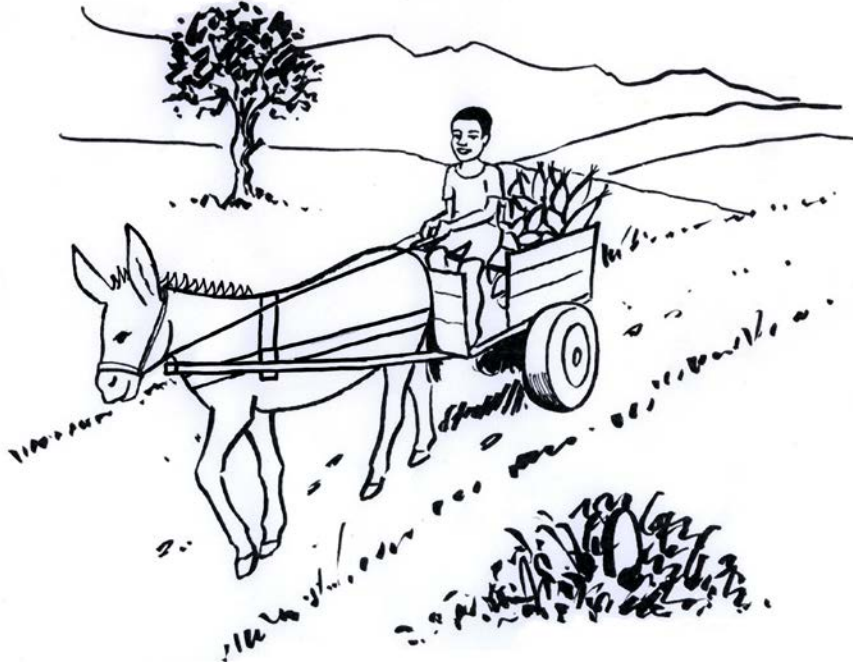


# Vuyo and Unam

A story by Arjan Bogaers

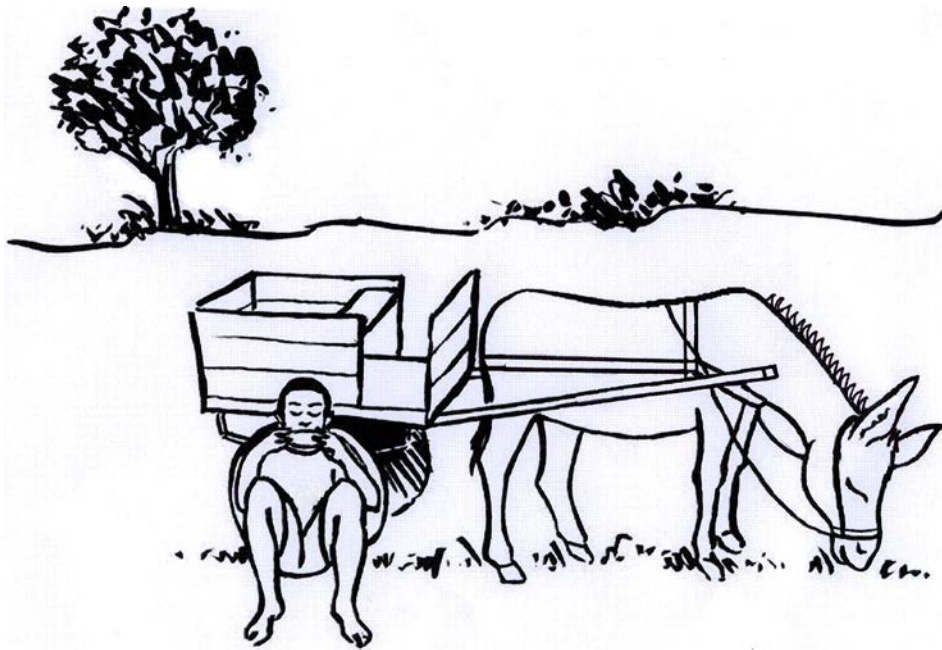
Vuyo and his family of two elder brothers and one younger sister lived in the Eastern Cape at the foothills of the mighty Drakensberg Mountains. Their village was surrounded by rolling grasslands and soaring mountains, but it was hard to travel. A car would struggle on the rough roads and a 4x4, or even a bakkie, was beyond the family's means. But they thought they had the best transport one could wish for, because they were blessed with a donkey called Unam. This means 'He is with me' in Xhosa.



