumping up from the table for Wus. It’s two of them that can’t hold him, and one gets busted in the eye, but the other digs a fork in Wus’s back to where it’s sticking out, hanging on Wus’s shirt. He can’t believe he’s done it. He has to stop to look, so Wus can get away, me up and running with him into the toilet.

We’re in the stall, me and Wus. The fork’s still hanging on Wus, but he’s pulling up his shirt and undershirt and all. There are little holes like snake bites and little lines of dark blood. The waistband on Wus’s jockies is torn, so it clings above his trousers like a strap on something a girl wears.

“Get up on the loo,” Wus is saying to me.

“What for?” I’m saying.

Wus is saying, “There’s two of us in here, they’ll think we’re fagging.”
I don’t care.

“Get up,” Wus is saying, and he’s shoving me, shoving me like he’ll pick me up off the ground.

Wus is screwing his head around. “I can’t see it,” he says. He puts his hand on the holes where the blood comes off on his fingers. I get toilet paper to clean it off. Wus is saying, “You can’t get it on you.”

I roll up lots of paper in a wad bigger than my hand. I touch Wus’s back and the blood soaks up in patterns like flowers and kiss lips.

“What do I do with it?” I say.

“I don’t know,” Wus says. I’ve got it in my hand, all the paper with Wus’s blood on it. Wus says, “Flush it.”

“What does it go?” I say.

Wus says, “The fountains. Let them all get it,” but I’m only still waiting.

“I don’t know,” he says then.

I drop it in the bowl, and now I’m standing on the seat and holding balance, to stick paper on Wus’s back like on shaving cuts.

When we’re coming out of the stall, there’s people coming in the door. Wus holds out the fork, and they can see the blood that’s dried.

“Get out,” he says. He jabs with the fork. When they go, he dumps the garbage can to stick the door closed. We hear them outside, asking who is it in there, sending for somebody to come here. We sit back in the stall.

“You better get a tetanus shot,” I say to make Wus start to laugh.

“You’re so damn dumb,” Wus says.

We sit quiet, hearing the thump and rushing down the pipes. The windows are open, from people cutting in here to smoke. Wus leaves the fork on the floor between his feet. The tines are black, like the blood’s bad, like it is.

Wus might cry. He might not, he might not want to.
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He says, “They’ll kick me out of school.”

“They’ll kick me out of school,” I say. I have to sit on my hands because the floor gets hard to me underneath.

“They kick me out, it doesn’t matter,” Wus says.

“Maybe you’ll get better,” I say. “Maybe there’s going to be medicine for it.”

“There’s not,” he says.

“Or maybe then you’ll just get better.”

“I’m going to be a worse mess than your dad,” Wus is saying.

“You don’t know,” I say. And Wus not saying anything back to me, not, so he can laugh for himself to hear laughing. And me then yelling back at him again, “You don’t know!”

He mashes my leg against the loo, and I know there’ll be a bruise the size of a tennis ball on my knee.

The people outside now are probably police. They’re pushing to get in, we can hear them.

“Get up,” Wus says. He means get out the window, and we do, and we’re outside.

We ditch at Uncle’s.

He says, “Go to school.”

“Been,” Wus says. Uncle has customers, come to get their clean clothes. He calls the numbers to the boys working at the presses and the racks. Wus is bending a hanger to a boomerang while I’m tuning in the radio. “What’s anything to me?” Wus is saying. I smell the distilled water and starch that makes me sneeze. We’re getting in Uncle’s way.

“Go bring me some fish and chips from the shop,” he says. He forks over a purple five Rand note. “I get change coming from this.”

I say, “We’ll take the Honda,” so we can get away on the motorbike while he can’t stop us.

“See your father,” Uncle yells to me.
Wus rides us toward Brackpan, toward where my father is in hospital. He’s a week there now, and I’ve been Friday and Sunday seeing him. We don’t stop because he hasn’t known us last time, and to go inside there makes my stomach hard. We’re only roaring around the parking out front and around the trees to maybe get the sisters mad. But nobody comes because the sound from the bike is too small.

