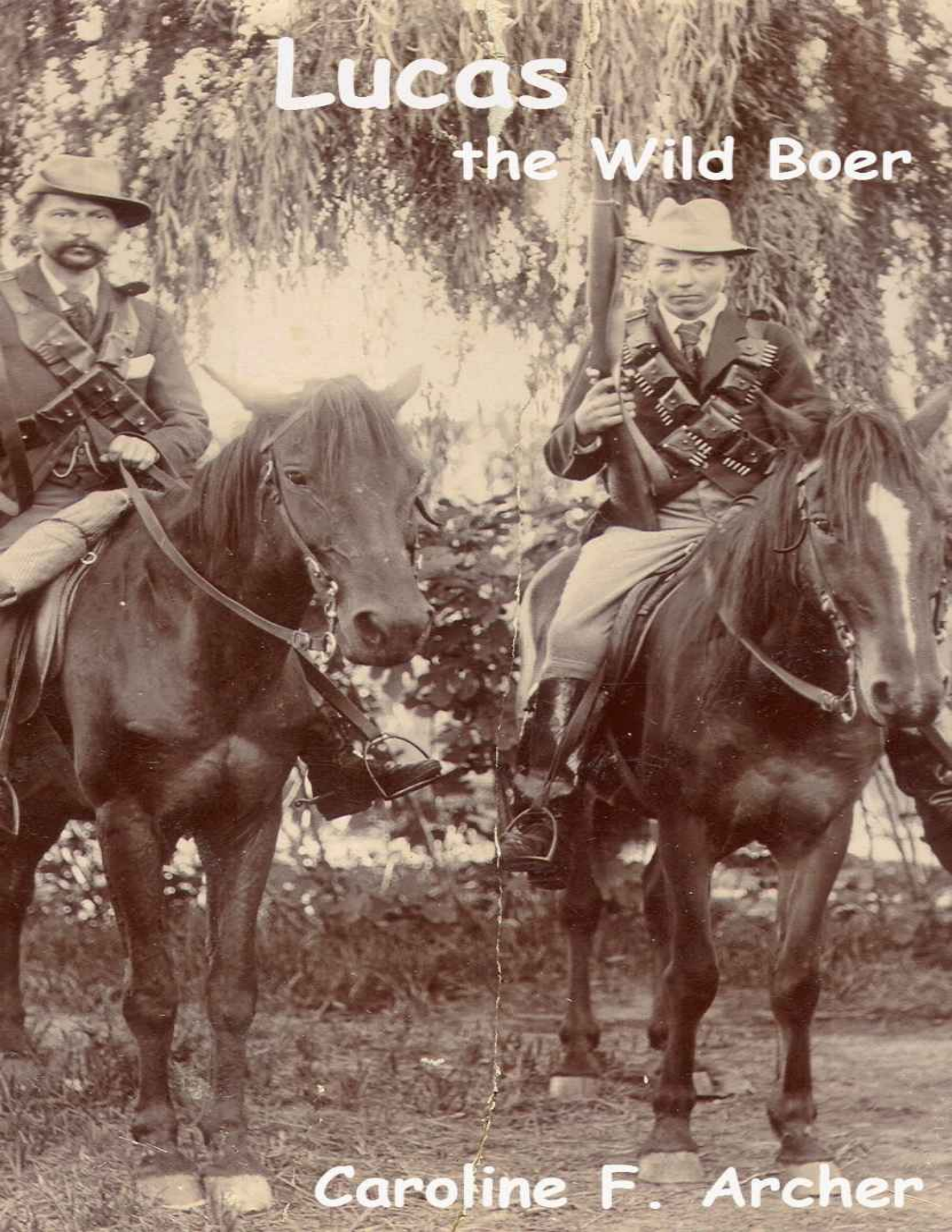
Lucas
the Wild Boer



Caroline F. Archer

Lucas, the Wild Boer

by Caroline F. Archer

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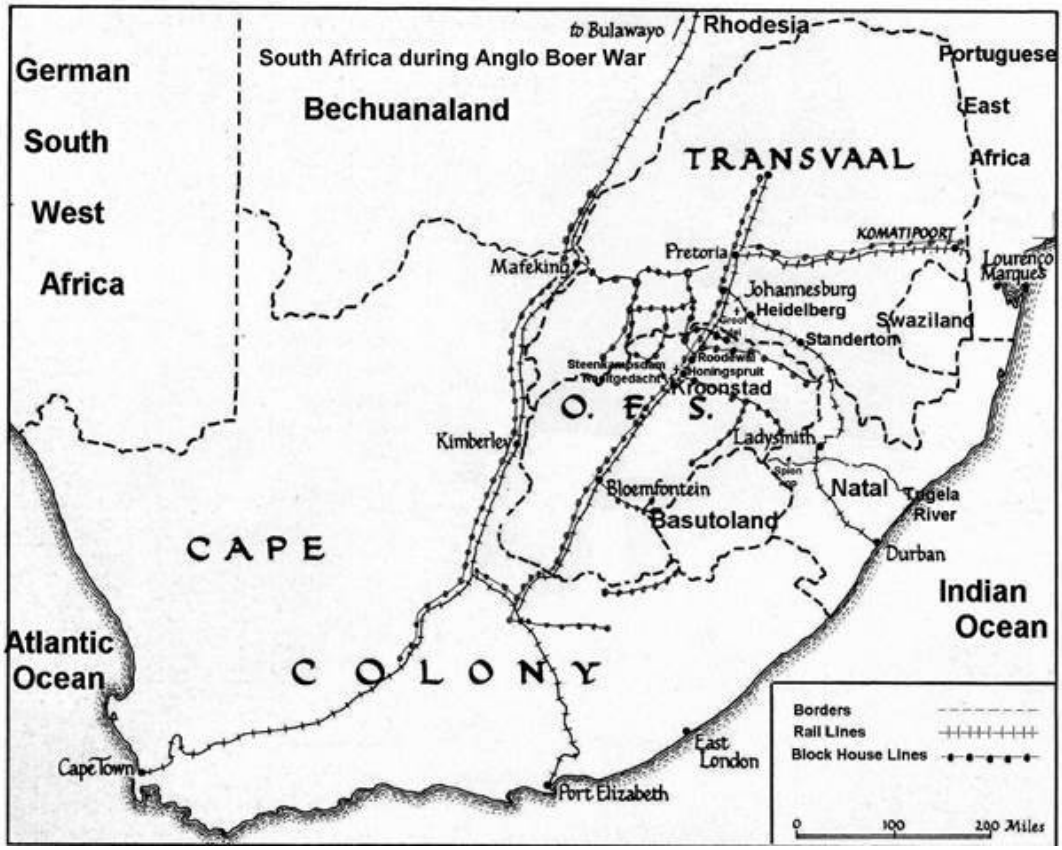
Broad and Narrow Way



Map of SA with Block Houses and railway Lines

Vocabulary

abba	carrying of baby on back, often held in place with blanket
biltong	beef or game, pickled, spiced and dried
blaasbalk	bellows
Boer	farmer
braai	roast
braaivleis	barbecue meat
broer	brother
burgher	citizen
dominee	minister or preacher
gogga	insect
gogo	old woman (respectful, from Zulu)
groot trek	great migration
hensopper	one who surrenders or even traitor
herneuter	jack-knife
honing	honey
khaki	British soldier
klein	small
kloof	cleft
kop	head
kwartel	quail
lekkerlê	lie comfortably
lobola	bride-price (from Zulu & Sotho)
meester	master, teacher
motto kiss	hard candy, with romantic messages
muti	medicine (cultural, from Zulu)
neef/nefie	male cousin
nig/niggie	female cousin
oom	uncle
rand	ridge, range of hills
spruit	stream
stoep	stoop
spaaider	spider, light horse-drawn carriage
suurkrop	sour-crop
tant	aunt
Tikoloshe	small, malicious, magical character from African folklore
Uitlander	foreigner

Vierkleur	Four-colour, flag of the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek (ZAR)
vlei	marsh
Volksraad	Parliament
Voortrekker	pioneer

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The Nooitgedacht Children

It is a Sunday afternoon on a farmyard. Silence spills from the drifting clouds. A few disgruntled hens are gossiping under the waggon. Six homemade plough shares and a wooden harrow are propped against the barn wall. Through the open door, Lucas notices his father's long saw and waggon shaft neatly suspended from brackets, a hand-mill and a pounding-block next to the pepper tree. A wispy breeze is churning the burnt-out ashes in the dirt-oven. Patches of shade dot the front garden.

Lucas and Margareet are lying on their backs. Tufts of sheep shearings cover the sky. The children are trying to identify cloud-images. Margareet supports herself on one elbow. She is uncommonly quiet. She dips a forefinger in her mouth and rubs at a smudge on Lucas's cheek. Her skinny body hardly fills out her smock.

Lucas flings himself on top of Greet and hugs her. She laughs, squirms free: "You are sticky with sweat!"

That Monday morning, her father, *oom* Peens, complains of a back so out of joint, that it is crushing his kidneys. This condition, he believes, is caused by hardship and suffering.

His wife, *tant* Sussie, believes differently. If there is a creature on this vale of tears with reason for complaint the Dear Lord knows it is herself seeing as she is burdened with this useless old man that cannot even tie his own laces and herself sick with the gout and maybe her only way out of all this misery would be the great beyond when at long last she'll find rest in the shade of the cypresses and please do not take this up the wrong way as she is not ungrateful but this last batch of home-boiled soap has the most disgusting tinge to it and to top it all the chickens are miserable with swollen necks and refuse to lay eggs and she cannot tell what keeps her going…

It is difficult to follow *tant* Sussie's never-ending jeremiad. She hardly ever stops to consider.

Oom Peens volunteers: “Sussie, if you are thinking of tottering off to the graveyard and joining Pa and Ma, rest their souls, I feel like going with.”

Pa Lucas says that there is no time for loafing. There’s work to be done. He then adds quietly: “Born a plodder, always a plodder.”

Pa Lucas is of the opinion that *tant* Sussie’s chickens will never amount to much. They lack brains in those tiny, misshapen heads. Just see those shrivelled combs: scaly! Hens like these, with their dim, beady eyes, always disappoint. They turn out to be egg-eaters and are too stringy to roast for Sunday dinner. Come month-end he’ll take *tant* Sussie to the Kroonstad Poultry Show so that she can learn what brood-hens should look like. These poor specimens are teeming with lice; just watch them stagger around on swollen claws. Not to mention those lacklustre feathers! The castor oil in the medicine box is too precious to waste on this lot. Nursing them would be like throwing money out the window! Neglect and mouldy feed have caused this disaster.

Tant Sussie: “A share cropper’s* life is not an easy one I am not complaining simply speaking from the heart.” *Tant* Sussie and the children have been treating disease-ridden chickens all morning. Lucas grabs each chicken in turn. Margareet dribbles generous amounts of castor oil down their bills and her mother, *tant* Sussie, milks the sticky liquid down their throats.

Lucas’s mother, *tant* Susannah, pays them a visit. She is convinced that, come evening, the children and *tant* Sussie will be covered with lice. They must please bear in mind that she’s warned them. Jan Ndlebe is gardening, but she’ll order him to clean the coops thoroughly. Setting fire to the hen-coop might be the only option. Farming at a loss simply does not make sense. Jan is thorough (which is more than can be said of this threesome).

“Just watch out for the watery green chicken-shit!”

Bedlam reigns. Startled chickens flutter in every which direction. *Oom* Peens does not get involved. He shifts his chair to keep to the shade. He says that his nerves

are shot and that the squawking fowl bring to mind the Day of Reckoning.

The threesome work furiously. *Tant* Sussie and the children nurse the scaly claws at the same time as tending to *Suurkrop*. They apply paraffin to the scaly claws. The tin will soon be empty. *Tant* Sussie says that if Jan does not stop smoking his pipe the entire roost is bound to catch fire.

The Free State heat is a remorseless, unwanted visitor. Much to Aunt Sussie's dismay, Jan notices a few chickens with sore eyes.

Tant Sussie flings up her arms: "O that flesh and blood should suffer like this the floors will have to be lime-washed and the swellings cleaned and just look at those chicks with gape-worm just watch the poor creatures stretching their necks and choking as if their very lives depend on breathing!"

These are the people of Nooitgedacht. In the large homestead: Lukas and Susannah van der Merwe and their firstborn, Lucas. Time disappears the way old pennies do. We intend to grow familiar with these people and accompany Lucas. We meet him as a sturdy five-year-old.

Ma Susannah is of Huguenot descent. Close friends and family from the Cape Colony regularly visit the farm. Ma Susannah's father is a member of the Free State *Volksraad*. This farm has been his wedding gift to his daughter. It is situated in the district of Roodewal. Pa Lukas has brought to this union a small fortune amassed at the diggers' village of Cullinan. The Van der Merwes are noted for their hospitality. Even the third and fourth generations have been burdened with implicit faith in the integrity of their fellow man.

Greet, the share-cropper's daughter, is at the very centre of Lucas's existence. She is *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens's only child. Greet lives in the cottage next to the blue gum trees.

Tant Sussie's words are little balls of buckshot without much sense of direction. In response to her voice, the guinea fowl in the yard rise up trumpeting. *Oom* Peens is a born victim and suffers in silence. He moves only when forced to and not very vigorously at that. He pursues shady or sunny patches, depending on the season, by shifting his thong chair around the cottage.

Greet is gifted with second sight. According to *tant* Sussie, Greet's birth has been agony as it tore at her body, picking apart every nerve as one would faulty embroidery.

"It was a strange business heavens above the entire little head was covered in afterbirth from the very beginning I could tell that Greet is special like a seer."

Greet is squatting in the dust and scratching at an ant-lion trap, using a twig of thatch: "*GOGGA, GOGGA,* please peep out,

I'm knocking at your door."

She digs until the dusty little bug scrambles up the sandy funnel.

Greet doesn't speak the way other people do. She puffs out little speech bubbles. One has to stand close to the brim of her bonnet in order to hear.

"Lucas," she whispers, "see those clouds? The angels are listening. Take care what you say."

Just like that.

She thinks in clusters of three, putting up three fingers. Like this:

"Lucas, which of these three burrow deepest?

- The ant-lion.
- The dung-beetle.

- The trap-door spider."

When teaching the marigolds in the front garden:

"Which of these do you like best?

- Hunting for tree-gum.
- Forfeits.
- Eating green-fig jam."

Greet wishes to lay claim to Lucas's every thought.

It is late evening when they have their feet washed in the zinc bowl. *Tant* Sussie scrubs feverishly. She and *oom* Peens have been giving each other the silent treatment this past week. *Tant* Sussie is a big woman. She sits on the yellow wood trunk and uses rubbing-stone and homemade soap. Lucas and Greet cling to the thong bench to avoid slipping into the suds. The coffeepot percolates on the grid. *Oom* Lukas sits on a folding-chair. He uses an awl to stretch heel skin of the black wildebeest to repair worn shoes.

Margareet whispers: "Lucas, what hurts most?

- Frostbitten toes.
- Crow's bite.
- Chapped heels."

Margareet is a few inches taller and two years older than Lucas. He is the only person in whom she confides. Tonight they sit side by side on the bench, their feet dangling above the bowl.

"That last thing, Greet."

Lucas peers up into Greet's face. His parents exchange a smile. Greet's face is framed by soft curls that escape the severe plait. Her cheeks are flushed with sunburn. Lucas experiences a pang of love.


C. Schade
Worcester, Mass.

Market day preparations

"*Jager, Tier*, yoke!

Smelt, Vuur, yoke!

Tobias, Lap, back!

Geelbek, Stap, over!

Skilder, Koos, WHOA!

Rooiland, Boontjie,

Spiegel, Kroontjie! HOOKHANEOU"

The oxen are being yoked. Our people are on their way to Kroonstad for market day and Communion week. The long waggon has pulled up in front of the sharecropper's cottage. Jan Ndlebe puts the oxen through their paces. He is ready to connect the coupling bar. Boos snorts and tosses. The stock-whip cracks.

Pa Lukas mutters that Jan shouldn't leave outsiders with the impression that the owner of Nooitgedacht is in dire straits: why such a confusion of colours in the team? He suspects that there might be a few cows in this motely team. Jan shouldn't give the other visitors at Kroonstad market square reason to believe that he, Lukas, is financially embarrassed.

Dawn is seeping higher. The breeze is mild. *Tant* Sussie's chickens start clucking discontentedly on their perches. A rooster crows, cracking the shell of the morning. Yolk leaks onto the farmyard.

Tant Sussie is taking command of the farm workers. Market day is her and Ma Susannah's opportunity to earn pocket money. The farmhands carry baskets to the waggon: vegetables from the back garden, a whole batch of creamy soap, homemade jam in earthenware pots, sealed with white, starched patches of flannel and a few dozen eggs. "Goodness," gasps t*ant* Sussie, "that I have to discover the bits of sticky

down on the shells at the very last minute these disgusting chickens shit all over the nests I'll have to send Martha to rinse the lot in the tub at the back door and with neef Lukas all fired up to get going and me in the grip of palpitations where is the Lennon's Life Essence!"

Pa Lukas personally attends to the hides and thongs. This way he is ensured of a job well done. Attend to it yourself if you want good results; the hides of cows, kudu skins for whiplashes, steenbuck skin for the poppers at the end of the whiplashes, as well as whips woven into quirts and horsewhips. All these need to be carefully packed. "If one wishes for a job well done, one should simply do it oneself." Pa Lukas talks within earshot of *oom* Peens. Pride of ownership curls *pa* Lucas's mouth.

Oom Peens doesn't respond. The old plodder has nothing much to say in self-defence. He tries to stay out of harm's way. He keeps himself entertained with his tobacco-pouch. He's struggling to keep up his strength. His body aches. He avoids eye contact. His tobacco-pouch is made from the maw of a slaughtered ewe. He sits fingering the intricate honeycomb pattern.

Ma Susannah is in the bedroom still, getting dressed. She takes pride in her appearance. She intends to have her moment of glory. At long last ma Susannah shuts the front door. When Pa Lukas sees her walking up to the *spaaider*, he falls silent. He admires her openly, as he adores her. Simply watching her, gives him satisfaction. He whistles to voice his approval.

This last month he had to deal with lamb mortalities and foot rot. Today he is feeling boisterous and relaxed. Jan's sons will have to cope on the farm all by themselves this weekend. Pa Lukas is looking forward to company on market-day. He intends to savour the peace and blessings of Church Communion in town. At this very moment he is the great performer. The stage is set for his latest flash of wit. He affects a squeaky voice:

"Three women were eager to show off their latest fashion accessories: the first, her sparkling ring, the second, new boots and the third, earrings. They were at a tea-party. The first stepped up confidently, stabbing at the air with her ring finger:

‘See, oh see, there goes a spider!’

The second was not to be outdone. She pointed her toes and pulled up her skirts ever so slightly. Her new shoe hovered just above floor level:

‘Shall I trample it?’

The last, not to be outdone, pushed the others out of her way. She shook her head, causing her dangling earrings to sparkle, then exclaimed:

‘Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!’ ”

Greet and Lucas collapse with laughter. Ma Susannah blushes. She is dressed in her weekend finery. A dainty bonnet is fixed jauntily to her bun. On its crown perches a stuffed sparrow. She has draped a fox fur cape around her shoulders. The pointed nose and bushy tail meet under her chin. “Have I been so preoccupied with farming that I’ve neglected you, my darling wife? I’ll make amends by spoiling you this weekend!”

The trip to Kroonstad

Greet is sitting bolt upright in the *spaaider*. She is accompanying the boy and his parents. Ma Sussie and Pa Peens will follow them in the waggon. Pa Peens's feather bed has been fluffed out under the bonnet of the waggon.

In the light of dawn, Greet's profile resembles that of a rubbing or engraving not unlike the one made of the pastor's wife by the *kunsmeester* Johannes Zweinenberg. Zweinenberg recently travelled the district carting along his silhouette chair and pantograph.

Lucas snuggles up to Greet. He covers their legs with the patchwork quilt and then proffers the small bag of sliced *biltong*. Kroonstad is a long distance from the farm and he doubts that Greet has had breakfast.

The horses prance. The *spaaider* jolts. It is the start of a new adventure and the dapple-greys pull smoothly; in unison. They are well-bred carthorses: broad of rump, a clean stance of the hind legs, well-proportioned and with slender necks held high.

The Free State has been blessed with rain. Into the distance the grassland, windswept and bright: blue-grass, sundew, barley. Thorn bush crowds out more succulent shrubs. Baboon's tail grows along the ridges. The sky is an immense, innocent blue.

The children share the back seat. Greet has been quiet. Suddenly she forms a triangle with her index fingers and thumbs. Through this, she scans the sky. She then holds up the triangle for Lucas to peer through:

"See, Lucas, I wish to buy a ribbon this colour in Kroonstad; blue-bag blue. Would that look pretty in my hair?"

The question catches Lucas off guard. His heart answers:

"Greet, if you were wearing a burlap sack, you'd still be beautiful. You would look pretty wearing the worn bag at the back door." He whispers:

"Yes, Greet."

The farms sweep by:

NOOITVERGETEN, ROODEWAL, RIETKUIL, LANGDEEL, WELGEVONDEN.

For a while he concentrates on spotting small game. He spots a scrawny lynx in a donga, a skunk, one isolated hare, thin-tailed meercat sitting motionless at their burrow, rock-rabbits on a rocky outcrop, a flock of guinea-fowl, a pheasant on an anthill, a butcher-bird's larder staked to a fence. Pa Lukas identifies the shrub: knob-thorn and flame-thorn.

In the waggon, this side of Wolwehoek, *oom* Peens sits on his buttocks on the featherbed. His head dangles as listlessly as that of a straw doll. Now that he and *tant* Sussie are on their own, he wishes to give vent to his pent up feelings of discontent. His chin shoots out: He has not been overly-pleased with neef Lukas's pepperiness this past week. If he, Peens Breedt, has to put those pathetic young rams' ability to breed to the test a second time! If the dashed things cannot even mount the feeding-trough, how much harder would the miserable things find mounting the ewes! In any case, he, Peens, is not to be blamed for the fact that somebody neglected closing the gates, allowing the pizzle-sick ram to go tearing down the hill, determined to cover the entire flock of ewes. He talks in a tired, edgy voice.

He can't be expected to keep an eye on everything that occurs on the farm all by himself. His thin body folds into itself. All this suffering weighs heavily on his mind.

Tant Sussie is of the opinion that it is not expected of him Peens to be all over the place as a long as he doesn't drown his sorrows about his losses at the Zuringkrans horse-racing in the Central Hotel keeping company with befuddled goods transporters she is content and it has not escaped her notice that van Rhyneveld serves tots of liquor from under the counter of his general store as everybody is sure to be aware as it is for that very reason that the minister has forbidden him the use of the Sacraments. Her lips are a reprimand.

Late afternoon, it is quiet in the waggon with only *tant* Sussie, looking forward to doing window-shopping at Clark and Coulson and at James Pulleyn's little shops in the main street of Kroonstad. Her calculations do not always tally:

brown sugar, 9p./lb.

tea 4/6.

paraffin 2/6.

Tant Sussie would like to know the price Hermaans Handjies charges for his imported multipurpose Nalther pills and if only he could witness Peen's terrible suffering Handjies might have a change of heart and take pity and provide her with a handful of these pills and who can predict they might even cure the pizzle-sick ram.

RHENOSTERKOP, VRISCHGEWAAGD, RUSTIG.

In the *spaaider* Margareet is unusually quiet. She is exhausted. *Tant* Susannah tries to remove the large bonnet, only to discover that the child's mother has cordonnet-stitched it to Greet's thick plaits. *Tant* Sussie must have done this in order to prevent the bonnet from being whipped off by the breeze. Here, under the protection of the hood of the *spaaider*, it is an unnecessary precaution. *Oom* Lukas pulls up. He takes out his jack-knife and painstakingly unpicks the stitches. *Tant* Susannah puts the bonnet in the trunk. Greet sighs and rests her head against the boy's shoulder.

Tant Susannah mutters: "awfully skinny for an eight year old."

Oom Lukas's words are barely audible. "I don't consider Peens to be a very good parent, but I have to admit that Greet is a clever, delicate child."

Lucas has just turned six. He is exhausted and falls asleep. The adults discuss the diamond-fields: Dawid Malan has picked up a big stone on the banks of the Vals River. Thirty small diamonds have recently been discovered on the farm Driekop.

Nooitgedacht, however, must remain farmland. Farming is a way of life and living and not simply a way of making money.



Covered Ox Wagon

The Boarding House

Late Thursday afternoon, the *spaaider* reaches Kroonstad. The waggon is travelling at a much slower pace and tonight *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens will unyoke the oxen in the veld. Here, at Kroonstad, it smells of river and of willow-green. At the river pool the finches are nesting in the reed. At Klipplaatdrift, just this side of the wool-scouring mill and the flour mill, the *spaaider* crosses the drift. Krans-pigeon and heron frequent the sandy slopes.

Pa Lukas reads out loud the street names: Brand Street, Hill Street, President Street, Church Street. The street lamp lighter has lit the oil-lamps. From a distance one can sense activity at the market-square. Several landaus and waggons are pulled up here. Tents have been pitched. Braai fires send up thin plumes of smoke. An accordion player plays a slow waltz; then starts on some cheerful folk-song.

Oom Lukas has booked lodging at Mrs Loxton's respectable boarding-house. He wishes to spoil his wife with a bit of luxury, but does not wish to desecrate the Communion weekend by staying at the hotel. Tomorrow night the family will join the Communion goers at the square. One wishes to share in the sanctity of the weekend. Evening falls in a thickening, ashy dusk.

To the children the evening seems unreal. The family sits with other boarders on the step of the boarding house under suspended lanterns. Six green doors face the street. Sweet-smelling Gardenias grow all along the garden-path and fill the night with their scent. The lamps in the communal dining room are lit and one can see the baked dishes through the screening gauze of the sliding windows. A tall lodger is giving Pa a detailed description of the local practitioner's approach to hypnosis and his knowledge of steam engines. Mr Coulson, a prosperous businessman, has had a fan driven by compressed air installed in his parlour.

Greet's eyes sparkle. She feels a little unsure of herself in this unusual environment and keeps close to Lucas. Just before turning in, the children take turns at visiting the outhouse.

There are four iron bedsteads in the room. The floral curtain is suspended from metal rings. The grain of the wooden floor feels rough under Lucas's bare soles. A parched fern teeters on its stand next to a wash-stand with enamelled pitchers and wash basins. Greet wonders why everyone has neglected watering the fern. Surely the fern must be very thirsty as it is within smelling distance of the water in the basin. There is also a small flask of toilet vinegar for the use of the guests.

Tonight Lucas and Greet escape a foot scrubbing. *Tant* Susannah is keen on resuming her visit with her friends on the step. She digs out the children's nightdresses from the travelling trunk and slips them over their heads. Then she shakes the worst creases from their town clothes and drapes these over the thong chair. The children now have to fend for themselves. She'll be on the step, she indicates with her head. She waits for them to say their evening prayers, gives the two of them a backward glance, and leaves the door slightly ajar.

The oil lamp is turned low. Greet is the first to jump up. She softly closes the door. She smiles at Lucas and flits around the room so that her fingers brush against the iron bedsteads, the yellowed wallpaper with the flower motifs, the bureau. She pings her foot against the big porcelain chamber pot under one of the beds. Greet stands on tip-toe in front of the washstand, then tips the pitcher and splashes water into the basin. Craning her neck with the effort, she puts the basin on the floor.

Together the children move the bench a little closer to the basin and plunge their feet into the water. Greet jumps up to fetch the flask of toilet-vinegar, sloshing a wet trail all the way to the wash stand. Her eyes lock onto Lucas's. Tonight her eyes are disconcertingly blue. Slowly she removes the stained stopper and pours a liberal amount of vinegar into the basin. Lucas fans his face. For a while they sit while their feet make soft, squishy sounds on the bottom of the basin.

When their feet are wrinkly, Greet shoves the basin back onto the stand. It is much easier this time, as the basin is considerably lighter. There is a large vinegar stain on the floorboards. Greet moves the wobbly fern stand a little in order to cover

the spot. Cupping her hands, she dribbles some water over the fern and turns down the lantern.

Lucas lies down on the guest house bed. From under eyelids heavy with sleep, he watches the adults move about on the *step*. The curtain is well worn and he can identify his father's broad shoulders on the *step* chair in front of the window. Lucas lies listening to their voices; to sound meeting sound, conversations circling one another and becoming a gentle dance. The grown ups fall quiet, reflecting. The men light their pipes and the sweet smell of tobacco permeates the bedroom. Greet sighs in her sleep. The coir-mattress is hard. Lucas tosses and turns, then drops off to sleep.

Market day and shopping

Early that Friday morning, *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens arrive at the marketplace in the market-waggon. There is plenty to take care of and *tant* Sussie's face soon shines with perspiration.

On arrival at the square, *tant* Sussie dons her apron and starts ordering the men about. She has a hard time getting the three of them to co-operate. *Oom* Peens feels vulnerable. Every so often he sneaks a glance at the hotel.

The pay that Kleinjan Ndlebe has received for holding the reins, is burning a hole in his pocket. His father, Jan Ndlebe, is the only reliable member of *tant* Sussie's team. There is a considerable load of vegetables as well as other merchandise that needs to be off-loaded and sold. *Tant* Sussie can only hope that the eggs have not cracked during the trip. She heaves a sigh of relief when she sees *neef* Lukas's broad-brimmed hat bobbing towards them.

By the time she and Jan have sold all the produce, it is swelteringly hot at the marketplace. Kleinjan sprints up to the market-master's office with the receipts. He queues up and awaits *tant* Sussie's arrival; she has to receive the payments herself.

Meanwhile, at the boarding house in upper town, *tant* Susannah has met with a soul mate. The lady is a young widow who boards at the lodging-house. The two women go shopping. The children saunter along contentedly. The day is bright and windswept, the shop windows sharply defined. The laughter on *ma* Susannah's face is light, delicate, like lint on a Sunday jacket.

The women have no interest in the joiner's shops, saddleries and farriers. With singleness of purpose, they saunter past the courthouse and post office.

They enter the drapery-stores. They feel at ease in these shops that smell of starch, dye and sewing machine oil. There is such a wide selection of fabrics. The few yards of *mouselline de laine* enchant the widow. It is priced at only 10p. a yard. *Tant* Susannah loves the feel of mohair. It is priced at 2/- a yard.

Lucas accidentally bumps against the counter. A roll of dress material thuds to the floor. A shop assistant coughs. He approaches the women, then watches with approval when he sees *tant* Susannah draped in chintz. She is clutching the fabric under her chin and is pirouetting in front of a full-length mirror.

For the first time it strikes Lucas that his mother is very attractive. He soon becomes bored with all the finery that women find interesting and studies the mechanics of the sewing machine at the window.

Greet has turned pale. She holds her breath when excited. The dressmaker is talkative this morning. "Outfitting an attractive customer is such a privilege," she wheedles. The saleswoman seats the ladies at a corner table and serves them tea. She puts a shoebox filled with envelopes of Beeton dress-patterns in front of them. Her voice is crisp like fresh strawberries:

"Why not buy the little girl a rag doll dressed in the same fabric as that of your dress?"

The saleslady puts on her reading glasses and squints at Greet, who is sitting in front of a cabinet containing lace and buttons. Then Lucas quietly holds up the roll of blue ribbon to remind his mother to buy Greet a ribbon: bluebag blue.

It is past twelve when the four shoppers return to the boarding house. They are carrying quite a few parcels. *Tant* Susannah immediately starts packing clothes and nightshirts; the family is going to join the rest of the church community at the square where *Tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens are awaiting the arrival of the van der Merwe family and their daughter, Greet. They have pitched tent next to the Nooitgedacht waggon.

Ma Susannah is nursing a guilty conscience. She feels guilty about having bought a new cloak. The Lord's Supper is not to be desecrated by worldly-mindedness.

Communion and The Broad Way and The Narrow Way

Long after, the boy would relive the scene: his mother is sitting on a folding-chair near the campfire. It is the Friday evening preceding Holy Communion. *Tant* Susannah has draped the new cloak around her shoulders. It comes to good use, as a nippy breeze stirs the ashes of the campfire and twilight shadows the sky. The night sky becomes a star-eaten blanket. *Ma* Susannah is aware of the admiring glances. She is radiantly happy.

Then, in front of Lucas's very eyes, his father is transformed into a cruel stranger. *Oom* Lukas's laughter becomes strained. He becomes talkative. For a short while discussions run dry. *Pa* Lukas sneers:

"Goodness, Wife, in order for a woman to wear such a beautiful shawl, she needs to take care of her skin. In future, try to avoid the harsh rays of the sun."

Silence sits down amidst them. Lucas is aware of the cruelty in his father's gaze. His father's lips are pursed. For a split second it seems as if *pa* Lukas regrets the insult. He pushes out his chin defiantly and scratches at his boot cap with a twig.

Ma Susannah's eyes grow dull. She lowers them to her lap and blushes fiercely. An embarrassed silence drops from the night sky. Weak conversations pass over the fire:

"Has the prosperous owner of Nooitgedacht discovered a way of dealing with stock disease? Wynand's sheep are dropping like flies."

The boy, Lucas, is reminded of the day his dog dropped his prize pigeon at his feet.

Greet puts a protective arm around Lucas:

"Let's leave, Lucas."

The boy dozes off next to Kleinjan Ndlebe on the sailcloth under the Nooitgedacht waggon. The coarse fabric imprints on his face. Towards morning, he

hears someone sobbing. When he wakes up, he discovers that his cheeks are wet. He flings an arm across Kleinjan's chest. Sleep enfolds him in its coal-black blanket. Communion-day dawns. Lucas lies watching dawn leaking between the waggons. The laughter of a lemon-dove sounds from the well. None of the grown-ups raise their voices above a whisper, as some fellow campers are still asleep. *Tant* Sussie pulls a groaning Lucas from under the waggon. He has to stand in front of the water pump. Up with the arms! *Tant* Sussie pulls his shirt over his head. Everything, save his underpants, is swept away. He stands shivering; too sleepy to protest. Lucas gasps for breath when a bucketful of cold water hits his head and shoulders. *Tant* Sussie rubs him down with a rough towel. Greet is skipping at the breakfast fires. She is wearing the blue ribbon in her hair.

Greet enjoys church services. She has unshakeable faith and trusts in three irrefutable facts:

- the existence of God our Father,
- a caring Jesus and
- an unrelenting conscience.

Lucas sits next to Greet. He sees that *Meester* from the farm school has made an inscription on the first page of Greet's hymnbook. Meester has drawn two doves and a family tree. Below that he has written her name. Greet mouths the words for Lucas's benefit: "Margaretha Susara Breedt." The letters are printed with a goose quill and flowers decorate the border of the page.

The congregation is dressed in their Sunday best. Petticoats swish as the women rise to sing. Lucas kicks lightly against the heel of Greet's shoe, but now the service has started, she does not turn her head. She frowns and flicks a thick plait over her shoulder.

Standing next to the children, *oom* Peens is a changed man. He is, without a doubt, the lead singer. With his scrawny body pulled upright, he sings with complete

abandon. *Oom* Peens's voice is clear and in tune, so much so that, when Lucas closes his eyes, he envisions the Archangel Gabriel. *Oom* Peens's church suit reeks of pipe tobacco and the pungent sweetness of the pipe oil. This does not quite fit in with the image of the angel.

The Minister preaches damnation, fire and brimstone. The boy prays with all of his trembling being that the good Lord will not rush the angel who carries the trumpet. Lucas has always been intimidated by sharp cracks and is not entirely comfortable with the prospect of Doomsday.

It is hard to control the lively twins that need to be baptised. Lodewikus, Albertus, Gehasius Albertyn refuses to approach the font.

After the service, the children retire to the feather mattress in the waggon. Greet shows Lucas the lithography of *The Broad Way and the Narrow Way* that *tant* Sussie keeps in the waggon trunk. It is a coloured folk illustration depicting the road to death and damnation and the dwindling road to life and salvation. The Broad Way twists past buildings such as the *"dance hall, the lottery and the theatre*." *"Sabbath defilers*" pass here and joke frivolously. A terrible fire rages at the end of this road. Devastating clouds of smoke, streaked with lighting, billow skywards. It reminds Lucas of the day that somebody set fire to the haystack at Nooitgedacht.

The narrow way meanders up a slope. Greet points out the buildings at the side of this road: the church house, Sunday school and manse. This is the pathway to the city of gold, Jerusalem. At the top of the page is the *Omniscient Eye*.

The children lean on their elbows. They study the lithography with their eyes inches above the glossy surface of the illustration. Greet points out characters in the illustration with her finger.

"See, Lucas, there we are: my mom and I in front, walking past the good Lord's cross. The cross is spurting water. I have almost reached the small bridge. There you are with your mother, directly opposite the minister, just entering the small opening in the wall. We're all on our way to Heaven."

Lucas drivels on the page:

“But Greet, are you sure? I don’t have a green jacket like the one the boy in the picture is wearing.”

“That green jacket is still going to be passed on to you by your *neef* Flippie.”

“Which one of these is my father, Greet?”



Lambing season at Nooitgedacht

Sultry summer days shorten. Winter with its deserted trees is harsh. Greet and Lucas squat against the outside oven. The whitewashed dome of the oven gives off a glow. An untimely lambing season is coming to an end. A stone kraal has been stacked against the kitchen wall. This gives shelter to hand-fed lambs.

Pa Lukas is upset by the ewes' lack of mothering instinct. This results from poor planning and inbreeding. He himself is to be blamed. Daily he kneels in mud soaked urine and runny dung, bottle-feeding the orphans with lukewarm milk and rubber teats. All the while he talks to the orphans, soothingly and patiently.

A pitiful flock of lambs press against Lucas and Greet. Greet gets stuck in with amazing dexterity. After the first anxious gulps of air, the lamb latches on like a fevered tick. Twitching its tail the lamb nudges, the milk foaming from the pink lips and cupped tongue.

The veld is blanketed with frost. The air is crisp and the trees and homestead are stark against the background of winter grey.

Moving between kitchen and outside oven, *tant* Sussie resembles a strange creature. She is wearing a fur mask over her nose and cheeks and muffs protect her hands against frostbite. *Pa* Lukas jumps aside in mock fear when she unexpectedly swings open the lower door.

Ma Susannah is in the kitchen. She dabs bread with lavish scoops from the lard pot. After breakfast the children have to stay out of her way. There is baking to be done. This morning Pa Lukas feels a zest for life. He grabs *tant* Susannah round the waist, singing and stomping:

"Old tante Koba

she's quite slow;

she stirs her coffee

with her big toe!

She walks like a crab,

She wiggles like a barbell,

She's the ugliest ever born!" (folk song.)

Greet and Lucas, shouting with laughter, shuffle along. Lucas jerks his head away when Greet gives him a sticky grape jam kiss.

Still chewing, Greet asks:

"Lucas, what is nicest?

- Grape jam,
- lard, or
- pot bread."

"All of those, Greet."



Dirt oven

That Rainy Season

Misfortunes that one expects, are seldom the blows that life metes out. The surprise attacks; those are the hardest to recover from. Just like the day that the bottom of the wooden wash-bowl gave and the precious dinner set, (an heirloom once carted all the way from the Colony to Nooitgedacht), scattered over the peach-pit floor and brass utensils. There you stand, left with the stink wood frame, clinging to the handles. Your first reaction is to repair with glue. You wish to recover some treasures, but realise that the damage is too great.

Ma Susannah says never mind, these are only earthly things. She sweeps the fragments of porcelain into the steel dust scoop and discards them with the rubbish. Unfortunately, the damage is not always limited to material possessions.

The adults say that Greet will have to start attending school on a weekly basis. *Meester*, headmaster at the farm school, is of the opinion that her staying at home is a waste of God-given talent: Greet is gifted. The boy will simply have to accompany her to school if the two are as inseparable as their parents claim them to be. Lucas will be six in a few months' time. Perhaps he will benefit from observing the older pupils.

Pa Lukas is not convinced that his child could pick up knowledge from the ignorant Koster and Pistorius offspring. The only things Lucas is likely to pick up are cracked heels and warts, but, seeing as Meester insists, he'll send Greet and Lucas.

Then the rains arrive like a stampede. Days on end. Clouds bursting. Farm dams overflowing. Streams gushing.

It's not healthy for a farm child to be trapped indoors. Boredom causes the children to become ungovernable. The moment they are able to go outdoors, they are off to the vlei to watch the frothing debris. Greet is off without her bonnet. There are still occasional showers with the sun beating down. Then follows a monkey's-wedding drizzle. It turns oppressive.

The Wash Tub Cracks



Tant Sussie says that Greet's headaches tormented her that night. Just before dawn the fever took a firm grip.

"Acute pains and the child was feverish and ill and thirsty and confused." *Tant* Sussie talks as though she is too exhausted to think. She says that at first she thought that Greet has had a vision as Greet has been born with second sight with a caul and this is a fact. *Tant* Sussie speaks continuously, never drawing breath:

"I said to Peens that it is hard to believe that the Good Lord would allow the illness to take its course now that the vlei is flooded and not even a messenger can wade through to summon a doctor."

Lucas is sitting next to Greet's bed. It is twilight. The room smells of the family's medicines and of chicken soup. Most of the flasks in the medicine chest have

their lids screwed off. Tant Sussie simply does not have the energy to screw the lids back on. The restorative has left a brown stain on the doily on the bedside table. Margareet, who is usually so energetic, lies under the patchwork quilt. She is limp; a rag doll. She's too tired to fight the sunstroke.



Lucas recalls the imagery on the picture of the *Broad Way and the Narrow Way*. He reflects on how far ahead Greet is on this road. He throws his arms around her and

cries so that sobs rack him. He is willing to promise the Good Lord anything in his power in exchange for Greet's life.

Early morning on the third day, Greet is spent. *Oom* Peens's shoulders sag with fatigue. Three days in a row, *tant* Sussie's bun has been left to unravel in grey strands. The past three days, *oom* Lukas has been pacing the river banks. All this within three days: three days during which *tant* Susannah has tried every home remedy. Lucas refuses food and drink.

It's all in the past. It is as though Nooitgedacht's soul has been ripped out. There are two enamel coffee mugs on the trestle table in the kitchen. The room is stuffy, the day windless. Despite this, *tant* Susannah and *tant* Sussie hunch at the coffee pot. It seems as though the two women are trying to draw strength from each other. They cup the mugs in their hands. A thin layer of dust covers the flour bin and the kitchen shelves. The women of Nooitgedacht lack energy to perform even the most pressing chores.

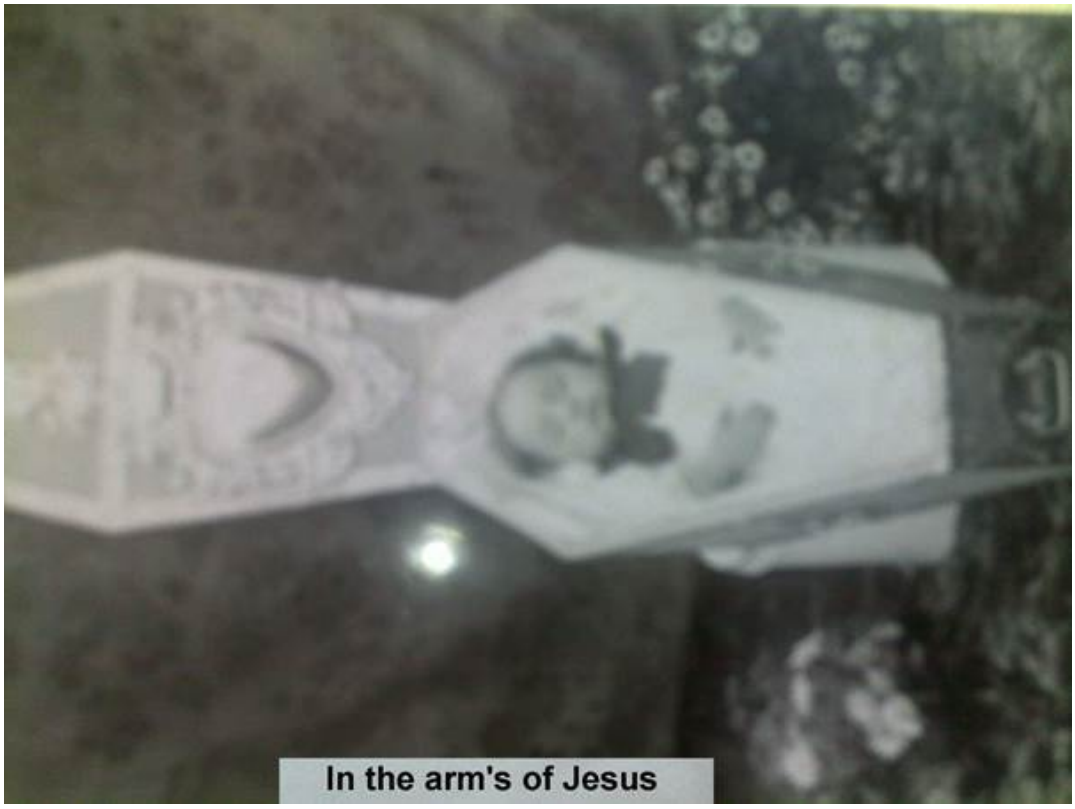
It is not often that *tant* Sussie is bereft of words. She does not want to be left on her own with her thoughts. When she wipes her eyes, sweat stains show under her armpits. A few sheaves of aromatic pepperbush chase off flies.

"Lord, I'm at a loss. If he keeps on languishing, I'll lose mine too," *tant* Susannah sighs.

Lucas is squatting in the farthest corner of the pantry. It is cooler here. The pantry is fragrant with the aroma of herbs: peppermint, rosemary, garlic and spearmint. The pot of lard on the corner shelf above his head is turning rancid. Every rack is smoothed over with his and Greet's paper cuttings. He is a small hedgehog. He hugs his knees and his cheeks are chapped with crying, his forearms encrusted with streaks of snot.

It is *oom* Lukas who casts the die, late that evening. He looks at Jan Ndlebe who is sitting on the bench next to the door, waiting for evening prayers to commence: "*Oupa* Petrus doesn't wish to farm all by himself at Heidelberg. You must

go and help him, Lucas. I've sent word that you and Jan will be leaving on Monday. It is time for you to let go of your mother's skirts. A man might suffocate here."



Life after Greet

The Journey to Grootvlei

Jan Ndlebe, trusted foreman, and Lucas, son of Lukas van der Merwe of the farm Nooitgedacht, district Kroonstad in the Free State, are sent off to Heidelberg. They take to the road in the buggy. Lucas, aged five, is going to live with his *Oupa*. It is a five day journey to *oupa* Petrus van der Merwe's farm Grootvlei in the Heidelberg district of in the *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek*. Later on, as times advance, one would estimate the distance as a hundred and nine miles in a northerly direction. A boy soon matures. Lifestyles are uncomplicated: prayer, practical consideration and the traditions of past generations, matter. The first grandson is handed over to the grandparents. A father makes a decision and sticks to it.

Lucas takes hold of the reins: on the left, the outside rein between the pinkie and second finger and the right inside rein between the second finger and index finger of his left hand. The second rein on the left between his left index and first fingers and the outside rein on the right between index finger and thumb. The way *pa* Lukas has taught him.

Jan Ndlebe is a father himself. Children must remain occupied. Lucas must not be allowed to reflect.

The morning star has just faded when the buggy drives out the gateposts of Nooitgedacht. Should he look back, Lucas would, for the very last time during the scope of fourteen years, notice the white of his mother's apron next to the verandah. On glancing around, he would see Boel disappearing around the corner of the house; one last time. One year in a human's life equals seven dog-years.

At the sheep fold, Lucas curves his fingers. The horses take a left turn along the marsh road. Jan watches Lucas covertly: the thin neck disappearing into the oversized coat, the eyes sunk into their sockets.

These are obedient Boer horses with shoulders that smoothly flow into the back and muscled thighs. When Jan gently places his hands over those of the boy and tugs at the reins, the horses trot effortlessly. *Tant* Susannah has insisted on the wind guard,

which will protect Lucas from the early morning chill. A few loose stones rattle against the splashboard. The draft pole thuds:

GREET,

GREET,

GREET.

It's a good thing that Jan is descended from a long line of storytellers. Still, he struggles to start a conversation. He does not think their leaving Nooitgedacht this morning a good thing. It's a long way to Heidelberg, but talking might help pass the time. Jan sees the erosion scarring the ploughed fields and this reminds him of the recent heavy rains. He tells Lucas the first story that comes to mind. It is the story of big waters. He tells the story of the River Maid and his voice pacifies the horses.

The River Maid

Before his good wife Martha came into his life, there was another, Emmelina. She was the most beautiful of all the women on the farm. She was very young still; strong and energetic with a firm body. Her white teeth flashed when she laughed. She laughed often: when she saw the goat kids, when the wild spinach was plentiful after the rains, when she met with him, Jan.

She was light on her feet and was always dancing: when she went to draw water, when collecting firewood, and when she saw him, Jan, approaching. He made her bangles from shiny wire. When she danced, the bangles tinkled like small goat bells.

She sang a lot: when telling the young ones stories, while stirring the porridge and when he, Jan, found it hard to fall asleep. Her voice was as sweet as the wind whistling through the reeds.

She had lovely eyes. They were dark as midnight. When she looked at him his legs went weak. At night by the fires, she had eyes for him only. She would stare at him.

The people started to talk. They said that Jan was a poor man. They whispered that it was not right that such a beautiful woman should look at him; there were other men that could pay her people more lobola.

The other men grew jealous. They saw Emmelina's eyes and body speaking to Jan when she brought him beer. They also wished to drink from her calabashes.

The women's eyes became hard when they saw their own men looking at Emmelina. They said that their men thought the beer they offered them bitter. Why should they draw water for lazy men that stare at another woman's calabashes?

There was big trouble. The men started pushing one another away in order to be able to squat at Emmelina's fire. The other women grew cold at the burnt out ashes

of their own fires. Only Emmelina laughed and danced and made up songs about the rain and the stream.

Then heavy rains came and washed away everything. The women talked. They talked about their men and about Emmelina and said: "This Emmelina with her white teeth and shiny body only makes trouble for us. Let us give her to the river; she loves the water." They talked a lot. They told the men: "See, the river is angry. It takes our harvests and washes them away. It takes our cattle and drowns them. The river wants the River Maid. Only then, will it be quiet."

The men asked: "What does a River Maid look like? Do we know such a one?" The men were tired of the women's fighting. They wished to eat and sleep and drink beer.

The women said that the River Maid was pretty with a shiny body and strong teeth. They imitated her moving her body and rattling her bangles. They rolled their eyes and sang the way Emmelina did, showing the whites of their eyes.

The men said that yes, they had seen her. Their ears hurt from the other women's never ending complaints. Besides: they were never offered beer from Emmelina's calabash. They gave Emmelina to the river so that their women would keep quiet and the river would be pleased.

"And then, Jan?"

It is the first time Lucas speaks. Jan musses the boy's hair: "Then they gave my Emmelina to the river. The women kept quiet. The river grew still. Now we are going to stop in the shade of that tree and have some coffee and rusks. My throat is dry. Look at the sun. Later, I'll tell you about the *Tikoloshe*."

It is hard going following the transport routes to Heidelberg. On the second day, Jan and Lucas encounter a train of waggons from the Colony. The merchant sells these to the farmers in the Transvaal. It is an interesting procession: an ox waggon with a team of sixteen oxen; in its wake two waggons and a Scotch cart, all strung

together. The Scotch cart in the rear hangs suspended with its draught pole trailing on the waggon in front of it. The vehicles form a procession of carts with draught poles raised and rear ends slouching.

Jan Ndlebe splits the days into shifts: from early morning till the sun is at its zenith, then from afternoon till sundown. At night he tends the horses. His hands stroke the large heads while curry combing the arched necks, the shoulders and hind-quarters. He and Lucas then squat around the fire. At night Jan pitches tent using the buck sail so that both can stretch out. Nights are cool and thick with dreams. It is during the long daily shifts that Jan, the storyteller, grows talkative.

The Tikoloshe

The previous evening they have walked the horses near a stony ridge. This morning Lucas is polishing his find with the hem of his shirt. His find consists of a few shiny stones. It is difficult to properly hold on to the rock fragments while on the move.