Unam was a small, grey donkey. He was faithful as only donkeys can be. He was also strong and pulled the cart with which the whole family did their business. This included working the land, shopping, building a wall and taking produce to the market down in the valley. They used Unam and his cart for everything.

Vuyo had turned fourteen the previous week, so he was allowed (for the first time) to go by himself with Unam and the cart to market. Up until then he always went with his brother Thembisa, but now Thembisa could stay at home and study.

Vuyo felt excited as he set off under a crisp blue sky with Unam. The cart was laden with maize, sorghum and vegetables. It was a smooth journey down to the valley and Unam seemed happy. Vuyo sold everything at the market and after off-loading they stopped to rest and eat before taking the road back up. He nibbled on some roasted corn while Unam grazed on the short tufts of green grass beside the path. Vuyo felt peaceful. The only sounds were a slight wind in the trees and Unam snorting to clear dust from his nostrils.



Pulling the cart up into the hills was always more difficult. Sometimes the road was steep, with loose rocks and a sheer drop on one side. 'But,' thought Vuyo, 'with an empty cart, it should be fine.' He was more worried about the gathering grey clouds that chilled the air. Although the weather had been clear and sunny lately, afternoon thunder showers were not unusual.

As they started up the road the sun disappeared. A wind started blowing. Bushes swayed from side to side. Vuyo thought they would have to move faster in order not to be overcome by a storm, so he pulled at the reins, urging Unam on. He was a sturdy donkey, but he was also getting on in years, so after walking briskly for a while, he had to slow down. 'It's okay Unam,' said Vuyo, 'you are doing very well and we're going to be alright.' Of course he had to encourage himself as much as Unam. Here he was, all by himself for the first time, and now it was getting cold and dark. Soon it would rain and turn the path into mud. And then what? He certainly did not want to be stuck in the mud.

All this worry made Vuyo anxious, and he needed to relieve himself somewhere next to the path. If only he hadn't had that second cup of tea at lunchtime! He let go of the reins and walked a little way down the slope, knowing Unam would wait for him. But afterwards, in his hurry to get back up the path, he lost his footing and stumbled over loose stones.

A sharp pain shot through his ankle. He cried out and fell, grabbing his foot. It hurt so much he thought he would never walk again. As he lay with his foot throbbing, it started to rain. Slowly at first, with lazy, big drops, but soon it rained harder until water poured out the sky and turned the whole world dark, cold and muddy. What was he going to do?

Vuyo was very scared now. He could hardly move. He was cold and drenched. Could he crawl back to the path somehow? Then, as he lay there, he saw two hooves stepping down the slope. He couldn't believe his eyes. Unam was carefully pulling and nudging the cart into position, until it was right above him, sheltering him from the rain. What an incredible donkey!

Vuyo felt comforted, and although he still felt scared, he whispered to Unam, 'Thank you, Unam, you are such a wonderful donkey and I am sure that someone will find us soon.' At that moment Unam started braying.



Meanwhile Vuyo's family had become worried. As the storm got worse, they decided to go out and search for him. When they heard a loud braying they followed the sound until it guided them to where Vuyo lay under the cart beside the road. He was shaking and cold, but safe. Relieved to see them, Vuyo struggled up and together his family laid him in the cart. They helped Unam pull the cart back on to the path before returning home together.

Vuyo's mother gave him dry clothes and a hot cup of tea in bed. Thembisa led Unam to the stable where he rubbed him down and gave him his favourite treat of carrots and fresh, dry straw to sleep on.

Vuyo's first trip to the market on his own had been eventful and even quite dangerous, but Unam had protected him. That evening, whilst sitting around a warm fire, everyone agreed how lucky they were to have a donkey as clever and strong as Unam. Thanks to Unam, Vuyo had only sprained his ankle and after a few days rest he felt ready to go to market again.