We like a roadhouse in Brackpan, doublethicks from the Casbah. I get lime, and Wus has, always, chocolate. And we eat chips, me with only vinegar and salt, but Wus with pepper, too. We eat them hot at a table outside, blowing the steam out our mouths.

“Does it hurt?” I say to Wus. “They could have maybe put a plaster on at the hospital for it.” Wus shakes his head no, his back doesn’t hurt him. The sky is clouds, like always here. The black boys hang out lazy at the window, no cars to wait on. They’re chatting up some cleaning girl, circling her like pack dogs.

Wus says, “We got to plan everything we’re going to do, now.”

“We got to spend all our money,” I say, “go some places.”

Wus says he thinks so.

“Do you want to get a girl?” he says.

I don’t know.

Wus is riding us through the East Rand, past the trees and mine dumps, farther than we go mostly, which is only ever to the Casbah or out another way to Nigel. I hold my thumbs in the belt of his pants. We can’t see any police.

Wus turns us to bounce off the road where there’s a hole in the fence. He is yelling, “Hang on, hang on!” He is charging us straight ahead to a mine dump where the motorbike can only climb a little up the side, but already we feel us going straight up before the fifty heaves and conks out.

“Come on,” Wus says. We climb up walking bent over, Wus first, up front, and sometimes our hands digging in the ground and
The top is flat and big enough across for rugby or football, but all dead rock like the moon. There's wind up here, and the sun's where you can't see it.

"Look here at this," Wus says. And down the south side in white out of rocks and paint the dump tells the people on the road, AWAKE! JESUS COMETH! in letters all square.

We sit on the top to watch the cars on the road to Alberton and to throw down rocks, shoot for the middle of the "O."

"There's still gold in it," Wus says, he's talking about the rocks, "if we could get it out."

Back at Uncle's, Uncle says, "Somebody's been here from the school about you."

"Wus has got sick," I say. Uncle's got an ear on the phone to somebody who wants clothes brought by the house.

"You shouldn't have been out riding that thing," he says with his lips to us without saying it over the phone.

"It's not that kind of sick," Wus says. Wus and I haven't decided yet anything for tonight. Tomorrow's no more school if we don't want. "They'll kick me out, anyway," Wus says.

We're sharing Uncle's fish and chips, Wus's chips over to the side where he puts on the pepper. We lean elbows on the counter to eat off the newspaper Uncle spreads out for grease.

"Did you go see your father?" Uncle says. "How's he doing in there?" Uncle sees him every night. "You should come with me," he tells me. Uncle won't know about whether I say the truth now, but I tell him no.

"Tomorrow night, with me," Uncle says. I don't say to him yes or no.

"What's wrong with you," Uncle says to Wus, "except for what
you do with your food?” I don’t think Wus is going to tell Uncle. I think he’ll make a thing up, and he does, to tell.

He says, “I got a cancer.”

Uncle can’t eat now. He stubs out a chip like a cigarette. He bows his head to hear Wus say anything more, and I’m waiting, too, to hear it.

“It’s only in my eye,” Wus says. Then he says, “But you can’t see it.”

“The trials of this life,” Uncle says, and he is sad. “What do they say about it at hospital?”

“Nothing, yet,” Wus says. He’s looking ahead, like when we get yelled at he does. “It’s just small.”

“I’m sorry, my boy,” Uncle says. “And that truly.” And he has Wus now, around the shoulders. Uncle could pick him up like a baby, but he doesn’t. He only holds onto Wus, and Wus doesn’t hold on back, but he can’t be getting away.

“Have you turned to the Lord?” Uncle says. He’s let go of Wus so he can see him again. “You’ve got to put your faith in him.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Wus says, and Uncle tells him about the tents and then the big Rema church in Randburg. He tells about the miracles. “They are the houses of salvation,” he says. “They are the homes of peace.”

When Uncle’s gone back to the phone, I tell Wus, “We can go there. Do you want to see?”