Jan says that now that he sees the sparkling stones, he is reminded of the pebble that the Tikoloshe places in his mouth when he wishes to vanish. He, Jan, feels that the time has come to tell Lucas about the Tikoloshe. This is Jan's version of the folk tale:

He, Jan, has always had trouble with his women. Martha and he are ready to put their little bundles of hides together and to set up house. Martha is not hard to please. She simply wishes to live near the homestead where she serves in the kitchen, as the porridge has to be cooked first thing in the morning. Porridge that is brought to the boil hastily, becomes lumpy.

Martha has already left for the homestead early morning when Jan encounters the small man. Jan is on his way to the grazing camp, where he keeps the few cows that he wishes to use as Martha's lobola. Her father is a difficult man. He will not accept a skinny cow. The matter needs to be dealt with properly with Jan's in-laws.

The little man talks softly. He is scrawny and his whole body is covered with tufts of beard. He is not shy. He unbuttons his fly and pees, not even turning his back to Jan. All the while he grumbles sullenly.

The little man wishes to know whether it's been Jan's beautiful, fat woman that has just wobbled off to the homestead. He reckons that he can assist Jan with the cattle. He can milk them and look after them. The black and white cow looks like it is suffering from some kind of udder rot. He points at the cow with a stick.

Jan is in a hurry. He has to plough. He tells the small man that they will talk later. Then the man does a strange thing: he takes a pebble from his bag. He places it

on his tongue. When Jan searches for him, only a whips of smoke curls in the air. Come evening, Jan finds the cows to be suckled dry.

Martha arrives at his home. She drags her feet. She says there has been trouble at the homestead. She says that six teaspoons and a knife are missing from the set in the homestead. She believes the Tikoloshe has taken them and now she has to carry the blame.

Jan's neighbour, Simon, visits Jan. He has seen some stranger with Jan's cows. He's found the little man lying on his back under the udder of the cow with the broken horn. The little man was drinking from the udder.

Jan and Martha find this hard to believe. They go to visit Martha's people. At first, Martha does not want to visit. Her head is hurting. When they arrive at the clay porch of Martha's father's house, they see that the ash in the fireplace is cold. Many flies are buzzing around the pot of beer.

Martha's sister Sebiena is at home. She is all by herself. She gets a fright when she sees Martha. She tells Martha and Jan that the people in her village make fun of her, Sebiena, because she is not yet married. She would also like many children who will look after her when she is old.

At first Jan feels sorry for Sebiena. Then he sees the stick by the leg of the table. Jan asks Martha if he may make use of her sight; his own eyes cannot see the Tikoloshe. Sebiena should please look closely for a little man standing near the table.

Sebiena looks. Then she screams. She covers her head with her skirts. Jan grabs the stick and hits the air.

"What then, Jan?"

"It's lunch time. You know I got married to Martha. The Tikoloshe will always be around. Let's stop at that tree. We'll have shade when we eat. One must not talk about the Tikoloshe."

Lucas later vividly recalls the exhaustion. Also the minutes, hours and days dragging by. Jan's kindness and patience is imprinted on his memory; a gentle understanding that one does not expect from this seasoned farm labourer. The beautiful scenery will always remain with Lucas. Greet has taught him to look closely at nature.

One can tell the time by looking at the red sunsets and changing shadows. Under a watery morning sun, the horse's heads cast the first shade. Towards mid-afternoon the sun blazes from directly above. Jan has to shield his eyes with his hands in order to estimate the time of day. Towards evening, the shadows of the trees slant across the road; deep, drowsy shadows that settle down like spilled sleep.

The prospect of their arrival at Heidelberg gives sparkle to Jan's stories that last day of the journey. Their talk travels the roads towards evening. Jan anticipates a plate of cooked food on their arrival at Grootvlei. Afterwards, he'll settle down on a mattress in the outbuilding.

Antjie Somers

Just beyond those grey ridges, Jan says, lives a man who loves to drink. This man has many children. The children love their mother. The youngest one is very close to her. (Jan indicates about knee high with the fingers of his left hand held together and pointing upwards like an upside-down ostrich-head.)

The man's wife is very talkative. She says the man should not get drunk in front of the children. She complains about the loose patch of thatch on the roof. The calabashes are empty. There are dead frogs in the well. The dung floor needs to be smeared. The children are wearing thongs only as their clothes are worn through. She talks when the sun shows its red face. She talks at midday when her husband is feeling shaky. She talks when the nights are thick with dreams. She never lets up. Her shrill voice can scour pots. One day there is big trouble in the cottage. The man's legs are weak with drink and he stabs his wife. That evening the young ones come home from play. They cry for their mother. The man puts on his wife's clothes. He says:

"See, it's me, your mother."

Now the children cry a lot, especially the young one. They say that their mother isn't this ugly. She does not have such rough stubble on her face. The porridge is burnt. Just see the way it sticks to the pot.

"Whe-e-ere, oh whe-e-ere is our mother. We wa-a-ant our mother. We want her now! Not later!"

The man grows tired of the howling. The neighbours come to collect the children. They say:

"Ag shame, just see how the little one cries. His aunties will care for him."

The man goes crazy being lonely and feeling guilty. He takes the knife. He puts it in the pocket of the dress. He visits far places. He becomes Antjie Somers.

"Where have you last seen Antjie Somers, Jan?"

Jan recalls: somewhere near Roodewal. He is on his way to Martha's people. He travels with the mule cart. It is late evening. Antjie Somers is standing near the goat's drinking trough at the side of the road. He, Jan, wonders what the large woman is doing next to the road at night.

The large woman struggles to mount the cart. She has a hat on her head and a scarf over her mouth. Jan asks:

"Where are your people, Gogo*?"*

She mumbles something. She puts a bundle of dirty rags on the bench. She says that she has heard that the tooth doctor has been doing his rounds at farms in the district. She is suffering from tooth ache.

Jan thinks: "She is even uglier than Martha's aunt Sophie. I shall be kind to her."

The old woman pulls at her scarf. Jan sees the stubbles of beard under the scarf. He grows scared. He can see that the mules are also jittery. He drops his hat in the road.

"Sorry, Gogo, the mules are jittery. Please jump down and pick up my hat. I'll reign in the mules."

"And then, Jan?"

"Then the mules tear down the road. I later find a sharp knife in the bundle. We're close to Grootvlei."

Arrival at Grootvlei

Starting at the Klip River, all along the Vaal, encircled by the Gats Ridge and the Houtbos Ridge, lie the softly inviting flats of the Heidelberg district. A cool breeze springs up. Blesbokspruit is swaying with reeds. The birds are quiet, anticipating the storm which is already flaying the Suikerbosrand with lighting. Lucas loves the scent of the veld;

- cat piss,
- rain and
- bent grass.

Someone at the Grootvlei homestead is on the lookout for the cart. The household awaits Lucas's arrival: family members in sepia against the white trelliswork of the front veranda. One cannot expect of Lucas to recognise his *Oupa*. Till now his *Oupa* has been an anecdote. His *Oupa's* stocky appearance is that of *pa* Lukas. *Ouma,* rest her soul, is deceased. There is a horse cart in front of the garden gate. The visitors are leaving. The man holding the reins is tapping his boot with a whip. His skinny wife is lifting a fistful of skirts, ready to mount.

Much later Lucas will get to know the skinny woman with the worried expression on her face and the man holding the horsewhip, as his *oom* Petrus and *tant* Hannie. His *Oupa* does not allow anyone to get close to Lucas. Right from the start the two of them are inseparable.

Later, Lucas recalls three things about that night:

- *Oupa* saying grace.
- The nourishing buttermilk.
- The sag of the feather bed.

He wakes up close to midnight. His mind is vacant. Like a puppy that has been dumped, he investigates new aromas. Once he senses his *Oupa* moving near his bed in the dark. *Oupa* probably wishes to convince himself that Lucas is at Grootvlei, asleep in the guest bedroom. Lucas's eyelids are heavy with sleep.

It is early dawn. This is Lucas's first dawn at Grootvlei. The vine in front of his bedroom window covers the entire window pane. His eyes soon grow accustomed to the dark. The room is in complete disarray: in the centre of the room there is a table covered with a cloth with the lace edging touching the wooden floor and the padded easy chair. A stylish dressing table and two chests of drawers have been shoved against the wall. It's as though the overflow from other rooms has collected here. On every available surface the clutter: snuff boxes, a tin lantern with a candle, a dented brass hot water bottle, a porcelain spittoon and a few tea trays. Clearly, this room is in need of a woman's touch.



Early Photograph of Grootvlei Homestead with Suikerbosrand in background

The Outcrop

Lucas dresses quickly, as he wishes to familiarise himself with his surrounds. He grabs the last clean shirt from his travel case. It smells of Nooitgedacht homemade soap and he has to suppress his homesickness, as he hears his *Oupa* coughing in the lounge. After morning coffee and rusks, the two of them set out to explore Grootvlei.

Some of us are in tune with nature. This is true for *oupa* Petrus. He is eager to help Lucas to get to know the area. The two of them are sitting on the cooler slopes of the Suikerbosrand. They share a small bag of dried fruit. The boy watches his *Oupa* covertly. There is much to remind him of his father Lukas; the broad shoulders and strong torso, the big hands and feet, the square wrists and thick neck.

Oupa Petrus absentmindedly breaks up a piece of slate. He studies it attentively, then holds it in his palm for Lucas to inspect. For the very first time anybody, Greet excluded, is on such intimate terms with Lucas.

Oupa points out everything, better than any teacher could have done. At the very peak of the Suikerbosrand, *oupa* Petrus indicates, is quartzite. The soil looks after us when we care for it. Look, up there the quartzite fronts over a thick bed of slate. Lower down, the slate starts to crumble. It becomes a slope of pebbles. Much further down, the slope consists of red clay.

“Look up at those rocks, Lucas. See the different colours. Those are different seams of rock. When this soil is overgrazed, patches of red clay appear. During the rainy season, the water trails down the gorge and gushes down the slope. It is the start of erosion. Your *oom* Koos disagrees, but if one simply allows stock to roam freely and trample vegetation, the land grows sterile. Summer storms wash the topsoil down the *spruit*. Would those breathtakingly beautiful ridges still be a fertile shelter then? I rather doubt that it would give shelter, let me tell you, I definitely doubt that.”

Lucas smiles up into his *Oupa’s* eyes and decides never to end up in a confrontation with him. He would be no match for the old man: there is far too much

drive and enthusiasm in the strong voice. One would need to be very sure of facts to contradict his arguments.

"One must never underestimate the cold of winter in these gorges. If you are exposed to the winds up there, you will freeze. The veld only warms up by late morning and the draughts funnel upwards, so that white clouds gather at the peak."

For a while, all is quiet. *Oupa* scans the peaks.

"Let's get a move on, Lucas. See the lightning lashing against those distant summits. A man doesn't want to get bogged down by rain and lightning out here."

Lucas grows accustomed to *Oupa*'s ways. It's the rest of the farm community that Lucas wishes to steer shy of.



Thunderheads over the Suikerbosrand

Courting

A few afternoons later, Lucas meets up with Netta and Susara at the kraal wall. They are two young girls in white dresses that watch him searchingly. They are children from the neighbourhood. He realises that he is no match for their scrutiny. They make him feel like an intruder. It feels as though a dry crust of bread is stuck in his throat. He covers his face with his collar and takes a wide berth, running in the direction of the coach house where he can hear *Oupa* working.

The pepper-tree in front of the large sliding door has splashed the area with a yellowish green. From the spruit comes the regular *peeow-peeow-peeow* of a red-winged starling. The interior of the shed looms dark. The coach house has, like everything that *oupa* Petrus erects, a sturdy structure.

This is new territory. There is a carpenter's bench against the farthest wall. At shearing time, with the large floor space swept clean, it becomes a sorting table. Supported against the wall is a veritable jungle of waggon parts: a drawbar from poplar, spokes from taaibos, and a body from apricot and assegai wood. *Oupa* sits on a waggon chest. He is busy plaiting a tow rope. His hat is pushed far back on his head. He doesn't look up when Lucas interrupts the tune he is whistling by stumbling into the shed.

"You fetch us some coffee from the kitchen. That's something of *Ouma's* that I miss; her coffee. During times of need, we drank a lot of peach kernel coffee. One simply had to get used to drinking it. Sometimes the longing for your *Ouma* really hits me hard. I then trudge up and down that long porch. At times like that the house stifles me. But the good Lord looks after me. Now you are here to keep me company. Also had your share of sadness, I hear. We men have to carry on, notwithstanding.

Here comes Selina with the coffee. She takes good care. At the time when I was courting *Ouma*, a fellow had to abide by the rules. It was not simply a case of taking the coffee and slurping. By not paying close attention, an overly-zealous young man could easily misinterpret a message. If the young lady handed him a cracked cup, he might as well saddle up and leave. A cup without a handle was also a bad omen.

Some young suitors acted rashly and became overly bold. An overly confident suitor would gulp down the coffee and return the cup with the teaspoon dangling through its ear. This would mean that he was asking her for her hand in marriage."

"Did *Oupa* do that with *Ouma*?"

"*Ouma* was really hard to please. At the time, *Ouma* was more interested in playing with dolls than in pleasing young men. When first I rode up to their homestead on Saturday nights, she hardly looked up from her embroidery.

My horse was a prancer. The last bit up to the veranda, I would shorten the reins and prod the mare.

Sometimes there were a number of saddles on the veranda by the time I arrived, as *Oupagrootjie used to* keep me busy doing chores till late afternoon. My arriving late, made things tough. I felt uncomfortable in the company of young ladies. My big hands and feet always became clumsy and my farm talk was of no great interest to *Ouma*. To make matters worse, *Oumagrootjie* would always save a soggy tallow-dip to serve as courting-candle. The thing would sputter and collapse and would be burnt out early evening. The residue would be a ring of floating wax.

To aggravate matters, *neef* Louis also fancied *Ouma*. Early one Saturday night, things started getting out of control. I was eating a cruller when *neef* Louis arrived under the pretext of looking for his father's donkeys.

As the evening wore on, the situation became unbearable. It apparently did not occur to *neef* Louis that he was in the way. Was the man was presumptuous! He simply ignored me and moved his chair next to *Ouma's*. There I sat, stuck with a sticky cruller in my mouth and incapable of forcing it down. *Ouma* had a heavy hand when baking.

Neef Louis then asked for a glass of water. I could read his mind: when *Ouma* stood up to fetch it, Louis would accompany her to the kitchen and try to kiss her. I

offered to fetch the glass of water, seeing as my hands were sticky from the cruller and I had to rinse them.

When dealing with a man like Louis, a man had to be quick-witted. In any case, I got rid of the rival.

Lucas, climb the attic ladder and collect a few winter-pears from the matting. Tonight we are going to make your first pair of velskoene and one needs something to chew on while working."

Oupa and Lucas establish their own routines. The thought of the farm school up on the hill makes Lucas feels nervous. At Nooitgedacht it used to be only Greet and himself. Greet did the talking. He never needed to defend himself against her. Here at Heidelberg, he would have to give his all if he did not wish to disappoint his Oupa. He realises; Oupa expects him to achieve.

To School

The cocks start crowing late at night; an omen that, come early morning, the wind will send dust devils funnelling over the farmyard. When all the chickens have settled on their perches, the plovers in the field behind the house grow restless. Come midday, weather will be unpredictable. In his bed, Lucas is contemplating three matters:

- he has to go to school this morning.
- Greet won't be there and
- Netta and Susara won't ever be able to replace Greet.

When Selina opens the kitchen door to boil water for coffee, the boy is crouched in front of the hearth. He is raking the coals beneath the grid. The acacia wood is burning well and the porridge is simmering. She hardly recognises him in his white pants with his hair all damp and slicked back. The school day looms large.

On the way to the farm school, he meets up with strangers. The school is situated on the neighbouring farm, Vergelegen. The walk reminds of the irrigation channel at Nooitgedacht where Greet and he used to play at farming in the shade of the vines. Initially, a damp trail trickles into the parched soil. A few trails of water flow together until a shiny stream gathers enough speed to fill the ditch. He starts off, walking on his own. Netta and Susara join him at the kraal wall. Further on along the foot-path, right next to the boundary line, they meet up with the Venter children. To the left, along the marshland of Swartland, three white bonnets come bobbing along. It becomes a substantial stream.

Lucas feels his chest tighten. If he closes his eyes and pleads with the good Lord: could the girl in the white bonnet in front of him please be Greet? *Tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens need not know that she is here; it would only confuse and sadden them.

As he draws level the white bonnet, the girl turns her head and her freckled face with bulging cheeks turn to frown at him:

“Cat caught your tongue?”

Lucas’s eyes sting with tears and he runs ahead to escape embarrassment. A man mustn’t disgrace himself in front of strangers! The whole day feels distant, like someone else’s nightmare.

A few of the boys enjoy asking riddles:

“Hoender, what does a cow do with its hind quarters that a horse does with its fore quarters?”

When Hoender shakes his head, quite embarrassed:

“The answer is that it gets up man! Get it? It gets up!”

“Hear this one that *oom* Koos Smalwater told our Katrien:

What wind brings light into your house? The wind-ow! Do you get it? The wind-ow, man!”

The School building is close to the well. It is a whitewashed building next to the eucalyptus plantation. The yard is swept clean. It is a spacious room with a hearth and outside chimney. Some of the children arrive on horseback and a few old mares graze under the trees. Only some are hobbled.

Meester Geertsema stands at the school door. When the children quieten down and form a queue, he spots Lucas.

“Oom Petrus Grootvlei’s grandchild?”

Lucas realises that one can easily get nicknamed here. He lifts his chin and says clearly:

"Lucas, *Meester*."

Nobody ridicules him.

Their children's education is important to the parents. Some parents contribute generously, others, according to their means. The school is well fitted out: rows of oak desks, stacks of slates and sheaves of chalk. The inkpots are full and there is a clay jar with goose quills. Bonnets, hats and coats hang from hooks along the wall. One of the girls has placed a bouquet of flowers on *Meester's* desk. The smell of carnations would always remind Lucas of this first day at school.

Meester is a leader in the community. It was he who painstakingly completed the family tree that now decorates the sitting room at Grootvlei. It is a tree of life with circular flowers and entries in illuminated print. It branches out. The children often help prepare ink from waggon-tree leaves and pomegranate roots. *Meester's* steel nib pen originates from the Colony.

The pupils start the day with scripture reading and prayer. Meester clearly has some serious concerns as his prayer is long and solemn. He prays that the Lord will bless his pupils with intelligence. Hoender has helped his father dose sheep last night. Some are bloated from eating green Lucerne. If only Hoender could master the seventy-four questions from the *Kort Begrip* or learn by heart part of the *Borstius-vraeboek*, he will be allowed to get married. Hoender is exhausted and his head sags onto his chest.

The pupils repeat the alphabet by rote from the *Haneboek*. Lucas, usually so withdrawn in company, is surprised to hear his own voice. Some of the diligent pupils have already started on the *AB-Jab* or even advanced to the *Trap der Jeugd*.

Lucas's thoughts are at Grootvlei where *Oupa* is busy planting. When the storm, forecast the night before by the plovers, advances, *Meester* sends his pupils home. The horses are well aware of the massive clouds, black-bellied and with lightning in their guts, and the pupils who have to leave on horseback, find it hard to pacify their horses.

Lucas has to run home. He is too shy to beg for a lift with one of the older boys. It becomes a race against the advancing storm. He takes off his shoes and only stops to draw breath when he sees the Grootvlei workers herding stock into the kraal. He arrives on time to help with the last herd. The cold rides his shoulders.

Shelter from the Storm

The clouds are livid with threat and prophecy. The first drops sound like gravel dropping on the tin roof. There is a short pause. The storm gathers strength. A gust rattles Grootvei's kitchen door. Then the storm breaks in all its fury.

If his mother were here, she would cover all the mirrors. She is a woman from the Colony and has great respect for lightning. Lucas imagines her moving through the house at Nooitgedacht, closing hatches, fastening latches. She has draped her crocheted house shawl over her shoulders and walks briskly with the candle held high. He wonders how his people would pacify Bull during the storm. Bull really panics when there is thunder about. He, Lucas, has always been the only one to pacify the dog. Maybe *pa* Lukas is telling *ma* Susannah:

"Wish Lucas were here."

When *Oupa* touches his shoulder, Lucas looks up at him. It's a bad habit Greet got him into; daydreaming like this.

The rain has eased off over the homestead and is now hissing down on the marsh. Lucas blurts out the first question that comes to mind:

"I wonder where the big cats shelter when it's this wet?"

Oupa Petrus stirs the ashes under the grid with a poker. He lights his pipe at the flame of the candle.

"You will never find a man lighting his pipe by the flame of a candle when there is a woman in the house. They say it is the first sign of slovenliness. Fortunately, it's only us men here in the kitchen. You speak of the lions. I don't know how many still survive in these ridges. Grootvei has not lost any stock to them for a long time. *Oom* Koos believes that a man should not be too relaxed. Your *Oupa* is not really keen on hunting. Only the Good lord can light the fire in an animal's eye. When the fire is cold, all that remains is waste and regret. With the lions, however, one needs to be on the lookout."

Oupa Petrus is of the opinion that a lion is not fussy. The yellow maned peril will hunt down anything. It's rare to find a lion separated from the pride. One of the workers has found some lion dung in one of the ravines just recently. The lion must have killed a porcupine as there have been a number of quills in the dung.

"What should one do if one comes across one, *Oupa*?"

"Keep calm, Lucas, keep calm."

Oupa is of the opinion that a lion can hear, smell and see well. Sometimes the farm workers come across a dozing lion. A man should just not run, just not run, most certainly not run.

Lucas cannot imagine himself doing anything but run:

"What is a person to do then, *Oupa*?"

"Watch. Before he charges, the lion will flatten his ears. Then you must quickly load the gun and look him in the eye. He will roar hoarsely and twitch his tail. He starts by inching along slowly, his head held low, and then gathers speed. Perhaps he has fed well, and then you only need to stand firm. Sometimes he only feigns an intention to attack and then turns away. The male lions often flee. If you are a poor shot and only wound the lion, then it is a very different matter."

"And if you are caught in the dark while out in the bush, *Oupa*?"

Oupa Petrus is of the opinion that that would be a real problem. One could gather firewood and build a large fire. If you have a companion, you must take turns at standing guard. If not, you will be in grave danger.

"Just don't try to be clever and believe that you can outwit the lion. Just don't try and be clever."

Lucas finds it difficult to imagine a man trying to be clever under such circumstances.

When the lion makes a kill, tells *Oupa*, the earth shakes with its roars. At sunrise, isolated hunters roar to make contact with the rest of the pride. *Oupa* clearly enjoys the storytelling, peppering his story with roars and soft groans.

“Let me tell you the story of the There-it-is-Steyns.”

The There-It-Is-Steyn Brothers

The storm moves on. *Oupa* hasn't yet learnt that youngsters must sleep well to be rested in order to meet the demands of the school hours. *Oupa's* tale now gains momentum:

The *There-it-is-Steyns*, says *Oupa*, are three brothers. Cowards. They are lazy at work, but heavy drinkers. Word has it that they run a still on the farm.

"Take to heart what *Oupa* tells you tonight: drink has never brought anyone happiness. It is brewed by Satan himself. I never want to see you drinking."

Be that as it may, the brothers are out hunting. The three do not find much game. By the third day they are weak with hunger. Maansie, the eldest, is lucky and kills a buck. This calls for a celebratory drink.

Come evening, they build a roaring fire. The waggon is pulled up at an angle to shield the hunters from the wind. The nights are becoming nippy. The buck has been skinned and a haunch of venison is roasting over the fire. They are very jolly. Their faces are shiny with fat and red with drink. Each tries to out boast the others with his story.

Late night they hear the lions roaring. Not one of the three has any desire to get up. But the drink is finished and the only flask left is in the tent, only a stone's throw away. The youngest staggers off. When he gets to the tent, he decides to relieve himself amongst the trees. His brothers are thirsty and are waiting for the drink. He simply flips the flask onto the ground-sheet next to his brothers and calls out:

"There it is!"

In the blink of an eye, the two elder brothers are on the waggon. They are scared sober. On hearing the waggon creak, the youngest turns sharply and jumps. He ends up on all fours, on the waggon bottom. Ever since, they have been nicknamed the *There-it-is-Steyns*."

"Who passed on the tale, *Oupa*?"

"The helpers who were settling down under the waggon for the night. The workers had a good laugh, I was told."

"They were probably fired on the spot, weren't they, *Oupa*?"

Both Lucas and *oupa* Petrus hesitate to move from the hearth and go to bed. Both dread solitude. During the darkest hours of the night you are forced to confront your regrets and fears. Nights become a passage to despair. Men don't like to express their fears. They do not wish to appear to be vulnerable.

Early this morning, while tending the sheep, *oupa* Petrus has tried to ignore the pain in his chest. Tonight he is acutely aware of the pain. It is not a pain that grows small and manageable. It cannot be soothed with a liniment. It never lets up.

*Ou*pa Petrus feels a tightness of the chest. The night shrinks close. He shuffles to the bedroom windows, feeling his way forward in the dark, and throws wide the shutters. The fragrance of the yesterday-today-and-tomorrow fills the room. He misses *Moeder*, the woman who helped develop Grootvlei, even when with child.

Oupa blames himself for having been too demanding. As always, he'd often be disgruntled. He used to be stubborn and impatient towards the children. He also drove himself hard with the sowing and harvesting. This only brought about loneliness and distanced him from those that he loved. Not that *Moeder* would ever have reproached him. Now it is too late to communicate with his late wife. Too late to bond with his children. He does not wish to alienate Lucas. The child is so impressionable.

Lucas is standing barefoot in front of his bedroom window. Raindrops cling to the leaves of the creeper. The sky seals the night into slate. He puts his hand through the open window and snaps a geranium twig between thumb and forefinger. It is moist and smells of garden-bug.

Lucas recalls three people:

- Greet,
- *ma* Susannah and
- *pa* Lukas.

He especially misses Greet. She always wished for a porcelain doll from the Cape Colony; one that would shatter when dropped. The doll had to have hair. When he saw Greet lying in the sitting room on the day of the wake, Lucas knew the grown-ups had slipped up.

They had dressed her in sooty black and parted her hair on the wrong side. There was a black ribbon in her hair. Like that they had laid out Greet's small body. Greet had never liked black. They never knew his Greet! Lucas was adamant. *Tant* Sussie had to plait her hair loosely and tie it with a blue ribbon.

The boy turns away from the dark frame where he can hear droplets falling on the stoep. He gets into bed and tucks the sheet under his chin. To-morrow will be another school day. Much of life hangs about like this ---- quiet as enamel but capable of clattering.



Liquor still

Essie

It sometimes happens that someone you grow to love dearly, quite unexpectedly walks into your life.

Lucas is in the outside room with Selina. He sits at the scrubbed table with his pencil and slate. Fact is; Netta and Susara have finished the *Haneboek*. His pride is hurt by the fact that Netta, who sits next to him at the same desk, opens her *AB-Jab* with much ceremony. She solemnly dusts the desk, carefully opens her satchel, puts her book on the shiny surface, turns the pages with great care and then smooths imaginary creases. Lucas does not take into account the fact that he has only been at this school for a week. In the *AB-Jab* there are words with two syllables. In addition, Netta is smart. She is also uninhibited and wise beyond her years. It is she who arranges a bouquet of carnations on *Meester's* desk every Monday morning.

Meester appoints Netta to instruct the young ones, while he himself concentrates on teaching the older pupils to do cursive writing. Lucas resents this. Nothing, however, escapes Meester's vigilance. He often marches along the rows of desks, tapping his quince stick against his trouser leg.

Netta has the unfortunate habit of pointing out to Lucas his spelling errors with the feather at the end of her goose quill. That leaves Lucas with no choice but to meekly sound the words. When Netta grows impatient with Lucas's progress, her eyes flick wide and she stares down at him. She disdainfully erases the incorrect answers to his arithmetic sums by spitting on her finger and rubbing at the slate. She then sighs heavily, glancing heavenwards.

Lucas concentrates hard and sounds his spelling in the cool outside room where Selina is busy moulding candles. It is not easy for the boy to master the work as his mind constantly turns to farming matters. This afternoon, one of the goats has scrambled onto the wooden perches in the coop. Goats investigate everything with those scheming eyes of theirs. On jumping down, the poor creature has twisted its entrails: *Oupa* calls this red gut. The workers are trying to save the ewe. Occasionally a pathetic bleat issues from the shed.

At that very moment, somebody casts a shadow on his books. Essie must be a regular visitor to the homestead as Boesman and Weeskind do not announce her arrival. She leans over the half-door and gestures shyly at Lucas's book:

"I'm also struggling. Kleinjaap is sickly and I must do chores. I don't always do homework."

This is the most beautiful creature that Lucas has ever encountered: Essie. Her dark hair cascades over her shoulders in a tangled mass. Her heart-shaped face is full, the body firm. Eyes, this brown, he has never seen before. When she laughs, he notices her dimpled cheeks. She is barefoot and covers one dirty foot with the other.

For a while Lucas just sits there, openly admiring her, then jumps up;

"Let's help Selina mould candles."

Selina has laid out short sticks and strips of cloth on one corner of the table. Patiently, Selina teaches them how to tear the strips into wicks. The children roll the strips on their knees. They laugh out loud, as it takes much skill to roll the wicks tightly. Wicks with ravelled threads don't burn well. Selina dips the wicks into hot fat and hangs them down the candle-mould. She allows Essie to help fill the moulds by means of a pitcher with a spout.

"Would you like some figs, Lucas?"

Lucas soon learns that Essie has a sweet tooth. She eats with abandon and much pleasure: cling peaches, ripe apricots, pot-bread with honey and dumplings with cinnamon-sugar. The children run barefoot down the fig tree lane. There is a let's-lick-the-ladle-together look in Essie's eyes.



Candle mould

Heidelberg

That first Holy Communion at Heidelberg is preceded by Lucas's first trip in the new Communion-waggon. The waggon does not have front and rear trunks, but is equipped with tool boxes on both sides. The canvas canopy is spotless and can be removed. The waggon is too heavy for an old-fashioned hoist and is equipped with a jack. Every now and again, Lucas lifts the lids of the trunks and touches the spare yokes, the halters, whiplashes, hatchets, thongs and a jack.

On this blue-fingered morning (Lucas has been up since five), the oxen are driven to pasture. Selina's husband Joseph handles the team. His: "Hoi! Hoi!" rings clearly over the yard. Lucas has yet to learn to identify the oxen. Their names resound over the farmyard as they line up:

"Optel, Neersit,

Rukker, Plukker,

Stamper, Stoter,

Klip, Skeur,

Flink, Fleur,

Bles en Beur!"

"*Voet*, *Rukker!*" Joseph shouts at a headstrong ox standing on the rope. *Rukker* sweeps with his horns, but eventually lifts his hoof. This is a show team and *Oupa* voices his pride:

"This team compensates for sweat and toil."

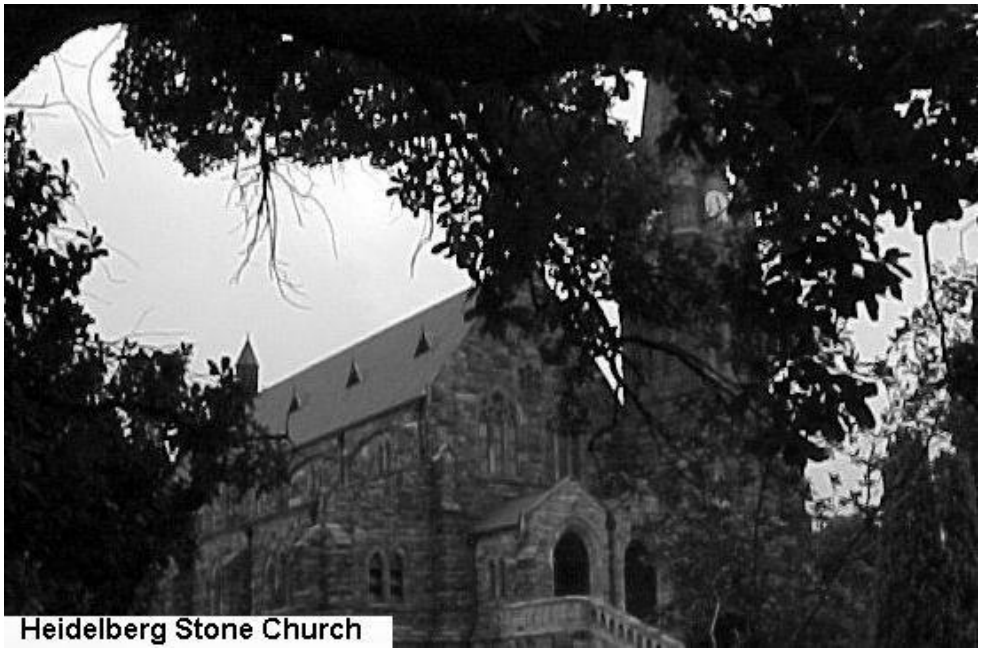
It's a short journey to the town nestling on the slopes of the Suikerbosrand. Heidelberg originates from the farm Langlaagte measured out into erven. *Oupa* Petrus gestures in the direction of the ravine where herds of Springbuck and Blesbuck roam.

Blesbok Spruit flows along. The drift is shallow and the oxen wade across effortlessly. During the rainy season, the transport waggons are driven onto the pont.

Ever since the discovery of gold and the mining of coal, pubs have mushroomed. Some seventy white houses have been erected. There are a few large shops and some government offices. The waggon trails along Ueckermann Street and stops in front of the tin-roofed telegraph-buildings and post office. The post coach has just left. *Oupa* goes to enquire about letters or messages addressed to Grootvlei. He returns with an envelope.

"News from Nooitgedacht, Lucas! Shall we wait until we get to the market square before we read this?"

The Stone Church stands guard over the market square. The church has been consecrated quite recently. Organ music floats through the oval windows. The organist and the bellows operator are practising. When the boy looks up at the tower, he knows: here you talk to the Good Lord. A wide staircase leads to the entrance with its oval doors. The oval windows with their circular motifs, calls to mind the family tree decorating a wall of the sitting room at Grootvlei. The building is graceful.



Heidelberg Stone Church

Market Square lies traced out in the shade of a few gigantic trees. Roughly thirty waggons have been outspanned. Some tents are pitched. It is Friday afternoon. There is ample time for settling down before Communion Services commence. *Oom* Koos, holding Kleinpetrus by the hand, is ready to help pitch the Grootvlei tent. *Tant* Hannie and some girls are busy at the fire. *Oupa* taps with his finger on his shirt pocket, where the white envelope protrudes:

"Lucas and I are first going to take a walk. We'll have coffee just now."

Nooitgedacht

February 8, 1891

Dearest Lucas and Vader

Lucas, I know that your Oupa will be reading you this letter and therefore, I address both of you. God is merciful and we are all keeping well. There's a new perambulator in the back room. You have a new brother. God willing, the minister will baptise him on Sunday in Kroonstad. We have decided to christen your brother Phillippus. I was in pain after the birth, but recovered quickly thanks to aunt Sussie's care. (Problems with my legs.)

I sometimes fret when I do not receive word from Grootvlei. At times like that, I reassure myself that ill news flies apace. It would mean a lot to me if you, Lucas, would drop a few lines. Are you making good progress with writing and arithmetic, Lucas? I believe that our Creator has blessed you with a sound mind. Do not give Meester any cause for concern.

I neglected to mention that tant Sussie's rooster was awarded first prize at the Kroonstad show. Your father was impressed. I trust that you obey your Oupa and listen to his readings from Scripture. Your pa and I are looking forward to the day that the four of us will visit. (God willing).

I neglected to send you the green jacket from your neef Flippie. He has outgrown it. It will arrive by mail-coach. Winter might grow harsh, and your Oupa must have you fitted with corduroy trousers at the tailors.

Your pa and I plan on spending some time with friends and family in the Colony. During our absence, Oom Peens and tant Sussie will keep an eye on Nooitgedacht.

I must greet you now. I'll write again next week when I can spare an hour. Now, Lucas and Vader, God be with you and heartfelt greetings.

Your ever-loving Ma and daughter-in-law.

"They do miss me, not so, *Oupa*?"

"They miss you a lot, my boy."

"Do you think *ma* Susannah is worried about the two of us, *Oupa*?"

"She is concerned, Lucas. We must take care not to give her cause for concern. The two of us will manage. Let's go drink some of *tant* Hannie's coffee and tell her that you have become a big brother. That's an event to celebrate!"

"But *Oupa*, I haven't even met Phillipus."

"That may be the case, but one day you'll meet your younger brother. That little one will look up to you. Then you must be a man that can lead by example. We must

make sure that that is the case. Know it for a fact. Your mother is a well-organised lady. She deserves to have peace of mind."

"*Pa* Lukas was lucky that *ma* Susannah agreed to marry him, not so, *Oupa*?"

"Very lucky, Lucas, very fortunate indeed."

"Does *Oupa* think *pa* Lukas knows how lucky he has been?"

"I'm sure he is aware, Lucas. Perhaps he does not realise his good fortune every single day, but he takes good care of your *ma*."

"That's true *Oupa*. It was a good thing that he asked her, not so, *Oupa*?"

"Just so, Lucas."

In his heart, the boy is now reassured about the well-being of the van der Merwe's of Nooitgedacht. Snippets, pinches of sadness, leave him. As soon as a man turns seven, he must let go of the apron strings.

It is a lengthy Communion Service. The Smalwaters quite clearly have to catch up as far as baptising the little ones is concerned. Perhaps the parents have been waiting for the completion of the recently consecrated church. Lucas hardly recognises his Maans from the farm school, as Maans is wearing a smart short jacket and corduroy trousers. Maans is struggling to make his twin brothers and two young sisters behave. He clearly takes his responsibilities seriously, but the young ones can hardly be taught discipline during the course of the Communion Service. They are easily recognisable as Smalwaters by virtue of their athletic frames and bright eyes. Lucas wonders if Phillipus will also resemble him, Lucas. Would Phillipus act the way young Gert Smalwater does and press his face into Lucas's shirt when he feels shy? The expression on Lucas's face is almost maternal as he watches the young ones.

Now the Minister has to confirm Hoender. Hoender is sitting next to a dainty girl. They are seated in the second pew from the front. The girl is wearing a silk dress

with a floral pattern. Hoender is nursing a goatee. He rests his *Cathechisatieboek* on his lap. It resembles a torn *Trap der Jeugd*. He has studied hard.

The Minister's sermon is after a sermon by *Bernardus Smytegelt*. If Lucas knows the words of a psalm, he sings heartily with *Oupa*.

In his mind Lucas pictures Greet in the Streets of Gold in the city at the end of the Narrow Way. She is playing with a few girls dressed in white. There is a blue ribbon in her hair. On her lap is a porcelain doll from the Colony. The other girls gather in a circle around her and watch as she brushes the doll's hair. Lucas often misses Greet as she is imprinted on his memory. Nowadays, Essie is his best friend.

Kleinjaap Takes a Tumble

Lucas and Essie don't realise that the tall grass along the foot path has been knotted. The knots were made by Hoender and his pals. (Not that it matters who has been responsible; the damage has been done.) One would have to look very hard to see the loops; from the school gate, all along the path to the water pump. There is a loop every two paces.

Essie has brought Kleinjaap with to school. *Meester* has agreed to this, on condition that Essie attends school. Kleinjaap is so quiet and frail, that he hardly breathes. He sits in the corner of the school room wearing his big, wide-brimmed hat, playing with the knuckle-bones of an ox. Kleinjaap is slight. He resembles a young dove that has fallen from its nest. A pale seedling growing in the shade. He sits most of the time. He sits very still. That is except when he is thirsty or needs to visit the privy.

Essie's people live only a stone-throw from the school. Essie's father, *oom* Koot, is the school janitor. It is a duty that he performs with dignity and dedication. *Oom* Koot treats most matters on this vale of tears as of great consequence. Essie's mother suffers from water retention. She is a large woman and moves with difficulty. This is why Essie has so many responsibilities. Keinjaap's future is the family's main concern.

Kleinjaap is accident prone. At the tender age of four, he's already swallowed a thimble, lodged a pumpkin pip up his nose and sat on a pail filled with prickly pears. He has single-handedly managed to slice open his forearm with his father's *herneuter* and has, on the same evening, almost drowned himself in a wash-tub. *Meester* Geertsema is concerned about Essie's posture. He believes that Essie will develop a crooked spine from continuously carrying Kleinjaap. She constantly carries Kleinjaap. Kleinjaap refuses to walk. He merely pulls a face and whines feebly when Essie puts him down.

Shortly before break, Kleinjaap wishes to drink at the water pump. He refuses to walk and wants Essie to carry him. *Meester* allows Lucas to accompany them, as

Lucas has already completed his arithmetic.

Half way to the well, Essie's foot gets caught in a loop. Kleinjaap travels high and thuds down head-first amongst the devil's thorn. The child's injuries seems to be serious: Kleinjaap has developed a squint and has a bump on his forehead. Lucas panicks; they should shake Kleinjaap to jar his eyes into focus. In the twinkling of an eye, Lucas and Essie are presenting themselves in Essie's parent's kitchen. They are submissive with fright. Kleinjaap appears dazed. *Tant* Mysie starts crying.

Oom Koot says that this is a serious matter. This is the doing of young scoundrels. He knows which of the pupils are responsible. He will promptly point out the culprits at school to *Meester* Geertsema. These are the same young villains that have just recently dunked frogs into the drinking water. This, says *oom* Koot, is not a trifling matter. Today's young ones refuse to face the consequences of their actions. They wish to laugh about everything. This is serious.

Little gets taught at the farm-school on this day. *Oom* Koot has donned his coat. He now stands in front of the class and points accusingly at Hoender, Maans and a few older boys, who are lined up along the school wall, their heads hanging.

Yes, reckons *oom* Koot, as though we are not having sufficient trouble dealing with the English and the foreigners in this country, we are harassed by our own people. Who can tell what a bright future Kleinjaap might have had? It is due to the actions of mischief-makers the likes of Hoender and Maans that everything, including politics, is messed up.

Meester merely pacifies. He promises to punish the guilty parties. He and *oom* Koot can agree on appropriate punishment. First, *oom* Koot must take a seat, so that his heart-rate can slow down. Essie and Lucas will fetch tea from *tant* Mysie. There has to be a remedy for this type of injury. Meester will see to it that the district surgeon tends to Kleinjaap. While in the vicinity, the surgeon might as well inspect all the pupils for rotten teeth, ringworm, warts, squinting and other ailments.

The class is stunned. A quiet and dismayed group of children walk home from school. Lucas and Essie quietly slip into *tant* Mysie's kitchen. They have been scared witless. Elderberry brew is simmering on the coal stove. Elderberry is *tant* Mysie's panacea for all ills. Kleinjaap sits drooling on his mother's lap. He is gnawing at a pear, blissfully ignorant of the ructions he has caused and happy at the sudden show of maternal concern. Tant Meisie is a fluster of hardships.

Johannesburg, 1893

It is fortunate indeed that the schoolbooks can be put aside sometimes. A squirt of dawn enters Lucas's bedroom. He lies listening to the tiny whistles and chirps of birds, followed by a sudden rush of doves rising up. This is the day of the circus.

It is Lucas and Essie's first visit to the young city, Johannesburg. The Johannesburg of 1893 already is an impressive sight. It is the flourishing period of cast-iron. Cast iron ornamental lettering announce "Thorne-Stuttaford" against the sky-line of Pritchard Street. Each street corner is resplendent with a cast iron street lamp. The tower of the three-storey Palace Building stands out against the silhouette of the city. The side walls of Wolff & Elias advertise Maskelya Tea, Scottish cycles, Cocoa and the cutting of keys. A large sale of hammocks and cane chairs overflows onto the sidewalk.

The morning has turned sultry and the skies are grey. *Oupa* Petrus puts it down to the city fog. It starts drizzling. Suddenly the skies start sobbing potato juice. Umbrellas bob along the sidewalks. Like most other pedestrians, the trio finds shelter under the arcade connecting Market and Commissioner Streets. There are no sharp draughts underneath the glass domes; simply a whisper of coldness. The arcade lies snugly curled up under glass domes and cast iron shapes.

Before dawn, Essie has had a bowl of samp and buttermilk. She is hungry and craves something sweet. The rainy weather makes her feel hungry. They seat themselves at one of the glass slabbed tables in the *Arcade Tea-room*. The waitresses are all wearing fig-leaves; stylish sculpted aprons. The ice cream is served in delicate dessert glasses and can be scooped out with long-stemmed spoons. Water condenses on the dessert glasses and dribbles onto the table tops. The head waiter wipes their table top with the white cloth draped over his arm. He murmurs apologetically and fetches paper doilies and serviettes.

Oupa has his moustache and hair groomed at the Venice Hair Cutting Salon a few doors lower down the arcade. He feels that there is a distinct difference between this set-up and the Barber Surgeons at Heidelberg. This is luxury! The salon has

adjustable twist chairs and tubes of shaving cream with brushes from which to pick and choose. Here a man leaves a proper dandy. The barber handles the blade with frightening dexterity. Bearded clients lean back against the padded supports, while barbers glide the blades against the most vulnerable folds in the neck. Lucas is reassured by the fact that there are no blood stains on their white jackets.

Essie slips into the Ladies' Hairdressing Salon. She does this merely to observe. The curling tongs smell of scorched hair. Sharp waves and corkscrew curls are in fashion. The cosmetics are not on display on the counter, but are covered in tissue paper and stored in small drawers. Rimmel's face powders are in boxes and packets. There is a wide variety of scented rice powder: violet, frangipani and rose.

In their shop windows the jewellers display cameos, necklaces, silver watch brooches that clip open and modern pins fashioned after bees and butterflies.

Essie is especially thrilled by the moulded flint glass figurines in a window.

"How about that?" *Oupa* Petrus whistles like a man that has been awarded first prize at an agricultural show. He comes to a halt in front the display. "Here is lady Godiva. We have to take her home with us."

Lucas and Essie crane their necks. *Oupa* points out a moulded flint-glass figurine of a well-endowed woman with flowing black tresses covering her breasts. It stands about a foot high. She is stark naked and sits mounted on a white mare.

"This is lady Godiva. Her husband used to be an English baron around the year 1000. He taxed his subjects heavily. The baron, like the rest of his nation, was greedy. Be that as it may, Lady Godiva pleaded with him to reduce the subjects' taxes and he agreed to do so; provided that she rode naked, on horseback, down the streets of his small domain. One might well question the integrity of a man that would challenge his wife to do this."

Lady Godiva, however, tells *oupa* Petrus, had a solution. She requested the town folk to stay indoors that morning. She mounted the horse and rode through the

town. Fortunately she had long hair, because a tailor named Tom just had to take a peep. Tom was struck blind.

"That's why the English call those secret watchers Peeping Toms."

The sky is hurtfully clear. Essie is the first to run out from under the canopy. A rainbow overarches the roofs:

peach red,

apricot,

snapdragon yellow,

apple green,

bruised,

robin's egg blue and

saintpaulia.

The Circus

Oupa has brought the children to Johannesburg to experience the circus. Activity is centred on Market Square with a large crowd milling around the Big Top. Frank Fillis's Circus is visiting. The large barred cages with lions and chimpanzees are parked in an adjacent pasture. A few young elephants lumber among the cages, led by minders and plucking at the tufts of hay next to the water troughs. Placards advertise the "musical capers" of Dolby, the clown.

Lucas and Essie wander around in a daze. It's as though they have been completely cut off from reality. Even *Oupa* feels the years slipping away. Everyone is gay and optimistic and fears and aches fade. Essie has Lucas's hand in a strong grip and makes dead sure that they stay out of range of trunks and hooves.

It's quiet in the Big Top with everyone seated around the arena. The lion tamer engages in a trial of wills with lions. They are twitching their tails while playing at musical chairs. A variety of half drums serve as perches. The circus orchestra is interrupted by the cracks of the whip. Emotions wash across Essie's face.

Oupa is of the opinion that these lions are not the healthiest specimens that he has ever encountered. These mangy hides won't fetch a good price. Captivity is clearly at odds with the King of the animal kingdom's nature. The animals' spirits are probably broken. It hurts to see them like this. Lucas would like to know what a lion's breath smells like. *Oupa* has brought along *biltong* and is carving the children some slices.

"*Oupa* Petrus, what would happen if the lion caught a whiff of the *biltong?"*

"Essie, my child, there are chunks of raw human flesh in the tent. Why would the lion give a piece of *biltong* a second thought?"

Essie grows very quiet. She moves a bit closer to *Oupa*. Lucas licks his lips. A smile tiptoes across his face.

“Professor” Stevens is as skinny as a rake and his hair is grey. He is wearing soft shoes and tights. He has donned a derby. Only now do the children notice the taut rope under the canopy of the tent. Using a ladder, the Professor bounces onto the rope. The taut rope walker has a frown of concentration on his narrow face. His assistants toss him a few balls. He tests the rope a few times and then, tentatively, sets off to the opposite side, all the while juggling the balls.

Lucas looks down at Essie sitting next to him. She is coiling her hair around her index finger. Her cheeks are aglow, her body slightly curves forward and her eyes are all lit up.

Oupa Petrus who, like *pa* Lukas, is unusually powerful, cannot restrain himself when he sees the weight lifter. He has to pass comment:

“No, this Englishman is not really muscular. He can take lessons from Strong Hermaans Lombard.”

Strong Hermaans

A few days after, *Oupa* has the opportunity of expanding on this statement. Essie and Lucas listen attentively.

Strong Hermaans is a distant relative and a pretty cantankerous man. He has remarried a number of times. All of his wives pass on while in their prime. They experience hard times. Strong Hermaans looks well after himself.

Come mid-afternoon, Strong Hermaans invariably takes a long nap. His wife dons a bonnet and patrols the yard to ensure that there is complete silence in and around the homestead. Nothing is allowed to disturb Hermaans's afternoon rest. Passers-by have to take a wide berth past the gate to ensure that the dogs do not start barking. Srong Hermaans rules. His wives may only speak when spoken to. This probably still is the case at Rooibult.

Hermaans grows very intolerant of trespassers. Especially of people passing through and throwing gates wide. A farmer could suffer serious losses this way. In fact, the entire farming community knows that Hermaans does not tolerate hawkers trespassing on his land.

Just the other day a hawker, hardly out of the shell, arrives on the scene. He is a nondescript little man. He starts conversations with strangers. This hawker loses his bearings near Rooibult. Much to his relief he notices Stong Hermaans ploughing his fields near the boundary fence and he relies on the hospitality farming communities are well-known for.

Hermaans watches the waggon approaching. He carries on ploughing, simply minding his own business. The hawker throws the gate wide and stops at the headland. He then proceeds by shouting at the top of his voice in order to attract Hermaans's attention. The poor hawker probably reaches the conclusion that Hermaans is short sighted and hard of hearing; some kind of simpleton or community idiot. Hermaans is enjoying the situation.

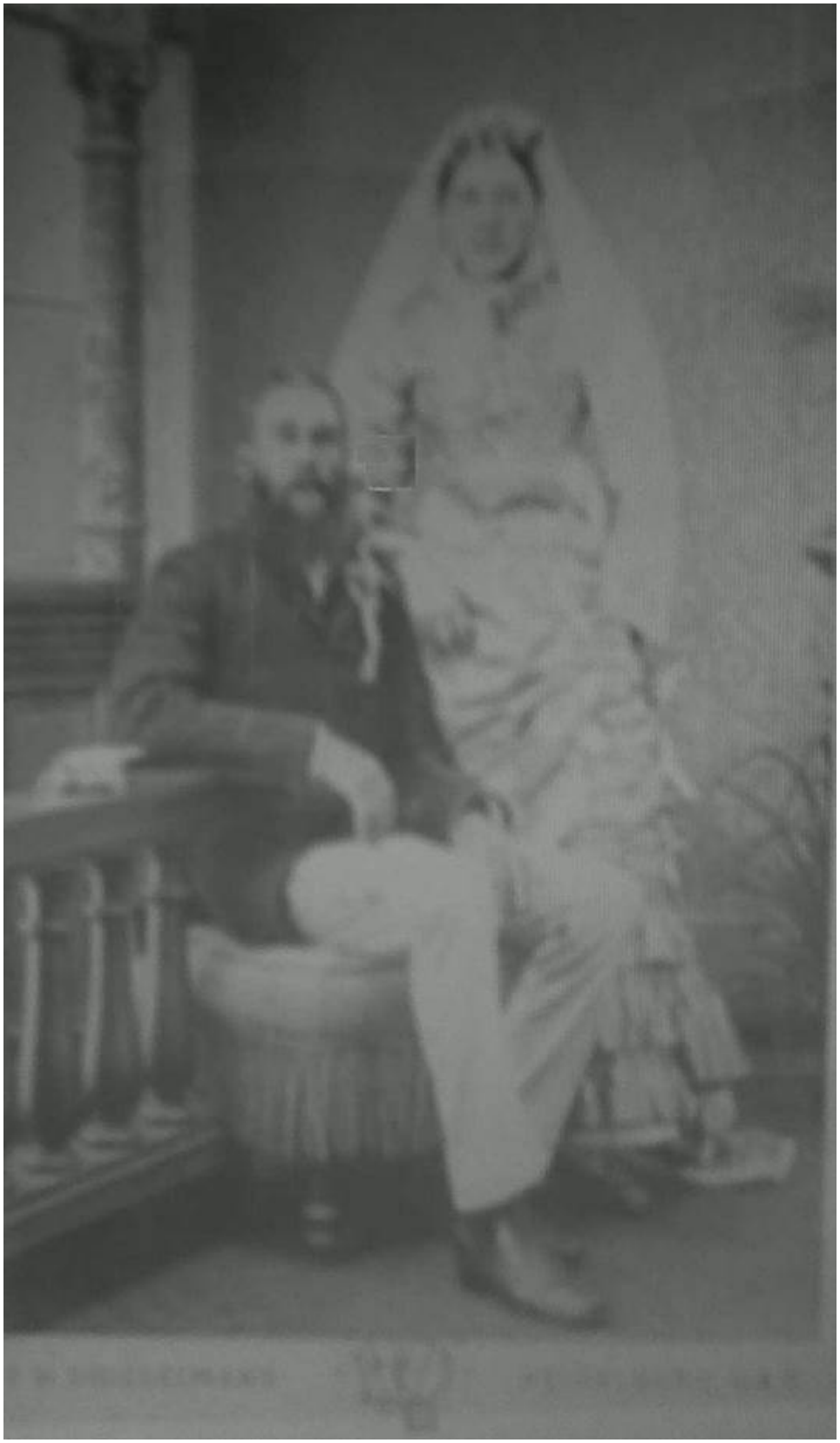
The fellow eventually stumbles over the clods in order to reach Hermaans. Hermaans ignores his presence. He then asks Hermaans for directions to the Bester's homestead, patiently and loudly mouthing each word. Hermaans's neck turns red and puffs out the collar of his shirt. He growls:

"That way. Remove your waggon from my farm!"

The hawker watches as Strong Hermaans picks up the plough and points the shares in a westerly direction. He leaves without delay.

To Lucas this sounds like good story to tell at school during break.

"Is Strong Hermaans a very close relative, *Oupa*?"



Grootvlei

Immediately he arrives at Grootvlei, Lucas gets involved with farming matters. Lucas has no special affinity with the Boer goat. The flock is both stubborn and single-minded: it regularly forces its way through the greenery to arrive at the front porch. They have such rebellious boiled-sweet eyes. The one thing that Lucas and the flock have in common is love of the unfurling veld, ravines and the krans.

The boy learns about this harsh landscape while caring for the large white goats with their red heads. Grootvlei relies on its flock of Boer goat. It is an adaptable and hardy small stock. Whenever the pain in his legs lets up, *oupa* Petrus enjoys accompanying Lucas to the mountain. Lucas's *Oupa* becomes his schoolmaster and the veld his *Trap der Jeugd* and Dutch Bible.

The rock ledge is populated with rock scorpions, tapping-beetles and spiders. Clouds of butterflies, in a variety of colours, waft along the peaks. From a ridge, a bateleur eagle shoots into the sky, only to tumble downwards again, shrieking shrilly like the jackal. The chalky excrement of the black eagle marks the rock-face. It circles while patrolling its kingdom. Its nest resembles a cemetery of bleached lamb- and mongoose skeletons.

"Troubles," says *Oupa,* "set in during the lambing season."

A man must be very careful then. It's not that the ewes are not good mothers. They have lots of milk and don't struggle to identify their own young. The lambs must receive some colostrum within an hour of birth. The difficulty starts when a ewe is suffering from swollen teats and the kid can't get a grip. This is Cape wild cat country. The ewe hides the kid in the thickets while she herself grazes and that's when the kid falls prey to the wild animals.

It is amazing, this ability of the Boer goat to suffer hardship. A goat will eat almost anything: shrubs, weeds, grass. Problem is that the veld could become overstocked. A goat flock will trample veld and impoverish soil.

Oupa sweeps his hand towards the ravine:

“God willing, we shall subdivide this grassland into paddocks next week so that we can put grazing-rotation to practice. Your *oom* Koos believes that it is unnecessary to mess around with subdivision, but the Lord blesses us with common sense and we don’t know what the next few years will yield.”

“Here is something that needs to be hacked out.” *Oupa* indicates towards the opposite slope. “The fleshy plants with the red bell-shaped flowers are destroying grazing. Those are a poisonous weed. Should a goat graze there, it will die of cramps. The animal moves around listlessly with an arched neck, grows bloated and convulses. The meat is unfit for human consumption; poisonous.”

“We must weed them out this afternoon. Look at all the sorrel. That will cause the runs if the flock grazes here. That’s the way of nature; weeds flourish when a farmer doesn’t keep an eye on things. This is the season during which bitter-apple and *stootsiek* shrub flourish. One must be very careful. You must remember these things, Lucas. One either farms progressively, or fails. There is nothing in between. This soil has been entrusted to us. We have got to take good care of it.”

The sun basks pleasantly. If he would spread his arms, close his eyes and open his fingers, Lucas could become one with the buzz of the cicadas and the rising heat waves.

“Watch out for snakes in these parts, Lucas. See the secretary bird dancing up ahead? I wonder what it has got hold of. Looks like a puff adder. See how he waltzes around the snake. A snake won’t easily strike through those hard feathers. Now watch it dragging the snake and taking off with it. See how the snake writhes. Now it’s going to drop it onto the rock and take it back to its nest for the young ones. It’s because of scenes like that, that I don’t allow shooting at Grootvlei.”

“Are there many venomous snakes in these fissures, *Oupa*?”

“Mostly we encounter the puff adder, the night adder, the Cape cobra and the tree-snake. Just stay out of the snake’s way, always stay out of its way.”

“What do you use to counteract snakebite, *Oupa*?”

“Your late *Ouma* saved a few people’s lives with barley that she boiled thoroughly. She washed your Uncle Koos’s bites with barley-water. I like to make sure by slicing open the bite and sucking out the venom properly. Your *oom* Koos squealed like a pig every time I came near him with the jack knife. He was very young at the time.

The River Snake

Ever heard about the water-snake? The old folks always told the story so as to keep the young ones away from the river. You, of course, are much too wise to be taken in by such a story, but it is worth telling. It's a good story to tell Kleinjaap."

So, as they made their way home, *Oupa* told the story*:*

The Water Serpent:

"The water serpent keeps to the reeds in the river. It has been a curse since the time of Eve; very sly. Few people have actually encountered the snake. Those that have, swear blind that it carries a huge diamond on its forehead. It must be a massive stone, as the people indicate a stone the size of a large chicken-egg. It sparkles, too. People in the know say that its rays are blinding.

The diamond, being as large as it is, makes swimming difficult. The water serpent likes to swim so that it can observe youngsters playing on the banks and then drag them in. Before he goes swimming, he hides the diamond in the mud amongst the reeds.

If one were fortunate enough to find where it is hidden in order to steal the diamond before the snake returns, you deprive the snake of all its powers. The wearer of the stone then, for the remainder of his life, has good fortune and resistance to any snake-bite."

I recall a youth in the area who claimed that he had come across the stone somewhere along the Klip River, but the poor soul must have had a round stone in his pocket, because he was later found dead in the veld; puff-adder bite. Nothing could be done to save him.

"*Oupa*, Essie would not thank me for filling Kleinjaap's head with scary stories. They have to air and dry his wet bedding every day."

“But Lucas, then you must tell Aunt Mysie to *braai* a field mouse and feed it to Kleinjaap every evening!” laughs *oupa* Petrus. “Field mice will soon put an end to bed wetting!”

Lucas thinks about Kleinjaap and the day *tant* Mysie, Essie and he, sat shelling peas at the back door:

The pea basin is filled with water and the peas plop into the water to float on top. *Tant* Mysie speaks of wizardry and of the white wizard Sors de Beer who uses his supernatural powers to heal and assist. *Tant* Mysie says that she blames herself for the fact that Kleinjaap does not put on weight. If only she had not been scared by the Smallbergers’ tame baboon a few months after the conception of Kleinjaap, Kleinjaap might have turned out differently.

When he looks up, Lucas sees her tears dripping into the pea basin. She wipes her hands on her apron and her face goes blank. He wants to console her, but doesn’t know what to say, as *ma* Susannah writes that Phillipus is doing well and Kleinjaap is a lot older than Phillipus. Just as well that Kleinjaap doesn’t understand. Just sits there and moves his knuckle-bones around. He is completely relaxed. Essie squats in front of Kleinjaap and holds out a handful of peas. Kleinjaap is fortunate to have Essie. Essie cares for him.

Ma Susannah sends Books from the Colony

A package has arrived for Lucas at Heidelberg with Doel Zeederberg's post coach. It is postmarked: Kroonstad. Lucas is filled with memory-cluttered happiness:

The goose pond on Nooitgedacht used to be his and Greet's favourite spot. It is a natural pond, but with poplar trees planted around the edge. The six or so geese have not turned the water murky yet. The pond is rippled with reflections of trunks. Finches are fists on the branches. They fly about patternlessly. Sunlight filters onto the carpet of leaves on this nippy autumn morning. Lucas remembers.

Just his own name, Lucas van der Merwe, appears on the envelope. Of course, *ma* Susannah will expect him to be able to read fluently. This, notwithstanding Netta and Susara's continual rivalry to improve his spelling. Lucas handles the letter with reverence. It's clear that his mother knows how to address a man of ten.

Nooitgedacht

August 7, 1893.

Beloved Child,

The centipedes visit the yard at Nooitgedacht this year. If it is our heavenly Father's will, we shall have a good rainy season. The farming progresses according to expectations.

I'm sending some winter clothing and hope that you have not outgrown them. We have never had a misunderstanding. The link between a mother and her first-born is so precious. It is so wonderful that our heavenly Father has sacrificed his son on the cross.

Respect your Oupa and pass on our sincere love. I've included a few books. I brought them back from the Colony. Please share them with Meester and your fellow pupils. Do your work conscientiously: Satan finds mischief for idle hands.

I include a package of kudu biltong, from which you and your oupa Petrus can carve some, after scripture reading every evening. You father really misses you during the lambing season. Phillipus is healthy, but very ill-tempered at times. Do not be worried, your dog Boel looks after himself and has even growled at your young brother last week!

I must end now. God willing, we shall be reunited soon.

Your loving parents.

On top in the chest lies "*Kleine Gedichten voor Kinderen,*" by Hieronymus van Alpen. The second book, "*Onderhoudend Geschenk voor Kinderen,*" (1823, Leiden), is beautifully illustrated with ten coloured plates. It covers subjects on nature. Neatly wrapped in a linen cloth is "*De Kleine Print-Bijbel*" with Proverbs of Solomon.

That Monday morning, Lucas stacks the books from the Colony, those that *ma* Susannah has sent, on Meester Geertsema's table. He places the pile right next to Netta's vase of carnations. He does so casually, while passing to his desk. The boy is blissfully unaware of the future consequences of the gift.

Meester does not blunder along aimlessly. He sees teaching as a vocation. He has been well-educated in the Netherlands. The problem is that *Meester* does not always harvests the fruits of his endeavours. This disheartens a schoolmaster.

There is not much that *Meester* can achieve with good intentions, a few *Hane* books and torn *Trap der Jeugd* books. The parents are, for the most part, concerned with farming matters. The farmers are working hard at making a living and they try to keep the school well-equipped. They prefer not to be bothered unnecessarily with school matters.

Meester is young and an idealist. These books came like doors opening. *Tant* Susannah's books inspire him. Life is lying round a bend in the road. If only he could convince the parents that knowledge is like the ploughing of fields. By being optimistic, he can even notice a spark of understanding and some progress made (Only at intervals, naturally.)

The ABC is repeated to the point of boredom. Most pupils know the Roman numerals from I to X. Even the slowest can manage words of one syllable. Mornings the words slide down their tongues like gravy. The cleverer ones can sound *ju-ni-per-tree-lea-ves* after the first week. The names of capitals and of the oceans, the children sound listlessly. They struggle with proper names from the Bible, such as *Almon-Diblathaim* and *Cuschan Reschartarataim*. But *Meester* does not consider this knowledge as vital to their education. The district inspector notices progress. *Meester* Geertsema now carries the knowledge in these new books as a heavy gift; one he can't wait to open.

The very next Monday, *Meester* Geertsema states that the earth is round and rotates around its own axis, around the sun. He illustrates this with a hard-boiled egg held by Maans Smalwater and Essie's lunch-apple.

Long and serious Devotions resound in the parents' homes that evening. The parents emphasise one or both of the following scripture-readings:

"You fixed the earth upon its foundations, not ever again to be moved." (Psalm 103:5.)

"You established the earth, and it abides." (Psalm 119:90.)

Essie's father, *oom* Koot, dresses up in his best jacket. He calls a meeting. This foreign teaching of *Meester's* must be countered. The school commission sits for a full five hours. The Minister is consulted. He reprimands the ashen-faced *Meester*, who nearly gets fired.

"*Meester* Geertsema, I can come to terms with your enthusiasm, but not with your daring. We both know that, in Holland, the earth is believed to revolve. For the peace of mind of all concerned, I gravely advise you to allow the world here in Heidelberg to rest on its pillars. Let us leave matters as such."

Oupa Petrus's reaction:

"Lucas, the workings of a God that creates and takes, cannot be explained by mere mortals. I don't desire to serve a Creator whose universe I, with all my human limitations, can actually explain. Each of us interprets The Scriptures in his own heart. One must also not stumble off blindly in some direction like a flock of sheep. It appears to me that *Meester's* way of thinking has some merit. The earth might turn. Of one blessing we may rest assured: the Father's mercy. Never forget that."

With that, the matter, as far as *oupa* Petrus is concerned, is settled.

The Crush Pen in the shade of the Blue Gum Tree

The most enjoyable discussions on Grootvlei are usually held underneath the canopy of the blue-gum plantation. *Oupa* Petrus has designed a crush-pen system here: a series of passages and camps with gates and troughs so that the sheep can be examined thoroughly.

The farming on Grootvlei is focused on wool-bearing sheep. These are not the broadtail-sheep that pa Lukas farms with on Nooitgedacht. Instead of the distinctive mane on the shoulders, these sheep have thick, creamy-white fleeces.

A car must have trespassed on Grootvlei early this morning. The gate is open and there is a traceable spoor in the dew-soaked soil. Some of the sheep have wandered through to the road. It is here that the cancer-bush flourishes. A number of the breeding ewes have grazed here and are now penned in the crush with swollen faces.

Selina's husband, Joseph, has just brought the news. *Oupa* and Lucas have been at breakfast. There are times, Lucas knows, when a man must keep quiet; merely listen and obey command. His eyes and nose are running from gulping down scorching coffee. He grabs an old hat hanging behind the kitchen door.

The poisoned sheep are attended to in the shade and the swollen faces are covered with layers of soot. The workers force a concoction of water, vinegar and brown sugar down their throats. They turn the sheep onto their backs and administer medicine using a modified siphon. The slow process of examining, turning them onto their backs, smearing and dosing, take up the entire morning. Lucas trembles with anxiety as *Oupa* hands him the mixture. *Oupa* then steps back in order to observe. Sweat runs into Lucas's eyes and grows cold between his shoulder blades. Then his hands grow strong and deft. Lucas and Joseph make for a good, rhythmical team.

Once or twice Lucas wishes to stretch his body and slow down, but when he looks up, he sees Essie carrying Kleinjaap on her hip, in the shade of a tree and he decides to push on. He comes upright when the last ewe shakes her head drunkenly

and totters off. His shoulders are sore and stiff and his mouth tastes of sand and sheep droppings. He pushes back his hat with the back of his forearm.

"Let's go get some coffee, Joseph."

Essie pours coffee from the can. It feels good to do a man's work. Essie's hair is washed clean. It smells of sunlight and of soap. Weeskind chases after a swarm of pied starlings.

The day is still young and they can't stop now, says *Oupa*. The rest of the flock can be examined for ticks, devil's thorn and footsore. Lucas quietly prays that he will be able to cope. With the lancing of the first boil, he realises that he would be no good as a surgeon. The cows have already gathered at the kraal.

Tant Hannie and *Oom* Koos Visit

The years at Grootvlei pass quickly and *oupa* Petrus starts sensing that time is running out. Thus develops a great need to record his image for his descendants. He sees his progeny in Lucas. *Oupa* can already picture his image in sepia against a black backdrop. Where would he hang this image? Possibly next to the buffalo horns above the fireplace or next to the photo of Paul Kruger, with his ragged features and the unkempt cheek beard? A wooden frame would display it very nicely against the piece of floral wallpaper above the home organ. One way or another, he must keep an eye on the descendants.

A young photographer has established a studio in Heidelberg. Even *tant* Hannie has been impressed with *oupa* Smalwater's rather formal photograph. One could hardly do better in Johannesburg. The Elite Studio has been opened there recently. The owner is, reputedly, a member of the newly established Photographic Society. He has had a glass roof and mirrors installed in his studio in order to make the most of natural light.

Early Saturday morning, *tant* Hannie and *oom* Koos arrive at Grootvlei. They clearly have something that they wish to discuss. *Oupa* Petrus and Lucas are pruning the fruit-trees in the orchard. Clouds gather like cattle coming in to drink; mild weather that allows for working outdoors. *Oupa* and Lucas's conversation is like the goose down in the quilt on Lucas's bed: it shifts and warms. Lucas and *Oupa* are now discussing women and relationships. Lucas is happy to discuss relationships. When it comes to Essie, he feels like an earthworm stuck to the end of a fish hook. He is unsure of how to handle his clumsiness when in her presence.

"Wish I could help, Lucas. How old do you say you are? Ten or eleven, if I'm not mistaken. A bit young to be love-sick. A man is quite helpless. The loss of Greet and the parting from your mother so early on, probably causes you to long for some tenderness. The feeling is to be expected. You must control your thoughts. I notice the way you look at Essie. She is an attractive child. Your *Oupa* would also have looked twice. A lovely friendship is a good thing, but don't let your emotions lead you astray.

You're much too young for that. Respect all your friends. Listen to what your *Oupa* tells you today. You won't regret paying attention.

They then spot the distant trail of dust suspended over the driveway, and rush back to the homestead to warn Selina that visitors are on the way. She should prepare coffee.

It is *tant* Hannie and *oom* Koos's buggy. Young Petrus is sitting on his mother's lap. *Tant* Hannie notices the neglected front garden. The ferns on the front verandah are withered. *Tant* Hannie removes the pin from her straw hat. She places the hat on the bed in the guest bedroom and uses the opportunity to inspect everything. When she enters the *voorhuis,* her eyes are blank like the bringer of bad news, her face expressionless. Lucas cannot be fooled; her eyes are bright and darting, like tiny birds wishing to alight; *tant* Hannie notices it all: the shrivelled herb bushes in the front garden, dust and disorder in the big house.

Selina places a soup plate filled with rusks on the tray with the coffee-service. She is keeping busy polishing brass pots and pans at the coal stove. She is working quietly, so that she is able to overhear part of the conversation. *Tant* Hannie does not get on very well with Selina. After the last visit there is a truce of sorts between the two women. Selina sees *tant* Hannie as a usurper.

"Father, surely you realise that I am far from comfortable with the way the household matters are run here at Grootvlei. This place needs a woman's touch. I've already told Koos that it is a crying shame the way everything is neglected here. Mother would never have approved of men running the household. Just see the chips in the coffee service! There isn't even a single cup or saucer that matches."

"But Hannie, my child, Lucas and I manage quite well. Selina cares well for us. What do these material things matter, anyway? Nobody comes here to inspect the house! We have all we need."

"Even so, I feel that one should maintain standards, Father." *Tant* Hannie's mouth is set in a pinched downturn.

“Whose standards should we maintain, Hannie; yours or mine?”

It is clear where this conversation is heading and that *Oupa* is unable to guard his and Lucas’s privacy.

Tant Hannie is very excited about the likeness. There is, she says, agreement on this with Koos. They have already discussed a family portrait.

This is clearly the first that Koos has heard of a portrait. He, however, is not a man that is accustomed to being consulted. He simply gets notified.

Tant Hannie feels that *oupa* Petrus’s birthday causes a pressing need for the house to be re-decorated. A competent house painter is travelling the district. The man is a trained tradesman. If one wishes to hang such an expensive image on the wall, one might as well paint the walls in order to do justice to the portrait. She doesn’t propose anything too extravagant; merely a few bunches of roses with ribbons and bows above the dado ledge and around the windows and the door in the sitting room. She is considering a dark green climber against a light green background.

Oupa Petrus, says the *Tante*, can’t take care of himself properly. He is subject to the mercies of life. What would happen should he grow ill? He’s not growing any younger!

Oupa Petrus reassures her that he is not planning on falling ill. Matter of fact, he’s feeling especially sprightly today. Besides, he is of the opinion that all human beings are mortal.

As far as *tant* Hannie is concerned, the matter has now been settled: she feels that is her and *oom* Koos’s duty to move into the Grootvlei homestead and to take control. She also plans to host a memorable celebration of pa Petrus’s seventy-fifth birthday. It has to be the talk of Heidelberg in years to come. Father Petrus, is, when all is said and done, a leading citizen. With her and Koos close at hand, Father can rest assured that he’ll be nursed during the remainder of his life on earth.

Oupa Petrus does not care for the way the word ‘remainder’ just hangs there. He maintains that his last days are in the remote future.



Colonial tea service

The Studio

Oupa Petrus and Lucas are preparing to visit the Heidelberg studio to have the image taken, when Essie arrives there. Essie simply has to join them. Kleinjaap is not well, he has stayed at home with *tant* Mysie. *Tant* Mysie is convinced that he is infested with tape worm and has fed him a handful of roasted pumpkin pips. She is sitting in her favourite stoep chair, awaiting the results.

There are a variety of photographs in J. Knaggs' display cabinet and these demonstrate the development of photography: the first inverted, blurry images traced on paper, the more life-like images as a result of the use of the lens, the first negatives on photo-sensitive paper, silver- and copper-plating, tintype and daguerreotype. Lucas inspects the plating in hues of brown and grey, as well as a few collotypes and ambrotypes and carte-de-visités. The ambrotypes are on display in small paper-maché boxes with hinges. Most of these are embossed in red velvet.

Lucas is sitting on his haunches in front of images of women dressed in crinoline and men wearing black jackets. He fully understands *Oupa's* need to be remembered by his descendants. The subjects of these images, at the time shared this need. The stand of the clamp keeping still the head of a small child, is only just visible where it protrudes from behind the child's boots. The hand of the baby in the cape is a blurry image; she must have moved it. Many children have a slight squint. They have been terrified of moving and were concentrating on standing stock-still.

The young photographer "*oohs*" and "*ahs*" when he sees Essie. He is hardly aware of Lucas's and of *oupa* Petrus's presence.

Oupa mutters: "The fellow's brains are addled."

Lucas does not answer. He agrees with the young artist. Essie is very pretty in her Sunday dress with the lace-collar. Her hair cascades over her shoulders and her cheeks blush against her milky white skin. Lucas grows aware of an unusual tension building up in him, so that a clammy sweat breaks out all over his body. He starts itching all over as if walking through tall grass in short pants. His new corduroy

trousers and gingham shirt shrink. He hears *Oupa*'s voice from afar. He notices *Oupa* looking at him enquiringly.

Oupa lets the photographer be. It would be useless trying to dictate to the man. Knaggs simply feels the inner urge to take a photograph of Essie. *Oupa* will pay for the photograph he has resigned himself to do so: see how happy the child is. He mutters to himself:

"Good businessman! I wonder how many parents are tricked into spending a fortune."

The wall of the studio is decorated with wallpaper. The wallpaper is covered in climbing-rose print. A few armchairs have been pushed against the wall next to a stand with a vase of peacock feathers. A painted landscaped garden covers the opposite wall of the studio. It is complete with garden-path and trelliswork-fence. Knaggs asks Essie to sit on a garden bench against this backdrop. He rearranges a few paper-maché pillars and makes her lean lightly against the bowl of a leaping fountain. He puts a wide-brimmed straw hat on her lap.

All this makes for a charming scene. Knaggs covers the camera and tripod with a hood and tells Essie to "watch for the birdie."

Oupa makes payment and returns his wallet to his coat pocket. He starts walking towards the door, changes his mind, and confronts the confused Knaggs:

"You seem to be a young man that will go far in life. It's a smart place that you have here, but allow this old man to advise you today: get rid of the peacock feathers and arrange some roses in the vase. We Boer people see the peacock as a bird of ill omen. People around here believe that even one peacock feather in your home can result in so much trouble, that you can lose everything you own or hold dear. Those spots that resemble eyes, they upset the locals. These people are your customers. Get rid of the stuff. The feathers are only gathering dust."


Essie

Birthday Preparations

The preparations for the birthday celebrations grow elaborate. It becomes clear to Lucas that *oupa* Petrus, where the arrangements the women make are concerned, mostly follows the course of least resistance. *Tant* Hannie is in command.

The rain-frogs that have been quiet over a long period, appear overnight. In the evenings Lucas listens to their mating-calls. A rain-tree is growing opposite the ridge of the mountain. A rain tree is a column of cloud that branches out into the sky. *Tant* Hannie decides to clean up the extensive garden and to plant more shrubs. She forecasts heavy rains. Every now and again she looks up at a sky rapidly crossed by lamb-like clouds.

Tant Hannie is fond of Essie. *Tant* Hannie mostly stands aloof, always with this strange feeling of sadness, something at the back of her throat, as though she has swallowed sand. But Essie is a reinforcement of the ranks of women on Grootvlei. *Tant* Hannie needs to be close to her. It is as though Essie makes *tant* Hannie grow less assertive. The two women are talkative and Essie is enjoying the housework

At home with *Ma* Mysie, Essie is not used to having these wonderful utensils at her disposal The women unpack, dust, and repack. They polish the scalloped yellow-wood racks, unhook the maize heads from the beam-hooks and stack them on the fireproof ceiling. All the brass utensils are burnished. *Tant* Hannie's water-container with the lid that hinges and the brass tap is a show article and is moved prominently next to the yellow-wood corner rack with the milled edges. Lucas whets the knives and carries buckets of water, two at a time, using the shoulder yoke. Selina complains that her hands are chapped from burnishing the brass utensils with lemon.

Oom Koos makes use of the opportunity to boast with his skins: he arranges mats made from jackal and duiker hides along the freshly smeared and polished surfaces. He puts cushions edged with the long hair of wild cats and maned jackals on the thong chairs.

Even *oupa* Petrus's and Lucas's most private sanctuaries are invaded, tidied and the furniture rearranged. Stinkwood furniture from the Colony has pride of place. Essie arranges *Schriftuurlijke Redevoeringen uit het Oude en Nieuwe Testament door Jacobus Nyloë* and *Stichtelijke Gesangen door Rutger Schutte*, in a neat stack on the house organ. The men have to move the grandfather clock and the small organ to the sitting room and *tant* Hannie airs mattresses in the sanitizing rays of the sun.

Preparations do not end here. Weeks of baking lie ahead. It all becomes a pleasant daily routine; the rolling out of the dough on the baking chest and building fires in the outside-oven. Essie can provide a few proven recipes. Aunt Hannie does not wish to see any long faces or hear any harsh words in the kitchen.

"Come now Selina, the attitude of the person doing the baking is absorbed by the dough. If you are angry, the batch will burn. A sad heart will cause the bread to fall in."

The women laugh a lot, causing *oupa* Petrus and Lucas to smile as they pause at the kitchen door on their way to waggon shed.

"Essie, why do you keep on dropping the knives? If you carry on like that, a man is sure to interrupt us, just as we are making progress with the baking."

"Not so, *tant* Hannie, I dropped a fork and Selina dropped a spoon earlier this morning. We can expect a woman and a child as well. See the dust devils in the backyard. It probably cautions that an entire waggon-load of visitors is on its way to Grootvlei."

"There, I've dropped the dishcloth. Pick it up, Essie, my child, it certainly gives warning that a man is going to take up some of our time; it is completely bunched up."

They laugh when Lucas's head appears above the half-door:

"It's a man, *Tante*, my nose is itching on the left side. This man looks hungry for something to nibble."

Lucas's hands are covered in dirt from the irrigation ditch. Essie feeds him the golden brown biscuit on the verandah steps. Her eyes are the colour of damp tobacco. Lucas experiences a strange and fragile happiness. He runs back to the shed.

There is an excited scratching in the dirt at the back-door where Selina has scattered peels, potato parings and crumbled crust. The poultry: the yard hens, a few hand-reared Muscovy ducks and a lazy turkey, assemble. The ducks charge in from the ditch to consort:

"I say: who laid an egg?

W-h-e-r-e?

In the shade, in the shade!

Si-c-k, si-c-k!"

"*Mev. Dijkman se Kook-, Koek- en Resepteboek*" was published in 1890. It is brand-new. *Tant* Hannie is almost overwhelmed by the occasion. She will approach this birthday feast with vigour. For the umpteenth time she wipes her hands on her apron, then smiles around the room, radiating a look of pride. The Dutch oven is hot enough to incinerate Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. An ox-head complete with horns and skin, lies grimacing in a basin. *Pa* Petrus prefers pork. The main dish is suckling-pig. Essie's heart goes out to the not- yet-weaned piglet of only a few weeks. When she looks at it, she can imagine it savouring the after taste of mother's milk that is still lingering in the tiny snout.

Tant Hannie has a zest for work. The piglet is scoured and washed till it lays in the pot, mother naked. Essie half expects *Tante* to sprinkle it with eau-de cologne. The rosemary and sage is used sparingly. The liver is fried, mixed with crumbed pot-bread and onion shoots and soaked in milk. The stuffing is ready. Tant Hannie drips butter into every skin fold. Now the time-consuming baking process starts. Finally it is put on a shelf in the larder, fragile and crisp, with an apple in its mouth and sprig of

parsley around the tail. The ladies sit back for a cup of coffee. They feel well satisfied.

Birthday Celebrations

The birthday celebrations fill the homestead with gaiety and high spirits. Memory-cluttered happiness emanates from the dining room with its painted floral creepers below the picture rail. (The decorator and *tant* Hannie have finally re-decorated.) The excitement spills through the front entrance, where a hat stand with derbies and broad brimmed hats obscures "The Battle of Blood River."

Diagonally to the right, through the pantry, the scrubbed carcass of a suckling pig breathes its last vapour. The kitchen door is closed. Down the passage, *Oupa's* likeness seems somewhat less disapproving on this joyous day.

There is a child's perambulator in the guest room. A crocheted shawl covers the folding-hood. *Tant* Bettie Smalwater's youngest is snugly cocooned. The perambulator sways slightly when the child turns in his sleep. A number of cloaks have been draped over the cast iron knobs of the bedposts. Hoender's *neef* Krisjan is under the grape-vine feeding the shy Malie Steenkamp grapes. He teases her, dangling the bunch in front of her and she laughs, clamping her mouth shut till it becomes a tiny line of nothing.

Most of the action is centred round the five-legged dining table. Tant Hannie is pleased and blushes right into the hairline of her pinned up hair. Today she asserts herself as hostess. *Oupa* Petrus sits at the head of the table. His features are relaxed. The Lord has been good to him. Lucas watches *oupa* Petrus reminiscing. *Oupa* is a satisfied spectator at his own table, on his farm, in his homestead, among his people. *Oupa* smooths the tablecloth with his hands and leans back in his favourite chair.

Empty serving dishes are lined up on the sideboard. Most of the pudding bowls have been eaten clean. A few dumplings float in the butter sauce. A cinnamon ring remains in *tant* Mysie's dumpling bowl. *Tant* Mysie is of the opinion that the dumplings are a little tough. Perhaps the dish has fallen in. That is not quite the way she has taught Essie. Essie has always had a heavy hand when preparing dough. *Tant* Mysie is trying to initiate a discussion over the meal. What *tant* Mysie would really like to say is:

"My child has helped prepare this meal."

Oom Kootjie Skoor is of the opinion that the Steenkamp brothers have started docking lambs' tails too early this season: the moon is dipping and this could result in trouble. Unfortunately not everyone heeds good advice. He looks askance at *oom* Hannes Steenkamp.

Tant Mysie believes that if anyone is qualified to speak of the moon, then it is herself. She is able to tell whether the moon is waxing or waning by the throbbing of her legs. The very moment that the moon scoops, she would be in bed, as miserable as can be. She has told someone just a while ago--- to whom was she speaking? That one could almost notice her limbs gradually swelling up. It would start at the ankles. By evening her calves would be the size of legs of mutton. Not to mention the painful throbbing. The pain hammers away at her strength the way the virgins with the empty oil lamps did at the wedding door. P-a-i-n-f-u-l! With Essie spending much of the time at Grootvlei, she has to take care of the housework all by herself. Not that she begrudges the child her freedom. *Tant* Mysie casts a tearful smile at *tant* Hannie.

Tant Mysie is sitting next to *oom* Skaam Sarel. For a split second it seems as though she is about to ask him to massage her puffy feet, and he pushes his chair back in horror. *Oupa* crosses his arms and leans back. A smile creases his face.

Oupa realises that that *tant* Mysie is actually pleased with the bond developing between her pretty daughter and the grandson of the owner of Grootvlei. He teases her:

"But Mysie, if you had spoken sooner I would have told Lucas not to keep Essie this occupied! I was never made aware of the fact that you and Koot do not approve of the relationship." Tant Mysie starts protesting strongly and *oupa* Petrus enjoys her discomfort. When Lucas grows quiet, *Oupa* regrets his own insensitivity.

Numerous Bazaars have served as fundraisers for the new church in Heidelberg. To Lucas it feels as though his *Oupa* has put his, Lucas's, deepest feelings on display,

exhibiting them amongst the doilies and crocheted cloths on the bazaar tables, so that anyone walking by can pick them up and finger them. Lucas's head droops.

The freshly drawn Maskelya tea proves to be to everyone's liking. *Oom* Sarel's wife compensates for his own withdrawn nature. She holds Lucas's cup by the handle, then swivels the leaves in such a way that *tant* Hannie sits up, fearful that her new porcelain cup will break. Lucas daren't say anything. He is at her mercy. Young ones are to be seen but not heard. Just as well that Essie is busy in the kitchen.

"Let's see what the leaves predict."

The *Tante* concentrates. The fine the hair on her upper lip vibrates. Everyone is spell bound.

"Seems to me like a girl standing at the Dutch oven. Long, dark hair. No, it's too milky in the cup. Everything is a bit blurry."

Lucas is rescued by *oupa* Petrus:

"Lucas, gather the young ones so that you can visit in the enclosed verandah. Where are Malie and the Smalwaters? They're probably up to no good. Surely the company of the grownups do not interest you young ones. Take Essie with you. She deserves the break from dishing up."



Birthday Banquet

Ransoms

It is hard work rounding up the young people for games in the enclosed verandah; almost as hard as collecting white ants in a hollowed out gunpowder-horn. Lucas tracks Essie down next to the perambulator in the spare bedroom.

The baby has been startled by the unfamiliar surroundings. Essie has picked up the child and is making soothing conversation, hushing it, her face buried in the soft collar of its nightshirt, inhaling its sticky sweetness.

Krisjan and Malie wish to lag behind. They are reluctant to join the rest. Lucas had better keep an eye on them; they are up to no good. Netta and Susara have pulled Kleinpetrus up the kraal wall and are sitting there, swinging their legs and taunting the bull. *Tant* Hannie would get an attack of sorts if she were to witness this!

Hoender is sitting on his haunches next to the new cart in the cart-shed. His eyes are red and he is tapping at the spokes with a leash. Lucas has difficulty getting him to express his feelings. It sounds as if his girlfriend has rejected him and Lucas is feeling sorry for him, as Hoender has been considering getting married to the girl. Lucas can recall her; she was the one sitting close to Hoender at his confirmation in Heidelberg. Hoender has been working hard to get married and become a provider and his hands are calloused. Lucas feels tempted to touch the horny skin, but does not wish to act the way a girl would. He slaps Hoender on the shoulder and promises him a large helping of milk tart.

The enclosed verandah faces the front garden. It is situated behind the trellis-work and pots of ferns. It is a large room with thong benches and a table. At last they are all there: Essie and Lucas, Maans Smalwarter, Rita and Lesya, Hoender, Krisjan and Malie, Hendrik, Netta and Susara, as well as Gert and Louis, *oom* Skaam Sarel's two bachelor-sons. The bachelors are too old to join in the conversation, but they have noticed the girls and have discarded all inhibitions.

Netta and Susara have brought anthologies on plants and flowers picked for courting. The books are scrutinised. Meester Geertsema has helped the girls to

decorate the anthologies. Each flower conveys a message of its own and the pages are edged with tiny dried petals. Pressed petals flutter from between pages. Essie picks them up carefully.

"Girls are unfathomable," Lucas considers while comparing Essie to Susara and Netta. Netta and Susara with their tiny waists, are more at ease with the men. Essie is thoughtful and tender.

Essie realises that Hoender is sad. She wishes to comfort him. She sits down between Lucas and Hoender and coaches Hoender. She reads Susara's neat handwriting:

"See, Hoender, you should take your Martie a flower. Pick carefully, though. Just see here:

Marigold: may I give you my heart?

Bean flower: I'll often visit.

Sweet pea: my happiness depends on your love.

Rose: I love you."

Hoender seems to regain confidence. He takes the book from Essie and sits studying it.

"What would you pick for me, Lucas?"

Essie's brown eyes are dark and gold-shot, like the ripe skins of pears simmering, spiced with cinnamon.

"A cypress twig, Es." He leans over her and traces the words in the anthology:

"I---shall---love---you---till---beyond---the---grave."

Louis grows bored. He and Gert do not enjoy enough of the girls' attention:

“How about a game of *ransoms* when you doves have finished cooing and playing with flowers?”

Gert takes the scarf from his neck and quickly starts collecting ransoms. He collects a ransom from each player and carefully wraps it in the cloth.

Susara and Netta have ransom rings from boyfriends. The rings have stone settings. Lucas notices Essie searching for a ransom. He suddenly jumps up. In his haste he nearly stumbles over Hoender’s big feet. In the dark lounge he fetches the box of Sweetheart candy-kisses that he and *Oupa* have bought in Heidelberg the day after Communion. He selects a pink heart and places it in Essie’s hand:

“Here’s a ransom for you.”

The words: “I love you” stained in pink letters on the pink candy heart, jumps out at her when she opens her fist.

Louis wishes to ensure that the game runs smoothly. Hoender stands with his back to Gert. Gert then presses the ransoms, one after the other, against Hoender’s back. A punishment is called out to the owner of each ransom.

“I have a ransom, a very nice ransom, and what should happen to it?”

Hoender would answer: “He or she must be dropped down the well. The well will be three feet deep.”

The owner of the ransom would then need to stand in front of the others and beg for mercy. One of the others would offer to save the player by taking his/her place. For every foot that the well is deep, the one that changes places with the unfortunate ransom-keeper, has to give the owner a kiss.

The girls are not keen on saving Gert or Louis, as these two can be very forward. All week the two bachelors have been dreaming about the opportunity of embracing a girl. Gert is always ready to save Essie with kisses and she is close to tears.

“I said to *broer* Louis: I would love to grab hold of *Tant* Mysie’s little black sheep.”

As the afternoon progresses, the game leaves a bitter after-taste in Lucas’s mouth. It is as though his ears are stopping up. Bile burns his throat and the incessant call of a cicada dizzies him. It is driving him insane. Before he realizes it, he finds himself facing Gert with clenched fists. It is the quiet before the storm.

“Touch Essie again and I’ll hit you.”

Hoender doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry; Lucas might be strong and broad of shoulder, but Gert is a fully grown man. Hoender does not know how to handle the situation. He looks around and catches Susara’s eye. She winks in collaboration and slips away quietly.

“I’ll meet you behind the kraal wall, young boy,” taunts Gert.

Lucas is too angry to think clearly. Outside, the sun is a fevered hand in the nape of his neck. Gert delivers the first blow and it is as though the sky collapses. Boesman and Weeskind start barking, then howl. Lucas hits wildly and his fists do not make contact. His day shatters when his head strikes the wall. It grows dark. He manages to stagger forward and his fist punches the soft night in front of him. The day becomes someone else’s dream. Lucas’s tongue tastes of iron.

“Is this what blood tastes like?”

There is no question of turning back now. He will hit for as long as he can remain upright. He hears Essie weeping behind him.

Oupa Petrus has never moved this fast before. He senses a problem when Susara appears, ashen, in the dining room door. Outside, his voice drenches Gert like a bucket of cold water.

“What is the problem with you and Louis that you can’t stick to people your own age? You’ve made your decision not to marry. Why then do you upset another

man's girlfriend? Lucas, in this homestead, we do not care for violence. Go wash your face. Essie, *Oupa*'s child, go ask Susara to help you pour ginger beer for everyone."

No one would have guessed that *Oupa* is severely shocked by Lucas's bloodied face. Lucas is a man. With rigid self-control, *Oupa* turns around and returns to the dining room. He asks *tant* Hannie for a cup of tea, rubs at the pain in his chest and resumes conversation with *oom* Skaam Sarel. Not even *tant* Mysie is aware that anything is amiss.

"Have you had a look at my sheep, Sarel? This Lucas of mine knows how to farm."

Sheep Farming

Joint farming is not a way of building sturdy relationships. *Oom* Koos is a difficult man. Neighbours consider him to be a real trouble maker. Judging by the way he stands: his hand in his side and pointing with his riding whip, it is clear that he will not be dominated by to anyone this morning. Least of all by *oupa* Petrus, who, according to *oom* Koos, farms with his heart and with no concern for the money purse.

Lucas would like to point out to *oom* Koos that Grootvlei is a show farm and that *oupa* Petrus is singled out to give advice on farming matters. Lucas wouldn't dare do so. *Oom* Koos is not happy with his, Lucas's presence on Grootvlei. *Ma* Susannah has impressed on him that he should respect his elders.

The biggest differences of opinion concern the two herds of sheep. *Oom* Koos is a round-rib Afrikaner Boer. This is a long legged sheep with a pendulous tail, from which the Hottentot farmers have been making a living in the Cape since long before 1652. This small stock is a hardy animal and much sought after for sheepskin blankets. Some have straight whips and others broad and flat tails. Unfortunately, as a result of inbreeding, most of *oom* Koos's flock has cork-screw tails. This is not a desirable trait.

Oupa Petrus is a Merino wool farmer. He is proud of the history of these sheep: sheep that have been the sought after property of royalty and the clergy in Spain. Two rams and four ewes from the Escorial Merino have been shipped to the Cape in 1789; a gift from the King of Spain to the House of Orange. Then orders are given to return these sheep. Colonel Gordon, who already farms with offspring of these sheep, keeps the progeny. *Oupa* Petrus has bought into these in the Cape Colony.

Lucas sits on the kraal wall counting the flock. The dust has settled after a light shower. The air smells of moist soil and sheep manure. The frogs in the spruit harmonise:

"Dad, where's the tabac-bac-bac?

It's sopping wet-wet-wet."

At the foot of the incline, the mares trot, displaying fanned out tail brushes.

Farming here is done by relying on common sense and sound judgement. The wetland has been subdivided into neat breeding camps and level ground, so that the rams are able to mount the ewes when in heat, without injuring themselves. Each camp has its own drinking trough. The flock needs to be shorn; the rams to prevent overheating, and the ewes to facilitate mounting by the rams. The drizzle is ill-timed, since the shearers will arrive at Grootvlei tonight.

The waggon shed has been cleared out. The shears have been boiled. The sorting table has been set up against the wall. The wool bags have been neatly stitched. The sorter is asleep in the veranda room and the team is having an early night, as the Grootvlei flock is large and this team are also expected on a neighbouring farm this week.

It is almost midnight when Lucas does a last round of the yard with Boesman and Weeskind panting at his heels. The night-sky is cloudless, so that the stars shine brightly. Lucas identifies the Evening Star, the Three Kings, Pleiades and the Southern Cross. Judging by the sounds rising from beyond the eucalyptus plantation, there is excitement and song from the workers' cottages. Some shearers are visiting the fires of the farm labourers. Lucas turns around; he'd better get some sleep.

Lucas walks down the eucalyptus lane in the pale morning. He must assist with the splitting of the flock. This is tricky, as the sheep are unsettled due to the unusual treatment. At this early stage, ewes with damaged udders or teats are separated from the main flock. Young, healthy stock that are susceptible to infectious diseases, are shorn first in order to prevent any form of contamination. Soon the morning will be sticky, yellow, like the wormy quinces dropping in the orchard.

The fleeces give off a particular smell. Lucas, who has been shown the ropes at the Smalwaters the previous week, lends a helping hand. He moves a sheep onto its lower back and starts shearing. Next, the trousers are removed. Skill is required to

work cleanly around the udders. Lucas places his right foot between the legs of the sheep and pulls the head back slightly so that the skin stretches tightly across the throat. Now the chest must be shorn. He turns the sheep onto its side and supports it with his knee. Only the dexterous shearers remove the fleece in one piece and fling it onto the sorting table.

Some of the shearers whistle or sing to the rhythm of the shears. *Oupa* Petrus moves eagle eyed amongst the shearers, as stab wounds easily become infected and clumsy shearing will not be tolerated. A few shearers are taken to task and forbidden to touch the prize rams.

The act of lifting and plucking and tearing and dividing by the sorter, is hypnotic. Lucas's mind empties out, then starts dragging like a razor over his days here at Grootvlei.

"I see that you're asking for a present! You put on your shirt inside-out this morning!" Essie suddenly laughs close to Lucas's ear. She and Kleinjaap have brought coffee. They stand like that for a short while: happy just to be with each other. There is the sound of birds, tiny, industrious whistles and chirps. Kleinjaap becomes irritable and Lucas scoops him up to drop him on top of the soft skeins in one of the bags.

The last shorn sheep bleats its way out the shed door.

Horse Breeding

Oupa Petrus still feels saddened whenever he thinks of Prins. He has measured out the boundaries of Grootvlei on Prins's back. Since Prins's death, no other horse has been able to impress him.

The first horses in South Africa were brought in from Java at the time that van Riebeeck was commander at the Cape. The Eastern horse breeds were bred to the Arabians that were brought in later and the Cape horse descended from these. Other breeds were brought in during and after the *Groot Trek*. The Boer Horse and the Basuto Pony were the hardiest breeds. During the 1870 horse-distemper epidemic, horses died in droves. The hardy Boer Horse survived.

Oom Koos is the horse breeder. He feels convinced that nothing is of greater importance than a pure-bred team drawing the cart. Lucas's eyes smart from the irritation of horse sweat, but he has difficulty tearing himself away from the stables. The horses are reassured by his firm hand and soothing voice. He voluntarily undertook to oversee the stables. This gives him the privilege of saddling a horse whenever he wishes to do so.

This morning he is leaning against the warm stone wall of the stables, while caring for the hooves of the horses. He slides his one hand down the horse's leg to the fetlock. With the other hand he pushes the horse's shoulder until the mare shifts her weight to the other leg. In one smooth movement, he lifts the hoof so that the hoof wall and then the frog, face upwards. He removes the dirt and rot with a hoof chisel.

Lucas admires the foal that is watching him from under lowered lids, while playfully plucking at the fodder with firm lips. Playfulness is part of the nature of a young foal. What starts as a hesitant nip of the lips to gain attention, can easily become a sharp bite. Lucas coaches the foals so that young Petrus will be safe around the stables.

"No, young Petrus, don't rub the foal around the nose and lips. That teaches it to bite. Rather stroke its neck. Like this …"

Lucas has no inkling of what brought about bad blood between *oupa* Petrus and *oom* Koos. It is clear that *oom* Koos is trying to establish a sort of master-servant relationship with him, Lucas. It is possible that *oom* Koos is sensing that *oupa* Petrus is growing frail. He, *oom* Koos, would like to run Grootvlei. It does not upset Lucas much. *Oupa* Petrus has often tried to make him aware of the discord. He has often overheard his *Oupa* say:

"Remember Lucas, an employer can only be a boss when he is willing to roll up his sleeves and help the workers do their chores. He must be able to perform any chore faster and better than the farm labourers can. Only then is he a worthy boss."

Now Lucas notices *Oom* Koos's back stiffening when he places one foot on the feeding trough while gazing over the pastures. It is as though *oom* Koos suspects him of bullying young Petrus. Lucas senses that he is being watched by eyes flat with malevolence. *Oom* Koos is preparing himself to take Lucas to task. In the past year he has also kept Lucas from his school work under the pretext that farming matters are deteriorating at Grootvlei. Lucas is not prone to argument. *Oupa* Petrus would not have approved.

Lucas puts his arm round young Petrus's shoulders and is immediately reminded of Philippus when he pulls the warm young body towards him:

"Look Kleinpetrus, I'll show you: the foal already has teeth. Sharp teeth. We must not teach it to nibble at our hands. In a few years' time, it will have large, strong teeth and then bite hard. We must be patient when working with the horses, so that young horses don't become jumpy. We'll teach him well.

I see that your front tooth is loose. It's a milk tooth. We must give it to the mouse. Perhaps he'll leave a coin in its place. Tonight still, we shall put the tooth in your veld-shoe and then we'll recite:

"Mouse, here is a stone tooth,

please give me a bone tooth."

You should ask Essie to help you. She is very good at this kind of thing. My voice is much too rough to call the mouse."

Young Petrus is not a child that endears himself to adults. He is highly strung and fidgety. He is continuously whining and hardly ever entertains himself quietly. What with *tant* Hannie enjoying being the hostess at the Grootvlei homestead, young Petrus is neglected. Slime and blood is dribbling from his loose tooth, down his chin, into the collar of his white sailor's suit and Lucas feels very sorry for him. Lucas squats in front of the child:

"Solve this riddle:

I have an old white hen. When the hen has jumped out, it never ever returns.

What is it?"

Young Petrus shakes his head. He has recently developed a few bad habits and is, at this moment, gnawing at a knuckle bone. Lucas is slightly nauseated by this. Patiently he takes the little boy's fist from his mouth:

"It's spittle Kleinpetrus. Try spitting onto the hay."

Kleinpetrus's cheeks bulge as he prepares to spit. The milk tooth clinks against the edge of the crib and the boy laughs as he staggers backwards.

"Get away from Kwartel's hind legs and I'll tell you a story. A horse like that can kick very hard. Has *oupa* Petrus told you about Jackal and Wolf?

Jackal and Wolf

Jackal continuously plays practical jokes on Wolf. Jackal is very sly, which is why his ears are so pointy. Old Wolf is clumsy and stupid."

One day Jackal and Wolf are walking down the main road. They are hungry as they have not eaten anything in a few days. Jackal is too scared to enter the farm yard. He knows that the farm dogs are vicious. He moves along sniffing, but there are no sheep in sight: just fields and a few horses with their foals.

"Oh, dear neef Wolf," complains Jackal. "I'm so terribly hungry. Listen to my stomach rumbling. Please ask that mare if she would sell us a new-born foal. We can easily roast the foal here next to the road and make a meal of it by adding some horse radish and pumpkin."

Wolf is scared to enter the paddock. He keeps glancing over his shoulder at the farmer's dog which is sleeping soundly on the verandah. He walks around the kraal wall to where the mare is standing in the sun, chasing off flies with flicks of her tail.

The mare lowers her head and clears her throat:

"What are you up to? The farmer will shoot you!"

"Oh, dear nig Mare, I merely want to buy a foal from you. How much for that shiny, plump one?"

The mare grows very angry. She curls her lips so that her big yellow teeth show.

"Do look under my hoof. The price is written there."

Old Wolf summarily examines the hind hoof. As he tries to peer under her hoof, the mare kicks him so hard that he performs a somersault and runs off yelping. Jackal collapses with laughter."

Oom Koos has moved closer to share in the fun and laughter.

“See how the foal arches his neck. That is because I have hung the afterbirth over the branch of the tree so that the new born foal has to look up at it. There is great power in such afterbirth. This foal will one day be Kleinpetrus’s horse.