I have money always I can get with a Help-U card. Wus has money in his pocket, and we take a train that goes to Randburg. Wus can’t sit still, his back hurting him. He is sad now, not going to talk to me. I gave him a window to look out of, but there’s only hills and dead grass and other tracks to see. I sit on the seat so I’m sideways to look up and down the aisle. I think about being little again, and if we had a ball with us, I could bounce it and catch it, like we did then all the time. I think that.
I think that because it’s better than thinking Wus is going to die. And it’s better than me thinking like I’m Wus and going to die, and I have to try all the time not to.

Wus says when was I ever at Rema.

“Uncle goes, and he took me to go with him,” I say.

“Does he believe in God?” Wus says.

I tell Wus, “He believes in Jesus.” I tell Wus wait till he sees the place, where it’s built big enough for sport, and when we get there, he sees what I was saying. He sees it big, with chairs like you sit in at the flicks, and I tell him what Uncle said about the whole place is in a blue like sky because that blue is the best for being on TV.

It’s middle week and seats are easier getting than on a Sunday. And maybe they’re fuller when Ray, the weight lifter who got saved and whose place Rema is, is here himself, but he isn’t tonight.

Wus asks, “Who gets healed?”

“The people who go up,” I say. “You go up around the stage,” and I tell Wus to watch for the front edge of the stage because it moves like a big tongue, out into the crowd and back on wheels underneath it.

“When do they do it?” Wus wants me to tell him.

“It’s all at the end,” I say. Wus nods.

“I’ll tell you when it is,” I say.

All the people start the meeting praising. They sing,

He whose name is Exaltation,
He whose wings supply salvation,
Praise Him, children of His promise,
Till we’re caught up in the Rapture,

and some of them stand waving their arms, and some of them are standing up to speak.

“Listen,” a fat foreign lady says, “listen to that manifestation. Listen to the tongues. Praise God.”

It’s a black man saying “Our Father” in some Bantu. He says it funny, but it means only, The Father Who Is In Heaven, You, The
Father Who Is In Heaven, Your Name Is A Great Name. It Is A Great Name Here On This Earth, And Where You Are In The Sky, It Is A Great Name There, Too. Give Us Bread Today. And Forget The Things We Owe, And We Will Forget Who Has Taken Things From Us And Never Returned Those Things Back. Keep Us Out From Trouble, And Keep Bad Things Away From Us. You Are Most Powerful, And Power Belongs To You. And You Are A King. And You Are Like The Sun. And You Are Forever.

And he says it over, like it's his passbook number he's giving the police.

But other people speak tongues. Wus wants to know is it a secret language they learn. “I don’t know,” I say. “It could be that.” No one sitting around us speaks. In front of us, people clap to the music, and behind us is a couple with a little dog in a basket.

There’s a singer special for tonight who’s been on a ministry with a Mr. Vanderdos to Zimbabwe. The singer says, “I was a bad man. I was the biggest sinner before the face of the Lord.” He was run away from home. And high all the time, too, shooting needles up in his arms like I have seen and never done. “I almost killed a man,” he says. “I did it, almost killed him, for his money.”

He starts out, and he’s singing in English. He gets a mike check, and then he goes into tongues, and then the backup singers, some of them switch to tongues, too, and I think he’s mad about that.

All the tongues say the same thing when the man at the microphone translates. They say praise the Lord, and they talk about the mountains and sun breaking out of the east, and they talk about glory waiting for all of them.

After tonight is sports night. Ray’s sports friends who have gotten saved have come to testify.

“I loved my body,” one man says. “I made it God.” He is speaking to us, a big man, with arms that make a muscle when they bend. “I had my gym for a chapel.”
And one a rugby flyhalf with his ear folded inside out. “Some people say you can’t hit hard when you’re a Christian,” he says. “Some people think you can’t win. But first you’ve got to be a champion for the Lord.” Wus says the flyhalf played for Eastern Transvaal.

Then the man who’s here instead of Ray tonight says come down and be saved.

Wus says, “Now?”

I tell him, “No. This isn’t you.”