Severe Drought

Nobody has been expecting the drought. Not that there is a way of preventing the onslaught of the drought. The onset of the drought is gradual. Initially farmers do not notice danger-signals. It comes as stealthily as would a thief in the night. Dust hangs suspended over the yard like a confession.

Come springtime, *tant* Mysie notices that the flowers in the school garden are withering. *Oom* Koot has to see to it that the boys fetch a few buckets of water from the dam. The days are long slabs of sun. Come early morning, the air has the warm kiss of fever.

Late at night, *Oupa* notices that the moon is giving off a strange glow. He is reminded of the year 1835 when that curious light appeared in the sky. He was in his prime then. It resembled a bright star with an even brighter trail, moving very slowly across the sky. The darkness is tight and hot.

Every spring *oom* Koot expresses his concern about the vlei-dam. It contains only a residue of murky water. *Tant* Hannie complains about the layer of fine dust coating the furniture. The household effects have to be dusted daily. The wind wheezes round the corners of the farmhouse. It is not the harbinger of rain.

Lucas is upset about the fact that the children of the farm-workers have destroyed the nest of the barn-owl. Every evening the owl sits on the ridge of the roof; lamenting the loss. Come twilight, the umber-bird hovers above the arid ditches, looking for bait. It swoops down on the farmhouse, screeching.

In the Heidelberg Dutch Reformed Church, the congregation diligently prays for rain. Some prayers move in lofty spills. The farmers take turns imploring the good Lord to provide good rains. *Oom* Skaam Sarel confesses to his secret sin; his roving eye. Most prayers are sincere and simple. The women mutter while bowing their heads. Their voices are smothered in their laps. Prayers trail to the good Lord's throne, overlapped by other supplicatory prayers. Separate voices cannot be discerned clearly. Some voices tremble. *Oom* Hans Smalwater is fighting a losing battle against

depression. He is becoming a hardly recognisable shadow of his former self. His body hangs from his shoulders, drooping joylessly.

At the Corner-Post

Lucas and Essie have to be there for each other. The grownups have grown dispirited and insecure. Lucas and Essie are on their way to the kraal. They often embrace and the grown-ups simply take no notice. The two of them hardly ever discuss the drought. The soil is barren and blisters bare feet.

Essie feels sorry for Lucas, as the drought has made *oom* Koos grow relentless. She looks up at Lucas and notices that his features have changed. He looks haggard and sunburnt and the palms of his hands are callused from hard work. Essie embraces him. She embraces his hard body and buries her face in the folds of his shirt. Essie picks up the scent of the veld on his clothes. Lucas has been taught to respect a woman. His whole being reaches out towards her and he suddenly misses Nooitgedacht and his parents, Greet and a carefree childhood. Lucas feels the need for tenderness and security. His chapped lips brushes Essie's.

Lucas is kissing Essie passionately. He kisses her mercilessly so that her head is forced backwards and her body grows slack and submissive. His kiss is huge. It sinks into her body. Only then does Lucas regain self-control.

"Sorry, Es?"

She is standing against the corner-post, her back towards him. Her hair is in disarray. She is trembling and he wishes to console her. It is only as she turns around that he notices that her face is aglow with happiness.

Essie lifts the hem of her dress and races home, not once looking over her shoulder. She runs towards her parents' share-cropper-house next to the farm school and stumbles into the small kitchen. She does not acknowledge the presence of her parents, *tant* Mysie and *oom* Koot, who are sitting on the thong bench in front of the grate but simply picks up Kleinjaap and, hugging him, whispers in his ear:

"I would so love to tell of my love for him!"

Essie is maturing. Problem is, *tant* Mysie has never really touched on the subject of love. Only once has she warned:

"Be careful around men. They are not to be trusted. Girls always end up being in trouble."

Essie is thoroughly confused. This vague warning has to suffice. *Ma* Mysie is making ends meet and is fussing about the water-retention in her own cumbersome body. One does not discuss awkward things like falling in love.

Oom Koot has never been talkative. He has always had to deal with poverty. He shares few intimacies with their beautiful daughter and considers his responsibilities dealt with every time he puts his chapped hand on Essie's head and entrusts her to the Good Lord: "Bless this house and those who dwell in it. Thy will be done. Amen."

As a small girl Essie often puts the milk-doily on her head and *tant* Mysie's only string of beads round her neck. She then twists and twirls in front of the dressing table, pushing out her chest. *Tant* Mysie used to warn in passing: "Go collect the eggs, Esther. Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do. Only immoral women preen themselves in front of the mirror. They later develop bulging bosoms and have to wear bust-bodices and suchlike constraints."

Evenings, when putting on her nightdress, Essie examines her budding breasts, but finds nothing amiss. She has never seen her mother naked. Her own breasts are small and pointed. *Tant* Mysie has never found it hard to ignore the mirror: she has simply resigned herself to her bulky thighs and swollen ankles. Even before she loses her eldest during the early stages of pregnancy, her limbs retain fluid. Her eyes, ever since she can recollect, is a nondescript grey; lack-lustre like the eyes of Leah, sister of Rachel; the one whom Jacob has to accept as bride when Laban tricks him into marrying her.

The Mirror

Every Friday evening Essie tilts the oval mirror on the wash-stand a little. She pushes the pitcher aside and looks at herself in the mirror. She recognises the sensual mouth and dark eyes as her very own and the candle allows the night to nestle in the dimples in her cheeks.

If she stands on tip-toe on the bed, her delicate ankles and rounded hips are reflected. When she presses up right against the door, she sees her entire body; shapely and enticing. She treasures her body. One day she'll give herself to Lucas. Does love transform all women?

Essie admires the way in which Netta and Susara flirt with older boys. She, herself, is too shy to interact and turns her back on these games. Her love for Lucas resembles one of *tant* Mysie's porch ferns; green and delicate.

During school-break, the girls sit with their backs against the whitewashed wall. While turning the pages of anthologies and sketch books, Netta and Susara tutor Essie on two subjects: men and relationships. Netta is courted by two equally headstrong boyfriends. It's a time-consuming business. Susara is haunted by fears of becoming a spinster. Malie's Krisjan has been confirmed last Sunday.

Malie strictly adheres to a Friday night ritual; cover the mirror of the dressing table with a black cloth. Time well: at midnight one lights a candle, removes the cloth, and looks at one's reflection in the mirror. One's future husband will be reflected in the mirror.

Problem is; one shouldn't just discard the cloth and dance with glee. The whole issue is complicated. It is essential that the husband-to-be should peep over one's left shoulder. If the lover peeps over your right shoulder, you will either pass on while still young, or become a spinster with a bleak future.

"My *Ouma's* sister, *tant* Meggie from the Cape Colony, used to be beautiful. Not even one as lovely as you, Essie, could compete with her beauty. *Tant* Meggie never sat on a table. She used to have many boyfriends: six to eight saddles on the

veranda every Saturday evening. Her waist was like this…" (Malie indicates, using a milky white hand adorned by an admirer's ring.)

"*Tant* Meggie wished to know the name of her husband-to-be. Being courted by so many love-sick boys is time consuming. Keeping jealous boyfriends on good terms with one another can be hard work. Remember, Essie, what a disaster the day turned out to be when Gert and Lucas came to fisticuffs?

Anyway, *tant* Meggie could not face uncertainty and lived in constant fear that the ugliest of the Steyns would become her husband. He simply refused to take no for an answer and became boringly persistent.

Ouma used to share a bedroom with *tant* Meggie. *Ouma* says she woke up the self same Friday evening that *tant* Meggie got up to look in the mirror. *Ouma* says *tant* Meggie returned, pale as can be. *When tant* Meggie refuses to tell who or what she's seen in the mirror, *Ouma* simply takes for granted that *tant* Meggie has seen the ugly Steyn brother.

It is at that very moment that *Ouma* decides to take matters into her own hands and make eyes at *Oupa*. See, she reckons that *Oupa* is not destined to marry tant Meggie anyway. *Ouma* has been in love with *Oupa* from the very first and so it has become a complicated business. Now *Ouma* can hide love-letters in *Oupa's* saddle-bag without experiencing pangs of guilt.

Tant Meggie never marries. All those lonely years she farms Welverdiend on her own, pining away. Not once does she look in a mirror. Her hair grows lank and unkempt; as she cannot face the mirror!"

That Friday night Essie tilts the mirror. It intimidates her. Essie covers the mirror on the wash stand with a black shawl. She is determined to lie awake till midnight. She must have fallen asleep, though, as she only awakes with a start when Kleinjaap moves in front of her bed. He's standing there, barefoot in the cold, hugging his pillow. It is a quarter past twelve!

Keinjaap's feet are cold in the small of her back and Essie realises that he's once again wetted his bed. He flings his skinny arm round her neck and his breath smells of the *dulcis* that *tant* Mysie makes him swallow to prevent him wetting his bed.

"I'll never be lonely. There'll always be Kleinjaap." Essie falls asleep.



Tant Mysie and oom Koot

The Rain Dance

When *oupa* Petrus's fear of the drought makes his throat constrict so that he does not talk above a whisper, he searches his own soul. When *Oupa* raises his head, Lucas can read the question in his eyes: "Why, God?"

When *Oupa* wishes to communicate, he has to consider and reconsider. Talking has become a cumbersome process. At times, though, talking becomes inevitable: "Water please, Hannie."

Oupa cannot quench his thirst. It is like the thirst of a meercat suffering from rabies. The meercat loses all fear of the farmyard when driven to distraction by a thirst that cannot be quenched. Spittle dribbles down its peaky snout. It runs up and down the fence in order to burrow through. It desperately needs to reach the dogs' water bowls. As soon as it arrives at the rust-covered bowl, however, hydrophobia scares it off. This is the thirst that *Oupa* gets to know intimately.

Lucas tries to talk to him. He sits close to *Oupa*, looking into the old man's eyes. The eyes are fierce with sorrow, staring up out of deep sockets. Lucas idolises his *Oupa*. His love for the old man all but equals his reverence for the Lord. Lucas reads *Oupa's* eyes and wills the words to Oupa's lips. Then Lucas sits back, drained of energy. "The sheep, Lucas, I trust that all is well with the sheep?"

Lucas knows *Oupa* well. The old man lives his life and runs the farm by the seasons. The moon dips, waxes and wanes. Come full moon, the crop that bears above the soil, prospers. The maize crop cannot succeed when the moon wanes. This much nature has taught him; as soon as the *Jaer-beschryver* (behind the door of the outhouse with its cess-pit) indicates that the moon is waning, the sweet potato and potato flourish.

All these years *Oupa* discerns the laws of nature by keeping an eye on the clouds and on new growth sprouting. His compass consists of the Southern Cross and the firmament. He knows that, come noon, the yellowish rocks way down the slope of the Suikerbosrand bask in the sun. The drought, however, has changed the Lord's tone

of voice. The Lord enforces punishment. The scorched earth has cracked into a myriad clods and only the hardiest growth struggles on.

At Grootvlei *Oupa* never simply takes fertile soil or the rainy season for granted. All the labourers realise that. Farming is a way of life; not a way of getting cash on hand. One has to put shoulder to the wheel and rely on the good Lord's grace. Willem and Shadrack, Selina and Josef and the little ones that live in the labourer's huts sheltered by the blue gum plantation, watch the clouds.

It is on one just such a morning, during this dry season, that Lucas notices the young women. They are farm labourers' wives, trailing down the dirt road to the rhythm of their ululating. Lucas notices that the whites of their eyes show. They are all in a trance; the entire umbilical cord of dancers, all dressed in red, the rain-queen stomping it out ahead of the others. Selina is limping along in a red apron; a last droplet of blood wrung from the cord. The rain-makers disappear into the distance.

Lucas is concerned by the number of ground-game skeletons littering the veld around the parched watering-place in the spruit. There is no sign of the swarms of worker bees that used to hive in the kloof and only a few rock-spiders are rummaging about. A scorpion sits slotted between rocks. All is quiet on the slope. To Lucas the quiet resembles that of a graveyard. He is the only visitor pacing up and down among the graves. He follows the call of a partridge, only to discover a butcher-bird imitating its call.

When a plover tears up, he gets such a fright that he has to sit down on his haunches. Hoender ties his horse to the corner post and Lucas gets up to meet him.

Hoender points towards the Smalbergers' homestead. The yard is obscured by smoke and soot. Maans and his father are kindling fires to make rain; a way of causing clouds to condense. The watering-places on the farm are dry as dust.

Lucas puts his arm round Hoender's shoulder: "Good to see you."

The Water-Diviner

The farmers agree: Tjaart Zwanepoel is the only man capable of coming to the rescue. Tjaart could make water flow from a rock. Tjaart can smell a trickle of subsurface-water from a distance. As water-diviner, Tjaart is unrivalled. Simply discussing his powers causes faces to light up. Zwanepoel is the man to bring relief.

Hoender voices his opinion: "If we had sufficient water to fill the drinking troughs, we could save the cattle."

Tjaart, *oom* Koos, *oom* Skaam Sarel, the Smalwaters, *oupa* Petrus, Lucas and Hoender are sitting against the clay oven at the back door on Hoender's farm, Eensaamheid. The men are forming a half-circle. They hunch, elbows on their knees. *Oupa* is using his jack-knife to remove scabs and calluses from his large hands. He has cultivated this habit during recent weeks.

Hoender farms on his own, as his girlfriend has left him for a prospector from the gold-fields. Hoender used to suffer from fits of despair; especially during the early days of the break-up of the relationship. Those were the days that Martie had him on a string and sadness made him mope in front of the hearth on Saturday evenings. These days Hoender takes matters into his own hands. It is far better than being at somebody else's mercy. He has arranged for this meeting to take place.

Oupa is watching Tjaart closely. On their return to Grootvlei, *Oupa* would try to dispel his own doubts: "Ja, Lucas. To me it seems clear that this Tjaart, the diviner, is familiar with drink. I am of the opinion that he could easily take to drink. Whether this diviner can show water, remains to be seen."

Tjaart Zwanepoel is all shrivelled up and has blood-shot eyes. Looking into his eyes is like looking into caves for the silty shine of pools of water. Such a diviner would need to rely on his sense of smell. His nostrils are set in a fixed flare. He talks a lot. His hands dry-point the air in front of him, then start shaking as if blessing the good earth. He cracks his knuckles. Every now and again he becomes jittery as

though being jolted by a bolt of lightning. He plants his feet as though trying to bridge an enormous watercourse.

Lucas would never dare criticise a grown-up's appearance. He has to keep his thoughts to himself: Tjaart resembles a stick insect. Put a forked stick in his hands, and it would grow into a spindly limb. Tjaart is the colour of tree bark. If the diviner should get stark naked and lie prostrate in the veld, one would mistake him for fire-wood. Even so, Lucas is grateful that Tjaart is present, as he makes *Oupa's* eyes come alive.

Oupa and Lucas are travelling in the hooded cart. "Does *Oupa* set faith by this thing called the dowsing-rod?"

"*Ja*, Lucas. Let's wait and see. Let's give Zwanepoel the benefit of the doubt. We don't risk losing anything. Do I have faith in water-divining? Without a doubt, I do. Talents differ. Some abilities are unusual. Water divining goes a long way back. As a young man I used to visit Graaff-Reinet. There used to be a water-diviner in that area. He could trace a vein of water. We could also become water-diviners if we took the trouble of looking closely at the veld. Just see those trees following a course downhill. Those trees are not part of a plantation. Let me tell you: one will find a water-vein coursing there. Just see those anthills on the headland. There has to be water coursing! Ants can sense these things.

We have to invite Tjaart and show him the camel-thorn in the lower paddock; they branch out in an easterly direction; every single tree bent over towards the east. The two of us must dig there. One can never tell. There might just be a watercourse that will help the sheep pull through.

All the men of the community are present on the Monday morning when Tjaart arrives at Grootvlei to find water. *Tant* Hannie and Selina take a lot of trouble for the group, as it is a relief to see the frowns fading from the faces of the farmers and to hear laughter ringing from the front stoep. *Oom* Koos can become difficult when experiencing hardship, but today he is like a boy on the

first day of the school holidays. He even gropes *tant* Hannie playfully when she serves the men crumpets and coffee.

Shadrack and William and the other farm workers make sure that they have their food tins with them. They work within hearing distance, while digging in the herb garden. It's not a strenuous effort and the sand sifts against the *veranda* windows. The herb garden is kept going with splashes of water from the ewers. Only the rosemary sprouts new growth.

"Well, let's go see where Grootvlei's water veins are; this water diviner has now stuffed himself with sweets."

Tjaart pops his floppy hat onto his head and grabs his bundle of magic tools, hugging them under his arm. One following the other, the older men drag themselves to their feet. The drought has made their knees grow stiff.

It a strange procession that trails down to the vlei: *oupa* Petrus and old *oom* Smalberger on horseback, *oom* Koos and the Sandfontein Griesels in the hooded cart, *oom* Skaam Sarel and a few neighbours on foot. Tjaart walks. He must stay connected to the earth; read the currents. Lucas, Hoender and Maans bring up the rear. Hoender has really large feet and believes that if Tjaart can set off a vibration in an underground current, the last shock waves should penetrate the soles of his veld shoes. Lucas can sense that Hoender is partial to walking barefoot, but the dry devil's thorn is all over and Hoender's daring is short-lived.

Oupa Petrus wishes to first lead the gathering to the dry course of the vlei. The previously perennial fountains that have fed the dongas, are sores surrounded by festering flotsam. Tjaart digs out a wing-shaped shell from the eroded bank of the spruit. Oupa believes that this dates far back to a now depleted water-table.

Tjaart has entrusted Lucas with the bag. Maans can't contain his excitement and loosens the thong around the mouth of the bag. Tjaart's tools do not impress: a length of steel wire, plaited copper wire, coiled galvanised wire, a coin and a bottle of water. There is a forked stick of pine and sticks raisin-bush and *taaibos*. Tjaart is selecting a forked stick from a tree on the banks of the vlei. It's time consuming, picking and whittling a divining-rod.

The horses and cart remain at a distance. Tjaart takes hold of the rod with both hands: palms upwards. The neck of the rod must be inclined upwards at an angle of 45 degrees. Quiet flows through his followers, the way medicine does.

Tjaart makes for the trees, his face intense so that his cleft chin becomes a tiny pair of smarting buttocks. He gets a good grip on the rod. Five times in succession he shifts his weight from the ball of his left foot to the ball of his right foot. He has a fixed stare. Tjaart takes a few steps in an easterly direction. He changes his mind, turns right and sets off in a southerly direction. He heads west.

When the diviner approaches Lucas and tosses the rod into the bag, the sun is already high. This doesn't seem promising. Tjaart, however, is not about to allow his courage to fail him. He takes the bottle of water from the bag. Lucas expects him to take a sip. Maans moves closer for a drink, as the sun smarts and the day is getting on.

Tjaart steadies the bottle on the palm of his hand. "Let's move closer to the ridge. If the bottle topples, we can rest assured that we are on the right track."

Zwanepoel then puts the bottle down and unbuttons his fly to pass water behind the thorn tree. Hoender follows suit. Lucas speculates: "Would water in the bladder interfere with the water-divining and cause the bottle to topple the wrong way? If that were the case, all of us had better empty our bladders. A man wouldn't wish to be mistaken for the water vein."

His friends laugh nervously. Even *oupa* Petrus enjoys the joke. The tension is relieved. The bottle also ends up in the bag.

Young Petrus has fallen asleep on his father's arm. His head dangles like a large fruit drooping from its stalk. Conversation has dried up. The sun sets behind the camel-thorn trees. The group has been criss-crossing the farm since early morning.

Tjaart has the coin in the palm of his right hand He stretches out his right arm as though proffering it to some homeless person skulking in the veld. He

stares fixedly, willing the coin to vibrate. Lucas is concerned about Oupa, who has turned pale with exhaustion. Tjaart clenches his fists. He sets off.

It happens when everyone is past caring. Tjaart's body jerks. He gets the shakes. He tears open his shirt to expose his skinny chest. Buttons pop in every which direction. Zwanepoel is jitterbugging. He surrenders himself to the dance until his teeth start rattling. Maans is the first to realise what has happened and shrills out the way a girl would: "Wa-a-a-ter!"

There is no stopping the men. *Oom* Smalberger grabs *oom* Koos around the waist and the young ones dance with. Tjaart has recovered from his trance. "Here's the water…. water aplenty. It's not deep. It's sweet, not brackish."



Tant Hannie obsesses

Tant Hannie's thrift is the saving grace of the people at Grootvlei. The farmers in the district suffer great hardship. *Tant* Hannie takes precautions. She becomes the virtuous woman whose praises are sung in the Word of the Lord; the virtuous housewife who provides for the needs of her family.

The drought takes a firm grip. *Tant* Hannie's determination to care for her family grows. Her face grows gaunt as she grits her teeth. She dusts and scrubs as if her very life depends on cleanliness. Her job is made harder by dust devils. Every new morning poplar leaves litter the stoep. Surface soil funnels and filters through crevices. Inside the house, the thick velvet curtains are drawn in mathematical precision; the pleats just so. Every surface in every room is kept dust-free. There are no smudges on the porcelain or glassware. Along the corridor a hand's breadth of floor surface lies exposed between the skin-mats and the wall. It is the year 1897 and here, in Heidelberg, neuroticism and compulsive behaviour cannot as yet be diagnosed. *Tant* Hannie is determined to take control and the household has to abide by her regulations.

The food served at Grootvlei is nutritious, but served in small portions. Lucas often goes in search of Cooboo berry or veld fruit in order to satisfy his hunger.

During spring, one could still pick the ripe yellow fruit of the Marula trees, but the baboons have harvested and the rest are preserved in the canned fruit bottles on the shelves of Grootvlei's pantry. The twisted seed pods of the umbrella-thorn lie processed as fodder in the barn. Selina's young ones have dug up the shallow roots of the cabbage-tree for the pot. A few handfuls of coffee have been ground from the seeds of the wild coffee- bush. Come early spring and the soil around the rain-bush cracks. The shuttle bugs cannot harvest enough sap from the bark to build their nests.

Tant Hannie, however, ensures that Grootvlei's pantry remains stocked and in the evening, she distributes provisions among Selina's children to take back to the workers' cottages. The largest stock is in the loft: up the stairs in the kitchen. Up in the reed loft, on the layer of matting weaved from bulrush,

on top of the layer of clay that fire-proofs it, emergency supplies lie stored. These consist of slips filled with dried beans, bags of rice, pockets of wheat, a tub of quinces, dried peaches, *biltong,* dried sausage and white pumpkin.

It is one of these split bean bags that causes the disaster. Kleinjaap spends the morning under *tant* Hannie and Essie's feet, where the two of them are busy making *vetkoek*. Essie is normally very careful, but she has scalded her hand with hot lye while boiling soap.

Kleinjaap keeps pulling at the sore hand, because the clay ox that Essie has helped him model, has lost a horn. He must play on his own; Kleinpetrus and *oom* Koos have left early morning to visit neighbours.

Essie sits Kleinjaap on the lowest step of the loft ladder. She gives him a mug of buttermilk and breaks off a piece from the edge of the freshly baked rusks. Kleinjaap is very fond of moist rusks. He's as quiet as can be.

It is only after Essie and Kleinjaap have left for home, that *tant* Hannie notices that the trap door to the loft is open. Her breathing is laboured as she pulls herself up the ladder. It has been a long day. In the attic she casts her eyes over the bags of dried goods. The burlap of one of the dried bean bags has become unravelled. The beans have run out into a small pile. She picks up the beans and places the bag upright to prevent more beans from spilling. She spots a piece of Kleinjaap's soaked rusk on the top step. It is squashed. She scoops up the mess into the palm of her hand and goes to dust it off into the chicken bowl.

Outside the chickens are already roosting. *Tant* Hannie is grateful that six months of molly coddling finally pay off. The hens have started laying eggs. She gathers her apron at the hem and rolls the few eggs into it. The trellis table in the kitchen has already been laid for supper. *Tant* Hannie pushes the bowl of curds to one side so that she can record the week's egg profits.

Monday: half dozen eggs + one cracked.
Tuesday: eight eggs.
Wednesday: three eggs + two cracked.
Thursday: half dozen.

Friday: two cracked.
Total: twenty three eggs + five cracked.
Price: approximately one shilling and six pence per dozen.

Meester's Heroism

Lucas enters and hangs his hat behind the kitchen door. A scream of anguish rises from the footpath to the school, causing Lucas to jerk open the door in confusion. The sound is that heart-rending, that it resembles the cry of an animal in agony. But, it's not an animal. It's Essie. Her hair frames her startled eyes. Her cheeks are covered in weals where her fingers have repeatedly clawed at her face.

"My doing … I should have watched him!"

She continually repeats this. Lucas takes her hands firmly into his own. He hugs her tightly until the worst sobs subside. Most of the sugar-water that *tant* Hannie has tried to force into her mouth, runs from the corners of her mouth. *Tant* Hannie and Lucas return her to the school house.

Every lamp and candle in the caretaker's cottage has been lit. It is as though the community wishes to force light and life into the dark. The empathy is tangible. *Meester* is there, his cuffs rolled up. His shoulders sag in defeat. Maans and his mother are present. *Oom* Skaam Sarel has arrived to lend support. Hoender stands at the rusted gate. He does not speak. He merely opens for Lucas and for *tant* Hannie and Es.

Tant Mysie sits in the corner of the bedroom. She is so shattered that she appears shrunken. She is hugging something. It's Kleinjaap. *Tant* Hannie tries to help her to her feet. Someone offers her a drink of black coffee. *Tant* Mysie refuses to let go of Kleinjaap.

Only then does Lucas notice the scissors on the mattress. *Meester*'s white school shirt is covered in blood. *Oom* Koot hugs Essie tightly: "It's not your doing, Es; the good Lord has come to take him. It's all in the past. Be quiet, my child. Kleinjaap has never been equipped for life."

It is much later that *oom* Koot explains:

Es and Kleinjaap have been laughing on their return home from Grootvlei. Nothing was amiss. They enjoyed their supper. Kleinjaap must have placed the dried bean in his mouth just before bedtime. He fell asleep with his head resting on the table and when Es took him by the arm to help him to bed, he gave a strangled hiccup and his face turned blue. The rest of

the beans were still in his shirt pocket. The bean must have ended up *down the wrong throat* when he woke up. The bean was all bulged out and Kleinjaap did not put up a great struggle.

Meester was in the school marking lessons when *oom* Koot called him. *Meester* made an incision in Kleinjaap's throat, using the school scissors, but the bean was lodged lower down in the throat and Kleinjaap was tired of fighting for breath.

The soft tubing in *Meester*'s desk drawer must have been part of a primitive stomach-pump. One can hardly begin to grasp the extent of the heroism; *Meester* trying to make an incision with the scissors in the soft dimple at the base of the child's throat!

Initially *Meester*'s hands shake uncontrollably. A cold sweat pours from his hair into his face. For a while he struggles to concentrate. He longs for his elderly mother, Jetje, in the Colony. She has wanted so much for him to study medicine. From a young age, *Meester* already showed anxiety at the sight of blood. He realises that this is Kleinjaap's only chance of survival. A slim one, but at least a straw to grasp hold of. Geertsema's breath becomes little private pockets of thought. All would be lost if he fainted. The boy smells of sun and of outdoors.

We watch Siemen Geertsema bravely executing the tracheotomy. Which is his dominant hand? Both are weak. There is a total obstruction of the larynx. The scissors pierce the soft skin of the neck just below the glottis and slit open the trachea. *Meester* threads the tube through the hole.

There is no soft gasp or fluttering of eyelids. Kleinjaap has long been looking down on *Meester*'s heroism.

For a long time after, Essie misses Kleinjaap's cold feet in the hollow of her back, whenever she startles awake at night.

The Locust Plague

What does a hue taste of? Of certain smells one could say: this has a red smell, like that of the red syrup that Lucas and Essie tasted in the Tearoom in the arcade.

That is a flavour one can taste. It sticks to the tongue and tastes of this or of the other. How does one describe flavours that one cannot touch, much less taste? Take for example the sweet scent of gardenia. Essie is in the garden at Grootvlei, inhaling the scent and to her it smells of white boiled sweets (not the minty ones, the sweet ones).

Could one claim that a colour is flavoured or that the blue of the clouds tastes of frost? Does the white of a star taste like spring-water?

Can one taste emotion? Perhaps one can claim that depression tastes of bitter peach kernel coffee? Or that longing sandpapers the teeth the way a lemon would?

That locust season, shortly after the first rains, is just such a green season. It is a green that seeps into the nostrils like the smell of freshly crushed stink-bugs. It leaves an aftertaste of bile. It tastes of insanity.

The swarm arrives during the darkest hour of the night. It takes a while for the image to move from the retina to the brain.

When he opens his eyes this morning, Lucas notices daylight dawning brightly through the window. The bedroom is brighter as there is no trace of the creeper that used to cover the pane. The lush plant, through which the late afternoon sun used to cast its rosy tints against the walls, has vanished overnight.

It smells of stink-bug green. The Bible states that if only one could lay claim to faith the size of a mustard seed, one would be able to perform miracles. Lucas has ample faith. If he shuts his eyes for a moment, will everything out there change back to the way it used to be?

By the time he finds himself standing next to *oupa* Petrus in *Oupa's* bedroom, Lucas has recovered his wits. Lucas holds *Oupa* in great esteem. This morning there is little that he can do to comfort *oupa* Petrus.

Some of the locusts are still settling. From close by, one can identify the stink-bug green with spots the colour of the red flesh of a fig. It is the *Locusta migratoria migratorioides;* the much feared migratory locust.

It has all started during the long drawn out drought. Out there on the dry African plains, the first female has pierced the warm earth with her vibrating lecontite. She has injected the white cocoon-like eggs into the hole. The rest of the pheromone-driven females have followed cue.

Throughout the dry period, the eggs have lain buried there. Then the first rains soak the earth. Countless eggs hatch. The swarm migrates, creating havoc.

It is a part of this green swarm that settles here in Heidelberg. Grootvlei is not its ultimate destination. Heidelberg is merely part of a migratory route.

To *tant* Mysie, it is as though the dark cloud of her depression has become tangible. The one thing that affects the emotions of the Afrikaner, is the sun. *Tant* Mysie remembers the last eclipse of the sun clearly; “I realised, when first I noticed the dreary darkness, that a sadness would come upon us. That was truly so, as we lay to rest Hester’s Klein Hester three days later.”

Tant Ella of *oom* Skaam Sarel recalls having read about the approach of disaster in the tea leaves a week ago. The leaves have clung to the bottom of the mug from which she takes her morning infusion.

“When I swirled the leaves, they covered the bottom of the mug so that one could not even see the rose-pattern.”

Tant Ella is visiting *tant* Mysie in her kitchen. The windows are shut tightly and *oom* Koot has plugged the gap at the bottom of the door with a damp Hessian sack.

The women are awaiting the return of *oom* Skaam Sarel and *oom* Smalwater and *Meester*, who have all left with Doel Zeederberg’s coach to Johannesburg the last week. They left under the pretext of having to order school supplies and books. *Tant* Ella knows that all of this is really about the new Johannesburg Railway Station. These things interest men.

The local school committee prides itself in being an authority in many fields.

Meester can testify to this, seeing as he's been at the receiving end of their displeasure. Since the Johannesburg Park Stop has attained the new status of Park Station, the farming community is of the opinion that this could have a life-changing effect. The members of the commission are convinced that trains will be harmful to the farming community.

The following arguments have been raised by the commission:

1. All those that have earned additional income as hawkers or as transport riders, will suffer financially.
2. All the cows will immediately dry up from shock, should the rails be laid close to the pastures.
3. There is a very real risk that houses in the vicinity will collapse or crack badly from the tremendous noise. The school building will also be at risk.

The community will have to approach the authorities to limit the inevitable damage. The trains must stick to a fixed speed limit, say twenty miles per hour. A higher speed limit would be fatal. It should be borne in mind that man is not supposed to exceed the speed of a horse-drawn buggy. Man should not put his Maker to the test.

The Johannesburg Station is the design of the Amsterdam designer Klinkhamer and is completed in the year 1896. First impressions are of the neat planking of the platform, of cast iron, forged iron pillars and of trelliswork, of windows and candelabras. All these have been brought over from Holland and re-erected in Millionaire's Row. The enormous glass dome has previously been part of an exhibition-studio in the Netherlands.

The station master is leaning against one of the signal posts. He is proud of his domain. There is gold braiding on his cap. In the tradition of station masters, only the top button of his jacket is buttoned.

The Netherlands *Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg Maatschappij* (NZASM) can take pride in the new building.

Oom Skaam Sarel, *oom* Smalwater and *Meester,* have just seated themselves on one of the neat wooden benches to watch activities, when the wave hits the station. Billions of grasshoppers cover the walls, advertising

boards, platforms and railway lines. Locust-bodies are pulverised into a slime that causes steam locomotives to skid to a standstill. The green tide has reached Johannesburg.

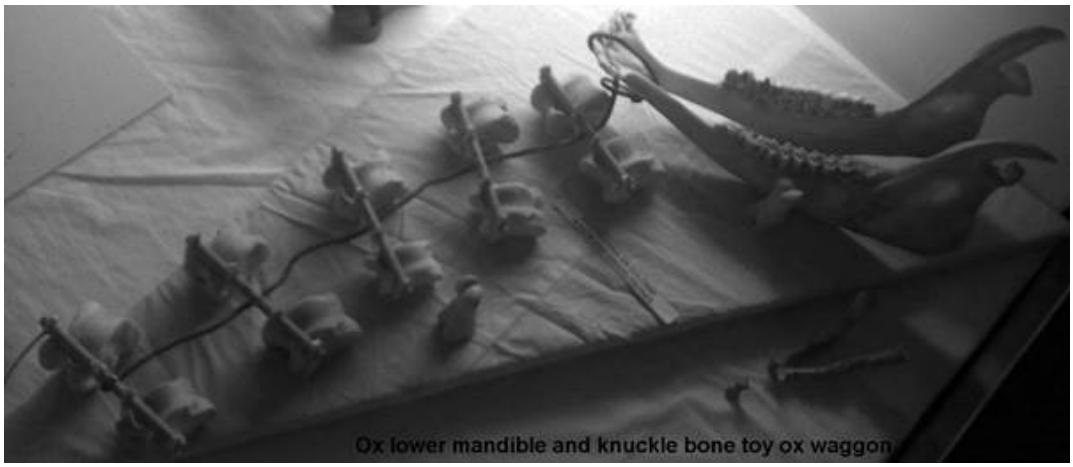


The Rinderpest

The jawbone of an ox rests on the springbuck skin in front of Kleinjaap's bedstead. The teeth are yellow. This is Kleinpetrus's ox-cart. Eighteen cleaned and washed knuckle bones of slaughter-cattle are piled next to this jawbone.

Kleinpetrus can identify each of his oxen: Rooiman is chipped and Kolberg has a splinter of marrow-bone attached to it. He has named each of his knuckle-bone oxen. If you should cover Kleinpetrus's eyes with your hand and put each knuckle bone in the palm of his hand in quick succession, he'll close his fist around each and identify it without hesitating. He knows them by their sizes, protuberances and textures. A team of knucklebone-oxen is a farm boy's most treasured possession. Kleinpetrus's yokes are whittled from the fire-wood at the hearth. The strops are *velskoen*-thong and the trek-ropes are from tall grass.

On clear days his team turns over the clods in the herb garden. When the day is overcast, he plays at the women's feet on the peach-stone floor in the kitchen. On days that tant Hannie suffers one of her blinding bouts of headache, he yokes them in the shade of the verandah wall. He talks little; mostly hums driver's songs. *Oom* Koos is mad as a wet hen when Kleinpetrus cuts up his whip-lash to serve as a whip for the knuckle bone oxen. Kleinpetrus's moods can be told from the way he urges on the team.



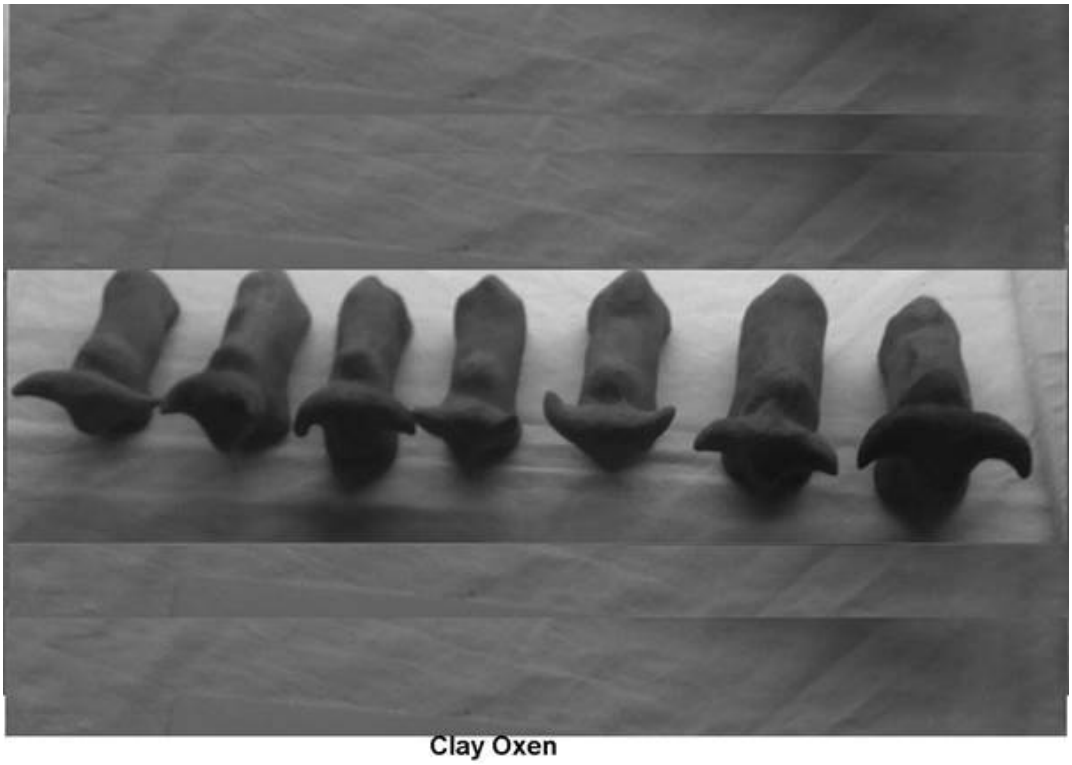
Ripples would coil on the surface of the water of the wash basin if a pebble were to be dropped in the centre. The largest ripples originate where the stone hits the water. Grootvlei is where the stone has plunged.

Kleinjaap is dead. He is laid to rest under the cypress trees. The impact of his death still fans out over the surface of his community.

Guilt consumes *tant* Hannie. She avoids Essie and *tant* Mysie. She feels that the trap door has been left open as a result of her negligence. Under her ribs, loneliness beats like some strange organ. When *tant* Mysie visits the Grootvlei homestead, *tant* Hannie orders Keinpetrus to play in the back room. She keeps the child out of sight, as she feels guilty that she still has Kleinpetrus, whilst *tant* Mysie's Kleinjaap has passed on.

Tant Hannie denies herself the small comfort of hugging Kleinpetrus, her only son, to her flat chest. She begrudges herself the pleasures of motherhood. If possible, one could say that she grows even more meticulous where housekeeping is concerned.

Tant Hannie's days grow into a series of compulsive behavioural patterns. She resists the impulses: she climbs the steep attic ladder a thousand times a day, checking that all the Hessian sacks filled with dried beans, peas and maize pips, are tightly stitched and knotted. With her bony fingers she carefully explores each seam on the pockets of dry goods. She knots the mouths of the pockets so securely, that the cotton stitching rips. *Oupa* Petrus then patiently repairs the stitching, as *tant* Hannie cannot relax unless everything is secure. She knots the pockets applying superhuman strength. *Oom* Koos has had to cut the thread with his jack knife this very morning. The knot could not be undone.



Clay Oxen

Kleinpetrus suffers. His clay oxen keep him company. He flogs them mercilessly with the whip lash, imitating his father's moodiness.

Oupa Petrus anxiously watches the child at play: Kleinpetrus builds miniature altars all over the yard. On these he sacrifices his clay oxen. He stacks pyres from chips of wood that he lights in the coal stove. *Oupa* watches the child cupping the flames with his hands. It is chilly and the small piles of twigs on which Kleinpetrus balances the clay oxen, are slow to catch fire.

Kleinpetrus sometimes buries the clay oxen in shallow graves. These he decorates with tiny headstones. He removes his cloth hat and keens tunelessly.

There is a limit to what we can perceive: the minimum stimulus that can be discerned by the taste-buds is one teaspoonful of sugar dissolved in two gallons of water. The merest touch that can be felt on the surface of the skin, is as tentative as the brush of a fly's wing dropped from a height of half a finger onto the sensitive skin

of the cheek. Without a doubt, certain senses dull. Hearing becomes unreliable. Pain remains intense.

The senses can discern one droplet of Eau de Cologne evaporated in the space of six large rooms. A sharp sense of smell is required to detect this faint waft. The smell choking the farmers at Heidelberg, is the sickly smell of decay. Grootvlei and indeed all of the Heidelberg farming community, is incinerating infected carcasses. This is the year of the *rinderpest*.

It is hard to imagine life on the farm without watching the show team drawing the Communion waggon and witnessing the harnessing of draught oxen. The herding of the dairy cows mornings and evenings announces the start and the end of the day. The clanging of milk pails and the lowing of cows at the end of the day, is a ritual. The *rinderpest* has put an end to all of this.

This morning Lucas arrives at Eensaamheid at milking-time. Hoender is shooing a would-be-weaned calf to one side. Hoender has been hard to get hold of these last few weeks. He seems ready to quit life.

Plas, Hoender's best dairy cow, is supporting itself against the fence. The animal is feverish and her breathing is shallow. Plas's face is wet with the tears streaming from her eyes. Two oxen listlessly trample dung near the corner post. Flies swarm over fluid streaming from their mouths and nostrils. The smell of discharge, of pus, hits Lucas as he moves closer. Hoender pulls opens the jaws of the nearest pitiful creature. The gums are covered in white sores.

Grootvlei's cattle herd is is depleted. During the advanced stage of the disease, the animals excrete stinking diarrhoea in which bits of rotten intestine float. The excreta crusts under their tails. Most animals die of dehydration; too weak to remain standing.

The civil guard collects sick herds and shoot the infected animals. Infection spreads like fire in the underwood. Carcases are burnt where kindling is available.

The Smalwaters are the first to inject their cattle with the blood of sick cattle, and then, as a last resort, with the gall of the dying. A depleted herd remains.

Lucas and Hoender, as though crazed, work together to fight the disease. With eyes that have grown accustomed to the warning signs, they separate the sickly from the dying. Hoender's scrawny body looks as though it has been whittled by an absent-minded water-diviner. With the outbreak at its peak, he sleeps on the sleeping porch at Grootvlei. Loneliness closes in on him.

Oupa Petrus has shrunk. To Lucas his *Oupa*'s suffering is of far greater importance than is the depleted herd. Some evenings the old man finds it hard to read the Scripture.

A prayer of Habakuk, the prophet.3: 17,18.

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my Salvation.

Young Love

Lucas sees Essie as his bride-to-be. Two women, both precious to him, have been snatched from his life: first Greet, then *ma* Susannah. Nowadays, *ma* Susannah is represented by a few words of longing scribbled on a sheet of paper.

Essie has grown insecure. Ever since she has lost Kleinjaap, she clings to Lucas. She has grown possessive and demanding. Lucas has to declare his love for her time and again.

This last Saturday, Lucas and Hoender struggle till late to tend a sick cow. Lucas does not tackle the task wholeheartedly. He knows that Essie will not be happy; Saturday nights are for courting

When he finally arrives at *oom* Koot and *tant* Mysie's front door, it is *oom* Koot who opens the door.

"Evening, Lucas. *Man*, we're at our wits end. Essie has convinced herself that you are not interested in keeping tonight's appointment. The *Tante* has given her a little *jalap*. Essie is in bed. She has cried herself to sleep."

Lucas would have loved to see Essie. He snaps off a cypress twig at the front door and gives it to *tant* Mysie to put on Essie's pillow.

"Thanks, *Tante*. I shall take my leave. Essie will understand the message of the twig.

That last Peach

Lucas sits quietly in the recliner in *oupa* Petrus's bedroom. Sometimes he can sense the heat of the old man's body in the indentation in the upholstery. Often *oupa* Petrus is in bed. Most of the time he is awake and Lucas realises: *oupa* Petrus has been waiting for him.

It's just before midnight. Lucas is sitting in the recliner in the bedroom. It has been a long winter, and he is looking out over the yard. He gets up to scoop a dab of goat fat from the tin on the bedside table next to *Oupa's* bed, as his arms and hands are chapped. He knocks over the lye bush berry candle. As he replaces the lid of the tin, the candlestick clangs from the table. He pauses. *Oupa's* breathing is like a dead leaf brushing against the pane.

Lucas leans back in the chair at the window. In the cypress next to the front gate, a turtle-dove calls; as though it has had a dream and wants to repeat this to its mate before the image fades. The moon browses. Lucas must have dozed off, because he wakes with a start when *Oupa's* bed creaks.

"Lucas."

"Yes, *Oupa*?"

"Your *Oupa* would love a peach. Perhaps there's a ripe one amongst the first of the cling peaches?"

"Could be, *Oupa*."

There's something surreal about picking peaches late at night in a still yard. Fortunately, one's eyes adjust to the night. Lucas cups the peach in his palm. The fruit is firm, covered in fragrant down. Lucas quietly shuts the back door and rinses his jack knife in the wash basin.

Once seated in front of the bedroom window with the dish basin between his knees, he peels clumsily. A man does not have a proper lap. This is a labour of love

and Lucas peels meticulously, so that the rind curls into the basin. He then moves to the folding chair up to the bed.

"You may light the lamp, Lucas."

He feeds *oupa* Petrus small slices, the way one would a small child so that the child does not choke.

"That was good."

When he looks up, Lucas sees *Oupa* crossing his arms. Then *oupa* Petrus exhales for the very last time. Lucas is left on his own in the quiet room. All is still, as the other members of the household are sound asleep.

Lucas wishes to shout in pain. He is not prepared for this loss. He is most certainly not ready for this.

A bitterness flows from him. He wishes to cup his hands over his testicles and snuggle up to the corpse.

Tant Lalie

Tant Lalie, sister in law to *oom* Skaam Sarel, lives behind the government buildings in Heidelberg. Her house is built from sheets of corrugated iron.

Tant Lalie suffers from an undiagnosed gnawing pain in the stomach: the cause of her wasting away. One would assume that this slow transition from life to eternity would terrify her. This is not the case. She is obsessed with death and the portents of the hereafter. Every wake and funeral ceremony prepares her for the fact that "all flesh is grass." She wishes to grow to accept the inevitable. On a cold evening, one would dip one's toe in the water in the big washbasin before lowering the rest of your body into the water. *Tant* Lalie knows that, for her, time is running out.

The children on their way to school in the very centre of town, make detours around this house with filigree on the veranda. Visitors seldom loiter between the two rows of river stones that lead up to aunt Lalie's green front door. All the townspeople are wary that she, Lalie, would detect signs of an early visit by the angel of death in their eyes. One afternoon, young Annie of *tant* Souf had to deliver *tant* Lalie a message from the schoolmaster.

It was an order with specifications for a shroud. Annie still shudders when reminded of the errand: she could not escape the look in the eyes of the pink glass dog on *tant* Lalie's sideboard.

The sadness of the matter is: lately, support and assistance with illness and death is the only link that the old lady has with the living. *Tant* Lalie later tells Louis of *oom* Skaam Sarel how the portrait of President Steyn has crashed from the wall on the night of *oupa* Petrus's death. Only President Kruger is still hanging on the picture-rail. This has been a portent of death, not one as clear as the time her deceased mother approached her before Kleinjaap's death, but still, an omen.

It is only when there is no hope of recovery that *tant* Lalie is asked to assist at the sick bed. Only when death has entered like a black star, does one summon *tant*

Lalie. Netta says that when a sick person opens his eyes after a delirium to see *tant* Lalie sitting there, he does not expect to recover.

Netta says that the Tante has a *Sieckentroost* from which she reads to those pining away. *Tant* Lalie also regularly updates a thick manuscript with parting words. Perhaps she reads it at night before retiring (in order to prepare herself to continue the conversation with the deceased in the hereafter). She treasures the cracked hand mirror that she holds above the deceased's face. Where life and death is concerned, there should be no room for doubt.

When one opens the door of the guest room, a long white dress swishes from a hook behind the door. This is the very *dress* that the young Lalie has stitched painstakingly. She has decorated it for her wedding night. There is bobbin lace on the collar and the buttons on the bust are covered. Thirteen white ribbons decorate the hem; one for each of her years as a thirteen year old (the age at which she promised herself to the livestock speculator). Her father disowned her after a heated argument as he found the man insufferable and was dead set against this match.

Oom Skaam Sarel says that *tant* Lalie used to be very beautiful, with long wavy hair; red as a peat fire. The speculator slipped a cheap ring on *tant* Lalie's finger and left for the Colony all by himself. He would return for her the next month. He must have had a change of heart, because he never put in an appearance again. *Tant* Lalie's baby was born prematurely. The tiny corpse was that of a fully developed boy. It had no imperfections. *Tant* Lalie's father was not forgiving. They were not on speaking terms. She later moved to town and worked at the General Dealers.

Her father, *oom* Skaam Sarel's late father in law, has been six foot under for years now. Only on his deathbed did he talk to *tant* Lalie. He needed assistance and was too weak to insist on a substitute nurse. All the old fire was gone from his heart. His parting words should also be somewhere in the book. Lalie is probably the loneliest mortal being in Heidelberg.

Parting

The dogs lie in a patch of sun on the front veranda. This morning they are waiting for their morning walk. Mornings *Oupa* Petrus usually comes down the front passage with his walking stick. Lucas can imagine the tapping of the stick on the floor. The four of them, *Oupa*, Lucas, Weeskind and Boesman will then set off for the ridges. With the dogs panting at their heels, progress has been slow, because in human years the dogs are old as Methuselah. Lucas squats next to Boesman and his tears drip onto the dog's yellow pelt. Weeskind senses that something is amiss, because he sniffs Lucas's collar. Lucas knows that he will not be the only one grieving.

The problem is that the waiting will long remain with the dogs. He would prefer to deal with this matter now, so that they can understand. He considers sneaking the two dogs through the parlour to the old man's bedroom so that they can lick the lifeless hand and take their leave. This is not an option. There is crockery in the hall cupboards and the big dogs have a clumsy tail-wagging gait. They will also be ill at ease in the house, as *tant* Hannie does not normally allow them in there.

Oom Koos has already reconciled himself with *Oupa*'s death. He is concerned with the inconvenience of finalising the arrangements for the funeral. He decides to leave all of this in *tant* Hannie and the neighbours' capable hands. *Tant* Hannie acts like an automaton. She has started drawing up a list:

1. Lay out the body; send Shadrack to town with the buggy this morning; fetch *nig* Lalie.
2. Make the bed in the guest bedroom for *nig* Lalie's stay.
3. Supervise Selina's roasting of the leg of mutton to ensure that there is enough cold meat for the mourning period; the three-legged pot will suffice.
4. Air the shroud; neatly folded in the large waggon-chest; remove the creases; ensure there are coals for the iron.

5. The coffin is in the attic; get Willem to retrieve and dust it. (Afterthought; grateful to have thought of getting the house decorator to embellish the lid with the family crest during the time that he was here to paint the picture rails); polish the eight pall bearer handles.

6. Order black mourning crepe.

7. Prepare the sitting room for the death watch.

8. Send notice to Essie and Meester to assist with the funeral notices; possibly Netta as well; neat cursive writing.

9. Inform *Dominee*.

10. Order Lucas and Willem to dig the grave under the cypresses next to *Moeder*.

Tant Hannie continuously runs the lists through her mind. For a period of two hours she neglects checking that the sleeves of dried products remain sealed.



Mourning

During that last year before the outbreak of war, nature seems to recover from drought and hardship. This is the way of nature: blood seeps from a wound, forms a scab; the raw scab hardens and shrivels up. A pale scar, sensitive to the touch, remains.

Such is Lucas's suffering after the passing on of *oupa* Petrus. The pain is still there; a door that might swing wide unexpectedly. *Oupa* visits in Lucas's dreams as the younger, more energetic man of Lucas's childhood years. Initially the dream image has no voice, but the eyes communicate concern. Lucas relives memories that elude him in broad daylight.

Tonight Lucas has pulled up the quilt under his chin. His eyes are moving rapidly under the thin tissue of his lids. In this dreamscape, images from the past surface:

Lucas is barefoot. He supports himself against the washstand with the marble top, while *Oupa* is washing his hands and face. The two of them have spent the whole day in the veld and where *Oupa* has unbuttoned his collar and tucked it in, a red patch of sunburnt skin is revealed. That real is this dream, that he can feel the rough texture of *Oupa's* skin as he snuggles up to him and runs his fingers over *Oupa's* forearms. *Oupa* Petrus soaps his forearms with a bar of lime soap that he puts on the saucer next to the pitcher. The brown congeals in scum round the rim of the basin.

"*Oupa*, it seems a though *Oupa* will never be able to rinse off all the soil today."

His *Oupa* turns his head. The laughter lines crease around his eyes: "It's as you say, Lucas. Fact is: you and I, the two of us, we are made from the earth. The Good Lord moulded us from clay. We are like clay oxen. It says so in the Word. You must learn to read well. I reckon you and I are covered in an extra layer of potter's clay, and for that very reason we love the marshlands."

Lucas agrees; his favourite smells are those of:

- rain that sinks into you the way history does
- sheep manure when herding the flock and
- the dust of the cypress when he presses against it.

His favourite textures are:

- silt in the irrigation canals,
- newly ploughed sods and
- red clay for his clay oxen.

These days Lucas takes refuge in his love for Essie and his friendship with Hoender, as he finds little of common interest with *oom* Koos. *Oom* Koos has grown possessive of Grootvlei and when Lucas tries to approach him, the older man reacts with sharp retorts.

"I notice that the trough in the corner paddock is empty. It won't fill by itself and what shoddy workmanship is this, Lucas? There's no time for small talk; the kraal wall at the gate is collapsing. Go fix it."

Essie is still grieving for Kleinjaap. One notices the grief when she is watching Kleinpetrus and lowers her guard. She has stopped blaming herself for his death, though. Lucas is grateful. Essie has, if possible, grown even more beautiful. Her face has remained heart-shaped, but she has lost weight and her step is graceful. She moves so lightly that, more often than not, Lucas becomes aware of her presence only when she is right next to him, holding his mug of coffee.

Lucas stands head-down working on the boundary fence. When he looks up, she is standing next to him. Lucas and Shadrack have been working side by side all morning, but now Shadrack moves over to Selina's kitchen for a scoop of porridge and sour milk. He knows that Lucas and Essie need some time on their own to greet properly.

Nature is also on the road to recovery. The grass in the marsh sprouts green and life and movement have returned along the ridges. The birds, especially, have multiplied. They have been feeding on grasshoppers: rock doves, swifts, larks and pied starling.

Mornings, one sees the odd duiker in the reeds where they turn the bald black patches on their skins to the sun for heat. The Egyptian goose hisses hoarsely in the marsh and the coot belly flops in the shallow water.

Even the creeper at Lucas's window sprouts, so that single leaves cast a gossamer shadow on the wall. Grootvlei is recovering.

Target shooting

October 1899. The word *Uitlander* has become slander. Here, amongst our people, two predicaments loom: the greed of the *Uitlander* and the avarice of Britain.

This morning the neighbours are discussing the *Uitlander*-situation on the veranda at Grootvlei. *Oom* Koos becomes so agitated that the cup in his hand shakes uncontrollably and the teaspoon rattles against the porcelain lip. *Tant* Mysie rests her hand lightly on his. She then pours a mouthful into the saucer. She places the cup out of his reach on the veranda wall. He's still shaky, but this way he is able to take a sip. What has possessed *tant* Hannie to serve tea in her best colonial set on a morning such as this one?

Oom Koos is leaning against one of the pillars. He taps his quirt against the plasterwork. "*Neef* Liebenberg says the *Uitlanders* board the trains like swarms of flies. They bulge over the sides of the cattle trucks. Cowards! They first run to the British government, lodging all sorts of complaints. Now that they've encouraged the British avarice, they flee the country. Troublemakers! They do not love the soil. They simply wish to enrich themselves."

Oom Skaam Sarel is busy inspecting the rifles. There's a variety displayed against the thong bench: a Martini Henry, a Wesley-Richards, a few Eitons with single and double barrels, Mausers and a Lee Enfield.

Shots ricochet in the garden. The young men are target-shooting. Hoender decides to lay claim to two guns: in case one grows too hot during an attack on the English. He reminds of a young boy with a new sling and a bag of pebbles. Lucas is amazed at Hoender's bravado: "Hoender, my friend, this is no clay-stick warfare on the banks of the Blesbok Spruit. A clod bruises its victim, but this stuff kills. I really don't want to look into the eyes of a victim. Fact is, a man has no choice. This enemy has no conscience."

Gert agrees: they will make life unbearable for these English. The shots at the home-made targets are impressively accurate. At two hundred yards the tight

grouping of the Mauser can be covered by a Kruger pound.

The seventy-fourth birthday of President Kruger has just been celebrated. War clouds enshroud the Transvaal.

Oom Maans Smalwater is a De la Rey supporter: “I see matters the way that De la Rey does: war cannot be avoided. There is nothing that the government can do about it. One cannot continue making concessions. Once we concede, the enemy demands more. I say: let them come. We are ready and waiting.”

The Liebenberg brothers from Roodewal have implicit faith in Krisjan de Wet. *Neef* Paul, the eldest, argues: “It seems to me that this is an enemy that shows no mercy. They will throttle us until we are blue in the face. They wish to eradicate us Afrikaners. President Steyn believes that the Free State should help. As long as there are men like De Wet in the Free State Parliament, I ask for no more; I’ve had enough. I’d rather die defending my country than *hensop* like a coward. A man has his pride.”

Lucas, who is sitting next to Weeskind on the steps, imagines that *oupa* Petrus would have said: “The Lord will defend our cause.”

He feels like saying this out loud, but keeps quiet, as *oom* Koos does not tolerate interruptions. Lucas looks out over the farmyard, past the henhouses, uphill towards the marshland. Grootvlei is basking in the afternoon sun. Lucas takes in the rocky rise dotted by the white of the goats, and more to the right towards the marshland, the plantations against the ridge. This makes for a colourful quilt.

He listens to the laughter of Selina’s young ones behind the poplar trees. One can walk on the kraal wall and he notices three blurry figures distorted by heat waves. There are two in red and the third in blue. Someone is sitting down in the footpath to remove devil’s thorns from his feet.

Oom Koos’s new thresher is parked in the clean-swept paddock. It is the first steam-driven machine of its kind in this district. It has been hard going to pay for this new-fangled machine, but that is *oom* Koos’s way of doing things.

The sheep kraal nestles in a small indentation in this colourful quilt. A significant flock of sheep gather at the trough. Grootvlei should have a good lambing season.

Essie flashes past the door. It's time to prepare the milking stalls. Here at Grootvlei, Lucas feels content. If only he could fold this quilt and put it in his saddle bag when joining the commando!

Louis jumps from the veranda into the front garden. He is armed with his new Mauser and takes aim. The dove in the cypress drops amongst the herbs.

"We don't shoot birds in this yard. *Oupa* Petrus would never have allowed this. It is senseless cruelty!"

Lucas's voice grows shrill with emotion. He remembers the night *oupa* Petrus passed away. The turtle dove has cooed so clearly that night. Lucas turns his back on the others and sets off towards the milk stalls. He hears Louis taunting him: "and you believe everything will remain the same on your precious Grootvlei once the British have visited it?"

On his way to the stalls, Lucas repeats a riddle that *Oupa* Petrus has often entertained him with when he, Lucas, has wished to go courting while the cows still needed to be milked:

Together they walk down the lane.

The sky is cloudless.

When they arrive at the gate,

he lifts the beam.

She doesn't smile

and doesn't thank him,

because she knows not how

to do so

as he is a farm boy

and she a Jersey cow.



Treasured possessions

This morning Essie has arrived at Grootvlei unannounced. She has brought a box. She feels rather lonely..

"Tant Hannie, Lucas tells me that he is uneasy about leaving *Tante* here on *Tante's* own The two of us must put things we treasure on the bed in *Tante's* bedroom. I so wish to see *Tante's* fine things. We'll drink a mug of coffee and pack the stuff neatly in the waggon *kist*. We can dig a hole in the shade of the vines and bury it. Let's do so just to be on the safe side. Pa Koot says that war is ugly and some deserters might plunder Grootvlei."

The horizon is written over with farmhouses. Essie is the daughter that *tant* Hannie has always longed for. She brings a little tenderness into *tant* Hannie's world. The Maskelya tea is fragrant. They dunk rusks. *Tant* Hannie has not eaten well for some time. Half a teaspoon of sugar has brought sparkle to her eyes and the heat makes her face flush.

This morning, the women are on their own on Grootvlei. Lucas, Kleinpetrus and *oom* Koos have gone to collect their war rations from Heidelberg. Willem, Shadrack and Josef, have accompanied them on the buck-waggon. Selina is at her home with young Selien who has been fretful all morning.

Two dolls are displayed on the brass bed. One is a wooden doll from the Netherlands and the other a rag doll wearing a floral *Voortrekker* dress. Essie arranges their limbs so that they rest comfortably against the pillows: she would make a loving mother. Essie's mouth is curved into a little smile.

The wooden doll is not a toy that a young girl would choose to cherish: The wood is covered in cracks and her eyes are mean as blood blisters. The mouth is a tiny line of nothing. The frock that the doll is wearing, has once justified this haughty expression. After a lifetime of wear and tear, however, the rose print on the dress has faded.

The rag doll would have been infinitely more cuddly were it not for the wistful look in her eyes. They were eyes that have have seen a terrible country. The face covered by the kidney skin, has been traced by a steady hand and a dress with a frilly apron covers the stuffed body. Essie tries to picture *tant* Hannie as a child, but finds it difficult to do so. When she removes the poke-bonnet, the doll's head is bald and the neck dangles without support.

Tant Hannie then picks up the doll. She holds it in front of her to examine the rag face. It's an unfamiliar, younger *tant* Hannie that talks to the doll. Her voice has become a soothing whisper and the frown between her brows has softened: "Oh no, oh no, Aletta Susara Magdalena, don't look so sad. The two of us have been together a long time. Essie and I promise not bury you under the vines and simply leave you there. Lucas will soon dig you out. Just you wait and see."

A variety of items are selected that morning: a pair of cloths painted with dove- and olive branch motifs, a crocheted tea cloth, Kleinpetrus's baptismal dress with hand-embroidered circle flowers at the hem and a small quilted bonnet. *Tant* Hannie proudly displays these on the bedspread. She smooths over the fine stitching with her hand and sits back to admire.

Essie has never realised that there was so much artistic ability in those thin hands of *tant* Hannie's. Her own contribution is limited: a picture assembled of pasted dried flower petals, seeds and butterfly wings, a few paper-clippings and a waistcoat in fine cross-stitching that she has been embroidering for Lucas. There is trousseau consisting of two pillow cases and a pair of sheets cross-stitched with tiny butterflies. Essie blushes when she exhibits those. She hastily folds them into a neat square that she ties up with a ribbon and a cypress twig.

"We should stain a few cloths with seed pods. They will turn a striking cream."

"Perhaps, one day. When we can look back on war-time."

"In a moment you can help me with some porcelain. My late mother bought the set in the Colony."

"Tante, don't you think we should place *Tante's* lace collars and fillet-gauze cloak on top of the crockery? To protect the porcelain?"

Tante is already at the clothes drawer. She has a closed-down look on her face; reliving so many memories. For a while, both *tant* Hannie and Essie forget about fears.

"Let's place the feather wrap on top. That way it won't be pressed flat."

The collection in the waggon *kist i*s no great treasure. Nevertheless, the women feel comforted; all the precious memories are now protected against future uncertainty.



Rag doll with kidney skin face

Departure

October 11, 1899. War has been declared between two Boer republics and the mighty Britain. The Heidelberg commando is subdivided into five field-cornetcies. The town ward is summoned by Cornelis Spruyt, a former Sunday school teacher in the Stone Church. His brother, Rudolph Spruyt, commands the Suikerbosrand ward. Field-cornet Willem Pretorius rides with his Highveld Ward. Org Meyer commands the Kliprivier Ward and the Roodekoppen Ward advances under the field-cornetcy of Buys.

Lucas and *oom* Koos are mobilised under field-cornet Buys. Buys is no stranger to Lucas. He and *oupa* Petrus have often visited on Buys's farm Leeuspruit, to the south of Heidelberg. Buys's two sons, Fanie and Leonard, have joined their father on commando. Lucas likes Fanie. They share many interests. Leonard has been studying at Stellenbosch. He has received a dressing-down from field-cornet Buys for putting off his studies indefinitely in order to join the commando. For Lucas, barely sixteen, it is good to be under the command of a man he trusts and respects.

It is hard to take leave of the people at Grootvlei. Essie is inconsolable. Lucas snaps off a cypress-twig and puts it in her hair. Essie experiences conflicting emotions: fear for Lucas's safety and pride for her young Boer that will defend his country.

"I'll return for you, Essie, God willing. I promise."

Essie's eyes are still brimming with tears. She looks up at Lucas. He has mounted his horse. He is a handsome boy: hair black and smooth, his blue eyes sharp, his chin strong and his shoulders over which the leather jacket stretches tightly, are broad. His horse is sturdy with a large head and fine neck. The shoulders are well-placed and the back strong. The mild-natured horse is well-adjusted to veld conditions.

Essie has taken care of the rations and has put a letter in his saddlebag. She thinks of the wall text in her parent's house. It describes the stages of aging. It is a

description of the unforgiving advance of time, illustrated with eleven images:

at ten a child,

at twenty a youth,

at thirty a man,

forty brings along wisdom,

fifty, the highest level,

sixty, stepped back a bit,

seventy, grey,

eighty, not always of sound mind,

ninety, ridiculed by children.

Hundred, in the coffin, finally.

This war will, without a doubt, mature all volunteers.

Hoender puts his arm around Essie's shoulders. He is clumsy when it comes to women and tears leave him flustered. That's why he rides off to the blue gum plantation to wait for Lucas.

Lucas is grateful to be with Hoender. Hoender is a man. Schoolwork has never been easy for Hoender, but Lucas has a lot to learn from the much older Hoender, especially where farming and self-defence are concerned.

Lucas recalls his recent fight with Gert behind the kraal wall. That was the afternoon of *oupa* Petrus's birthday celebrations. Lucas has shown great courage, but he has also taken a lot of punishment. The much older Gert has clearly gained the upper hand. Hoender has been furious: "*Ag* no *man,* shame. You fight like a girl. No

one beats up a friend of mine like that. You seem to have the heart, you just don't have the experience."

That's why the lessons start. Hoender coaches him after school and mornings before milking: "See Lucas, this is the way a man that wishes to attack, positions himself. Stand firmly. Now look at your fists. Shield your face and body. Appear as though you wish to attack. Remember: the body must instruct the head. As soon as the body attacks, the mind will take over."

Lucas remembers of *oupa* Petrus who, at the time of the Jameson raid, sensed disaster: "Lucas, we are faced with trouble. May God have mercy on us as he had with the people of Israel. Your *oupa* won't always be here to advise you, but I've also had a taste of life on commando. The Boers do not always pull together. A Boer tends to headstrong.

The Boer does not like to be laid down the law. It is fortunate that most of us care about our country. The Boer wishes to stand on his stoep and look out over the countryside and think: "This is why the Good Lord gave me strength; to till this soil and to love it. All this land is mine and my wife's and will one day be inherited by my children (God willing). In the distance I see the smoke from my neighbour's homestead. We live just far enough from each other to be able to remain friends and just close enough to get help in times of emergency. My neighbour will not interfere on my land.

We must, however, unite in war. Remember what this old man tells you today: there are rules that apply to life on commando. We have to obey these if we wish to protect what is precious to us:

Prepare you rifle and horse, as you have to rely on them.

Obey your superiors.

Remain calm so that you can think clearly.

Where possible, take cover and aim to hit, it may very well be your last opportunity.

Remember, the fight is not about your rashness or heroism.

If needs be, then risk your life to protect your comrades.

Do what is asked of you, so that one day, whether the battle is won or lost, you can face your people and your Maker, without having to hang your head."

Oupa Petrus then scanned the horizon with its blue and endless forgetting. He emphasised his words with the stem of his pipe.



The Heidelberg Commando

Commandant Jan Weilbach commands the Heidelberg Commando to the Natal front. He is a restful, bearded farmer from *Faraosfontein*, to the north of Heidelberg, who has commanded the Heidelberg Commando twenty years ago. The Highveld winter has only recently passed and his biggest concern is the condition of the horses. He is not to be hurried. He believes that the war will play itself out (in the Boer's favour, naturally).

At the end October 1899, Org Meyer and his men attack the English occupying a range of hills in the Modderspruit area. Field-cornet Buys and his men take over command and drive off Grimwood's infantry. His adjutant, Dirk Grobler and his brother Hans Grobler, fight at his side.

Bullets fly and shrapnel from exploding shells send up billows of sulphurous cloud. An enemy Maxim barks. With a "Forwards!" the riders pursue the enemy. Then follows a scene that would repeatedly replay itself in Lucas's mind: Fanie slips from his horse while the horses are splashing through the spruit. He squats to scoop up water from the spruit. The water is invitingly cool and Hoender considers following his example.

At that very moment, a sharpshooter targets Fanie's broad back. The boy collapses into the water. Death stretches away in the lazy stream. Hoender looks at Lucas, distraught.

Hans Grobler's avenging shot takes the Brit between the eyes. In their reckless pursuit, the Boers find themselves surrounded by British so that Buys has to recall his armed forces. Spruyt and the volunteer Kriegler give chase to the Tommies and capture twenty eight British.

That afternoon there is a cold shower, so that the shirts of the Boers, already wet with perspiration, cling transparently to their torsos. Food rations are used sparingly, but there is an adequate supply of *biltong*. The woollen blankets are damp.

The horses are cared for at the lager. Rain, like soft nails, is driven into the kindling so that the bodies take long to dry. A few support riders assist with a spit braai.

Quiet prevails. The Boers empathise with field-cornet Buys and the commando feels the pain of having lost five Heidelbergers. Each Boer tries to organise shelter for the night.

Lucas watches Kriegler nursing a young British soldier. There are so many conflicting images:

The merciless fatal shots and the tender nursing.

The zeal of the attack and the pain of leaving behind a loved one.

Lucas tosses and turns under his and Hoender's makeshift tent. Confusing images and the ricocheting bullets disturb his sleep. Hoender talks in his sleep.

Siemen, the Teacher.

Meester Geertsema and his mother are Colonials. Siemen spent his early years in the Netherlands where he qualified as a teacher. Later, his mother settled in the Colony. Life has not been easy since her passing. He is a loner, but has been raised in the firm belief that he has a calling. When appointed as headmaster at the farm school, he believes that he has a contribution to make.

It is very hard, initially. He has to scrape a living. Sometimes his salary is jeopardised by drought. The equipment is meagre and the parents headstrong. The Boer parents mostly focus on farming. He himself has to help whitewash the walls of the school building and assist with the masonry.

He is underpaid, but is dedicated to his calling as teacher. For the most part, the farm children are equipped with sound minds and strong bodies. The pupils are honest and sincere and Siemen gets to know the farming community. He establishes roots.

Initially he lodges with *tant* Mysie, eating watery stews and fatty sheep-tail that induce bile. He advises *tant* Mysie concerning the water retention that causes her body to swell. Later the school commission arranges his accommodation in the store room at the back of the school. Siemen is satisfied. His mother has taught him that the word “too” indicates excess. As in; “too” fat, “too” lazy, “too” late. Excess, she has taught him, is undesirable. One only needs to be well satisfied.

During the last year or so, Siemen has befriended Lucas and Hoender. This is permissible, since they have completed their education at the farm school. Lucas takes pleasure in sharing reading material with Siemen. Hoender does not take much pleasure in reading; he is simply happy to be rid of school. He is also glad to be confirmed (in case he gets a girl again and wishes to marry).

Siemen can sympathise with Hoender on the matter of marriage. Compared to the young Boers, Siemen is an unimpressive prospect: of medium build, with fair hair combed back like a washed paintbrush.

Siemen has never courted Netta. Nothing untoward has happened between him and Netta while she has been at school. He has never thought of her in terms of a future wife.

Long before the outbreak of war, he bemoans his loneliness to Hoender: “No, old friend, the girls here are too picky. There’s not one that is interested in an old school master. One day you and I will sit together on the veranda, smoking, old and lonely.”

It was then that Hoender answered crossly. “Don’t be so blind. For a lettered man, you can be pretty stupid. Must poor Netta write you a love-letter on the black-board before you take notice of her?”

Only then does Siemen realise that Netta has always shown him affection: the carnations and the fresh veld flowers on the school table, the crocheted table cloth and the clean blackboard, sometimes with a posy sketched in one corner.

There is understanding and sincerity. Netta does not hesitate to speak her mind and has a sharp intellect. She shares in his dreams of a permanent appointment, perhaps even at the town school in Heidelberg. He is able to share his thoughts with Netta.

War is imminent. Siemen cannot return to the Colony; there is nothing and no one waiting for him. He belongs here. He plans no different future. He assists as much as he can with the young ones; like with Kleinpetrus, the little Smalwaters and Malie’s tiny twin sisters. The people care for him and often send him vegetables or a stew.

Essie delivers a pail of fresh milk every morning. He regularly watches her milking the Friesland cow in the school paddock. Quite often they talk, mostly about Lucas. She misses him. The women and children here are in need of support.

Netta assists with teaching. She has always loved doing that. At times her sharp mind and impulsive nature has earned her the mistrust of her fellow pupils. Next

month Siemen and Netta will become engaged. The people here say: “God willing.”

A Hospital at Heidelberg

Even before the outbreak of war we see the dignified man with the grey goatee and steel rimmed glasses, moving tirelessly down the spoor of train trucks. He serves soda water and brings his first aid skills to the truck loads of refugee women and children that are exposed to the scorching sun all day long. They are mostly foreigners and members of the English community. The friendly Samaritan is Dr James O'Reilly who has, for many years now, been practising in Heidelberg.

At their home in the centre of town, his wife, Cassie, awaits his return. She, too, is concerned for the safety of the citizens of Heidelberg. Overnight the sleepy town has become a hive of activity. English speakers are leaving for Natal, while Boers are preparing to leave for the front.

It is after the commandeering of the Heidelbergers that a burgher falls from a moving truck. It is midnight. The young Boer's arm is crushed and Dr O'Reilly is sent for. There is no hospital in Heidelberg and the doctor is forced to amputate the arm using the prison facilities.

It is then decided to establish a hospital in Heidelberg. Rev. Louw of the Klipkerk addresses the women of the community. Progress is made and a committee is appointed from the hundred volunteers. This committee is to equip and staff a care unit. Shop owners, including Indians, contribute generously, carting bedding and curtains to the hall. The women stitch a Red Cross flag.

Essie is one of the Boer girls that make available her nursing skills. From the outset she only nurses a few days a week, as the house next to the farm school is on the outskirts of Heidelberg and *tant* Mysie still suffers the inconvenience of dropsy. *Oom* Koot is not growing any younger, either.

Essie prefers to exhaust herself. She wishes to be too tired to be concerned for Lucas's safety. Who can tell when they will meet again? On days that she nurses, she lodges with *tant* Lalie. She folds away her uniform and flannel night dress in the bottom drawer of the bedside table in *tant* Lalie's guest room. When Essie closes the

bedroom door at night, *tant* Lalie's white dress swishes softly from the door hook. Essie thinks it very beautiful.

People confide in Essie. Essie and *tant* Lalie soon become friends. They talk about Lucas and the cattle speculator that has disappeared so unexpectedly from *tant* Lalie's life way back. They whisper a little of the baby boy that has been born prematurely. They speak tenderly of how beautiful he has been, with dark hair and long fingers. *Tant* Lalie carries a downy lock of his hair in the heart-shaped locket around her neck. She never takes it off.

Essie speaks blushingly of Lucas. She tells how strong and manly he is. She shows *tant* Lalie the cypress twig that she keeps between the pages of her Bible. When she holds the branch against her cheek, it still smells of cypress.

Essie sometimes cries when she arrives back from an exhausting night-shift at the hospital. Then she thinks of the message the branch conveys. Lucas read it to her from Netta's anthology that day of *Oupa's* birthday celebrations. She and Lucas were seated on the thong bench in the enclosed veranda: "I will love you till beyond the grave."

Sometimes she is comforted, but mostly those carefree days are a lifetime away. Nowadays Essie feels a lot older than her actual years. Her imagination mostly creates images of Lucas lying cold and wounded on the battlefield. Then she goes to sit on the bed next to the small mound that *tant* Lalie's body makes under the blankets. Most of the time *tant* Lalie is awake, simply trying to rest. It's because of the cancer. At times Essie says things she later regrets, like: "Actually, you are so blessed, *Tante*, to have been able to carry your loved one's child, even if only for a very short while. What does life feel like under a woman's heart? Is one less lonely? Why can I not picture my own child? Do you think, *Tante*, that I'll ever be a mother?"

Tant Lalie always gives the same answer: "The Good Lord knows best, my child." Essie grows deeply ashamed of her own doubts and kisses *tant* Lalie's cheek before going to bed.

Sometimes the two of them laugh uproariously. Like the time that Essie tells *tant* Lalie of the young Boer that has lost the use of both arms; how the nursing staff pamper him. A young nurse holds his pipe to his lips, while another keeps him company and a third shoos the flies from his face.

Ladysmith

During November 1899, a group of Heidelbergers under command of Hendrik Kamffer occupy a wooded hill near Platberg. An attack is launched on Ladysmith, but the Heidelbergers retire to Lombardskop. Here, the commando is surprised by the British Cavalry early December and their 4.7 Howitzer and Long Tom blown up.

16 December 1899, the kommandos of field-cornets Buys, Pretorius and Dercksen, together with the Krugersdorp commando, exact revenge. The Heidelbergers, stationed where the Tugela forms a loop, oppose the forces of General Buller.

The aim of the Heidelbergers is accurate and the enemy suffers heavy losses. One of the Heidelbergers is shot. Three are wounded, one with a shot to the head.

Then, Christmas is upon them. The Burghers pray in the trenches at Modderspruit and the lagers of Ladybrand. This comes as naturally to them as does scooping up water with a cupped hand. These are days of prayer. At Christmas, the Boer misses his wife and children. The Heidelberg Postmaster, Frans Broers, arrives at the main lager with a waggon-load of Christmas cheer. There are chests filled with cakes, drink, enamel mugs and diaries. A wealth of treasure is spread on a trestle-work table: letters from the home front. Lucas approaches the postmaster to scan for Essie's familiar handwriting, but is so fearful of returning empty-handed, that he suddenly goes down on his haunches and starts scratching in the dirt with a stick. What if she doesn't write?

"Dash it, Lucas, why are you sitting here rearranging termite paths? Can't you hear them calling out your name? This is Essie's handwriting here. Quite a thick letter. There's a sheet for me too, from my old friend Siemen. It surprises me that the Dutchman thinks me capable of reading! Takes me back to the days when he spelt the misspelt words on my hands with a quince-stick. Those were tough times, behind the desk in the farm school. I don't know who had it tougher: Siemen trying to teach me from the *Kategismus*, or me learning to do cursive writing."

Hoender watches Lucas's teardrops trickle down onto the hardworking ants, so that the lead worker has to re-lay the path to the nest. Lucas's eyes brim with tears when he lifts his head to take the letter from Hoender.

He then moves blindly into the bush. The words blur and he has to consciously blink to read the delicate handwriting:

Heidelberg

November 3, 1899.

Darling,

Lucas has to blink, read and re-read. *I would love to tell you how much I long for you. I have been brought up so primly, that I wish to write my desires in condensed milk. That way you could iron the letter to read my most private thoughts. I have no condensed milk. One certainly cannot take from the limited stock at the hospital. Yes, I'm working part time at the hospital here in Heidelberg.*

Dr O'Reilly is running the surgery. I have made friends with the other girls working here. I lodge at tant Lalie's on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays. She is a much more loving person than what the community believes her to be.

I must also spend time with Mother and Father. They are growing old and Father is suffering much from his rheumatism.

Tant Hannie is getting along fine, but oom Koos has surely told you this. I know that the two of you have never been close, but I am sure that, with the war and separation from house and home, your uncle has been friendlier towards you.

Josef and Selina help tant Hannie on the farm. There is talk that Shadrack wishes to trace you so that he may become your support rider, but tant Hannie feels safer with young help around the yard. Shadrack has always been your friend.

Did you know that Netta has promised Siemen her hand in marriage? I used to think her admiration for Meester an attempt to curry favour. Time often proves one wrong.

When I'm at home, I regularly take Siemen a pail of milk. I feel embarrassed to tell you this, but we mostly speak of you. Did you know that Siemen has looked up oom Koos while you were finishing your schooling at the farm school? He has always wanted you to continue your studies. Oom Koos hasn't been in favour of that. One can understand that he has been concerned with Kleinpetrus's interests, only.

Kleinpetrus, Malie's young sisters and a few Smalwaters are now taught by Siemen. Netta is quite good at teaching the young ones. She cares for them. It's a good thing that they work to educate our Boer people.

I insert a paper cutting that you should keep in your Bible. Use it as a marker at I Cor. 13. In case you can't read my handwriting (my hands are sometimes clumsy); I fold and cut you two birds. Our spirits are set free. I believe that, in spirit, we shall always be able to fly to join each other. Sorry that I cut the one claw. They do at least resemble doves, don't they?

To reassure you about your people: I have heard that your parents are still with your mother's people in the Colony. Your mother has been ill, but is recovering well.

I keep the cypress twig in my Bible. I don't have a flower with me, so I'll say it in as many words on paper as in my heart: I LOVE YOU.

May the Good Lord protect you.

Love,

Essie.

XXX

Christmas Festivities

The first thing that Lucas notices on his return to the open square surrounded by tents, is that the Heidelberg Regimental Flag holds the place of honour at the two trestle tables. The Free State and Transvaal flags have been stitched by the women at home. The women wish to give the men renewed hope in the struggle.

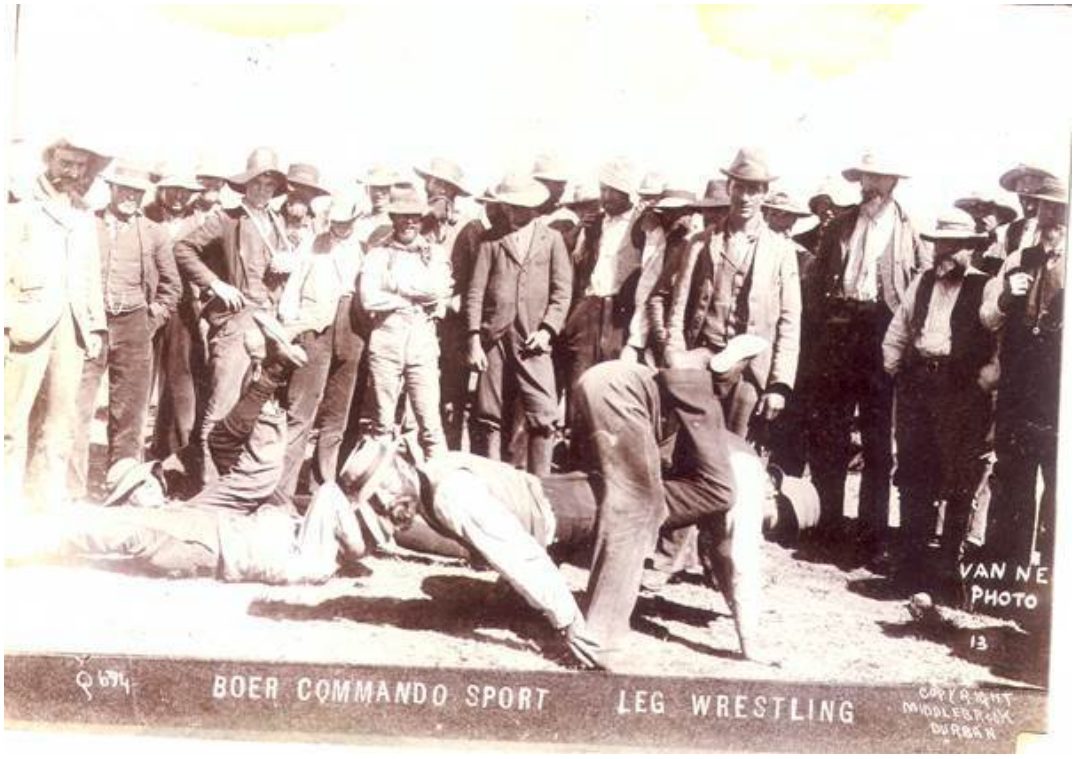
There is a waggonload of gifts from Heidelberg: cakes, fruit, wine, tobacco, enamel mugs and diaries. Women from Pretoria have sent twelve large Christmas puddings and a few hard working cooks have been slaving over the fires since early morning.

Hoender, clearly on the lookout for Lucas, grabs him by the arm. He propels his friend in the direction of the fires. A man that has been under fire from guns and has escaped with his life, lives with vigour. Life is a new and exciting land and even dry rations taste of Boer rusks. The Irish Brigade under Colonel Blake, stationed just outside Ladysmith, is also preparing to celebrate. To the Irish, it is a day of freedom, without a queen; a day of patriotic celebration. A half-mile track is prepared for horseraces and athletics. The Boer commandos in the area are invited to participate. There is a wealth of flags in the Irish camp: the ZAR four-coloured flag, the green flag with harp, stars and stripes, the French Tricolour and the German flags.



Col Blake – Irish Brigade - Westpoint Graduate

The Irish burghers have brought a race horse from Pretoria. This horse is far superior to all the others on the racecourse. It's a different matter with trials of strength. Hoender gets that look in his eye: no one will beat him. Rivalry becomes a matter of life or death. Lucas is an obvious team mate. Hoender matches strength as though taking on the Devil himself and after hook-it-crook-it and tortoise tug of war, he is carried off the field shoulder-high. Maans, a Smalwater is the fastest man on the track.



The ox hide riding has repercussions. *Oom* Skaam Sarel's son, Gert, believes that Hoender is too pleased with his team's victories. He feels that Hoender needs to ride the ox-hide. Gert is too small-minded to accept another's victory. Hoender has exhausted himself against the Irish and is basking in the late afternoon sun. It is one of the Grobbelaars that drawls: "But, *neef* Gert, if you are so excited at the prospect of ox hide riding, we should let you enjoy the privilege. It's not as though your team has excelled."

The fresh hide is on the cart next to the course. There's never a shortage of ox hide shooters. Gert is too embarrassed to walk away from the challenge, as he is aware of his father watching him. There are neat slits for easy handling in the hide. Before he has an opportunity to protest, Gert is shoved onto the hide. Strong arms stretch the ox hide. Gert flails in the air as though he were a rag doll. At times he lands on his feet, thrice on his head. The ox hide throwing is accompanied by much laughter. Lucas counts the number of times Gert's body touches the ox hide and knows that this afternoon will not endear the Boers to Gert. He thinks of *oupa* Petrus

that has in the past often put a stop to his, Lucas's impetuosity: "Lucas, one should know when to put an end to humiliating others. Don't push things too far. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between joking with a friend and making an enemy."

This is why Lucas sits next to Hoender, drinking coffee at the fire. Hoender seems to have lost interest in the fun. He fills his pipe from the bag of Christmas tobacco. Lucas imagines him and Hoender back at Grootvlei, basking against the kraal wall. "Lucas, Siemen is a Colonial. The English say that the Colonials are prohibited from engaging in this war. Do you think he will be able to sit aside and watch us being killed off? You know, especially now that he and Netta are engaged?"

And then, before Lucas has an opportunity to reply: "If you had to tell what is closest to your heart. What are you fighting for?"

"Nearest, Hoender?"

Suddenly, Lucas is the small boy who is allowed to fill a paper-coronet with boiled sweets, picking through the glass-counter of the general dealer in Kroonstad. *Oupa* Petrus and he have often discussed these things. Lucas wishes to share this with Hoender. He pictures Greet holding up three fingers and then says clearly and with conviction: "Three things, Hoender:

- the soil,
- my people,
- Essie."

"Has there ever been anyone other than Essie, Lucas?"

"When I was very young. At Nooitgedacht. Greet. We were like this."

Lucas entwines his index finger and third finger.

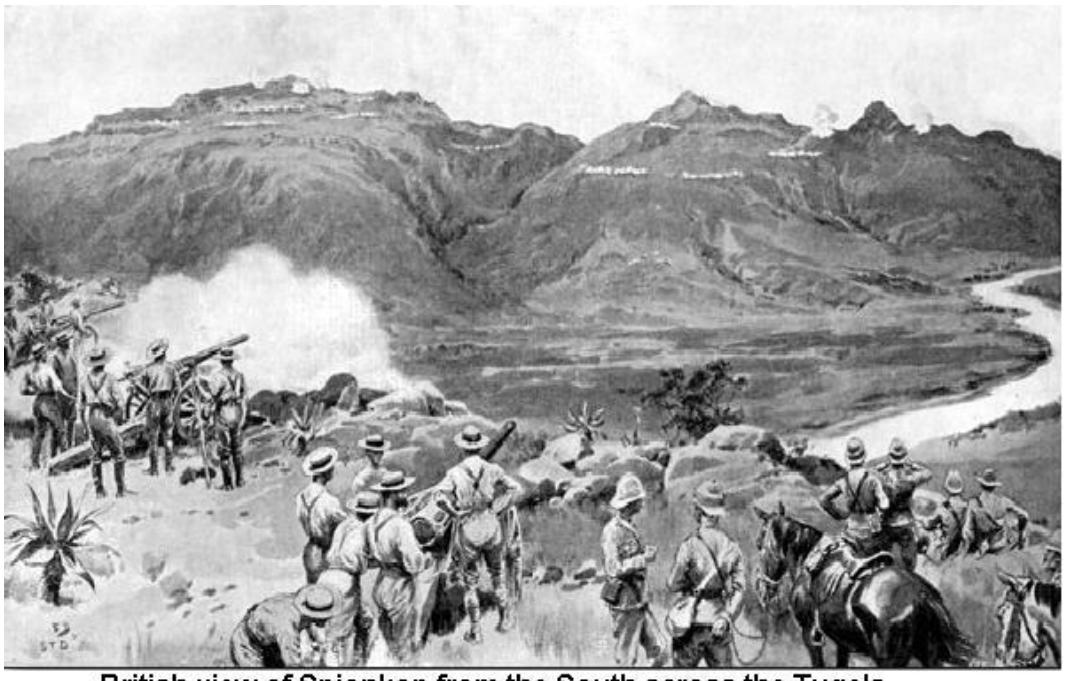
“Martie has such beautiful hair. The colour of wheat. What do you find most beautiful about Essie?”

- “Her hair when she plaits it,
- her eyes when she talks to me,
- the way she turns her back on me and walks off when she knows that I am watching.”

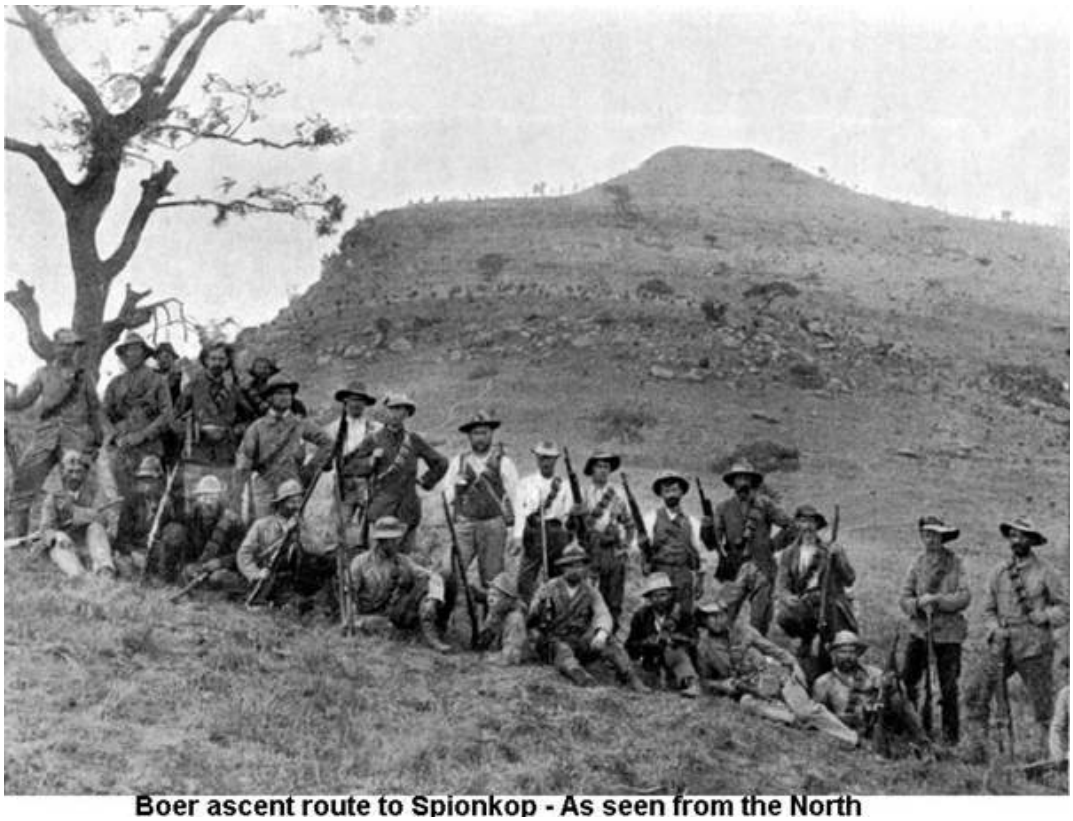
“Will the two of you get married, once the war is done?”

“If the Lord so disposes.”

“The two of us, you and I, we stick together!”



British view of Spionkop from the South across the Tugela



Boer ascent route to Spionkop - As seen from the North

The Battle of Spionkop

Any young Boer who has had some misconceptions about the cruel realities of war, gets a rude awakening at the Battle of Spionkop.

Both parties suffer heavy losses. The Heidelbergers are caught up in the thick of the battle. Spionkop is a relatively high hill. It lies with the Tugela to the south, Thabanyama to the west and Ladysmith to the north east.

Some two hundred burghers have occupied the flat summit of the hill. Shortly before dawn, January 26, they are surprised by a British force of one thousand six hundred. The small Boer force fires as it retreats, while the alarm is spread amongst all the burghers in the vicinity.

The peak of the hill is shrouded in a dense mist. The British cut a shallow trench into the rocky crust on the summit. This is done under the supervision of the British engineers. The cut is shallow and about three hundred yards long.

Schalk Burger and Louis Botha are among the generals on the Boer side. Burghers from the Heidelberg, Rustenburg, Middelburg and Pretoria commandos are involved during the first phases of battle. A few hundred burghers slowly ascend Spionkop. The shallow trenches offer the British troops little protection from Boer gunfire, as the Boers have ascended the neighbouring hill, to the northeast of Spionkop. The British are within striking distance of Boer sharpshooters.

The heliographer, Louis Botha, is one of the first to position his heliograph on the peak. He signals the Boer forces from the Northeast summit. This brings the Boers within accurate striking distance.

Lucas is aware of:

- the rock rampart behind which he has taken shelter,
- his own shallow gasps for breath

- Hoender taking aim at his side,

.Lucas's mind empties out. The morning heat bulges, trapped in the confines of surrounding outcrops. Lucas is not familiar with the thorny shrubs and jagged rocks. His ears are stopped up. The cacophony of exploding shells, the singing of Lee Metford bullets and the whistling of Maxim bullets; activity surrounding him, congeals. Lucas's mind soars as if he's thrown it in the air, high, until it has formed a terrible cloud. He then he hears Hoender kneeling, his knees crunching on the gravel next to him. Lucas blinks against the sticky perspiration running from under his hat. He opens his jaws wide and swallows hard, that sound and reality might return. He settles to fire with his rifle rested.

At one o'clock there seems to be a lull in the firing from the British shelters. Hunger and thirst returns. Lucas takes the water bottle from Hoender and rinses his mouth. He swallows with difficulty, tasting cordite fumes, blood and dust. The water is hot. Only then does he become aware of his cracked lips.

The weather-beaten Hoender is hardly recognisable: "A man should not look around too much."

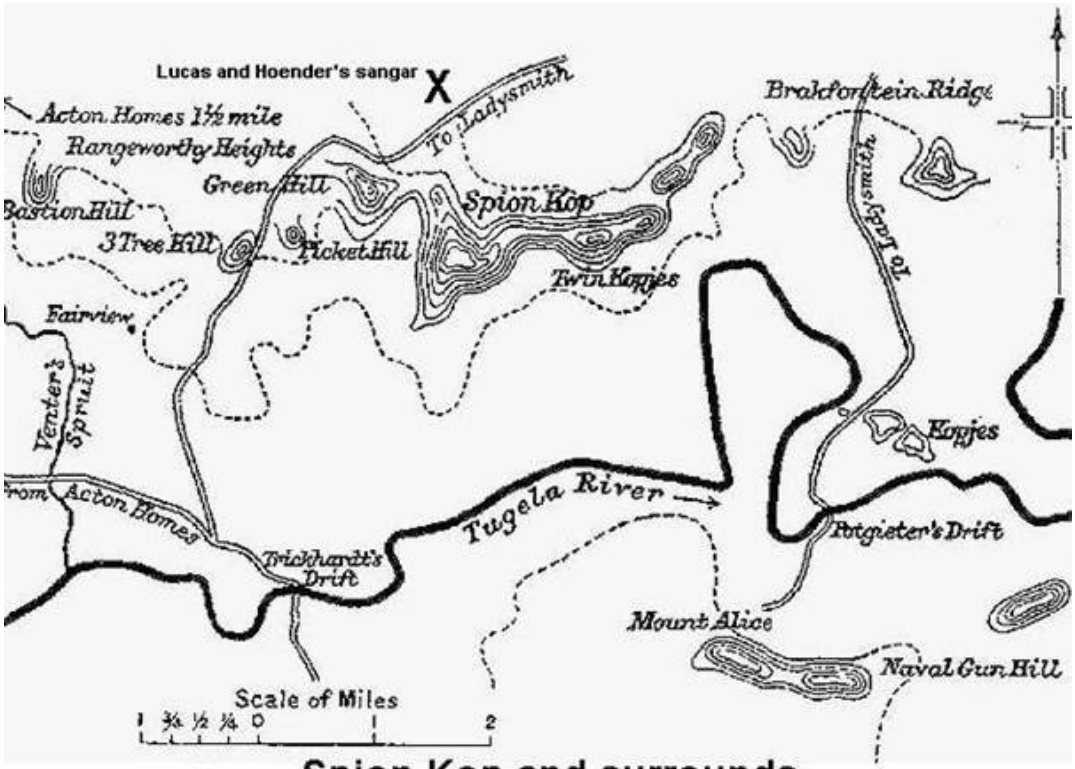
"Why are you always protective of me?"

"I promised Essie."

The sudden surrender of about a hundred British, offers little respite. Reinforcements allow the British to renew the intensity of the attack. Fallen comrades lie scattered about. At times one notices a head jerking backwards. A mortal shot. Maans sprawls like a broken doll, his arms spread wide. He resembles an athlete crossing an invisible finish on the athletics track; his full weight thrown forwards to snap the tape. Blood stains the rocks. Black clouds of flies buzz on the rigid bodies. A young Boer lies heavily wounded. He convulses with shock and clasps the hot barrel of the rifle, so that Lucas smells the scorched flesh.

Night is a passage to despair. The whole scene is erased as though with a damp cloth from black slate. The gun fire peters out. The night rings with the moans of the wounded.

An estimated fifty eight Boers and two hundred and twenty five British die on the battlefield on this long day. Many more are wounded.



Spion Kop and surrounds

Tant Hannie Farms

If we turn in through the big gate at Grootvlei, It looks as though farming activities are running smoothly. On closer inspection, some fences might sag slightly and the herb garden might be a little neglected. This is what happens when a woman has to cope with a man's work. One still notices progress.

Shadrack and Willem are believed to have been to the Boer front lines. The comings and goings of everyone cannot be reported in these uncertain times. Josef and Selina are still here. The young ones still arrive evenings, armed with pails. They come to fetch milk and to walk home with *ma* Selina. They detour to the kraal to fetch the milk for the morning porridge. Josef is doing all the milking. He should have started milking earlier.

Kleinpetrus is growing up without much supervision. He feels at home with Selina and with the young ones. All day long he plays with Selina's eldest. They farm under the pepper tree with their clay oxen. The children model them themselves these days: fat oxen with thorn tree horns and grass tails (Tant Hannie suspects that Josef has dug the children a fresh supply of clay from the donga). Kleinpetrus's cheeks glow with good health and Siemen Geertsema has reported that he is the best achiever in his class. Netta is also good at teaching and comforting the little ones!

Tant Hannie and Selina are busy at the soap cauldrons behind the chicken coop, under the poplar tree. They discuss the colour of the latest batch. The fat, soap-lye and caustic soda are kept in the cool pantry. Yesterday they have burnt lye-bush and boiled it in the three legged pot. The extract is clear. One must continuously stir, as ash-bush lye is quite mild.

Tant Hannie has a good posture and she walks purposefully. Since her men have been commandeered, she is too busy with farm work to be concerned with nervous afflictions. She has fended off the ghosts of the past and is preparing for the day that the commando might stop over at Grootvlei. She quite enjoys being in control. *Tant* Hannie, Selina and Josef discuss the farming matters. At night she sleeps soundly.

Tant Hannie, Selina and Josef often laugh together. This evening the two women have to assist with the milking. It's quite cold at the milking stalls at night. *Tant* Hannie and Selina are well bundled up against the cold. The trouble starts with the still grazing cows and their calves. Kwartel is the least restrained of the calves. (After her birth, Blommetjie has hidden Kwartel in the tall grass, hence the name.) The other calves are quite docile when their names are called. Kwartel still tries to suckle when Blommetjie has to be milked.

A row of spectators are lined up on the kraal wall. These often shout with laughter. Four little Ndebele's and a chubby Boer boy sit on the kraal wall. The little ones are ready to be entertained. It happens when *Speentjie's* squirt of milk misses the pail. *Tant* Hannie joins in the laughter, glad that the children are healthy. One must curtail fears. All the cows are called by their names. The red spotted one, continuously bellowing in the corner, is; one names the animals according to their nature; like *Lekkerlê,* the one Josef can barely get to rise.

The women have slaughtered an ox two days ago. As always, everything has been laid out in advance: the tubs, clean cloths and the skinning-knives. They have minced meat using the Cape teak mincer. A portion of the meat is sprinkled with dried spices and soaked in vinegar-and-onion. The women wish to make *biltong*. When he returns from the wars, Koos must notice that she, Hannie, has coped well. The gut for the stuffing of *Boerewors* has been cleaned and is soaked in the pickle-vat. There must be food for the two families; hers and Selina's. Boer children need to be healthy and strong. The young Smallwaters have grown tall. Meester believes that they will become as athletic as Maans used to be.

The Afrikaner mother is proud of her Boer fighters. She is proud of the fact that by giving moral support, she can motivate and contribute. Like Ella of Skaam Sarel says: "One entrusts your husband and children to the Lord and do your share on the home front."

The Battle of Vaalkrans

At Vaalkrans that Lucas and Hoender experience the devastation caused by shells, lyddite and shrapnel. Initially the Boers respond with their pom-poms. Men from Heidelberg, Ermelo and Lydenburg fight side by side.

Early morning, February, 6: The sun is pinned to the ceaseless smoke of explosives; a medal on a uniform. All of a sudden a patch of tambookie-grass, diagonally in front of the Boer positions, is set alight. The advancing lines of the Boers crawl forward under the cover of smoke and their gunfire cuts accurately through the British. The smoke causes Lucas to wheeze. Next to him, Hoender cries sooty tears that he wipes at with his sleeves. Vision is now blurred.

Their bodies are sore, as the Boer lager has recently been infested by ticks the size of pin heads. These hatch under layers of sand. Even the horses have been suffering. Last week Hoender has come across a puff-adder, covered with lice.

A British officer signals the start of an attack with fixed bayonets. The sound of cold steel makes fear surface like a sharp scent on Lucas's skin. The Boer lines retreart.