We watch the people go down front and kneel on the blue floor. The choir’s singing something about coming into the arms of Jesus. The man who isn’t Ray is preaching to us to come get on the road to heaven, and all the church men and women come out from behind the curtain now, and some are gathering up the people praying from the floor to come with them backstage and finish, and some are handing out the yellow baskets for the crowd to fill with money.

Wus says does he have to pay?

“No,” I say. “They won’t know.”

Then it’s what we’re waiting for, because the man who’s here because Ray can’t be tonight is saying brother DuPreez has got an anointing to heal, and I tell Wus to go now.

The crowd is singing again. Nobody going down the aisles to the stage looks too sick. Nobody in a cast, and they can walk. But they might all be like Wus is, who you can’t see him being sick, but he’s going to die.

There are about ten of them on the stage where Wus looks like a sloppy dwarf. His pants are too long and his shoes are thick on the bottoms and the sleeves on his jacket come down over his hands, only now he’s taking that off because it must be warm up there on the stage where he has to wait.

Brother DuPreez has two assistants to catch the people. When he touches them on the forehead, they all fall, and I look to see him
pushing, but I don't. The second woman, she falls down forward, falling on her knees, but everybody else goes backward, like brother DuPreez is picking them up and giving them a toss.

"Look at it," the fat lady is saying. "Look at the miracle. Hallelujah. Hallelujah, Lord, amen."

Wus is at the end of the line, and I'm going down to have a look closer. I want to know what happens.

"You have to remember everything," I've said to Wus. "You have to say if you see anything." And now I'm down to where I'm in front, and it's going to be Wus they're coming for. The catchers line up back behind him, and see it now, Wus's shirt with a big spot of blood, big as a fist, and one of them says something. I see how his lips are moving when he says it, turning Wus to see his back, he must say, "You're hurt."

And Wus tells them he isn't here for that, that little spot is nothing to them. Then Brother DuPreez is over, and Wus telling him what he wants, like it's Santa for Christmas. And then the catcher letting go from Wus's shoulder like a hot thing and jumping back. And DuPreez standing with nothing he's got to say to Wus, with the other sick ones carried off the stage, and DuPreez now looking down like he's dropped a handful of water.

"You liar! You're liars!" Wus is yelling. He's got fists up to duke out DuPreez right there up front, but two of Ray's lifters are already on him, already with the rubber gloves. And they take an arm each of them to stretch Wus out so he can't move in on them, and everybody standing to watch.

I follow where they haul him out behind the stage, with Wus yelling, "Liars!" and trying to kick. Back here the halls are long and white like in hospital. "Watch it he doesn't bite," one of the lifters is saying. I follow till I see a fire handle to pull.

"Hey," I yell, "hey." And they're turning to look, while I tug the handle down to start the bells on. Wus is away between them, and we are too fast in this world ever for them to be catching us.
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Outside of Randburg we can take a train now either way, back to Springs where home is and Wus not having to ride his bicycle anywhere because he can be staying at my house, or down into Johannesburg, and I say to Wus, the first thing, "Do you want to go to the city?" But he won't say. There's nothing here much. The railway platform and a shop. And then just weeds Wus kicks in and veld besides. The train's not coming till half an hour, and I'm hungry from it being so long since the Casbah and the fish and chips.

"You want to eat?" I say. Wus still won't say, but we walk to the cafe, and I buy two Cornish pasties and a Lunch Bar to divide up and pine-nut soda, and I know to buy two cans because Wus won't share.

"I hate it here," Wus says.

"Better than the East Rand," I say. Springs is ugly, and Brackpan and Boxburg. Here are no buildings, no mines.

The pie is mostly crust instead of meat, not how I like it. Wus has thrown his out in the weeds.

I haven't asked Wus to know how he got it. It's not his fault. Wus will die, and maybe my father first or after, but him too. I don't like things here either. It's dark and night now, and me shaking all over because it's cold. At the platform, Wus is buying tickets and then pushing the stick of hard blue cardboard in my hand.

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