During the night, the commando works feverishly to reinforce their front lines. On the 7th, the British appear to retreat. The Burghers foresee a full scale infantry attack. At dusk, Buller withdraws his troops over the Tugela and removes the pontoon bridge. The Boers are grateful for the respite.

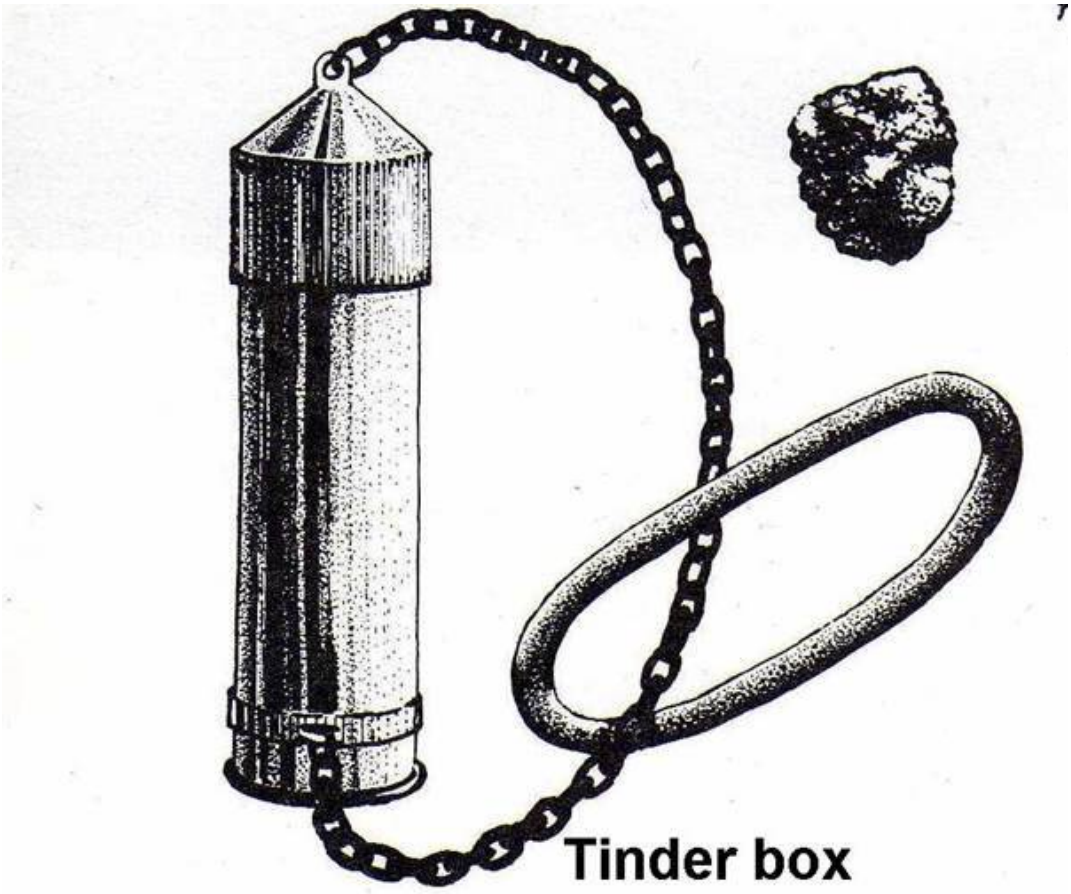
Lucas and Hoender pick up ammunition on the battle field. They find Lee Metfords with dum-dum bullets. The dum-dum bullet has no nickel jacket and is blunted. Some bullets have a hole drilled through the core. Such a bullet has an explosive impact. Bullets with crosses filed into the nub, are often retrieved. Most of the Boers are carrying Mausers. The Martini Henry is a popular rifle, but it is a single shot weapon. Reloading is a time-consuming process and the rifle gives off a lot of smoke when fired. Some Boers carry muzzle- and breech loaders. Most British

officers are armed with Mauser pistols or .45 Webleys. Hoender retrieves a Lee Metford from the battle field.

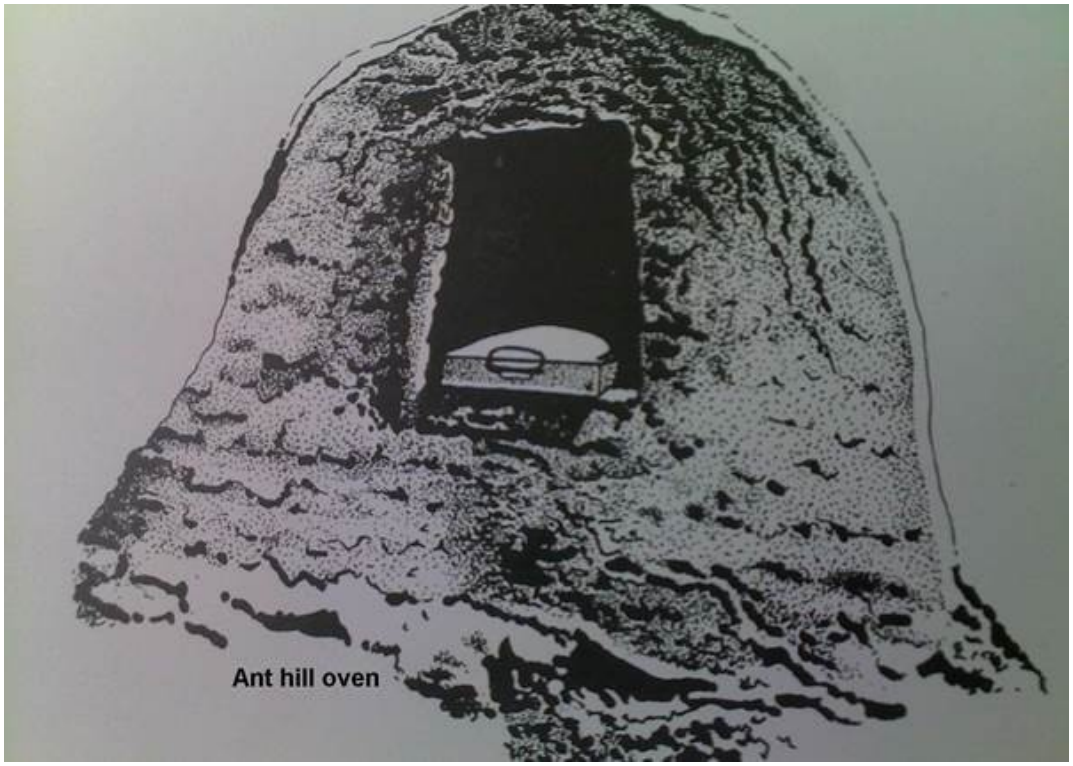
There are times of rest and a relaxed return to the routine of life on commando. Lucas and Hoender also learn some new skills. When the matches are finished, they scour the veld for flint stones. Tinder comprises the soft wool in the silver coloured leaves of the shrub. Tinder boxes are made up from these. In the absence of firewood, aloe stalks or dried sugar bush serve as kindling.

There is no better cooking place than in a hollowed out termite mound. An ox is to be slaughtered to-morrow. The camp commandant will see to it that each member of the commando receives a fair share. Tonight, the Heidelbergers have to satisfy their hunger with *stormjaers*. Spoonfuls of dough are dropped into the fat in order to bake small brown loaves.

Building of shelters requires the greatest skill. Lucas and Hoender soon learn to settle for cavities in the banks of rivers, makeshift tents assembled from sheets of corrugated iron or of branches, boulders and tall grass. Before snuggling into bed at night, they remove undesirable bedfellows: frogs, lizards, praying mantises, moths, caterpillars, flies, blowflies, scorpions and earwigs. Drenched clothing and shared blankets are no longer considered a discomfort.



Tinder box


Ant hill oven


Boer Trench Vaal Krantz Spion Kop

The Black Wedding Dress

Netta and Siemen are getting married. Netta insists on a pitch black gown. Her mother, *tant* Hester, considers this to be an unfortunate choice. Nevertheless, one has to consider the bride's wishes, even though this bride is very young. During wartime a wedding gown is not worthy of a dispute. Netta usually has her way; she's been obstinate since birth.

The preparations for the wedding and festivities bring relief during these times of great suffering. Planning requires ingenuity and skill. So much has been requisitioned for the war effort.

All the women of the community are involved; even the bed-ridden, the aged and the schoolchildren wish to contribute. These days everybody wards off fears and loneliness by talking about the wedding. It keeps the thoughts occupied.

Netta asks *Tant* Mysie to sew the wedding gown. If one considers the *Tante's* generous body and clumsy movements, one would never guess at her sewing skills. After the passing of Kleinjaap, *tant* Blink Bettie from the upper town has given *tant* Mysie one of her sewing machines; a Singer. Initially *tant* Mysie pays the contraption in its wooden case little attention. One morning she seats herself in front of the sewing machine and becomes so engrossed, that her coffee grows cold on the sideboard. She first mends a few shirts that belong to *oom* Koot. Worn collars are unpicked, turned inside out, are then restitched, and scuffed cuffs are replaced. During the course of the morning, she grows even more inventive.

A week passes by and by this time *oom* Koot sings the praises of his wife and her little machine and his wife's dressmaking abilities. *Tant* Mysie has to start taking orders: a sailor suit for Kleinkoos, a Sunday romper for one of the Smalwaters. *Tant* Mysie is famous and fame spreads. The well-to-do in Heidelberg are now placing orders: pleated chokers, flared skirts with bushels and dinner-dresses with crackling white collars for the refined to wear at tea-parties in Heidelberg.

Once *tant* Mysie has fingered the cloth, she does not move from behind the machine. She enjoys being in demand. She is overjoyed when Netta comes to visit with the black silk.

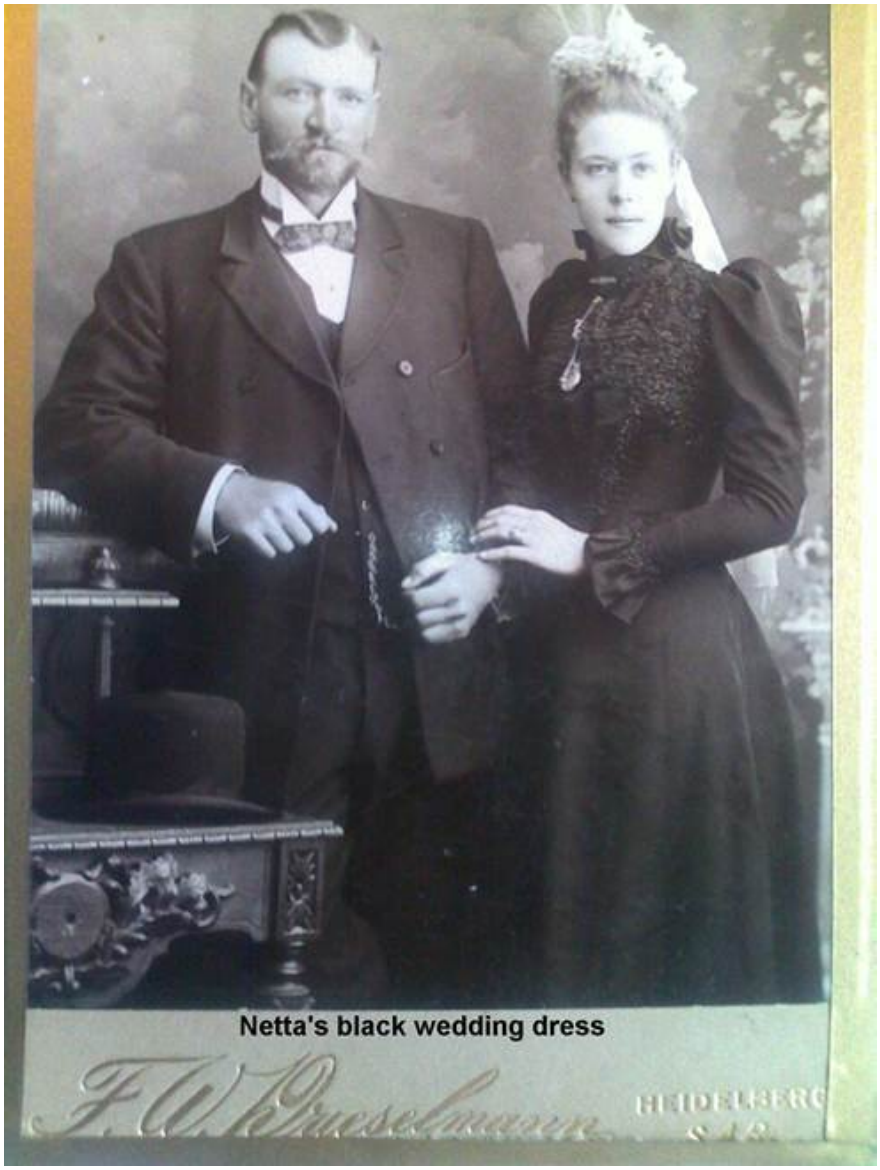
"My child, what are you telling me? At the time when Siemen lodged with the *Oom* and me, I said to the *Oom*: 'Now, this is a God fearing Hollander. He even has a photo of his late mother in his Bible.' I then showed the *Oom*: such a small photo of and elderly woman wearing a frilly bonnet. She appeared to be quite strict. It was not that I wished to interfere with his things; the photo just fluttered out while I was dusting the bedside table. But, what am I saying? Of course he's shown you the photo!"

Tant Mysie is also taken with the piece of black silk: "Nice shine to the cloth; will drape nicely, too. Not that I've actually laid eyes on many black wedding gowns. But you and I are ready for something different and now at wartime, it would be improper to wear white."

Tant Mysie and Netta pour over the *Seamstresses' Friend,* but Netta seems indecisive and keeps on shaking her head. She then draws a picture of a dress she has seen in a magazine in the hairdressing salon in Heidelberg. *Tant* Mysie is flattered; she and Netta will design it themselves. Soon Netta is standing on the step-ladder while the *Tante*, talking past the pins in the corner her mouth, measures and fits.

Essie, during her off-duty days at the hospital, helps by industriously covering numerous spider-sized buttons for the bodice and the long sleeves. She aligns tiny loops for the buttons to slip through. On days like these, her thoughts are with a brave young man who is trying to make a difference on the battle fields. When their eyes grow scratchy, she and Ma Mysie enjoy a mug of tea and nurse the pot plants. Then Ma Mysie gloats: "You'll make a beautiful bride, Essie. Prettier than Netta. Her face is a little pinched. I imagine she laces her corsets too tightly. Lucas has already spoken to your father and me. Honest as daylight, that young man. We must find a Beeton. Those give clear instructions. That gives one something to look forward to. We can have a big celebration, after the war even two-step, if it be the Lord's will."

Essie blushes and inspects the tiny buttons. Her thoughts turn to the corner post in the vlei.



Netta's black wedding dress

The Wedding Hall

There is not an abundance of flowers in the school garden this year. The path is, however, neatly edged with stones and the few shrubs, the yesterday-today-and-tomorrow and the japonica, are regularly watered. Should you stand back a little and shield your eyes against the blinding morning light, you can see the faded patches on the school building's walls show up. The children have decide to whitewash the school building. This is going to be the wedding hall: *Dominee* says that this is fine, as long as the formalities are uplifting. Marriage is not to be taken lightly and one should know what one is letting oneself in for.

The team of pupils do not lack enthusiasm. With every stroke of the brush, they are versed in arithmetic. The lion's share is *Meester's*, as the oldest boy has just turned eleven. Fortunately *oom* Koot is able to assist on pleasant mornings, his health permitting. His contribution usually consists of a running commentary accompanied by instructions of what *Meester*, teetering on the home made ladder, is to do: *"Meester*, you missed a grey spot, just there under the plasterwork of the gable. It is a crying shame: see the pigeon-dung on the beams under the overhang."

Oom Koot points out shoddy workmanship with his walking stick. This makes him feel indispensable. "Whoa! *Meester* Siemen, if you move to your left, you'll fall off the scaffolding. Get down and come and stand here next to me. From over here you will see the faded spots. The two of us will have to redo all of yesterday's botched work. We cannot allow Netta to feel ashamed, you know. The girl has been a bit glum at times, but always good to the *Tante* and me. She's been a good friend to Essie, too."

Meester is nervous at the prospect of meeting the in-laws. Netta's parents are well-to-do and the majority of his relatives-to-be live in Pretoria. Meester Siemen has fleetingly met some of the *Neefs* and *Niggies* at a picnic in Pretoria. It has been a spring morning at the Bronkhorst springs; at the clear source fringed by ferns, *kameeldoring* trees, *raasblaar* and willows. Netta has spread a cloth in the shade of a willow. Magdel and Aletta have stood their cycles against the trunk of the tree. Aletta is an excellent cyclist and proud of the cycle that she has bought from the dealer for

four pounds. Some of the parents view cycling as morally decadent, but Magdel is outspoken about the advantages of cycling. The two of them are clearly exposed to various activities. They regularly play croquette and are invited to “at homes” where tea and iced drinks are served. *Meester* grows despondent; he has so little to bestow upon Netta.

The young Smalwaters are whitewashing the inside walls. Earlier that morning, some of the girls have carved pretty motifs into potatoes. They are fond of Netta and are keen to potato-print a pattern above the skirting-board, using bluebag-blue. There is a lot of good-natured banter and every now and again Siemen gets called to admire the prints.

Tant Ella quite cordially offers Netta the use of her tea- and coffee services. These are, when all is said and done, no more than earthly possessions. She’d like to assist. The services can be displayed on a crocheted cloth on the school table. *Tant* Blink Bettie’s dinner-set has an almost identical floral pattern and it should be put to good use. Crockery gathers dust.

There is a show of secrecy among the pupils gathered around the desk at the back of the classroom. As Siemen and Netta enter the classroom after break, paper cuttings rustle and the desk top is brought down with a thud. Siemen and Netta are intrigued. They have noticed the wedding card and the surprise that the pupils are preparing. Young Kerneels Venter, who has been awarded the certificate: “*Beste Shrijver*” at the previous award ceremony at school, is in charge of this important task.

As a wedding memento, the pupils have printed a neat geometrical decoration framing the edges of the sheet:

SIEMEN GEERTSEMA

AND

JANETTA SUSARA JOHANNA VENTER

Tesamen in den Echt Vereening.

They have decorated a card wishing Siemen and Netta conjugal bliss: an arch with two richly decorated pillars. The pillars represent family trees. The pupils print using the calligraphy that Siemen has taught them:

TO OUR BELOVED *MEESTER* AND OUR NETTA.

Meester can but trust that the compass, ruler and steel nib pen that the pupils have "borrowed" from his drawer, will be returned after completion of the work of art. The level of the ink in the glass pot has dropped measurably.

The Banns

Dominee cross-questions Siemen and Netta. In order for their banns to be read, they have to satisfy conditions. One cannot put cart before horse. As representative of the elders of the church, *oom* Koot is also present. To be quite candid, he has invited himself to the occasion. He sits importantly, wearing his best jacket and enjoying Siemen and Netta's discomfort. This much the couple has to realise: marry in haste and repent at leisure.

At times like this, the minister reverts to a stilted High-Dutch, something that does not really intimidate *Meester* Geertsema.

"Siemen Geertsema, *hoe oud zyt gy?"*

This is a question that causes Siemen to move about nervously, as he is not convinced that the age difference has dawned on Netta: "*Dertig jaren*."

"Hebt gy u aan iemand anders ter trouw beloofd?"

"Neen."

"Bestaat gy malkander in de bloede?"

Siemen considers this question to be redundant, as the *Dominee* is fully aware of the fact that there exists no blood relationship between himself and Netta. He moves his shoulders under his jacket and says emphatically: *"Neen."*

"Janetta Susara Johanna Venter*, hoe oud zyt gy?"*

Netta blushes under *Dominee*'s ferocious stare. She picks at a loose thread on her crocheted muff: "Fifteen this past month, *Dominee*."

Fortunately youthfulness is not considered to be a crime and the *Dominee* only frowns in a slightly bewildered manner: *"Hebt gy u tevoren aan iemand anders ter trouw beloofd?"*

Oom Koot clearly enjoys this question. He stoops forward and clears his throat. He cups both ears with his hands. He wishes to make the most of Netta's discomfort. Has he himself not witnessed a number of suitors leaving *Ongeluksvlei* with their tails between their legs and with their hearts broken? Netta can be quite an outspoken little thing and does not hesitate to call a spade a spade when rejecting a suitor. Hearsay has it that she is the cause of *oom* Skaam Sarel's sons being bachelors.

Then, at last: "Never! *Dominee*!"

Siemen wipes perspiration from his brow. Clearly he has been expecting a disclosure of sorts. He sees Netta fidgeting under what she experiences as a personal attack. He picks up her lace handkerchief and hands it to her. She looks into his face and he smiles reassuringly. Quietly, he takes an oath to protect his young bride.

They walk out into the vicarage garden. It smells of buffalo thorn and of sweet thorn. Siemen takes Netta by the elbow. With Netta at his side, he is able to face life.

The Battle of Paardeberg

Late February 1900, the Heidelbergers withdraw from Pietershoogte. The British cross the Tugela and the relief of Ladysmith heralds the end of the campaign in Natal.

General Cronjé's lager is trapped at Paardeberg. Spruyt and his commando undertake to speed to the rescue. Chief commandant Christiaan de Wet welcomes the assistance.

Two days in succession, the Heidelbergers fill the gap in the left flank. Then commandant Spruyt allows his men under the command of field-cornet Kriegler to rush to the assistance of the Kliprivier men commanded by Org Meyer. Lucas and Hoender are amongst the few that are instructed to remain behind on the ridge. They shelter behind a low rampart of rocks.

Since early morning there has been a continuous detonation of lyddite shells. Accurate fire has little impact on the advancing British troops. The gaps left by the wounded or dead are soon filled by successors. Endurance is stretched to the limit. Lucas is exhausted. The shelter has become a death trap. Lucas feels his eyelids drooping. Is this how one experiences the end: as delicious sleep?

Lucas recalls *tant* Lalie mentioning that some of those facing the End visualise a bright light. She's told him that the dying sometimes call out in delight when they witness the glory of the hereafter. Grootgert of Genadeheuwel has been snatched back from death's door. He's witnessed his entire life flashing past. Lucas does not experience this; he is simply free from all anxiety. Lucas is about to put his gun down, rest his head against the rock, and close his eyes. Would he recognise Greet?

"My God, Lucas, did they get you? Good Lord, answer me! God, help me! I'll kick you till you recover!"

Hoender is standing over him, tears pouring down his face. He grabs Lucas by the shoulders and shakes him till Lucas's teeth rattle. "Funny, this haziness," Lucas later recalls his thoughts.

He comes to when Hoender shouts: “There’s only a few of us left here. We have to retreat. I am too weak to carry you over my shoulder. Here comes a bayonet-charge. They are going to impale you! The horses are behind the hill. I’ll horsewhip you if we survive!”

Then Hoender shoots at the first British soldier that dives over the stone rampart where Lucas has, only moments before, been sitting with rifle rested. It is as though Lucas has received a blow to the stomach. Only now does he notice: the dead, the dying and the mutilated lying scattered. He skids on entrails and vomits bile in his stumbling run.

The night is sewn with stars. The return journey is accompanied by the groans of the wounded on the ammunition waggons. Strips of unsalted meat are roasted over the fire. It pacifies the hunger. Soon all is quiet under the buck sails and in shelters, as they need to take up their positions before dawn. Outriders report for duty and support riders tend the horses.

On February 27, the anniversary of Majuba, Cronjé sends messengers to Lord Roberts. They carry the white flag. Four thousand Boers are taken prisoner.

Hoender

During a lull between attacks, members of nearby commandos visit. A Red Cross official makes his rounds with a tray of medicinal supplies. Hoender has little faith in the man's qualifications. "Looks to me like a man that has never even docked a lamb."

Hoender has established his name as marksman and sharpshooter. He would not hesitate to march up to the cannon's mouth if this be fated, but would use his own discretion. People notice these qualities on the war front where there is little need for pretence. Wartime has a way of bringing out either the best in a man; or the worst. Lucas, at sixteen, worships the twenty six year old Hoender.

Commando members and visitors from surrounding areas whose war discussions have grown stale, are visiting the commando. This is not unusual. Lood is a visitor from a neighbouring camp. He is a magnanimous man who thinks before speaking his mind and then remains silent to give the reply careful consideration. As a result of this, he dominates the discussions around the fires. His voice carries. Lood wishes to involve Hoender in the discussion.

"Neef, have we been introduced?"

"Hoender Els."

Everyone's hands are busy: cleaning rifles, cutting thongs, slicing tobacco or filling pipes. All are paying close attention.

"Now what kind of a nickname is "Hoender" to give a man that can shoot the way you do? You definitely do not behave like you are chicken!"

"Well, it's a name that my friends gave me. Probably because I wore a floppy cloth hat as a youngster. My late mother swore that no child of hers was going to die of sunstroke. I was always one for the outdoors so I had to take my pick: poke bonnet or floppy hat. As I was hardly ever allowed to remove the hat, I learnt to peer out

from under the brim. My friends reckoned that I resembled a chicken in search of a patch of dirt to scratch. The name stuck."

This does not meet with Lood's approval: "No disrespect intended, but doesn't the name stick in your gizzard?"

Hoender's voice joins in the general laughter. He has no problem accepting the name. He's stripped a British soldier some time ago. He wears a decent hat these days. Hoender is a handsome man; slightly skinny if one considers his height, but well proportioned.

Lood persists. The nickname is inappropriate. "One would like to address you by your real name. No need to act the way children would."

"Johannes."

Oom Jaap's speaks up: "But, surely, the name Johannes suits you. Are you and Lucas not teammates the way Luke and John are in the Word? The two of you stand together in the field, the way David and Jonathan did."

Lucas glows with pleasure.

The Wedding

Rumours of battles in which their commando is involved, reach Heidelberg: battles at Abrahamskraal, Brandkop and Tafelkop. Brandfort is occupied on May3, 1900.

May 5, 1900. This morning Netta and Siemen are joined in Holy Matrimony in the farm school building near the farm Grootvlei, district Heidelberg. One can hear the sweet sounds of the home organ from afar. It is a clear day. The winter wind has settled. The fog has evaporated. The frost has left the veld winter-stark.

If one takes the footpath and pause at the top of the hill, one sees the Smalwater's dormant orchard, *oom* Skaam Sarel's white gables down there in the valley and a hazy tendril of smoke (Selina is preparing coffee at Grootvlei). The spruit is a thin blue coil and whitewashed houses dot Suikerbosrand.

Down there, near the kraal wall, Lucas has first met Netta and Susara. On that gravelly patch in the school road Lucas has seen Hoender and Maans squatting to copy answers from Essie in their school scribblers. Look to your right where Kleinjaap has been hurt on the way to the peach tree at the well. *Tant* Mysie's turkeys gobble in the school garden. During break Malie, Essie and Netta have compiled anthologies while resting against the school wall. The whitewash has always left white patches on their backs, so that they had to dust one another before returning to class.

There are paper flower bouquets over the school door. Our people sit in the cast iron school desks. The twins are sitting in Hoender's desk. If you lift the lid, you can see the heart with his and Martie's names. He has carved it out with his jack knife during break. Lucas's desk is to the right, in front. He has always rested his shoes on the iron frame, hence the worn spots.

The building is decorated festively. *Tant* Hannie and Essie have prepared most of the food and have laughed while baking the wedding cake in the kitchen at Grootvlei. Kleinpetrus is ringleader in the games of *Aljander* and *0ld ewe and jackal*

under the eucalyptus. The young ones are dusty when they slip in to nab a handful of tartlets. One of the twins has lost her hair comb.

Netta is a beautiful bride. Pity about the black gown. She has curled her hair with strips of flannel and this softens her thin face. Siemen looks a little tired. This last while he has exerted himself in order to take care of the farms and families in the district. Siemen does not know a lot about farming!

Tant Mysie leans back in the desk, satisfied. She listens to Essie playing the blow organ. The child plays well: devotional hymns and lyrics from *Sluyter's Buiten-Eensaemhuys, Somer en Winter Leven*. Nothing secular.

One misses absent loved ones at times of festivity. Essie sits with her back to the wedding guests. Siemen walks up to the organ with refreshments. He notices that Essie's eyes are brimming with tears. Tears drip from her chin and disappear somewhere between middle C and D flat minor. He knows she does not wish to spoil the festivities, so he puts his hand on her shoulder and sings, accompanied by the piano.

Everyone puts up a gay front*: tant* Malie for the sake of the twins that miss their father so much, *oom* Koot for the sake of *tant* Mysie who is enjoying Essie's music, and *tant* Hannie, out of gratitude that Kleinpetrus displays leadership qualities. One wishes to shield children from harsh realities.

Hoender receives a fatal shot the very moment that Netta slices through the first layer of decorative pink roses on the wedding cake. He slowly collapses behind the stone parapet at Misgunfontein, to the west of the railway line. His past flies by him, event by event. This is the battle of Vetrivier. The British are now occupying Winburg.


Hoender

Lucas mourns Hoender's passing

- Lost
- Irrational
- Desperate

These three words best describe Lucas's state of mind. Once again he is a stray dog in strange surroundings; foot sore and neglected, too stunned to see a way forward.

Thrice he has been left like this;

· the day that Greet stopped fighting, at Nooitgedacht in *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens's cottage.

· Late that night that of *oupa* Petrus passed on at Grootvlei.

· On this day that Hoender collapses next to him at Misgunfontein.

Each time, Lucas has managed to stagger to his feet; distrustful, but at least with a will to survive. This time, he finds the effort too great.

At the lager, Lucas notices that there is a lull in conversation when he joins the group around the fire. Every time a shadow falls over him, he looks up in expectation; this might just turn out to be Hoender. In Lucas's dreamscape, Hoender is by his side. Come morning, Lucas has to face reality. Lucas struggles to be vigilant.

He mercilessly subjects himself to endless introspection. Could he have:

changed places with Hoender behind the parapet,

hunched up so that Hoender could have more space to shelter,

taken up less elbow room,

noticed the sharpshooter in time,

aimed accurately the way Hoender has taught him?

It's like this game that Greet never tired of playing:

> "Lucas, if *Oupa* told you to pick anything that you wished for in Loxton's shop, would it be cold homemade lemonade, or rock candy, or liquorice? Do remember: rock candy can crack your teeth. Rather choose marzipan, I like marzipan best."

or:

> "Lucas, say *Antjie Somers* catches me, puts me in a hessian bag and ties the mouth of the bag with a thong: will you search till you find me? Will you call for Wagter to help search for me?"

or:

> "Lucas, if one day I am walking and searching for tree gum and I fall into the borehole near the wild asparagus, will you find me even if my voice grows very small?"

Wishful thinking will not return Hoender to Lucas's side.

On June 14 and 15, the Heidelberg men attend a council of war. After the fall of Bloemfontein, Piet Retief Viljoen has fought under command of Andries Cronjé. His men have served until the general's surrender to the British. Viljoen then escapes with thirty men and joins forces with the Heidelbergers. The council decides to send the Heidelberg commando to Heidelberg under Viljoen's command.

Louis Botha visits the commando and explains that a guerrilla technique will be employed. De la Rey is on his way to the Western Transvaal with 1200 of his men. Chris Botha will sabotage the railway line in Natal. Some of the Heidelberg commando should do the same in the Heidelberg district. The plundering of train loads of supplies will impede Lord Roberts.

Louis Botha's Address

Louis Botha is standing on an enormous ant hill and is speaking with great conviction. Unity is strength. God is on their side. He, himself, will fight to the bitter end. It may prove necessary to take up arms against brothers: traitors will not be tolerated.

Time for questioning: rumour has it that Lord Roberts has employed bribes to buy Louis Botha's surrender. This is true. Lord Roberts has used a go-between. It is clear that Roberts is feeling uncomfortable about the weaknesses in his own army. As far as Botha is concerned, the independence of the Boers is of greater importance than any peace-offering could ever be.

The commandoes have a responsibility towards fellow men that have paid the ultimate price on the fields of battle. Have they died in vain? May the God that has supported the Heidelbergers at Modderspruit, Colenso, Spioenkop and Paardeberg, continue to reinforce them.The meeting ends with three cheers and the Heidelberg closing ceremony.

The deaths of Hoender and Maans will be avenged. Lucas senses courage and conviction coursing through his veins. In his mind's eye he sees the patchwork layout of Grootvlei and considers the vulnerability of the women at home. They depend on him. He is here to make a difference and is deeply grateful of the opportunity of seeing Essie again. The thought of Essie and of seeing her again, is uplifting. Hunger pangs return and he fingers the lining of his unravelling coat pocket for *biltong*. He wipes the blade of his jack knife on the leg of his trousers and starts carving. He carves while deliberating over the return to Heidelberg: slowly, evenly, painstakingly. The *biltong* tastes good.

For the first time since Hoender's death, Lucas slept the sleep of lead: heavy and immobile.

The Joiner

It is June 14, 1900. The breeze is nippy. A nurse has just closed the emergency doors of the Heidelberg hospital on her way out. She skips down the long veranda. As she reaches the end of the garden path, she looks at the watch pinned upside down to the bib of her apron: eleven o'clock.

Heidelberg is introspective this morning. Most windows and doors are shut, so that the houses look out expressionlessly over the streets. The war has brought on divided loyalties and distrust. Fears and accusations are whispered softly behind drawn curtains. The town is in discord.

There is a considerable English speaking community in the Heidelberg of 1900. The majority of the community comprises Boer families. They are very patriotic. Dr O'Reilly and his wife Cassie are English-speaking. Cassie is one of the women running the hospital and both she and Dr O'Reilly are dedicated to their calling. Nobody can question the professional manner in which Cassie administers the hospital. Nevertheless, the Boers are distrustful, as British officers are sometimes entertained at the O'Reilly home. The sick and wounded in the long building with the corrugated iron roof and white washed gable have no cause for complaint.

Cassie has just sent the nursing-aide to obtain supplies from the general dealers in the main street. The girl moves head down against the wind, fumbling in the purse hanging from her belt. She wears a small frilly cap over her pinned up plait.

The uniform is neat: an ankle length black dress with a white collar and sleeves with white facing and cuffs. The apron is starched. The uniform is completed by a broad leather belt. Suspended from the belt, is a small first aid case containing balms, boric acid, Lysol and a purse for small change.

We recognise Essie when she lifts her head. This morning she is unusually pale and has dark rings under her eyes. Small black curls escape from the plait. She takes out a *Vierkleur* rosette and pins it to her bib next to the upside-down face of the

watch. She then lifts her chin challengingly and walks on purposefully. She has a Boer on commando and is here to serve her country.

It's good to escape the smell of antiseptics and boiled cabbage. Times without number, she has had to scrub the wooden hospital floors. The grooves grow ingrained with dirt. A cleaner assists with polishing the brass window-latches. Sometimes she stands on a chair and dusts the fan lights with a damp cloth. No window sill or door frame escapes her attention. One cold morning the window panes mist over and she takes great pleasure in drawing a heart shape with an L at the centre of it, on the pane next to the admissions counter.

These days Essie mostly supervises and a short veil flutters from her nursing cap.

A large amount of the general store supplies have been commandeered by the army, so that the display windows seem stripped. The general dealer is one of the few shops still open to the public. Posters and signboards advertise Epsom salts, laxatives and bandages.

The interior is close and smells of leather. Kettles, candle stick holders, lanterns and watering cans dangle from hooks. Reins sprout from the roof as though they are creepers. Bars of caustic smelling tar soap, green soap, toilet soap and groceries are stacked on shelves against the walls.

Essie staggers into a man. She assesses the body from his feet upwards, lifting her gaze: the polished shoes, pleated pants, the drooping moustache and the fleshy face. They recognise each other. This is *oom* Skaam Sarel's son Gert, propping himself up with his elbows on the counter. He blushes as though caught out. "Would Lucas then also be here?" Essie wonders.

Gert grabs at the *Vierkleur* rosette on Essie's bib: "This is not allowed!"

Essie is held captive by the tiny droplets of spittle on his moustache. She cannot help but stare. Then it hits her in the face like a bucket of cold water: Gert is one of

the despised, a joiner! She stumbles from the general dealer, her errands neglected.

She has never been attracted to the swaggering Gert. Essie has always loathed him. She thinks of his mother, *tant* Ella, who has sat with *tant* Mysie in the kitchen, dunking rusks, only last week. *Tant* Ella is very proud of her bachelor sons. She has winked at Essie: "I wonder how the men are coping on commando?"

Essie feels sorry for *tant* Ella. How does one console the mother of a joiner?

"Sorry *Tante*, I know you're not to be blamed for the fact that Gert has become a traitor."

Or:

"Perhaps Gert is a cowardly deserter and let's hope it will not be brother against brother or father against son."

Or:

"Don't allow him back into your home; a man without loyalty is a threat to our people."

Back at the hospital, she sits hunched at the foot-end of the nearest bed. All week she has been suffering with cramps. At this moment it is as though someone has punched her in the stomach. When she rises to scrounge a dose of Jamaican Ginger in the storeroom, she feels, with the cramps, the release of a flow that soaks her under garments. This has been brought on by shock and is very ill-timed!

The Litter

That Friday morning, Essie becomes aware of the soft, urgent mewing. She finds them in the drawer; *Vales*, the tabby cat, and her litter. They are a motley litter. The tabby blinks her eyes to adjust to the sudden bright sunlight after having hidden in the shadowy interior of the closed drawer. She doesn't jump up, but stretches leisurely in the sunbeam glistening with dust particles. The grey eyes become slits and her body vibrates with pleasure. The purring grows in intensity. The paws open and curl when Essie strokes the fur.

Essie places a bowl of fresh milk on the peach stone floor. *Vales's* whiskers twitch. Amber coloured slits widen with interest. *Vales* arches her back and shrugs off the kittens. Essie listens to the soft suckling sounds when the rosy teats are pulled from the tiny cupped tongues. A few kittens dangle, determined not to lose their grip. *Vales* starts lapping up the milk in her saucer, never taking her eyes off Essie. Her whiskers and the surrounding floorboards are spotted with milk stains.

The kittens complain. Essie has not been aware that *Vales* has been in heat. The litter must have arrived while Essie has been at the hospital. The tabby has littered quite recently as the kittens' eyes are still shut. *Vales* is now washing them vigorously, nose to tail tip, till the six start fretting. She washes till the kittens are wet and bedraggled. Eventually they grow restful. It grows quiet on Essie's cape in the bottom of the cupboard.

The whole morning *ma* Mysie and Essie gloat over the kittens. Every now and again, *oom* Koot comes to take a peek. The next three days Essie spends at home. The smell of milk attracts sugar ants.

Laughing doves call from the cypresses on either side of the garden gate. One evening, just before a chilly dusk settles like a mood, Siemen and Netta pays a visit to enjoy a meal of sweet-potato fritters served with crushed maize. Netta can't resist the urge; she picks up a wriggly kitten, cups its face in her hand and presses the warm body to her cheek. The still pumping snout is sticky with milk foam.

Netta sits down in the kitchen and rests her feet on a foot stool. She confides in Essie: “Es, it’s been two months... I know Siemen suspects.”

Essie hugs Netta and pulls her up to whirl in an elated dance of loop-the-loop, same as when they were school girls. Then Essie puts her hand to her mouth and whispers wide-eyed: “Sorry, Netta. I should take into consideration your condition. Is *ma* Mysie allowed to know just yet?”

Netta nods gravely. “Problem is: Siemen wishes to join the commando. At heart my Dutchman is a Boer. Ever since Willem Mangold has told him about Hoender’s death, he has been restless.”

Tant Mysie glows with pleasure. She may share in the secret! They celebrate with the last of the pork from the pantry. *Tant* Mysie wedges thin slices of pork between slices of sticky sweet-potatoes and serves this up with crushed maize. *Oom* Koot considers this to be wasteful in war times. In order to pacify him, *tant* Mysie whispers in his good ear: “Tell you later, in bed.”

Essie cannot help but warn: “Siemen, do you know that the German baker, Cord Rosenbrock, has been put in the Johannesburg jail? He has been suspected of being a Boer supporter. You are a Cape Colonist. You should not get involved. “

Anxiety is suppressed by the pleasure taken in a hot meal and friendly company. It is only when all are in bed that the grim realities of wartimes thrust home. Thoughts dwell the way the slight whiff of the extinguished candles dwell in the rooms. Netta lies next to Siemen. She tries to pierce the darkness; to predict what lies in store. Fears prowl around the school building, trying the latches.

Caught in Crossfire

Yet thou shalt see the land before thee; but thou shalt not go thither unto the lan - Deuteronomy 32:52.

June 20, 1900. The commando is setting up laager. They have taken up position north of Heidelberg. The Boers are allowed the opportunity of paying fleeting visits to farms to obtain supplies. *Oom* Koos is on his way to Grootvlei. Lucas thinks of Essie, solely. To him the caretaker's house opposite the farm school represents the Promised Land. He is on his way there this morning.

The surrounding area has been stripped bare. There are no large antelope left. A few jumpy blesbuck find shelter in the winter reeds at the spruit. *Oupa* Petrus has always been dead set against hunting on his land and the vlei lands have been a sanctuary for a large herd. Culling has never been an option.

This morning, all is quiet in the sanctuary on the hill. There must be honey comb in the ravine, as the bees swarm threateningly. A go-away bird cautions against intruders. Even the small game has been exterminated. The horse stumbles when a large rock iguana scurries in the undergrowth.

Lucas sees Essie's home at the bottom of a gradual slope. He imagines being re-united with Essie. These images run through his mind;

It is Saturday morning and Essie should not be on duty at the hospital. Lucas imagines what the reunion will be like: Essie is probably milking the Jersey in the school yard. She wears the quilted sun-bonnet and milk spurts into the pail. When she looks up, she sees him coming down the hawthorn lane. She leaves go of everything and runs up to him. The horse shies. He dismounts and embraces her. Essie cups her hand and scoops the cream from the pail. He drinks from her palm while still kneeling. With her kisses she covers his face in cream. It seeps into the thirsty cracks of his chapped lips and rough cheeks. He lifts her onto the horse. She sits in his arms and leans her head against his chest. Her hair smells of rosemary. Together they ride to her parent's home.

Essie sits at the wash stone in the shade of the knob-thorn. She has a partially completed quilt on her lap. Next to her is a basket of pastel-coloured floral remnants. Her hair is plaited. When she looks up in surprise, he is standing in front of her. She jumps up and hugs him. He holds her tightly so that he can feel her soft curves. They then spread the unfinished quilt under the tree and lie with their limbs entwined: he looks into her dark eyes. Her clothes are in disarray, her face is flushed.

Essie is in the kitchen at the flour bin. She is wearing her pinafore. Flour is dusting her forearms as she is preparing milk-food. When he kisses her over the half-door, she hugs him. They sit on the thong bench and Lucas licks off the dough that is sticking to her fingers.

Lucas can now clearly discern the fir green sitting room door and the stables. The water tank next to the house reflects the sun. There are no doves at the back door where they usually perch on the trelliswork, waiting for scattered crumbs. The only windows visible are the two bow windows in the sitting room wall. Behind the house is the whitewashed school building with the weather vane where Siemen and Netta live.

There is no movement in the yard. Perhaps *oom* Koot or the *tante* are at the new privvies with the sunken pits near the blue gum trees. Behind the trelliswork, the stoep is stacked with pot plants. One can see very little of the front veranda. Why do the yard dogs not come running? Trouble is brewing.

Lucas spots a movement near the buck waggon in the shed. He has looted binoculars from a British officer shot on the battle field. These are badly damaged, but by adjusting them very carefully, he can just discern a tail lashing in the gloomy interior of the waggon shed. It's the tail of a horse chasing flies. It is not the long tail of a Boer horse, but the trimmed brush of a British horse.

Lucas hears the bullets ricocheting. His horse's legs buckle. The pain is paralysing. It's downhill to the quarry. From the corner of his eye, he sees the carcass of the dead horse bouncing down towards him. He hits a ridge in the embankment of

the quarry. The horse carcass thuds past. For a while Lucas feigns death. His lungs are empty.

The morning grows rose tinted:
the clouds,
the gravel in the quarry and
the very earth grow
red.

He is caught in the crossfire. The British fire is answered from the Boer lines. Lucas rolls into a hollow in the eroded bank of the quarry. He is unable to drag his eyes from his blood dripping onto the gravel.

- Essie?
- Essie?
- Essie?

Even the veld fruits under the overhang are red:

- ostrich's toe,
- bush-tick berry,
- *koeiriempies*.

Lucas thinks of Moses; how this prophet must have experienced overlooking the land of milk and honey, Canaan, realising: "I shall never enter it this land."

Tant Mysie's Pot Plants

Tant Mysie has had little book-learning, but this has never proved to be an insurmountable setback. There is little anyone can teach her about the mysteries of nature. Not only does she appreciate the healing power of herbs; she loves all garden plants, and in particular, ferns. *Oupa* Petrus has, during his lifetime, often visited to have coffee. The one love that they have shared, has been that of nature. *Oupa* Petrus would often make statements like: "A Boer that nourishes the soil has a legacy."

Tant Mysie would agree. The bigger the dropsy has caused her body to swell, the smaller her world has shrunk. Finally, she can barely shuffle from veranda to sewing machine. For this reason she has created a pot plant haven on the veranda against the trelliswork. She often rests on the thong bench at the front door. She and *oom* Koot sit there evenings, holding hands and reliving memories.

Those get to know *tant* Mysie, do not notice the clumsy movements. They see the big heart. *Tant* Mysie loves her pot plants. She talks to them and can prevent it from shrivelling up by talking to it. Her ferns react to her moods and the geranium in the tin on the veranda flourishes in order to please her.

When *tant* Mysie visits the veranda, carrying her pruning scissors, she has the watering can at hand to refresh: "Do not fear, I'm only snipping off the dead leaves. I need your advice. What are we to help *Vales*. Those kittens, the whole caboodle, are feeding off *Vales's* very life blood. If only Kleinjaap were here to see them. Quite possibly, he is doing just that while sitting on the lap of the Good Lord.

Decades after, Luther Burbank, the author of *The Secret Lives of Plants*, would claim that all plants are endowed with emotion and intellect. They also have the ability to sense malice and to read minds.

When Gert's shiny boot crushes down on the step of the veranda of *tant* Mysie's house shortly before dawn on June 20, 1900, he takes control. Gert is a despicable joiner that knows where the Boer is at his most vulnerable.

Essie's door is closest to the veranda. She is asleep, hugging the smallest of the litter, its sticky face under her chin. *Vales* is lying in the cupboard with her litter, purring. She hisses, then ghosts over the open window frame and into the night. *Tant* Mysie and *oom* Koot are sound asleep in the four-poster in the room just off the pantry.

Essie hears the cupboard door being jerked open. Somebody kicks at the kittens: "Bloody cats. Get the old girl and her husband; third room on your right."

Essie is scared witless. She has been dragged from a peaceful dream. Essie recognises Gert silhouetted against the faint glow from the bay window. A British soldier has stepped into the milk bowl and is cursing to high heavens. One silhouette merges with the next. She hugs the kitten she has been holding onto in her sleep. She is standing barefoot on the featherbed, shivering. She is wearing a cotton nightdress. Essie looks down at her chest and feels the runt of *Vales's* litter going limp. She has crushed it to death.

Then Gert talks: "You have always looked down upon me. Today I have the upper hand. You are all under house arrest. This house will serve as a good lookout post to spy on the Boer commando. The Heidelberg commando is making its way back to Heidelberg."

He looks into Essie's face. She can smell drink on his breath: "I sure hope Lucas will pay us a visit."

From the dark front room demands are being issued. "Food, coffee, quiet. In that sequence!"

Essie gains strength. She puts on a smock and boots. She takes *tant* Mysie by the arm and seats her at the foot end of her bed. Essie pulls the loose dress over *tant* Mysie's night clothes. She puts on socks and shoes over the swollen feet.

Oom Koot is dressed. The whites of his eyes show tiny red capillaries. He follows Essie, accompanied by a rear guard. There is no elbow-room. Essie percolates

the coffee and stirs three sugars into ma Mysie's mug, then goes to fetch her father's pipe – her back challengingly straight; "Try and prevent me from looking after my parents! Just you try."

Essie's eyes are scornful. They restrain Gert and his guards from taking liberties. Ma Mysie must answer the call of nature. Essie grabs the chamber pot from the bedside table and shoos the soldiers into the hallway. She then empties it out the window and droplets splash over a Tommy's leggings. Essie watches dawn leaking between the outbuildings. She wishes to throw wide the kitchen window and to shout a warning. Fear for the safety of Netta and her unborn child, keeps her from doing so. Eventually she wrenches open a window sash. Gert brings down the heavy frame on her fingers so that blood oozes from Essie's cuticles.

"Today I control what happens."

Essie kneels at the cupboard among the wriggling cat bodies. She wishes to pick one up, then snatches back a hand covered in entrails and blood. A few kittens lie alarmingly still.

Her hatred is clear and unwavering. She is free. She has simply ceased to care for her own safety and refuses to be the bait in a trap. She feels the doorknob in her hand. Essie runs down the garden path, down towards the stables behind the waggon shed. When Gert hits her head with the butt of his gun, she stumbles, tearing off a cypress branch. The cypress does not scream. It gives off a smell of bruising that travels over the front garden. Three, four japonicas droop. The geranium on the veranda wall wilts. *Vales* has settled down in the attic door.

Siemen, the *Boer*

Siemen often thinks back on the Amsterdam that he has been familiar with as a child. Most of the miracles of this sad world have been created by the Father. As for Amsterdam, well, Amsterdam the Netherlanders have erected on pylons all by themselves and in the least likely spot imaginable. As the level of the water in the river rises and subsides with the floods, the sluices have to be adjusted. Hence the Dutch saying:

Als het getij verloopt, moet men de bakens verzetten.

One should always adapt to the changing circumstances. Siemen has been forced to adapt from early on in his life: to a dialect that is foreign to the ear as well as to a nation that does things very differently. He has learnt to admire the *Boers* for their singleness of purpose. He has moved his beacons in order to adjust.

Nowadays, it seems to him, his life teeters on shaky supports. If these give way, he will be forced to tread water. He is no fence sitter and has difficulty in coming to terms with Hoender's death. He now no longer wishes to sit by idly, watching the Boers suffer.

The Smalwaters depend on him; the children miss Maans. Sampie is inconsolable. He is the youngest of six. Like his brother Maans, he is a good athlete. He no longer wishes to compete.

Siemen is vulnerable as he sides with the *Boers* and wears his heart on his sleeve. This Monday, after the lesson in multiplication, Sampie gets up to lean against the corner of Siemen's desk. The child is barefoot and his eyes are forlorn. He has lost weight. The toes of his left foot are wedged over the heel of the right. Siemen is intolerant of bad posture. This morning he does not rebuke Sampie. He picks the boy up and seats him on the table. Now the two of them have eye contact. "*Meester*, *Meester* also loved our Maans and Hoender. Is *Meester* not then going to help Lucas

to wipe the floor with the English? Tell us, *Meester*? We shall care for Netta and the baby when it comes and cries for you, *Meester*. Cross my heart, *Meester*."

Only then does Siemen realise: the die has actually been cast a long time ago. Facts such as him being a Hollander and a Colonist, are incidental. He and Netta have been avoiding the subject of the battle front. Netta carries his child and is vulnerable. His heart, however, leaves Siemen no choice. It is merely a question of time. He will join the *Boers* . He must adjust the sluices and come to a decision.

He looks at the boy, then gets up and allows his gaze to move over the class. They sit in expectation: the twins with their well-worn corduroys and velskoene, Kleinpetrus who is balancing a crocked clay ox on the bench, the Ventertjie with the missing front tooth and ten weather-beaten children from Blesbokspruit. *Meester* announces: "*Meester* is a Boer!"

He reverts to his mother tongue:

"Je moet het maar allemaal weten."

Then in warning, finger to his lips: "*Niets Zeggen*!"

Sampie is pacified and for the rest of the morning, the children are wide-eyed and submissive.

When Netta later enters the class with a batch of freshly baked cookies, she senses the change of mood. She wipes her hands on her apron. Before Siemen can get a word in edgeways, Sampie spills the beans: "*Meester* is going to help Lucas to stuff up the Khakis!"

Netta turns pale. Her knees buckle so that she drops down onto the nearest school desk. Kleinpetrus has to make room. Siemen expects reproaches. He wishes to soften the blow. "In Holland they say that the swans bring the babies. *Ach*, if only mother were here to look after the two of you!"

Siemen has not expected her reaction: “I am so proud of my *Boer*. Can’t wait to tell Essie!”

Meester’s lesson in Biology is on the window ledge in the school: a kidney bean in a saucer covered with damp paper pulp. A tiny plant is waiting for the right conditions in order to germinate.

This morning Siemen takes his leave of Netta, closing the half-door of the kitchen behind him. Siemen has been to see *oom* Koos at Grootvlei before dawn. He has obtained news of the course of the war. On his return, he hears the shots and realises that Lucas has been targeted. Siemen meets up with the men sent to fetch Lucas from under the crossfire: back to the laager. *Meester* Geertsema joins the commando.

Tant Hannie holds the crying Kleinpetrus firmly by the hand and holds out two pouches of food to *oom* Koos: one of those he should give Lucas. The men must return to commando. She would have it no other way.

Essie massages her bruised temple with eucalyptus ointment. The joiner and his assistants have left. She starts clearing up frenziedly. The front veranda is covered with potting soil and trampled fern. Red geranium has been trampled into the peach-stone floor of the hallway. The house reeks of withered wreath; as though there has been an overnight wake.

Tant Mysie moves listlessly from veranda trelliswork to thong bench, picking up bits of snapped off stem and pushing them into pot soil. They will grow roots again. The Good Lord will dispose.

Essie attends to the mugs. She lifts the kettle from the stand on the hob and scoops a pail of water out of the small tank, filling the wash tub to the brim then hands *oom* Koot the kitchen towel. She takes a bar of green soap and rubs the suds into a washcloth, then starts washing the mugs as though attempting to scrub off the enamel: “One doesn’t know what pestilence other than lice this gang of khakis have contaminated this house with.”

Oom Koot shuffles closer. The pain in his chest abates. Essie hands him the mugs and he starts drying them; a simple chore that keeps his hands occupied. Essie washes vigorously so that water sloshes over the brim of the tub. *Oom* Koot knows that Essie's anger is a good sign. Essie bends down to mop up puddles: "*Tant* Ella is the one we should feel sorry for. If only she had suffocated Gert by accidentally lying on him after having given birth, the way the woman seeking advice from Solomon had done! It would have been good riddance." *Oom* Koot bites his tongue.

At family prayers, *Vales* sits on Essie's lap. The tabby has been wandering about aimlessly, searching.

The Broad Way and the Narrow Way

Lucas repeatedly walks the same dwindling path. The very moment the City paved with Gold and the All-seeing's eye is within reach, he has to go right back to the entrance. He makes no progress. At the moment he is standing in front of the surrounding wall. He has become a tiny drawing and he recognises himself by the green jacket he is wearing. It's the jacket handed down to him by *neef* Flippie, the one that *ma* Susannah has sent him by mail coach to Heidelberg.

He senses the presence of others travellers. When he turns his head, the paper figurines all but topple over: the young man who seems to be in two minds as to which entrance to use, has lifted his hat to a young lady in his company. A dog pants at their heels. Moving proves to be painful and Lucas finds it hard to breathe. Still, he catches a glimpse of the other figures standing in front of the gate. A guard with a goatee stands at attention at a pillar-gate. Emblazoning the entrance, is a welcoming banner. The path from this entrance is broad and free from obstacles. A mail coach swerves through the entrance. A flag with the words *WERELDZIN* flutters from a storeyed building. Guests allowed in here are talkative and carefree.

A hand propels Lucas in the direction of the narrow arch. Could be *ma* Susannah, because he gets a whiff of her Eau de Cologne. He is now on his own again and he is soaked with perspiration.

The gentleman beckoning the travellers to the narrow entrance, wears a cloak. He resembles a still younger looking Sarel Cilliers. (*Dominee*, perhaps?) There is an unimposing sign at the entrance: *Godsrijk*. Lucas doubts that he has the energy to mount the three steps. He then becomes aware of the sound of water gushing. This gives him determination, as his thirst is unquenchable.

From where he now stands; halfway through the gate, a grey stone church becomes visible. It resembles the church at Heidelberg, but is not a replica. The foot path winds up a gentle slope. It winds the way the path to the swimming-hole at Grootvlei does. He sees the lower part of a wooden cross. Out of the fear for the directness of the beloved Lord's gaze, Lucas does not raise his head. Water gushes

from the rock at the foot of the Cross. Far ahead, he spots a girl wearing a blue ribbon in her plait.

When Lucas recognises her, he has the urge to call out: “Greet!’

The sound is muffled. He’ll never catch up with Greet. How will he be able to call her? His lungs are deflated. He is in agony. Something heavy is weighing him down and Greet doesn’t look back!

Lucas can pinpoint exactly where he is. He is a pressed drawing in the picture on the wall of the share-cropper’s house at Nooitgedacht. *Tant* Sussie has framed the lithograph of the *Broad and Narrow Way*. He is a paper thin printed figure caught between the glass and the hardboard backing. The wavy glass presses the last grain of strength from his injured body.

Claustrophobia consumes him and he clenches his fists. All of this exertion causes him to sweat. This covers the pane of glass in the mounted picture with vapour. It’s now impossible to discern much. He hammers at the glass frame, but feebly, as he has outgrown *neef* Flippie’s jacket and the fit is so tight that it limits his movements. With a mighty blow, he strikes against the glass so that it cracks open and shards tinkle on the floor. This brings relief, but it still feels as though he is breathing through a damp cloth. He hears the banner fluttering close by:

- *Wereldzin,*
- *Wereldzin,*
- *Wereldzin.*



Broad and Narrow Way

The Sisters Uys

"*Ma*, he's broken the basin!"

Lucas grabs at the fluttering flag so that it clatters down.

"*Ma*, just see: he has pulled down the curtain and rod!"

She bends over.to study his face. Could this be his Greet? She looks at him accusingly, her eyes ice blue slits. Her hair is tied back tightly. She is that near him, that he can see the pink scalp in the parting. She chews at her full bottom lip and looks him in the eye as though trying to determine the extent of his guilt.

"Yesterday, you vomited all over the pillow!"

"Ragie, leave the poor man be. He's just returned from death's door and now you harass him. Go call your *ma*."

The command is issued from the corner of the room. A woman is sitting on a folding chair. Her face is restful. Her hands remain occupied with the sewing on her lap. She does not look like someone easily upset. She puts down her embroidery and walks up to the bed. In a leisurely way, she bends to pick up the pieces of glass next to his bed and replaces the curtain rod on its wall hooks.

Lucas's eyes follow her, watching as she opens a bottle of Eau de Cologne. She sprinkles a damp flannel cloth with this perfume and systematically wipes his face and chest.

"You've really scared us witless. If your friend Siemen hasn't carted you here, well, then you wouldn't have made it in the laager."

Ragie's mother takes in his condition at a glance: "We've allowed you to decide by yourself whether you wish to grow stronger."

She delivers this statement blandly. She stands in the doorway with her hands in her apron-pockets, slowly rocking back on her heels as though wishing to stretch

taller. Miemie Uys is a tall woman: tall, thin body, bony hands and a long, sinewy neck. She keeps her neck-collar buttoned. Everything about her is unyielding and straight-laced.

It's as though Miemie has just bought this much of a roll of linen to clothe the whole family. No remnants to add to the crazy quilt. Mercifully, the five children are quite thin. Three daughters and two sons queue up next to the bed.

Lucas finds their stares somewhat unnerving; relentless stares, mouths open, the eyes unblinking. Who can tell for how many days they have been observing him? Ragie's nose twitches as though she is in the presence of something that gives off a bad odour. Such is indeed the case. As Lucas looks down, he sees a strip of goat skin, slimy side sticking to his chest hairs, stretching from between his nipples to his navel.

It's as though he needs explore this body afresh. He puts his hand on his chest and touches the goat skin. He tries to bring a smile to the faces, but his voice slurs: "Jacob covered with Esau's goat skin..."

Not one twitches a muscle. Ragie pats at the goatskin with her small hand. Lucas shrinks back into the pillow. Self-righteous little vixen!

"This is the second goat that *tant* Kowie has had to kill for you. We'll cover you with a fresh one soon as this one goes dry."

Lucas gets to know and respect *tant* Kowie. She is well loved by her relatives. For the greater part of every day, she still remains seated in the corner of the room, mending clothes. Gerhardus likes to stand close to her. He is very protective of her and talks with one hand round her shoulder: "You'd better get well soon. You must not let Neef Niklaas find you here. He doesn't like other men around our Kowie. He is on commando, but once he's sorted out the English, he'll be back."

There is little Lucas would rather do than recover. The spirit is willing.

Recovery is slow. Affection for the family comes by itself. He gets to know the daily routine. Lucas grows to understand the mother of the six. In the afternoons, *tant*

Hester, the mother, pulls up a cane chair and sits by his bed. Her eyes and cheeks are sunken. Lucas is reassured by her presence. Every afternoon she sits there, her face absent as the clouds drifting by the bedroom window.

Tant Kowie nurses Lucas diligently, so that Lucas does not even consider protesting. It is mostly a method of trial and error and his injured lungs give cause for concern. The sisters exchange diagnoses and medical opinions, not in the least embarrassed by his presence. "*Sus* Kowie, the boy is a bit pale this morning. Do you think it's his blood circulation?"

Tant Kowie comes to see for herself. Ragie is present. *Tant* Kowie cranes her neck. "No, *Sus* Hester, his injuries are healing quite well. It's just the green around the shoulder wound that bothers me. Could be blood poisoning. I'll prepare an extract from Eucalyptus leaves and *beukesbossie*."

Then comes the day that Lucas is allowed to sit up: "Ragie, go take the young ones to the blue gum lane, pick me a pillowcase of leaves. Not tender ones, good sized ones. Get moving now."

When all is quiet: "*Sus* Kowie, give us a hand, let's see if we can get this man to the outhouse. Do we have another dose of white emetic?"

Today*Tant* Kowie is sitting with the needle work box in her lap. This is a treasured heirloom, as the two sisters barely make ends meet. The box is upholstered on the inside and has small compartments for Sewing Susan needle cards, a brown pincushion and a measuring tape. Kleindaniël cosies up to her quite often. He entwines his fingers in the cane work covering the frame of her chair. This is why some of the cane matting bulges. *Tant* Kowie remains unperturbed. She talks as though slowly, assuredly rewriting the Book of Job. This relaxed attitude aids recovery. Evenings, when pain and fever return with a vengeance and his breath gets stuck in his throat, he notices the glint of the needle in the lamplight. He then thinks: "The Angel of Death would have difficulty in snatching me from the grasps of these two women."

Lucas sleeps arrives in small thimblesful.

Tant Hester is finishing a sampler:

De Oogen Des Heeren Zijn In Alle Plaatsen.

Lucas grows familiar with the room. It is large and has rush matting resting on a few cross beams. At night this room becomes sullen with inner knowledge. Lucas can tell the exact position of gaps in the rush of the ceiling. He listens for the rustling of tiny feet on the matting. The walls are white washed. Wall texts and folk pictures hang from the picture rail. He can recall them, from left to right, clockwise, without once opening his eyes: A picture of president Paul Kruger against a background of an assortment of seeds, a calligraphic version of the evil of drunkenness, depicted in the shape of a tree, a patriotic folk picture of the two presidents of the two republics and a wall text running as follows:

Wentel uwen weg op den Heere

en vertrowd op Hem, Hij zal het maken.

For what seems to him an eternity, Lucas lies in this room, shying from his own fears. He is protecting himself against the pain of longing and uncertainty. The human mind and body can only handle a certain amount of pain over a given period. Tomorrow promises a complete daisy-chain of strung together memories.



The two Presidents

The Cure?

Lucas aims to survive. He remains short of breath as though his lungs are in the grip of a gigantic vice. He does not recover overnight.

Tant Kowie aids his recovery by thumping his back with her fists. This treatment and the eucalyptus vapour that he inhales while sitting with a towel draped over his head, day in and day out, bring relief. The sisters prop him up with pillows. They wedge the washbasin with its steaming extract of dried herbs and eucalyptus leaves in his lap between his knees and drape a cloth over his head so that the steam funnels up his nostrils. The heat causes him to involuntarily gasp for breath. Every now and again one of the sisters add another mug of boiling water: This causes Lucas to sit very still. He does not wish to spill. There is no opportunity for protesting. The steam scalds his lips and eyelids. It condenses on his forehead and cheeks. It drips from his chin and nose. Then the fits of coughing rack his body. Lucas holds back till his face turns red. The enamel chamber pot now replaces the wash basin.

"Suster Hester, seems to me the man is getting rid of scraps of lung; see the lung tissue drifting in the mucus. Oh, he has been seriously injured, that's for sure."

One evening, late August 1900, Lucas wakes from a refreshing sleep. This proves to be the turning point; the brink of recovery. Quiet flows through him as though a cure. He is free from pain and fever. Lucas lies motionless, disembodied. He listens to the clanging of pails, the bellows and herding calls drifting from the kraal.

The front door has been thrown wide. The sun is setting in the mirror on the dressing table. The oil lamp hangs suspended from the beam. The flame burns quietly. It dwindles on the joyless sepia of the face of President Kruger. It licks at the coal scuttle and burnishes the door knob.

Lucas is deeply grateful. He is happy to merely lie still, without thinking, as though his life has just begun. He listens to the children's laughter. They are on their way from the kraal. Ragie opens the bedroom door. Then they all line up in the doorway; *tant* Kowie, *tant* Hester, Ragie, Gerhardus and the younger ones. *Tant*

Kowie puts her hand against his forehead and smiles happily: “Welcome back to the land of the living. It feels as though I am a pea-hen and you are the only egg that has hatched.”

Tant Hester wipes her hands on her apron: “Thank the Good Lord. Please don’t pretend to have helped Lucas pull through all by yourself, *Suster*. I’ve also done my share of hatching. We are not going to meet trouble halfway by being ungrateful.”

Lucas finishes the milk-food. The spoon rattles in the empty bowl. The sisters quietly prepare for bed.

Late at night a gust of wind flurries round the outbuildings. A loose shutter slams. The grandfather clock in the hall strikes the hour: two o’clock. Lucas drops his guard and during that moment, his thoughts switch to Essie. He is powerless in the grip of memories. He cries without tears or sound. The early hours of the night are usually the loneliest. Someone must bring him news to prevent him from going crazy.

He lies awake, watching dawn seeping higher and higher and relives the day that he and Essie embraced at the corner post in the vlei. He is reminded of the way in which she clung to him, the inevitable surrender, the taste of her skin and lips.

He must have dozed off, because when he wakes, the curtains are already drawn. A turtle-dove repatedly calls: “*Work slowly, work slowly*.”

He supports himself on his elbow. The dove is perching on the trelliswork of the veranda. It is a charcoal grey dove, with wing feathers the colour of fresh cream. Another swoops down next to it: “*Kerrr*.”

The visitor first notices the *vlei* wagtails in the rushes at the swampland. Their “*che-che-cherioee*” becomes a plaintive: “*dswee, dswee. dswee*.”

The visitor supports his battered bicycle against the garden wall. His eyes flicker over the garden shrubs. He comes to a decision and sets off to the workers’ huts with the ornamental squares and swirls on the clay walls. Lucas whispers: “Josef.”

The man stops dead. He turns around and moves to the veranda. “I’ve come looking for you. “Josef stands looking at Lucas. For a long while he gazes at Lucas. The food bin dangles in the crook of his arm. Never before has he seen Lucas this skinny and bedraggled. “What have they done to you? I am taking you home. These are not your people.”

Lucas shuffles forward. He drops down on the step: “I am a grown man, Josef. I am returning to the commando.”

“Just see what they’ve done to you!”

“I’m young. I’m strong as a horse. How is Essie?”

“I brought the letter.”

Josef does not immediately pass on the letter. He cannot help but stare at Lucas. Josef has brought all of Grootvlei with him:

He is wearing the late *oupa* Petrus’s working trousers. Two of his, *oupa* Petrus’s, jacket buttons are missing. The shirt and waistcoat used to belong to *oom* Koos. The brim of the hat is turned up and the feather of a bush partridge is slipped underneath the band.

Josef bends over the bicycle. He unscrews the handle bar. A strip of paper coils from a hollowed out tube.

‘What shall I say to our people?”

“That everything is fine. Just fine. That I have put on weight. That I’m on my way to the commando.”

“I cannot do this. On Grootvlei, *tubas* Petrus never allowed us to lie.”

Tant Kowie brings Josef a small bag of *biltong*, two rusks and coffee. Lucas limps to the front room. *Tant* Hester comes hurrying with pen and paper. “Message from your people?”

Lucas merely nods. As Josef leaves, he asks him for the partridge feather.

"You must go well and look after our people. Thanks Josef. Many thanks. May the good Lord look after you." Lucas watches him leave. At the kraal, Josef turns around. Josef puts his hand in his jacket pocket. Lucas half expects Josef to give him a peppermint, the way *oupa* Petrus always did, when he wore the jacket to church. Josef puts the clay ox in Lucas's hand.

"Kleinpetrus sent it."

Lucas closes the bedroom door behind him. He reads Essie's letter, over and over again. He rereads it till the milk pails clang in the kraal and dusk comes to squat in the corners of the room, then lights the candle and memorises every word. *Tant* Kowie has instructed the children not to enter his room. When he knows the words by heart, Lucas extinguishes the flame with his fingers. He rubs his knuckles against his scratchy eyelids.

Lucas is lying down in the dark when *tant* Kowie slips into the room. She has brought supper: "A man can't grow strong on love without nourishment. What does she write?"

He laughs out loud: "She'll wait for me!"

Tant Kowie pulls up a chair. "Do tell. What does she look like? This is the very first time that I have heard your laughter. I love the sound of your laughter."

The night grows thick with dreams.

Geertrui

The night before joining the commando, Siemen Geertsema and *oom* Koos arranges for the women to move into the farm house at Grootvlei. *Oom* Koot and Josef are to look after them as best they can. Netta, Essie, *tant* Mysie, *tant* Hannie and Selina have now moved into the big homestead

Springtime has reached Heidelberg. Josef carts all *tant* Mysie's pot plants to the long veranda at Grootvlei. Here, *tant* Mysie allows each plant to pick a favourite spot behind the trelliswork of the veranda. *Tant* Hannie does not interfere; the five women living together under one roof must live in harmony. There is no alternative. There are actually six women, Geertrui included. Netta is torn between two names: Geertrui, after Siemen's deceased Ouma, or Klaus, after Siemen's deceased father. Geertrui is resting beneath Netta's budding breasts. She is five months into her development. Geertrui is resting in the amniotic fluid, her two small fists touching. Her limbs are perfectly developed. The nails are rosy. The heel of Geertrui's left foot rests on the bridge of her right foot. Geertrui's head is turned slightly to the right, as though she is listening to the women's conversation. Her eyebrows are as downy as the tufts starting to show on her scalp. Sometimes, as is the case this morning, she startles and kicks against the wall of the uterus.

The day is windless and clear, the pulpous shoots on the vineyard, the buds on the rosebush, sharply defined. It takes each tendril on the vine an hour to complete a circle. Each tendrils feels its way inquisitively. When it grips onto the vine, it corkscrews.

Tant Mysie's creeper has been torn from its familiar supports. Some buds wither and branches sag. Tendrils reach out in order to cling to the trelliswork.

This is the season of fertility and growth. Essie feels cheated. She observes Netta surreptitiously and notices the bloom on her cheeks and her body filling out. There is a frailty about Netta, a soft beauty that causes one to fear for her wellbeing Essie desires to be with child. She watches Netta's every move so that she notices when Netta feels the baby moving. Netta understands. "Come here Essie. Put your

hand here. Don't be scared. Press your palm flat. The baby is restless today. Be patient, then you'll feel it kicking."

Essie glows with pleasure. She cannot do enough for Netta and Geertrui. "May Lucas and I be godparents when the war is past? Please Netta?"

"I've already decided that it should be the two of you. Perhaps you will fall pregnant when Lucas and *oom* Koos come for provisions. I know one should not show disrespect, but we could arrange an intimate wedding-ceremony as soon as the commando visits for provisions. Who can tell; yours and mine might only differ by a year or so. They'll be good friends. The way we are. You must be patient. There will be an end to this war."

"What do you think: is it a boy or a girl?"

"I haven't put my heart on one or on the other. I pray for the baby's health. God disposes. Ma Mysie reckons it's a girl."

Selina smiles and removes the tray: "It is a girl. My little Selien will play with her. She is good with girls."

Everyone is knitting in white or cream, in case the predictions are not accurate. Essie has also started sewing a baby's frock. She takes pains, sewing by hand; creamy muslin. The bodice is high and the skirt flares out. The back piece can be adjusted by gathering the pleats on a draw-string.

"Netta, you must take good care of the clothes. These are hard times and one does not wish to be wasteful. Soon you'll hand them over to Lucas and me. I plan to crochet the next one. A person can use it for the baptism. I'm allowing for a bit of give at the hems. Some babies grow faster than others do. What length should the skirts be?"

Kleinpetrus drapes himself over his mother's knee .He is listless and bored and does not wish to play with his oxen. *Tant* Hannie must fetch some cold ginger beer. He is running a fever. All this talk of unborn babies does not agree with his health.

Netta's unborn baby is getting so much attention. It's pleasant here on the veranda, as fears are not addressed in front of young children or pregnant mothers. Little pitchers have long ears and Kleinpetrus has already reverted to bedwetting. Netta should also be restful. One does not wish to harm an unborn child. Malie's mother is convinced that their neighbour's tame baboon is to be blamed for her younger son's squint. Malie's mother claims that the baboon gave her a fright at the time she was four months pregnant. Tant Hannie rubs Kleinpetrus's back. She winks at Essie: "Kleinpetrus was a beautiful baby. Still is. Has never been a nuisance."

Explosives

It's December 1900. Heidelberg has suffered some defeat. Dr O'Reilly has been arrested, his wife Cassie deported and the hospital, where Essie has spent so many hours, has been closed. Siemen has participated in recent fights at Kliprivier and at Grootvlei. Lucas has returned to the commando.

Both Republics are occupied by the British. Some areas in the Northern Transvaal still escape occupation. It is a strange manner of occupation, as the British colons only occupy the area on which they are stationed. The British lose jurisdiction the instant they move on. The good earth is like sand seeping through the fingers of the British. The British authority is unable clench its fist timeously in order to prevent these repossessions.

Botha is active to the north of the Delagoa Bay railway line. To the south of the line, the commandos employ hit and run tactics. The British forces are simply too strong to be confronted directly. The commandos share a vital, inextinguishable life force. They will not surrender. Come late December, supplies in Commandant Buys's commando run very low. The Boers have to ambush a train carrying supplies to the British front. The explosive charges are set close to a railway station, between Standerton and Greylingstad. Lucas and Siemen are commandeered, as Siemen has knowledge of the intricacies of explosives. Timing a fuse in the tall grass is time consuming. The two van den Heever brothers are left behind in the *buffelsgras,* while the rest of the Boers retreat to observe matters from a safe distance.

Come dawn, the shift-boss and a number of soldiers shuttle along the line on a trolley. Then something quite unpredictable happens: the shift-boss jumps from the inspection carriage and walks between the rails as if to inspect the area properly. Do the British suspect?

Mounted British troops move along the rail. It's very hot. The British government has issued a proclamation: train plunderers are to be shot on sight. Lucas and Siemen lie behind the closest hillock. The British force splits into two.

Lucas dares not touch the gun barrel. He watches as beads of perspiration run down the bridge of Siemen's nose and sizzle on the barrel of his rifle.

The soldier rides towards Lucas and Siemen. Lucas is petrified as the soldier's gaze seems to be resting on him. Lucas remembers times that he, Maans, Hoender, and the Kalbasventertjies have played war games among the reeds after school. This much he has learnt: you take shelter as best you can. You take great pains, as the attacker is armed with a catapult and being wounded is painful. He remembers what Hoender has taught him: "You mustn't look at me when I get close, Lucas. Sometimes I approach you almost directly, but I don't notice you. When you stare at me, I can sense that you are watching me. Rather close your eyes and hope for the best."

Lucas shuts his eyes tightly. The rider remains blissfully unaware of his presence. Lucas inhales. Siemen has turned to stone.

Three trucks are derailed in the explosion. Gravel rains down on Lucas and Siemen. The *Boer* commando come galloping along: one hundred and fifty riders under the command of Buys and his field cornets.

Back in the laager, the looters hand out the spoils: jam preserve, condensed milk, pudding, fish, vegetables and meat, all tinned. They sit around the fire: landowner, share cropper and back velder equally bedraggled. Siemen has adopted their way of life. Lucas and the rest of the commando sometimes tease him mercilessly.

Siemen enjoys the banter, even though he does not admit to doing so. His fair skin is blistered. It as though *Meester* Geertsema insists on being all *Boer*. He has sacrificed all his refined ways and wears a leather jacket that appears to have been made from the hide of a scabby ox. A *Vierkleur* rosette is pinned to his hat and his beard curls and grows in every which direction. He's married to a Boer girl and one of these days he will be a father!

Lucas provides the entertainment, standing at the fire gesticulating with a stick: “Pupils, what have I taught you today? That the earth is round? No, no, listen well to what *Meester* says, it is: our stomachs are full tonight!”

Grootvlei plundered

The homestead at Grootvlei is impressive, much larger that the school caretaker's house where Essie has grown up. Essie enjoys the luxury of the garden and the spacious rooms. At night she saunters through the rose garden. The night smells of jasmine. *Oupa* Petrus has laid out a rose garden fashioned after a waggon wheel. The nave is a fish pond with a bird bath at its centre. The spokes are lanes of damask-, moss- and tea-roses. Noisette roses trail the garden walk and the arched entrance is framed by climbing roses. *Tant* Hannie has pampered, pruned and tended the roses to their former glory. These are the last roses of summer.

This morning, Essie lies staring at the pressed steel ceiling with its rose shaped imprints. Dawn breaks, seeps through a slit between the drawn curtains. It's quiet in the house. Obviously Seliena has also overslept. Essie decides to lie in a while longer. First thing, she'll fetch Netta a glass of milk. These days, Netta feels peckish most of the time. She has these cravings and Ma Mysie believes that the baby knows what is required for sound development. One cannot allow a young mother carrying a child to be malnourished. Netta is delicate. Essie wonders: if she so overwhelmingly loves Netta's unborn child, will she then one day be overprotective of her own?

Essie and Seliena have decided that Netta is carrying a girl-child, Geertrui. When on their own, they discuss the baby, calling her by this name. Only last night, Essie and Selina have sauntered to the kraal: "Selina, if you had to take a guess, how long before Geertrui arrives?

"It won't be long now, but it's difficult to be sure. Your friend Netta is still young. She's not quite sure when Geertrui was started."

"True, Selina, I felt Geertrui kicking a few days ago. Have you felt that yet?"

"I did feel. With my sons and whiIe I was carrying Selien. With Selien I could tell that she was a girl."

Essie now becomes aware of a distant sound, like that of riders advancing. It is still very early. She is concerned that it might be the Boer commando. She fears for

their safety, as she knows that the house is being watched. She quickly puts on a pinafore and rushes to the front room.

The door is slammed wide the moment she enters the parlour. Such is the force of the entry that the cast-iron pedestal and potted palm clatters to the floor. This is judgment day.

"Pack, I'll give you ten minutes."

He positions himself in the front door, issuing commands. The British officer tramples the loamy soil scattered over the floor. The British take possession. Essie, who is standing there with widespread arms as though to stem the flow, might as well not have existed. The British have come to brutally plunder.

There is no controlling this mob. They resemble a herd of swine possessed by devils. This demented herd doesn't plunge down the cliff, they plunder the homestead.

Essie's first concern is: "Geertrui!"

Anger consumes her. She is determined to survive and to protect the women. Essie starts bundling up goods. She spreads the beggars quilt, piles the bedding on top, grabs the bags of dried goods from the pantry and straddles the bundle. She knots the corners of the sheets and shoves the bundle into the arms of the bewildered *tant* Mysie. She opens the cupboard and starts to dress: striped, gingham, plaid, linen, muslin, wool, soon resembling a well- stuffed rag doll. *Tant* Mysie follows her lead. She does so with difficulty, as her body is heavy. Essie and *tant* Mysie ignore the humiliation. They have experienced hardship.

Essie then moves to Netta and Geertrui. She dresses Netta, all the while addressing Geertrui. "Mummy has to pull on more dress, Geertrui, the British daren't undress us. Drink this milk, Netta, so that our baby will grow." Netta looks abandoned, hanging onto a long-lost purpose.

Only *tant* Hannie hasn't given up arguing with the officer. This upsets Essie, as the British are clearly happy to be amused. She does not restrain *tant* Hannie, because the torrents of abuse and pleas give the rest of them time to pack. Some of the British stand at ease, watching.

"We're taking you to the railway station. Your husbands aren't there to look after you. The British government will look after you. Women need to be looked after."

When *tant* Hannie points at the bag of dried beans, asking the officer to help her load it: "Where's your husband? He should help you."

Oom Koot steers Kleinpetrus out the back door. The child seems to be suffering from shock, as he hasn't uttered a word all morning. His eyes take in the devastation of the yard. He sees Boesman and Weeskind circling the Khakis, barking and yelping intermittently. They are too old to offer much protection. They crawl closer, then retreat, howling. Animals can sense evil. The British soldier who has looted *oupa* Petrus's watch chain, shoots at the dogs. Kleinpetrus wants to go and comfort them, but *oom* Koot has him by the hand, restraining him.

Four soldiers clamber onto the kraal wall and take aim. Smelling blood, the cattle stampede, trampling dust in the furthest corner. The previously well-tended herd is milling around in a state of confusion, spilling their bowels on the manure. They bellow to high heaven. Kwartel is standing against the kraal wall. She stretches her neck and bellows, her eyes rolling.

The wool sheep mill, glassy eyed. The pampered flock is not used to this mindless cruelty. A few British press the flock against the corner post and stab wildly with their bayonets. Entrails trail in the dust. Sheep bleat. Skeins of wool that should be on the sorting table, come shearing season, are soaked in blood. A whirlwind like so many that has corkscrewed on this farmyard, moves past the waggon house and scoops up fowl feathers in an indifferent manner. Chickens that have been scurrying around the yard, raising alarm only minutes ago, are sheaved up, the legs tied with steel fencing, bouncing against saddlebags. They dangle upside down. Only some

have been beheaded. The chicken roosts are empty and white with fowl-droppings. At the pigsty pigs are squealing. We won't visit the sty this morning.

The British are still mocking *tant* Hannie. She is at the hub of amusement. She must pack her precious belongings, the officer tells her, as they are going to torch the house. They stand with folded arms while the poor *Tante* lugs the bag of dried beans, the skinny arms, the sore back, the stringy neck, straining. They then step forwards and carry it all the way back into the house. *Tant* Hannie's face is red with the effort and wisps of hair cover her face and eyes. Essie puts her arm round *tant* Hannie's shoulders: "Come have a drink of water, *Tante*; what you are doing is simply grist to their mill. Don't tire yourself so, *Tante,* preserve your energy."

Tant Hannie meekly allows Essie to lead her to the kitchen. She drinks gratefully from the mug that Essie holds out to her. She looks Essie straight in the eye and asks earnestly: "Do you believe the Good Lord sees this?"

"The Lord certainly witnesses."

They have hardly left the house, when the homestead goes up in flames.

Tant Mysie hugs *tant* Hannie: "All earthly goods, *Suster,* nothing but earthly possessions." It is the very first time that she addresses *tant* Hannie as "*Suster*."

Tant Hannie rambles on as if waiting for the angels to take notes: "It's Monday morning, I forget the hour. Could it be ten in the morning? It is time to collect the eggs, air the bedding and do the washing. The whites are to be soaked first. It won't be necessary to do all these chores. The labour of a lifetime ... For a while we had the privilege of enjoying the sunsets while visiting together behind the trellis-work of the porch at Grootvlei. No one can deprive us of that."

On the buck waggon, Netta sags against *tant* Mysie. She is spent. *Tant* Mysie smells of soot and sweat, but this does not bother anybody. Essie must walk. Neighbours, women and children have to get on still. "One never thought that one

would have to trudge uphill like this," Essie says, quite simply in order to remain sane.

At Grootvlei a British soldier stands, hands-on-hips, stirring with his boot the pile of belongings and treasures that *tant* Hannie has stacked at the back door. It has never been loaded. He sits on his haunches and uses his whip to search the ashes for earthenware mugs, small ornaments and trifles. He considers: "Not much to take home. What a backward nation. The morning has not been completely wasted though; the old girl has been entertaining."

Journey by Train

Essie is greatly surprised to find *tant* Malie on the cart. Tant Malie's shoulders are hunched and it's difficult to read her face, as she is wearing a poke-bonnet. The news, that Gert is a turncoat, has spread throughout the community.

The Heidelberg Station is a hive of activity, mostly British bustling about. It's blazingly hot, but they parade around in shiny boots and uniforms. "Trying to impress one another or in order to terrify the bedraggled Boer women? These women are past caring," Essie wonders out loud.

A locomotive is shunting coal and cattle trucks. Essie immediately identifies Gert stomping about, trying to curry favour with the officers. He is laughing in an awkward manner, addressing first this, then that little cluster of British. He notices *tant* Malie's arrival from beneath his lowered lids, then approaches the waggon: "Mother, there's no need for you to leave with these women. I've arranged for a home in Heidelberg for you."

Tant Malie straightens up, lifts her head and faces her son. Bystanders cannot see the face concealed by the brim of her bonnet: "My husband and only son are on commando."

She takes Essie by the arm. Together they help Netta and *tant* Mysie down from the waggon. Essie sees *tant* Malie shaking with embarrassment and anger. She does not know how to comfort her. One would expect one of the hundreds of women to offer resistance and scramble off, making their way to glimpses of open veld between the rails or to turn and plead for mercy, but they do not care for further humiliation. The loading door of the cattle truck is lowered and the inside smells of dirt. The musty smell is suffocating. Clearly the floor has clearly not been swept or hosed down. Heat waves rise from the sizzling metal and scorch the women's faces. When she tries to pull herself up into the truck, Essie involuntarily cries out, pulling her hand back. Her hand is blistered. She denies herself comfort, thinking only of Netta and Geertrui. She has not expected the pregnant Netta to be treated with mercy, as

three of the young women in the open coal truck linked to this one, are heavy with child.

Two red buckets filled with sand and a trough of water have been placed next to the entrance to the Railway Offices. Essie drags herself down the truck and turns her back on the officer yelling at her. She soaks her apron and the hem of her dress in the trough, then returns to wipe Netta's face with the lukewarm cloth. She bends to scoop water with her cupped hand and reaches Netta before she and Greet are swallowed by the dim interior of the truck. Netta drinks gratefully. None of the women have much to say.

They are herded in tightly, so that there is no room for lying down or moving about. A third at most is left with enough space to sit with their knees pulled up. *Tant* Malie positions herself in the farthest corner and doubles up so as not to inconvenience anyone. It is as though she feels responsible for everyone's discomfort.

For the very last time, Essie takes a hungry look at everything framed by the open door: the station platform, parading British, shiny boots, a bright red geranium in the container at the station master's door. Today the sky is the colour of gunmetal. One of the British nibbles at a sandwich. A sparrow fearlessly swoops down to peck at the crumbs at his feet.

Then the British slam the doors shut. The black heat is a monster that pushes against the sides and roof. Essie worms up to Netta. She gathers her dress. As she sits flat on the dirt floor, she pulls Netta down into her lap. This way Geertrui is cushioned from the worst shocks. Netta is too tired to argue and leans back against Essie's shoulder. Once the train has jerked into motion, there is no sense in trying to communicate.

The air vents are shut. It's suffocatingly hot and claustrophobia hits Essie. The heat rises from the rails. If only she were like the sparrow at the station, she would be able to visit Lucas on commando. Essie closes her eyes and imagines herself taking off, swooping upwards, into the blue sky. She allows the currents to carry her along. This level of discomfort does not allow for daydreams. Pinpricks of pain run up and

down her limbs. Soon her feet are numb. Netta has fallen asleep against her breast and is sleeping the dark, heavy, molten sleep of lead. Geertrui needs to rest.

Somewhere towards the front a child gnashes tearfully: “Ma, I can’t keep it back any longer. I must pee now!” The adults shove him to a gap in the floor. There is a join in the metal slabs where light filters through. The child suffers great humiliation, as it is a sturdy boy of about eight. Other children have clearly given in, as a sharp sweet smell fills the air. Hatred is metallic and unwavering.

The brakes are applied often, the sound piercing to the very marrow. The steel door is padlocked from the outside and there is nothing that they can do but singe. It is terrible to realise that you are at the mercy of tyrants.

When the troops eventually let down the sides of the truck, Netta’s eyes refuse to adjust to the brightness of the day. From the guards’ amusement, it is clear that they are bedraggled. Essie notices the cause for the delay: at each junction, the women are forced from the trucks to walk alongside the train, which then moves at walking pace. The prisoners have not yet had anything to eat or drink. They have to remove their bonnets and wave them high. This is a successful tactic as the Boer commandos now daren’t attack the train. A supply train has recently been derailed and looted not far from here and the British fear for a repetition of this incident.

Essie is happy to be let out. She and Netta squat next to the rail. An officer walks past; a magistrate from hell sentencing them to heaven. It’s a relief to be forced to exchange places with women on the nearest open coal-truck. Essie embraces Netta in order for her body to cushion Geertrui’s. A pitch black layer of soot coats their faces.

Late at night the trucks are shunted into Standerton Station. No provision has been made for shelter or food and drink. Someone starts humming a Hymn, but their throats are too dry to sing. Netta is running a fever. For some this is a childbearing night.

In the Concentration Camp

At Standerton Station, the truckloads of women are abandoned. They shelter under the trucks at the station for an entire week. A few tattered buck sails cover two of the trucks. Thrice during the course of this week, the women and children get to share a few tins of bully beef and a bucket of water. Some survive.

Essie refuses to give up on Netta and Geertrui. Ballast fills the spaces between the rails and the crossties and covers the embankment next to the rails. Lower down the veld is stripped, barren and charred. Patches of green regrowth show up sporadically. Essie slips away to harvest. Grass can be harvested the way wheat and maize are harvested.

Essie is tired this afternoon. Her thoughts come in small, sooty pockets. She sits in a patch of *soetgras*. Pulling gently at the plume, she strips the seeds from the sheaf. The soft green stems are juicy. She identifies the various species of grass: buffalo-grass, finger-grass and *knietjiesgras* grow a little further down the embankment. She strips the ears from the *knietjiesgras* with her fingers and fills the pocket of her pinafore. *Knietjiesgras* is a tuft with an ear resembling that of wheat. She wanders over to Netta and feeds her.

Essie harvests the leaves from a solitary eucalyptus. Most of the trees in the area have been chopped down. Houses have been destroyed. She comes across a *wag-'n-bietjie* and strips off a handful of leaves. Using a sharp stone, she rips off strips of bark. This she will boil at a later time as a cure for chest ailments. Netta's breath has the sound of gravel rattling in a tin.

Essie longs deeply for Lucas, but needs to focus on survival only. She feels inconsequential, giddy, thistle on the wind and longs for a bowl of *Ma* Mysie's milk-food: flour dumplings boiled in milk and the sauce thickened with maize. The milk should be simmering when the dough drops from the ladle. Sweet dumplings are made from buck wheat and sprinkled with brown cinnamon sugar. Essie ignores her own pangs of hunger and returns to Netta.

During the first week of January 1901, the women are dumped at the Standerton Camp. When the mind dies, goes, belly-up, one mercifully ceases to hurt. *Tant* Mysie has this closed down look. *Tant* Hannie is exhausted, but tries hard to elicit some response: "Come with me *Suster*, we have been carted here only to be treated like children. We have to queue up in front of the tent of some camp supervisor to give up our names. If we do not hurry to do so, we'll not receive rations this week."

The camp is swept and tents are pitched. Sandy pathways lie between. News is that tents are not available. *Oom* Koot goes searching: "Evening, *Broer*, *Susters,* the *Tantes* and I have just been brought here. My daughter here, is with child and we have nowhere to shelter." Some family might just take pity and share their already overcrowded tent with Essie and them, especially as Netta is not well. *Tant* Mysie also seems to have abandoned all hope. The camp has such an inhospitable, sandy layout.

They simply have to beg for a place to shelter in the first available tent. Newcomers are a threat and are not welcomed with open arms, as survival of those one holds nearest and dearest is important and one cannot simply hand out food or dole out Christian charity. This tent already houses thirty people.

Netta finishes her scanty ration. There is a glimmer of hope for Geertrui. Tonight they all occupy a tent. Most of the inhabitants sleep on loose mattresses or on quilts. They lay these on the sand as there is no alternative. Their few chairs and the trestle table are pressed against the canvas. The canvas bulges and gives with the night wind's smothered complaint. One has to get accustomed to this.

It's like *tant* Mysie says; "A large number of tame cattle can be herded into a small kraal. And thank heavens that there are no joiners and turncoats in this tent; one would not like to listen to them breathing at night. That could cause terrible resentment and demand endless self-control. How would we be able have prayer meetings?"



Grootvlei at night

Rumours of the women's abduction the camp reach the commando that very day. The Boers watch the camp train steaming out. They observe the taunts and provocation exercised by the British at a distance. Lucas holds his breath each time that the bonnets are waved next to the railway line. Using his binoculars, he searches for Essie's dark hair. Siemen grabs the binoculars from Lucas almost violently in order to inspect the women. It is impossible to discern much at this distance. Derailing the train now is not an option.

Siemen curses loudly and distinctly in Dutch. He curses and cries in such a way that Afrikaans curses simply would not be able to compete. By comparison Boer curses sound like love songs. Siemen does not blaspheme. He simply shouts out crude opinions of the British, their ancestors and as yet unborn descendants. Lucas is too amazed to comment. Allow Siemen to get this out of his system. The man standing next to Lucas is not the restrained Siemen that Lucas has grown to respect.

It is the first time that Lucas witnesses *oom* Koos like this: that vulnerable that he seeks to be consoled by Siemen and himself. *Oom* Koos is shadowed by fear and feels helpless. Lucas experiences great concern. It could drive him to distraction. He could run up to the train and fling himself across the rails. This would not benefit Essie. He has no consolation to offer. He wonders what *oupa* Petrus would say. At a guess: "Lucas, before a man takes action, he should always determine the real state of affairs. If you wish to act on behalf of your loved ones, you should allow the Good Lord to guide you."

Lucas, once he is able to control his voice, suggests that they investigate the situation at Grootvlei this very night. No one would in any case be able to restrain him from doing so, as he needs to see for himself what can be salvaged. It might be that Essie has received prior warning and is hiding in the ravine. He pins his hopes on Josef. Josef is resourceful and would go to great lengths to protect the women.

A plan of action is discussed with the commandant and it is decided that Lucas, Siemen and *oom* Koos may investigate the situation at Grootvlei tonight. Three men

move faster and are less likely to be observed than a large force would be. *Oom* Koos grumbles: “We won’t go to *oom* Skaamsarel’s place. That’s turncoat territory. Who can tell whether Gert and his gang are responsible for this disaster?”

Oom Skaamsarel stands with his head bowed, submissive, the way someone would who deserves these blows. Louis walks off into the veld. There isn’t much that one can do for a traitor’s people. Guilt is bound to tremble in their chests.

The day wears on. A lot of planning is still required if the visit to Grootvlei this night is to be successful. These preparations might prevent them from going crazy.

Come late evening, the trio make their way to Grootvlei. Stealth is essential for secrecy. Each rides taunted by his own fears and thoughts of revenge. Lucas prays.

He knows the road ahead, every inch of it, but this landscape is foreign to him! A full moon with an escort of stars rides the sky. The smell of soot and smouldering ruins reaches them before they breast the rise. Gloom settles like grit between his teeth.

Lucas has to dismount, as his grief is so great, that it is scraping at the lining of his stomach. It is difficult for a man to encounter this, but you must keep faith, overlook all the destruction and first search the cliffs; everywhere in the *vlei* among the reeds, in the corner field behind the prickly pear bush, behind the chicken coops and in the orchard. For hours on end they circle the yard.

A few wounded cattle still bellow in the kraal. The yard is destroyed beyond recognition. The homestead resembles a ruin. Dead sheep have been dragged into the rooms. The beams have collapsed. The house has been ransacked and torched. Some of the keys of the house organ have been hacked out with a bayonet. Lucas stumbles over *Weeskind*.

Even the farmworkers’ houses behind the gum plantation have been detroyed. All the voices have been silenced.

Kleinpetrus and Lien

Essie, who used to have such a healthy appetite, learns to survive on even less than the reduced rations handed out to the least submissive. She scrimps and saves leftovers in order to care for Netta and Geertrui. There is no fresh milk or vegetables. Rations at the Standerton Camp, the Murder Camp, are issued weekly:

1 lb of flour

1 sugar, coffee and

1 teaspoon salt.

Putrid meat, thrice weekly.

The ration is insufficient to ensure survival, but sufficient to result in slow starvation!

Netta does not manage to lie comfortably at night. Essie senses her rolling about. By the second night, Netta's eyes have sunk deep into their sockets. On the third morning she has withdrawn completely. Netta simply does not care about her own condition anymore. By the fourth morning Essie finds Netta sitting in front of the tent, staring vacantly. On the fifth morning she complains to Essie that everyone in the tent resents her. At night she hears voices and calls on Essie to attend to the demands of the disembodied strangers. Mornings she is impossible, a red-eyed insomniac, and Essie fears for Geertrui.

The other occupants of the tent offer little understanding. Netta's behaviour is unsettling. Most flee from the tent early each morning. Two old people, Liebenbergs, sit motionless on folding chairs in front of the tent flaps, morning till night. These are simple folk that accept fate without fighting the Lord's will.

Essie relives the same dream every night. She is sitting on the front veranda of Grootvlei with *ma* Mysie's pot plants all around her. A laughing-dove coos in the cypress. It calls clearly and repeatedly: "coo-coo-coo-coo-coo". Lucas comes walking

up the steps and holds his hat out to her. The bowl of the hat is filled with cling peaches and sour plum. The figs are so sweet and ripe that the juice drips onto the porch. Essie awakes with a start when he puts the hat in her lap.

Kleinpetrus has a new friend. She is a quiet child with large, reproving eyes. Lien is very young, five at a guess, maybe younger still? Essie has never heard the child talking. Lien has started following Kleinpetrus around slavishly since the second morning of his arrival at the camp. Every morning she stands waiting, taking no notice of the other children. She always has an empty condensed-milk tin in her hands. It's licked clean, but she keeps pushing her forefinger into it. The finger then moves from tin to mouth. It may be that her mother lovingly pours sugary water or a salty infusion into it every morning. Essie beckons the girl closer as she wishes to gain her confidence. She wishes to pour some black coffee into the tin, but when she tries to take the tin, the girl jerks it back aggressively. The child's face is worryingly expressionless, her movements guarded.

Lien is following Kleinpetrus again this morning. He talks continuously and holds a stick with which he makes drawings in the dust next to the tent. Essie takes a look soon as the children have moved on. The layout of Grootvlei is set out in the dust. The name is scratched into the sand at the entrance of the scribbled road to the homestead. Everything is there: the berry lane, the prickly pear bush, the kraal, a flock of sheep, the waggon shed and the homestead. Kleinpetrus has drawn six stick figures in front of the homestead. Essie bends low to see more clearly. Two of the stick people are wearing dresses.

PA, MA, LOEKAS, ESI, ME, YOU.

Two dogs are guarding the entrance to the lane.

Essie moves away quietly.

The children have returned. Kleinpetrus has collected gravel for laying out the homestead properly. Essie, holding her ear against the threadbare canvas of the tent, listens to him fighting pangs of hunger: "See, Lien, *ma* Hannie has cooked us food.

I'll draw us two large soup plates Look, here's meat, potato, pumpkin and rice. For pudding we have dumplings and prickly pear syrup. Let's eat: nyam, nyam, nyam."

Essie now spies on them. Lien and Kleinpetrus are sitting down at the outlines of the plates with much ceremony. Kleinpetrus eats tiny pinches of saliva and dust. Lien retains her hold on the tin. She gravely watches his every move, opening her tiny mouth in order to have him feed her. Lien wipes off the sand with her forearm, smiling in self- conscious conspiracy.

Essie cries unrestrainedly. The tears flow freely, accompanied by a sense of defeat. For the very first time since the torching of Grootvlei, she feels cleansed. She sighs like her heart has just been aired, then goes off in search of pen and paper. She wishes to write Lucas: she will survive, God willing.

Rooie

There are people who have difficulty minding their own business. Like jealous children, they simply have to tattle to the authorities and cause others distress. They desire the power to ensure that petty punishments are meted out. Such an objectionable person is the refugee/favoured/turn coat/hands upper; always trying to curry favour with the camp authorities at the expense of others.

This is the way ma Mysie has grown to know Rooie: “I’ve come across the likes of him; rotten to the core. Even the Good Lord would not wish to be held responsible for his existence.”

This morning Tant Mysie is spying on Rooie. He marches up to tent 20. She pretends not to notice him. Ignoring his existence is for the best. Rooies is fully aware that she is not keen on his company. For this very reason he will not leave them be. He is armed with a grass broom.

“Morning *Antie*. I see the children mess up the sand streets. The camp government wishes the streets to be swept clean. We’re soon having a camp inspection. I’ve brought the broom with so that the young ones can sweep smooth their scribbles.”

“You turncoats would pull the soil from under our feet if it so pleases the government. Have you no shame? The likes of you would have had to knock at the back door at my home. This sandy layout has been created by the Good Lord and you wish to rob the children of the only way that they have of keeping busy and fending off pangs of hunger? Just you dare touch their pictures!”

It seems as if Rooie reconsiders. He then gains courage. Other occupants have come to their tent flaps to see what the commotion is about. Unless he wants his control as camp caretaker to be undermined, he will have to follow through. Rooie grabs Kleinpetrus by the collar. He shoves him to the children’s drawing in the sand by the tent.

“Orders!”

Essie then flies at him as if she were a tigress. The festering ball of anger in her skull splits open, and she is all bitter juice, her eyes spitting. She stops short and reconsiders. Essie has not considered the consequences of her actions. She simply feels so angry and frustrated.

The previous week, women in the camp have followed *tant* Mysie's advice and have declared the meat of a slaughtered animal distributed in the camp to be rancid. The ewe has died after having given birth. The commandant has later discovered the carcass in the kraal. The insubordination of the women is grist to the mill of the camp caretaker. *Tant* Mysie and her people are professed to be loud and rebellious. This week the occupants of *tant* Mysie's tent will not receive any meat.

Essie has to spend time in complete isolation. Punitive measures are taken as there is no excuse for her outburst. She has raged at a representative of the government. She will be taught self-control. Receiving reduced rations and in solitary confinement, Essie has ample time to repent.

Silence is breath held at the ribs. The government representative, accompanied by camp guards, march off. The dust has settled. All the sandy pathways have been swept.

Inner Peace

Peace of mind is akin to the quiet of shady clouds passing overhead, a state of mind resembling the cool retreat in which the prophet Elijah could sense the presence of the Lord, when he sheltered in the cave on Mount Sinai. One can be robbed of this tranquillity. It is difficult to retain this quiet in the face of injustice.

Tant Mysie wards off demons of her own; she sees some of her treasures here in the camp in the tent of a joiner. These possessions have been precious to her. Here she doesn't even have a chair to call her own. She identifies:

1. A dainty rosewood communion chair. She has taken pains picking the velvet for the seat of the folding chair from the dealer. The velvet is of a deep blue that smudges when touched.
2. Her pink pitcher and washbasin. She knows for a fact that it is her pitcher, as there is a chip in the enamel of the handle. Kleinjaap has, while still at Grootvlei, used a piece of gravel to carve out three crosses in the rim. The set might as well call out her name.
3. *Tant* Hannie's walnut wall cabinet. This has always been suspended from a hook in the entrance hall (alongside a likeness of *tant* Hannie's deceased brother). It's a small drawer-cabinet with mirrors, about two hands wide. *Tant* Hannie is convinced that should she be allowed to open the drawer, she will find some of her crocheted doilies or possibly a doily bead. *Tant* Hannie has always used these doilies to cover the jug containing buttermilk in the cooler.

Tant Mysie and *tant* Hannie have no proof of ownership. The camp government insists on proof of ownership.

Tant Mysie is very worried about Essie's well-being. Essie has not recovered from the hardships of solitary confinement. If an outbreak of fever were to hit the camp...

Geertrui is lying on the stained quilt. Netta has given birth to Geertrui. Geertrui has simply slipped out. Both Netta and Geertrui are undernourished. When Geertrui holds out her tiny hands to the sun, palms down, the red of the rays show through. When she sleeps, her eyelids resemble the leaves of the moss rose in the rose garden at Grootvlei. Every so often Geertrui clenches her fists and frowns, as though suffering from cramps. Geertrui is obviously suffering pangs of hunger. There is nothing that the women can do to relieve these, as Netta's milk has dried up soon after Geertrui's birth and the medicine chest does not contain medication to ward off hunger. A month old child is not supposed to flourish on a few drops of condensed milk dissolved in boiled water.

Lien has a sore on her mouth. Essie wants to take a closer look, but the child jerks free. Lien's mother has apparently passed on from the measles. Neighbours are taking care of Lien, but the child keeps on wandering around aimlessly. Heavens knows what would have happened to Lien if it hasn't been for Kleinpetrus. Kleinpetrus bears a strong resemblance to Lucas and he is kind to the young ones.

Today our people have found a two foot long log for cooking. This should last our people seven days. Some of the women have left camp without a ticket of leave. They have done so to collect cow pats. Their food rations are therefore reduced. The young ones are collecting crusts from the rubbish dumps. Three more people have starved today. The authorities are putting up a barbed wire fence. The horizon now is a length of taut barbed wire, the sturdy fence posts resembling punched-in facts.



Walnut wall cabinet

The Peach

At first Essie cannot determine what the children are up to. They saunter along, following the British camp authority. Kleinpetrus is not a child that imitates adults or mocks them. You need to take leave of your senses to dare show disrespect while imprisoned in this camp!

Then Essie sees that the man walking down the dusty street, overseeing, is peeling a peach with his jack knife. Lien and Kleinpetrus are quick to pick up twirls of peach skin. From the dust, the skin finds its way to Lien's mouth. She is completely preoccupied; inspecting each twirl of peach-peel closely and in wiping some of the sand off on her apron.

Essie finds it hard to watch Kleinpetrus, who has had ample opportunity to eat his fill in Grootvlei's orchards, acting like a beggar, picking up peels. It is as though Essie is reliving life at Grootvlei, the way it used to be. She reminisces:

First comes the picking. All of the farm population move off into the recently cultivated orchard. The orchard is large, so that one can easily feel isolated from the rest of the farm. Essie and Lucas are barefoot. They step around overripe fruit and those pecked at by the birds, that dot the ground. The pulp squishes between the toes and attracts bees. Their voices are light and happy, as talking is not prohibited. Work is started from one end and the containers, mostly zinc tubs, are placed among the trees. These are too heavy to drag along. The women pick apronsful and bend low over the tubs to drop the fruit gently into the tubs. This prevents bruising. It's harder for the men, as they have to carry tubs. Lucas prefers to fill Essie's apron with fruit. The two of them often slip away to spend time together.

On days set aside for peeling, the women sit in the shade of the tree by the back door. They cover the peach tubs with cloth. They sit cross legged on Selina's blanket and small Selien is dozing in the abba-blanket on her mother's back. When she keens, Selina rocks and pats at the small bottom in the blanket on her back until Selien's eyes fall shut. The rich brown air presses down on them and a cloud of gnats hovers above the sticky covering cloths.

The women remove the stones of the peaches and spread the peeled and stoned peaches on the drying racks behind the screen doors of the fruit cabinet. The dried fruit is stored in the attic and pantry while dry but slightly sticky, giving off a sickly sweet smell.

And pomegranates! Essie recalls her and Lucas slipping off to the pomegranate hedge where it is shady and quiet. Lucas makes a shallow groove in the leathery skin and cracks open the fruit. He rolls the red pips into her palm and promises: "One day I'll buy you jewellery set with red stones the likes of these; stones the colour of your lips: rings, bracelets and lockets."

Lucas watches her without batting an eye. Essie laughs. "Why do you laugh, Es? One day I'll build us a house. Here, or at Nooitgedacht. There's so much that I would do for you sometime soon. God disposes."

They kiss; a long, probing kiss that causes the Essie's knees to turn to jelly. Lucas looks at her as though judging for himself just how long he'll have to pursue this conversation before taking another small liberty: "Guess what you remind me of, Essie? You make me think of the flint-glass figurine resembling *Lady Godiva* in *oupa* Petrus's study. But you are even more beautiful than she is. I would also have peeped."

Essie panics. She skips off. "I think I hear Kleinjaap crying."

"Your hearing is pretty sharp when it suits you. Even if *tant* Mysie were to shout at us from the veranda of the school house, you would not be able to overhear."

Tant Hannie allows the lace curtain of the kitchen window to swing back. She puts four koeksisters on a cake plate and calls over the half-door: "Essie, Luca-a-a-s! Coffee!"

Essie runs all the way to the back door, taunting him: "chancer!"

All this took place at Grootvlei. Memories stir like our dead ones turning.

Essie turns around to lie down next to Geertrui on the mattress in the tent. She is feverish and her body aches. *Tant* Hannie has left to fetch the rations. For the very first time at the camp, rations will include rice.

This has to last five people eight days:

3½ lb rice

and

5½ lb meat.



Grootvlei's prize peaches

The Scorched Earth

In 1901 the guerrilla warfare is conducted full scale. Roberts believes that the British will soon gain victory over the Boers. Kitchener now has supreme command of the British forces. The British realise that they have not taken into consideration Boer bloody mindedness. The two republics are determined to resist. The British reconsider and decide on these stratagems:

1. Enforcing the scorched earth policy with vigour.
2. Perseverance of the concentration camp policy.
3. Launching sweeping drives in order to corner the commandos (Block houses are linked up and barbed wire fencing is erected to subdivide the veld).

The veld is at the heart of the Boer's existence. Fires have spread to the slopes of Grootvlei, where Lucas and *Oupa* have spent so much time. From the ravines of the Suikerbosrand smoke funnels. Parts of the sanctuary on the hill have been rendered inaccessible. The rock itself may be fire resistant, but the heat generated by veld fires, create fire storms. There is confusion among the tribes of baboons on the cliffs as they flee in panic, barking continuously.

Some herds of antelope survive. The black backed jackal slinks low. She has sheltered, but the litter that she has abandoned in the burrow of the warthog, will not survive. Small game like hedgehog and leveret are most vulnerable.

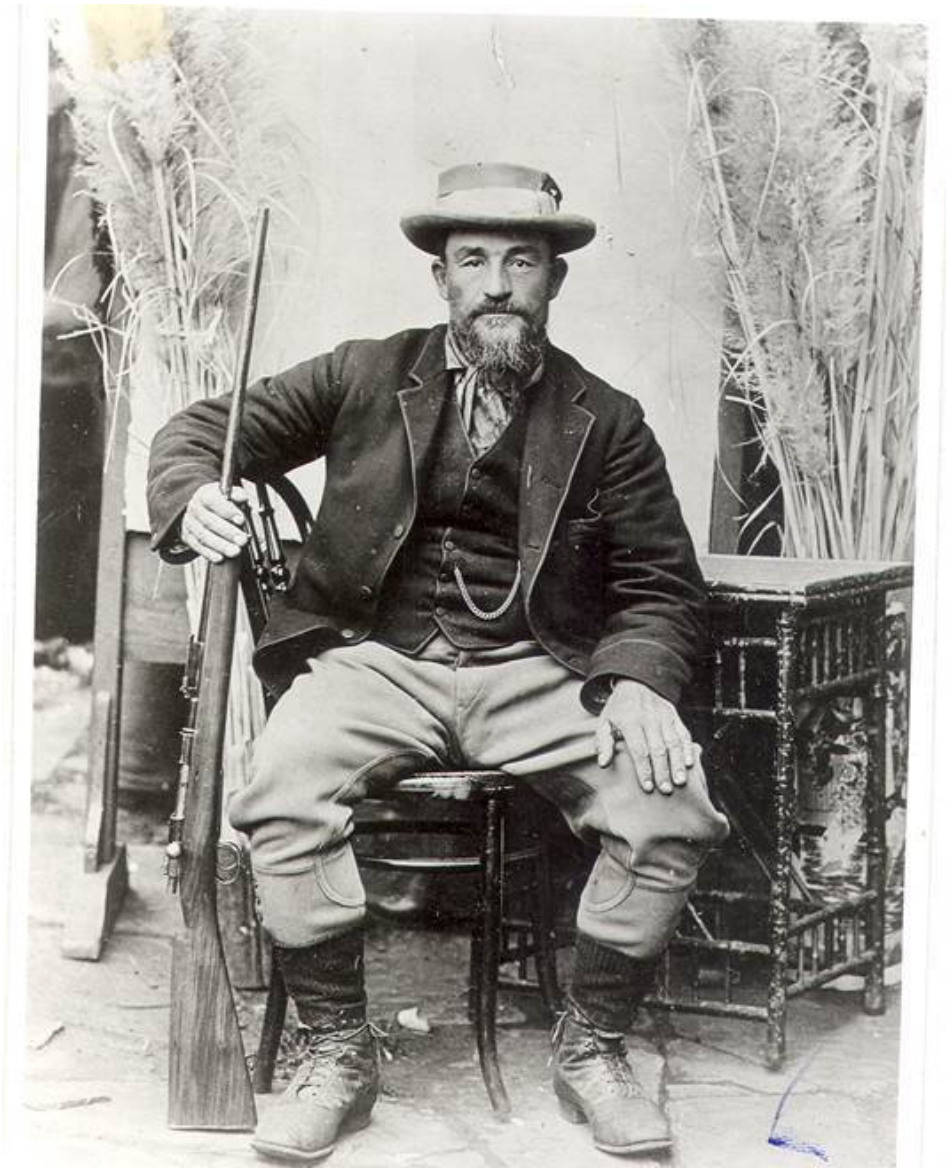
Even plant growth is stunted. Varieties of grass, with delicate root systems anchored in the shallow soil on the slopes, are scorched. This season the *rooigras* will not germinate. The baboon's-tail that Seliena and Josef have harvested to serve as yard *besom* burns like tinder. The *blousaadgras, vlei grass, douvatgras, knietjiesgras* and bent-grass singe. The veld deteriorates until only the hardy weeds remain. The thorn of the jointed cactus, the flat, leathery devil's thorn, the *knapsak-kêrel*, the blue thistle, the milk thistle and khaki bush will choke grazing and render the veld unfit for agriculture.

The vlei camp will become eroded. The summer rains will wash away layers of fertile top soil and hollow out deep dongas in the slopes. It will be many years before the veld will recover completely.

The nesting place of the waterfowl and the retreat of the *wildegans* are destroyed. The husky *Kol-ga*ns will not sound its *hur-hur-hur.* Flocks of plover call from the burnt veld: *kiewie-e-e-t*.

Lucas will lose his mind if he has to witness this day in and day out, aware that Essie no longer lives on Grootvlei. For this very reason, Siemen and Lucas request to join the commando of General de Wet. The request is granted.

Christiaan de Wet



Christiaan de Wet is the most prominent commander in the Free State of 1901. His scouts are resourceful, his strategy unequalled and his discipline relentless.

De Wet exercises a simple technique:

1. He eliminates unreliable or unwilling members of the commando.

2. He refuses to be slowed down by the worry of slow moving waggons that have previously accompanied his commandos. Mobility and speed are of the essence.
3. His forces target the superior forces of the British from behind and cause much damage.

The British forces in Pretoria depend on the war supplies brought in from the Cape harbours via Bloemfontein and Kroonstad. The Boer commandos apply themselves to blowing up bridges.

The blockhouses erected by the British don't seem to detain de Wet. De Wet and Steyn have gathered a force of between two thousand and two thousand five hundred men. Kitchener would like to corner these Boers. Tonight Lucas and Siemen are posted as sentinels near *Roodewal*. The scouts have branched out along the Kroonstad blockhouse line to the south.

All appears to be at peace in the laager tonight, but de Wet remains vigilant. For this reason no British column can corner his commando. De Wet's young scouts are indefatigable. They recuperate by taking short naps in the saddle. These young men have no war experience worth mentioning, but are far superior to the British scouts. De Wet knows this country well. He is familiar with every rock. The devastation of this country calls for revenge.

Lucas and Siemen are on the alert behind the rocky outcrop. Lucas's eyes sting from the strain of observing the area. Siemen's eyes are scratchy and his head is heavy with fatigue. There is little discussion and Siemen does not even consider lighting his pipe. Time crawls past on leaden hands and knees.

Tonight the two of them experience Free State cold. Winter runs at them like a bayonet. Their hands are numb but ache when rubbed together. Their feet go numb from sitting still for long. The rock, on which Lucas sits, seems to have absorbed the chill from the surrounding veld.

The stars remain familiar. Tonight they are the colour of water. The heavenly river, the Milky Way originates from the Southern Cross, courses between the two

dogs of Orion, then sinks towards the northern horizon. Lucas adjusts Siemen's binoculars: the milky river becomes a collection of individual pinpricks. Lucas wonders if Essie is gazing on the same stars tonight. *Oupa* Petrus has taught him to read this map. When he puts down the binoculars, the brightness becomes white-of-egg froth. A Boer navigates by the stars.

Lucas only has indistinct memories of the Free State. He has just been turning six, when promised to *oupa* Petrus. At that age a child's frame of reference is limited. Some memories are sharp, but he is on the palest brink of most. Tonight, Lucas's mind is a grey hush, listening. It recalls:

The colour of his mother's eyes.

The texture of her Sunday dress between his fingers.

His father's wire-clipping voice.

A parent's laughter, thick as Sunday gravy.

The smell of the duck pond.

The poplars at the duck pond in new leaf.

The spot next to his bed at Nooitgedacht,

where thin strips of wallpaper could be prised free.

The illustration of *The Broad Way and Narrow Way*.

Greet.

He recalls Greet:

- The arch of her eyebrows.
- The smell of her breath.
- The curiously fixed intensity of her eyes.

Soon Siemen will be standing sentry. Lucas doesn't head for shelter in order to rest. He sits tightly against Siemen with his head pulled into the collar of his coat. This way one can share some warmth.

At first light back at the lager, Lucas and Siemen are sending word to their loved ones. These letters might reach the camp at Standerton. The letters must be written now, then scrutinised by the commandant to prevent information of their whereabouts falling into enemy hands. Siemen always has stationery at hand. Lucas is bone tired and every now and again his head droops onto the paper. He jerks upright when his nose touches the paper, each time drawing a line on the note-paper. The sheet is crossed with stripes and if the letter were to be intercepted, it would be interpreted as a baffling plan of attack.

Siemen possesses a flair for writing. Siemen writes to Netta and Geertrui till the first birds give a few experimental chirps. Someday Netta will put this letter in her trousseau kist. She would read this letter from Siemen repeatedly to Geertrui. It's good that Siemen takes so much trouble over the wording.



Siemen & Lucas

Aspaai

Children should have the security of a home. Even when on a visit to *tant* Lalie in Heidelberg, Kleinpetrus had the habit of tugging at his mother's sleeve: "When are we returning home, *Mama*?"

Before the outbreak of war, Kleinpetrus has had a favourite playing area: the corner on the veranda, against the trellis work, where the sun filters through the climber. Kleinpetrus used to loop the reigns of his clay horse through the railings.

There is a shallow indentation on the stoep. Someone has stepped in the cement when it was still wet. Kleinpetrus has always scooped water from the washbasin to fill the hollow. This has been the watering hole for his knuckle-bones and clay oxen. They have nibbled at the fern on the veranda. There have been other delightful areas on Grootvlei, but this has been the spot where *tant* Hannie and Seliena always looked for him first.

Essie has always been there for Kleinpetrus and Lien. Essie has also left. They have carried her off in a khaki blanket and covered her with sods. Adults don't discuss these happenings in front of the children. They simply claim that the angels have carried Essie off and that these are first going to take her to Lucas on commando as he misses her so, before swooping her off to heaven. Kleinpetrus is very worried about Lucas; "What will Lucas say when he comes looking for Essie and she is gone?" *Tant* Hannie and *tant* Mysie do not restrict themselves when it comes to softening the blows of harsh reality. They tell the ever present Lien that her mother and Essie are enjoying tea on the veranda in heaven. Lien seldom responds.

The two children have a new playmate. He is the child of the black washerwoman who launders for one of the camp officers. Kleinpetrus calls him Aspaai, after Selina's youngest. The friendship carries *tant* Hannie's blessings, as there has always been mutual respect between farm labourers and owners on Grootvlei and evenings they all attended the scripture reading and prayers. When Selina brought visitors with, the farm workers spilled over onto the back steps by the

kitchen door. It used to be a sanctified occasion, as *oupa* Petrus did not tolerate rowdiness.

On this grey, mirthless day in camp, Kleinpetrus and Lien rush up to *tant* Mysie where she is doing laundry in a bucket of cold water. Lien is on the verge of talking, she is that distraught. Kleinpetrus tells: one of the camp officers has discovered Aspaai shitting in the wrong sewage ditch. The officer is going to bury Aspaai. He's nailing him into a coffin. Ma Hannie and *tant* Mysie must please come and save him.

There is a separate ditch for use by the men in the camp when they have bowel movements. For purposes of privacy, the ditch is shielded from the camp with a canvas screen. All males, over the age of five, have to make use of this ditch. Aspaai has taken a shortcut to the sand behind the women's corrugated iron privvies. This cannot be of great consequence, because Lord knows there is not much in the young ones' guts. The British camp officer has caught Aspaai in the act. Aspaai has to take his pick; being thrown into the slimy depths of the ditch or being nailed shut in a coffin. Aspaai is terrified of the ditch. This is not just an empty threat, as a boy from tent fourteen has been thrown into the ditch for a similar transgression only last week.

Aspaai does not relish the ditch. A turncoat has been sent to catch him and he is now busy nailing Aspaai inside the coffin. This is done to terrify Aspaai and the other small ones. At the age of one hundred and more, when the three will scarcely be able to recall their names, they will be able to recall this incident quite vividly.

It is exactly so, just as Kleinpetrus has explained. The turncoat has Aspaai in a soap box. Aspaai is spent and his voice is weak and ragged; the sound made by the dry turning of the home made wire and screen flour sifter on the farm. When the man looks up, all the people of the camp are facing him. Perhaps he realises that he has gone too far, because he rarely leaves his tent these days.

The children have often been bullied. Many an evening when a mother is tending to the sick or dying, the camp commandant slaps the sides of the tent: "Lights out!"

It is to be expected that Kleinpetrus would whine: “but when are we going home, Mamma?”

Tant Hannie quietly reassures: “Kleinpetrussie, we are going home when we leave Standerton camp. We will be free when that happens. That’s a shortcut out of these rows and rows of tents. In the meanwhile we pray and make do. The Lord sees.”

That evening *oom* Koot reads from 2 Corinthians 5:4: “For we that are in this tabernacle (home of tents) do groan, being burdened.”

The Camp Hospital

The ill are seldom reunited with their loved ones, once they have been admitted to the camp hospital. Visitors are seldom permitted, since a crowd would inconvenience the staff. Every day our people, covered in blankets or even squeezed into soap boxes, are transported to the cemetery on the supply cart. Often loved ones do not have the opportunity to grieve.

The British camp management is strongly opposed to the use of herbs and home remedies. The use of Dutch remedies is discouraged. The ill are torn away from their tents, to be exposed to the mercy of the staff at the camp hospital. For fear of this hospital, *tant* Mysie hides Lien beneath a pile of blankets when the British officer does camp inspection. This must be planned carefully, as the tent flaps must be rolled up, even on windy days when the dust whirls through the tent.

When Lien and Kleinpetrus arrives at the tent this morning, It is obvious that something is amiss. Lien's cheek is badly swollen. *Tant* Mysie is dismayed. She and *tant* Hannie have grown to love Lien. The child has no one to turn to, since all her people are dead. Lien seldom talks. One doesn't know what her fears are. She is growing less unmanageable; nowadays we see her on *tant* Mysie's lap more frequently. *Tant* Mysie is teaching her to crochet a chain of flowers. Lien is quick to learn. This way she relaxes and often falls asleep on *tant* Mysies's breast.

Tant Mysie must also have fallen asleep, because she wakes up to find the man from the camp authority bending over her and Lien. He is accompanied by a British nursing sister. It is of no use arguing with them. The child needs to be admitted to hospital. Immediately!

Lien screams like a stuck pig. She makes amends for all the months of silence. Kleinpetrus shrieks in harmony. A major upheaval is caused by what is probably a tooth abscess or a boil (probably as a result of her continuously having her finger in her mouth).

Tant Mysie explains to the camp authority: One waits until the sore is ripe, it's then easily cleaned. Essie's sore lips were easily healed this way with Buchu ointment. *Tant* Mysie's pleas fall on deaf ears. She listens to Lien's wailing all the way to the camp hospital. The officer carries her with his hands in her arm pits. He holds her out in front of him as if she were something contagious that he does not wish to touch.

Now Netta and theTantes sit in expectation of news of Lien. Geertrui also seems worried where she sits propped with cushions the way one would prop up a doll. She doesn't cry much and has already learnt that crying does result in being fed milk or maize porridge. There is only so much that *ma* Netta can provide. When the food is used up, it's used up. The little one is as tough as a tick with a will to survive. She has learnt to reach out and grab and sometimes ends up with a fistful of *ma* Netta's hair.

Lien is brought back on the third day. The commandant provides them with a tin of carbolic powder that, he insists, must be sprinkled about in the tent. He believes that it is a highly infectious sore. The doctor has operated.

Lien is hardly recognisable. The doctor has made a deep incision in her cheek and has plugged this with cotton of sorts. Lien does not talk or cry. Her face quivers with misery enough for a thousand lifetimes. Her eyes are large like the eyes of someone who has survived unmentionable misery, grey like bullets and fixed on emptiness and disillusionment. She grabs *tant* Mysie by the collar and does not release her grip. Eventually *tant* Mysie uses a strip of blanket to tie the child to her the way one would an abba-blanket. She carries her on her hip all day. Lien is light as a feather. *Tant* Mysie does not have the courage to put the child down. She walks, eats and sleeps with Lien tied to her. Lien does not eat. She turns her face away when they try to feed her.

It's a long week after. Lien is gone. They have laid her out in one of Geertrui's dresses, not fastening the buttons on the back. Lien has shrunk away so much. Her hair has fallen out in handfuls this last while. The *Tantes* have tied one of Geertrui's

bonnets round her chin. *Tant* Mysie has ironed the ribbon of the drawstring to cover the wound in her cheek.

The Letter

Under de Wet's command, Lucas grows accustomed to constantly being on the move. Lucas and Siemen have not received word from the women. They cannot allow this to prey on their minds, though. De Wet is suspicious that joiners, who know the countryside well, may betray where the troops are posted or where they are heading. For this reason, after-riders keep surpluses of ten horses rested. There is no time to settle down and pitch camp properly. The Boers tie chunks of raw meat to the necks of the horses. This ensures that wind-dried *biltong* is always available. There is little time to prepare food. At intervals the troops dismount in order to rest the horses, periods not exceeding one hour. Horses and mules are undernourished due to the scorched earth policy.

Lucas has learnt to sleep in the saddle. In time you learn to nod off while on the go without sacrificing too much vigilance. The young commando members are sent off, scouting in all directions. De Wet plans according to the reports of his scouts. Quiet as a Sphinx, De Wet delays issuing commands to the very last moment, so that traitors are thwarted when trying to communicate the commando's whereabouts. The commando saddles up at the most unexpected times. The British are not confronted head-on. Instead their rear is harassed with skirmishes, the way a dog would constantly nip at the heels. The British suffer setbacks and de Wet and his men earn themselves the reputation of being fearless fighters.

Siemen is still considered to be a citizen of the Cape colony. His letter to Netta and Geertrui has reached the Standerton concentration camp safely. Netta reads it to Geertrui every day, as if it were a bedtime story.

Tant Mysie receives the letter that Lucas has written Essie that night on the plains near Roodewal station. For a while she carries the sealed letter in the pocket of her apron. She respects others' privacy. She doesn't read letters addressed to others. She notices, however, that the camp authorities have intercepted the letter. In the end she reasons that, if the turncoats and British have read it, she has every right to do so herself. It is not as though she is not personally involved.

Today *tant* Mysie sits in the shade at the back of the tent on the wall that *oom* Koot has built to support the broiler and the cooking utensils. From here she can also watch for Kleinpetrus and Aspaai. The two of them have left early to collect kindling. She trusts that they keep their hats on; one does not wish for the added misery of sunstroke. She would be able to hear when Geertrui wakes up. Netta has left to get the rations, and that would take up a whole day of queuing. One learns not to impose and to wait one's turn. The women get on well. They are all of the opinion that the Boers must continue the struggle. After having sacrificed this much, they cannot accept the British yoke.

Juice from the meat must have dripped off the cooking pot, as a thin line of ants are being marshalled up the wall. They will be disappointed, since every shred of meat has been devoured. Two beetles have ended up on their shuttered backs and are now droning brainlessly. Tant Mysie whisks them up and watches them flying off. The sky is high and grey and cannot be less concerned. She must guard against ants attacking the peach stone that she has planted. *Tant* Mysie has planted it in a clean boiled condensed milk tin. This is what they resort to nowadays; simply throw the empty tins into the water to boil off the stickiness. This way one can extract a little more cloudy water for Geertrui. *Tant* Mysie has scooped a little sand into this tin to plant the peach-stone. She can't survive without plants. This afternoon she notices a green stem probing the sand. She senses the faintest of pulses, something resembling a distant memory.

These days there are two things that excite *tant* Mysie: watching the seedling grow and rereading Lucas's letter. His love for Essie is gentle and discreet, light green and feathery like the seedling. Some days she quietly flicks the letters off her tongue. This has become a habit and gives her a sense of belonging.

Darling Essie

My darling, under these circumstances, life is bearable. I am not allowed to write more. Please don't be concerned for my safety. You are my entire world. As soon as I put pen to paper, I fall asleep.

Es, you are my everything. I knew that when first I saw you standing barefoot in the doorway at Grootvlei. You must recall; the day we helped Selina to make candles. Remember the injured goat bleating so pitifully? The Good Lord has brought two loves into my life: you and Greet. Greet is with Jesus. Only you have remained for me and I wish to spend the rest of my life caring for you. I could treasure you for a lifetime. God disposes. I feel as though I have already failed you. I believe that if only I had the reassurance that you were fine, I could endure all hardship.

Think on the Cypress twig. Remember its message: "I will love you till beyond the grave."

If I am to be on the alert tomorrow, I must sleep. Night after night I have the same dreams of you. Siemen has been writing all night.

Unconditionally,

Your Lucas,

XXX

Tant Mysie presses the letter to her heart. She feels the throbbing of veins that knot and branch under the skin of her legs. "This letter remains our secret, Es." All day long the sentences circle her; hang in the sultry air and ring in her head. She won't inform Lucas just yet. The child still has to conquer the enemy.

Albertha

"Enna, please hand me a cloth. We need to pack without clattering the dishes and I'm up to my elbows in tub water. This wasp won't leave me be. Has to be all this pollen on my skirt. I'm sick and tired of all these blackjacks in the washing." Albertha gives Enna a quick, sideways look.

The twelve year old Albertha is beautiful. She is easily spotted in the company of women hiding on the banks of the Renoster River. She is the girl with the honey coloured hair that she flicks over her shoulder while sitting on the washing stone. Her hair swoops down low to her hips. Her grey eyes look tired this morning. Her sister, Enna, is a brunette, but Albertha's fair complexion and delicate skin catches the eye. The fact, that her lips are slightly unyielding, is not immediately noticeable. The women cannot afford to lower their guard.

Albertha has been used to a sheltered life. Rooikop is a lovely farm. By ox waggon, the farm is about a day's travel from where the fleeing women are laagered today. Albertha, her mother and sister yoked the oxen when they first became aware of British forces in the hills at Rooikop. Tonight they will return to the homestead, exhausted. They can but pray that a British rear-guard won't waylay them. Everything at the homestead has been systematically plundered so that there is not much to return to. At intervals British troops shelter there. Eventually everything goes up in flames. The family's love of Rooikop keeps them in the area. The men are on commando.

At the outbreak of war, their neighbours have refused to abandon their farm. Everybody has been removed to a concentration camp. Children's voices do not resound on the neighbouring farm, even after the war. They do not return.

The Free State, the *Renoster* river ward and surrounds is plains country with the occasional hill. The rest is flatland or vleiland. Its isolation conquers the heart, the way anything unpretentious would. There are thorn bushes, eucalyptus and grass lands; few surprises and little shelter. The fleeing women watch for the dust kicked up under the hooves of approaching British; along the horizon, left to right, right to left, then again from the laager to the skyline.

Rains are early this year. It rains daily, mostly with passing thunderstorms. The banks of the *Renoster* River are spectacular with the willows sprouting green. Wheels and hooves cut trails into the soil. Tonight Albertha and her people are on their way back to Rooikop as waggons get stuck in the mud on the banks.

Their clothes are damp from the rain that is gusting in under the waggon hood. The team of oxen is obstinate, not happy about being driven, helter-skelter, under these conditions. A few of the tamer oxen have already collapsed from exhaustion and have been cut free from the yoke. There is no time for proper inspanning and some of the untrained oxen are uncooperative. Mercifully the women could employ a driver for the team, but the elderly man needs to rest at regular intervals.

Albertha assists him with the driving. It is from this walking alongside the waggon and driving the oxen, that she is sopping wet. Fortunately the ruins of the waggon shed at Rooikop are already lit up by intermittent flashes of lightning. Now the oxen sense the familiar home environment, the oxen cannot be stopped, even though there is no fodder in the troughs.

Albertha has to apply the brakes in order to prevent skidding. She is riding on the draft pole of the second waggon. The brake of the first waggon is within her reach. She listens to someone starting on a psalm. Then, above the rumbling of thunder, she hears someone calling on her to apply the brake. She is thrown off-balance. For a short while she remains upright. She remains calm and then shoots free so that for a moment she flies suspended in the rain that is now coming down heavily. It is an instinctive act of self-preservation. On impact, she rolls away from the waggon. Not completely out of danger, though, as the heavy waggon wheel crushes her right foot. Albertha drags herself to safety.

Lightning lashes out like a whip against the backdrop of the red hills. It strikes the rocks. This lights the area. Then, shortly after, the clap of thunder resounds close by. Suddenly, the play of lighting is over and rain punishes the earth. Albertha tries to determine the extent of the damage to her foot by the amount of pain she has to

endure. The occupants of the waggon are oblivious of the accident. The rain is God's mercy. The wheel has rolled over her foot, but the sodden ground has given way.

The leader of the team of oxen is first to notice the problem. He lifts her onto the waggon kist. She moves up until she sits flat on the waggon-bed. She clasps her ankle between her thumbs and forefingers. The waggon takes the last turn into the yard. She remains silent, because on this dark night, there is little that can be done for her. Part of the house has not collapsed altogether. What remains is the centre of the house with the built in oven and the chimney. Not a sturdy construction, but mercifully still standing. The roof beam still gives support. By exercising a little ingenuity, one can shelter here.

It is here that Albertha and her people unroll bedding. Some of the blankets are dry. The women are too exhausted to prepare food.

It is during this first night of their arrival at Rooikop, that Alberta has the dream.



Albertha

She lies with her right leg pulled up. She has grasped her shin, holding onto it between her arms, and lies with her back against Anna's breast. She has not removed her boot. It would be easier to examine the injury in broad daylight. Her foot is badly swollen. You could write lyrics to the throbbing beat of her pain. It would sound something akin to the children's counting-out rhyme "*O boom*" that they had sung during school break:

There's a branch in the tree,

There's a nest in the branch...

This is rehearsed till bored to tears. Albertha's rhyme goes something like:

Albertha, Albertha, how do you feel,

What was your foot doing under the waggon wheel?

Despite the pain, she must have fallen asleep. The dream is as clear as though real:

A young man on a white horse rides up to her. He is broad shouldered. There is no immediate greeting or look of recognition in his eyes. Still, he rides up to her, then pulls up. The rim of his hat shades his face. He wears a pitch black mourning band round the sleeve of his jacket and a shred of white cloth is pinned to his lapel. Alberta notices the mourning-band on his sleeve when he reaches out to greet her. The dream is interrupted when Enna rolls over onto her other side.

The Injury

The next morning they wake to find Albertha sitting on the trestle table.

“I’ve been waiting for you to help me remove my boot.”

Mother, Enna and *tant* Lottie throw up their hands in disbelief. Enna is the first to speak: “But, our Berthie, your foot looks terrible!”

Enna makes soothing noises, all the while picking at the wet laces, trying to loosen them: “We never thought we would witness Albertha sitting on the shelf, not so, Mother? The day that my pretty sister does not even care about never finding a suitable husband, there must be a big problem. Yet, here she is, sitting on the table!”

They kneel at Albertha’s foot. Albertha has been restraining her grief too long now. Tears run down her cheeks and she wails: “Now I have to face life limping.”

They work carefully. Enna cuts the threadbare laces with a knife. *Tant* Lettie comes to Albertha’s rescue. *Tant* Lettie knows all about various herbs and home remedies: “Oh dash it, we’ll simply apply the whole lot. Your *Tante* can name them till doomsday.”

While massaging the bare foot lightly with buck fat, *tant* Lettie rattles off the names of all the possible remedies in order to take Albertha’s mind off the pain:

“agt-dae-geneesbos,

douwurmbos,

geneesblaar,

jagsiekbossie,

koorsbossie,

sinkingsbossie,”

Tant Lettie takes Albertha’s foot in her lap and continues rubbing it, nodding towards the kettle:

“something- to-chew,

dry-my-throat.”

These last two are also home remedies and have little in common with biscuits and coffee, but they cause Enna to shake her head and move to make coffee. Last night the women have been resourceful and have put out all containers in order to collect fresh rainwater. This morning there is ample washing and drinking water. The birds nesting in the yard have heard the voices and from behind the prickly pear bush a bustard calls “Sovereignty, sovereignty, Sovereignty!”

Everybody feels desperately sorry for Albertha and this beautiful girl now provides escape from the tragedies of war. It also so happens that during this time of Albertha’s recovery, there isn’t a single intrusion by any British force. Just when bad luck clings like black jack, God is merciful.

Albertha enjoys the attention. At the start of their flight into the veld, she has been the one on whom the women could rely. Albertha could do the work of a man. Now it is her turn to be waited on. *Moeder* helps her to wash her hair and she basks in the sun on a patchwork quilt. She tells of her dream. She does so above a whisper so that everyone has to move close in order to listen. She exaggerates a little: about the dream rider’s muscles, his strong jaw and the kiss that he gave her. Albertha can see that her audience enjoys the story as they sit around her, forming a circle, craning their necks.

But, Albertha, in so doing, has to bear the brunt of witticisms. Enna, when passing by, starts singing the folk song “*Liefste Leenie*.” Only, she replaces the name Leenie with Albertha and makes use of playful rhyme:

“*Trust me Albertha, I’ll never,*

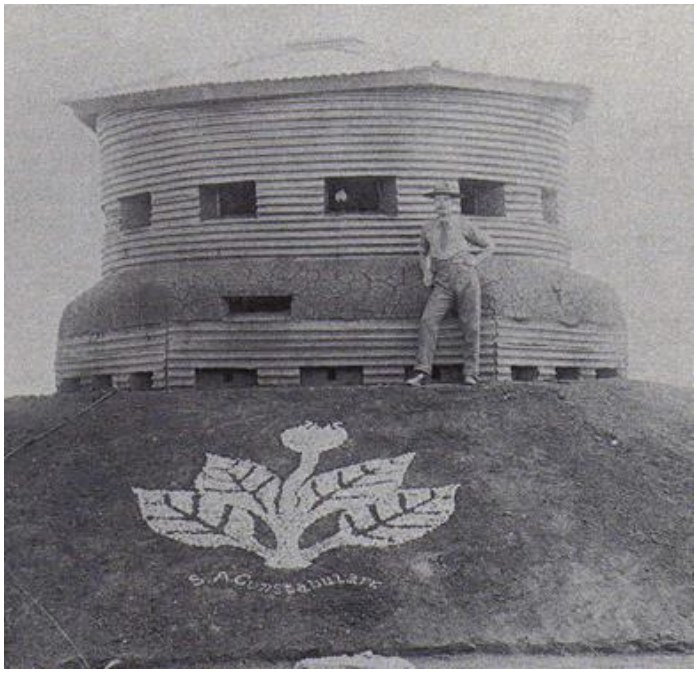
Never court another,

Pa and Ma gave their consent,

Tomorrow to you I ride.”

Life is short. One should create snatches of joy for oneself, even if those stem from wishful thinking.

Block houses



During this period, Lucas and Siemen receive no news whatsoever from the women.

The British, often defeated by the Boers' guerrilla warfare and the fact that the Boer commandos are familiar with the open veld, have erected a near impenetrable block house system, from Kroonstad to Wolwehoek in the north, east from Kroonstad past Lindley to Bethlehem, linking the plains from Wolwehoek to Frankfort and Heilbron. These also serve to protect trains and secure British telegraph communications.

With mounting interest, Lucas and Siemen spy on the English erecting these buildings. In de Wet's laager, the men talk with contempt of this British ploy to corner them. Still, this system gives cause for concern.

Scouts watch as sheets of corrugated iron, wooden planks and, as a last resort, water tanks are delivered to selected lookout points. Mule teams transport the

building materials. The British employ black labourers. The soldiers merely supervise, posted like red faced storks, barking and domineering, hands on hips.

Constructions differ. Most of these consist of sheaths of corrugated iron bent into the shape of a circular wall and a similar inner wall, with the space in between filled up with stone or gravel. The British insert embrasures for firing. Lucas watches a group of black women cementing by hand; they have not been provided with trowels. The women keep time, swaying their bodies, stamping their feet:

"Rest well little baby,

now close your eyes,

back home the cattle are in the kraal.

If you refuse to sleep,

the big male baboon,

you've seen it on the hill,

the one chosen by the pack,

the one picked as sentinel,

is keeping watch over the pack,

watching out for Bhubesi the lion,

and if you refuse to sleep,

he'll bite off, bite off,

your nose and ears."

The British frown on this singing. They are not familiar with it and the soft, steady rhythm unsettles them. Sound travels. The African women persevere. This war

has turned their souls into hard-packed dung.

Several of these blockhouses have canvas roofs. Sandbags are dragged about and dropped around the buildings to provide the British with additional protection. Workers are also put to work digging long trenches. Barbed wire fencing links the blockhouses. The fences are mostly chest high with the two top strands of wire twisted together to hamper the movement of Boer forces and prevent cutting. The British set loaded guns and string together empty tin cans with barbed wire and these give them warning when Boers tamper with fences.

Lucas and Siemen watch a few soldiers assembling a scarecrow, outfitted with helmet, wooden rifle and uniform. Like the loopholed eyes of the small fort, the dummy stares out blindly over the plains. “Think he’ll spot us, Siemen?” Lucas nudges Siemen playfully: “Whatever you do, just don’t stare him in the eye. Back home at Grootvlei, after school, when he, Maans and I pelted one another with clay clods, hiding amongst the reeds, Hoender used to be the best shot. I once asked him what gave him the advantage. He claimed that he could sense where we were hiding, as we stared at him so fixedly that he sensed our closeness.”

“Used to discuss this kind of thing with classmates when studying. Had regular discussions about the way the mind operates, instincts and suchlike topics. Must be some truth to it. Wish I could take care of Netta. I’m tired of warfare. Should be with Netta. She shouldn’t be exposed to all of this. I doubt that these war games we are playing are worth the candle. I do remember the three of you attending school, sporting livid bruises. I used to be aware of the age difference, back then. I don’t notice the age difference any longer. Of the two of us, you are the better shot. We are on equal footing; we Boers are good marksmen.”

While the Boers are exposed to harsh conditions in the veld, the enemy forces rest protected, warm and dry. The rainy season is here and cloudbursts drench the Free State.

De Wet

Early November and wire looted from the blockhouse fencing is used to shod Boer horses. Lucas excels as farrier. Horse shoes and nails have become currency in the laager; four nails in exchange for lookout duty, eight in exchange for a threadbare shirt, and two in exchange for a few pipes of tobacco.

Today the Boers swim and do laundry in a farm dam. Dust mites and fleas tend to penetrate the seams and hems of clothing and make life difficult for the wearer. The clothing must be boiled. The Boers wash and strip, but remain vigilant. Trousers are washed last, as a man does not wish to be cornered while stark naked. The scouts cover the *cat's tail* shrubs with wet washing.

Most of the young men are reluctant to wade out of the dam. The water is soothing. Faces bob above the water surface; expressionless and relaxed. Lucas has a thorn in his heel. He has trodden on a thorny shrub this morning while saddling his horse. Everyone's boots are patched and these patched boots provide little protection. Siemen will be able to remove the thorn this evening.

There is very little opportunity for fun and relaxation during this guerrilla war phase, but Siemen has discovered a slightly scorched dress from a torched homestead. While his commando clothes are drying, he parades in front of the other men, wearing this tattered pink dress and winking seductively. He holds a sheep shears and hands out beauty tips. Despite his friends' protestations, he trims their beards and hair.

"Gentlemen, queue up for a shave. This *niggie* will cosset you. Let me spoil you with some gentle loving care; apply some of the beauty products available? A soothing application of horse dung might do the trick. Why, oh why do you not wear your hats or, better still, your poke bonnets, in order to prevent sunburn? Sorry to hurt your feelings, but most of you gents sport the complexion of an unwashed potato baked in the skin. Jeremiah, your hair resembles damp ripe hay. Let's trim those split ends."

Lucas listens to the sound of water sucking at splashing bodies. He looks up at a sky that is slowly starting to cloud over, growing softish and dun-coloured like a dove's breast. He watches as Jeremiah, shrieking in high, thin spirals of laughter, immediately enters into the spirit of the conversation: "Friends, do not be tricked by *Antjie Somers*. Nights when we refused to settle down and sleep back home on *Kleinplaas*, *Ma* used to warn *broer* Abel and myself of Antjie's cruelty."

De Wet is a strict disciplinarian. Scripture reading is early tonight, even before supper. Nobody passes comment. The men swallow a few mouthfuls of maize porridge. They are commanded to extinguish fires and mount their horses. De Wet's main force totals seven hundred. There are approximately 20 000 armed soldiers in the opposing British forces. De Wet moves towards the weakest part of the block house line; the last stages of the still to be completed line from Harrismith to Kroonstad, near Bethlehem.

The Departed

They come across the ruins of a farmhouse. The men are tired. The horses are curry-combed and shelter behind the crumbling stone.

Lucas still indulges in flights of imagination. Suffering cannot subdue escapism. Perhaps this is what keeps him sane: the child in him. When first he sees the damaged walls, he immediately starts fleshing out the skeleton of the ruins facing him; the way a modern forensic pathologist would reconstruct remains till the features of the deceased become identifiable. He can tell what the homestead originally looked like. Siemen can identify with this escapism and plays along.

There are no carcasses and one is left with the impression of the erf having been swept clean with a grass *besom*. The commando advances circumspectly. Any number of British hiding here could start shooting. One can clearly make out the remains of a kraal. The dilapidated cottage next door, is likely to have housed a share cropper's family, people same as Greet and her people at Nooitgedacht. The building is of stone, with a peach stone floor, but the thatched roof has been torched and is on the verge of collapsing. The circular foundation nearby once must have served as a cold storage chamber for butter and perishable foods.

The footpath leading up to the homestead has been cleared properly. Lucas walks along the path, pretending to be a visitor. He and Siemen are on their own, as the other commando members are looting the orchard. Lucas stands on the slate step. He knocks on the remains of a half door, then takes off his ragged hat and bows ceremoniously: "Good afternoon, *Tante*. My friend and I are here to pay you a quick visit. Are the *Niggies* at home? We would really appreciate them brewing us some coffee. May we sit here on the verandah? Please accept our humblest apologies for arriving out of the blue."

Lucas steps over what must once have been the entrance to the front room.

"Tante wishes us to accompany *Tante* to the kitchen for something to eat?"

Not much of the kitchen has remained intact. A section of the range can still be identified, with the outside oven now part of the open plan construction.

"*Tante* says that the *Niggies* have prepared a meal? Have you been expecting the visit? Oh, here you are, *Niggies*. May I kiss the little hands that have prepared this meal?" Lucas pretends to kiss a few proffered hands.

Siemen shakes his head while following Lucas. Lucas reaches down to open the oven door with a flourish. When he straightens, his face is ashen.

Siemen moves closer. He expects to see a decayed carcass of sorts. There's a leg of mutton in the oven, aromatically spiced and with the sauce just thickening.

Served with fruit from the orchard and with dumplings, this makes for a festive meal. Siemen has to repeat the story of Lucas and the invisible *Tante* and *Niggies*. The others will not leave Lucas be. They thank the *Tante* with great courtesy. Most of them have entered into the spirit of things and give her a hearty handshake. A few wish to know from Lucas whether the *Niggies* are attractive. Lucas has to fend off those who grow bold and wish to hand out kisses. Those kisses end up in mid-air. At evening prayers, Lucas and his friends dedicate the people of the farm to the Lord. These people are probably hiding or have been carted off to some camp and might have suffered great hardship.

Ever since, the commando does not pass a torched homestead without asking Lucas to call on the Tante. Perhaps the invisible Niggies can offer them a meal, as Lucas quite clearly is on good terms with the departed.

Jeremia, the Story teller

Evenings stories are exchanged around the fires in the laager. Jeremia, one of the more resourceful young story tellers, relates what would become a well-known folk story.

It's a story involving two women sheltering in a remote homestead.

The entrance to this farm is, and this Jeremia would vouch for, somewhere in these parts of the Free State. The name escapes Jeremia now; something akin to Verlore Siel or Eensaamheid. The name is of little consequence, as the name on the gatepost has been shot to smithereens by the British, probably while practising target shooting.

The white washed pillars still guard the entrance. Events have occurred recently, during the war; they should be on the lookout for a farm gate with white washed pillars. The pillars have attractive head-stones and ferns and cattails grow in these.

The drive way is eroded. It is a long drive with a variety of trees forming an arch over the road to the homestead. It is difficult to spot the house in broad daylight. Only at night, when candlelight flickers in the back rooms of the house, does one notice the house among the trees. The flame is a pinprick of light and flickers only occasionally; about every third or fourth night. As the house is not discernable to every eye, the British haven't destroyed it yet. For Lucas, Jeremia indicates with a roguish smile directed at Lucas, it would be child's play to find this place.

The house is impressive. Someone has taken a great deal of trouble to settle here, as it has a large verandah and the roof is decorated with weather vanes and gables. The house has ten or twelve rooms. It is very spacious. There are decorations on the veranda. The cypress in the front garden looms over the house and casts its gloom over the veranda. There are circular windows under the gables. There are three such windows, as the house has three gables. The curtains are not drawn. When peeping through the uneven pane, one only sees darkness. It is a moth-laden darkness

and even if you should press your nose to the windows, your eyes wouldn't be able to pierce it.

A grandchild lives here with her Ouma. It is a child of twelve or thirteen. The Ouma is very old; tough as leather and with wrinkles running through her forehead and cheeks. She walks bent over, using a walking stick.

No, Jeremia indicates impatiently to a young commando member, he doesn't know what the girl looks like, but she's probably pretty, as she is a Boer girl.

It's a house protected by angels. The father and sons are on commando. Nevertheless, the Khakis have not plundered the place yet. The two women have learnt to survive on their own.

What decides the fate of the two, is their evening routine. After scripture reading the old lady sits in front of the dressing table and then the girl combs her Ouma's hair. The hair trails almost to her knees. The young girl then combs her own fair hair. It's just as long.

Hermaans now wishes to know if the two plait their hair for the night; as his sisters always plait their hair after they have applied a little oil, otherwise the hair tangles with all the tossing about during the night.

No, indicates Jeremia, these two women do not plait their hair at night. Neither do they toss about at night. They each wear a long white flannel night dress and put on a frilly, white night cap. They wear it like this, perched on the long strands of hair. (Jeremia's hair has grown to shoulder length on commando. He perches a cloth hat on the crown of his head and continues telling his story). Every evening the Ouma and the girl carry a candle and look under every bed and in every cupboard to make sure that no Tommy is hiding there.

These two inspect the entire house. They take great pains to search the place. They then crawl into bed, pull the bedclothes up to their chins and lie dead still till who knows when. That part is not important.

As coincidence would have it, a turncoat and his Tommy friend stumble onto the house one night. The Tommy is ready to attack with a fixed bayonet. He wishes to scare the living daylights out of the occupants. The two of them wish to ransack the house. The turncoat hammers at the door. The girl lights the candle. She tiptoes down the long hallway to the front door. Ouma follows. Ouma walks softly, slowly, bent over, tip, tap, tip, tap.

The girl opens the door. The turncoat demands to know: "Where are the men of the house? We want food. Afterwards brew us coffee. Large mugs."

The girl looks at the Ouma. The Ouma looks at the girl. The girl then talks shrilly, the way she and her tone-deaf Ouma sing their evening hymns (the family has no musical talents worth mentioning): "Uncles, way back when Ouma and I were alive, there was always enough to eat and drink. However, now that we are no longer in the land of the living…"

She does not even need to complete her sentence. The two men flee. Word of this evening must have spread, because no thug has ever bothered the women since.

Siemen laughs till the tears roll down his cheeks. The Dutchman is starting to appreciate the Boer sense of humour. Humour sustains the Boer.

Lucas, Prisoner of War

Groenkop is a hill occupied by four hundred British soldiers. It is a fortress soaring two hundred feet. The rocky western slopes are inaccessible.

On 25 December 1901, De Wet approaches the camp along a gully.

The British have neglected setting up observation posts against the slopes. Lucas and Siemen are almost halfway up the slope. It is two o'clock in the morning on the birthday of our Lord. The guard's challenge rings out: "Who goes there?"

The challenge is answered by de Wet's command: "Attack, Burghers!"

A flurry of shots from the top follows. Lucas's cheek burns and when he wipes it with his hand, he senses a moist stickiness on the back of his hand. Siemen's voice is hoarse and rapid-fire: "Everything fine?"

Lucas nods and then realises that nothing can be distinguished against this slope: "Yes, Siemen. God be with us."

Drowsy British stumble from their tents as the Burghers reach the peak. The Boers must have presented a strange spectacle. Due to clothing shortages, some of the Burghers are wearing poke-bonnets and dresses. The bullets have a sobering effect, as the British are caught unawares. The destruction in the laager is extensive and the surviving British are disarmed and taken prisoner. A kind of reckless euphoria overtakes Lucas so that he takes possession of numerous bandoliers and loops these over his shoulders. Many rifles are seized, while de Wet, sjambok in hand, is in command.

Lucas and Siemen are approaching the final stages of their participation in the war effort. The recent defeat prompts Kitchener to greater endeavour to capture de Wet. On 5th February 1902, a reinforcement of 9 000 troops are sent to corner de Wet. The British flood the plains like a wide stream. De Wet and Steyn, side by side, have become legendary.

The commando is trapped against the Kroonstad-Lindley block house line on the night of the 7th February 1902. At one o'clock at night de Wet cuts the barbed wire and the main force escapes. Amongst a handful trapped by the British, are Lucas and Siemen.

Throughout the night, they are under British fire. They are tired beyond caring. These are cruel realities. There is no sign of mercy towards the prisoners of war.

On the second day of capture, they are herded by men on horseback. The Khakis set up camp when too many of the prisoners start collapsing. From amongst the others, from right next to Lucas, the officer summons Siemen with his eyes.

Siemen walks off as bolt upright as he has always taught his pupils to do. He does not resist, but walks ahead of the officer, seemingly unconcerned. Lucas stares at Siemen's back. Siemen looks straight ahead. One can imagine that Siemen does not wish to prolong all this by shaking hands with his friends. Quite possibly he does not wish Lucas to read the fear in his eyes. Perhaps he is scared that Lucas will stumble along, pursuing them.

It would have been more merciful for Lucas if he has been aware of Siemen's exact fate. He needs to know what is happening to Siemen. Lucas can let his imagination run riot and this situation evokes terrible images. The problem with uncertainty is that possible occurrences are relived over and over again.

From Siemen Lucas has learnt a lot: how to sing in tune so that the members of the congregation in front, do not turn around to discover the tone-deaf culprit.

When Siemen sees that Lucas has an ear for music, he teaches him the scales: do/re/mi/fa/so/la/ti/do.

How to do cursive writing with a steel point pen, without smudging: thin strokes sliding up, and bolder down strokes.

The basics of arithmetic so that he can select sheep and count the sheep in the flock on Grootvlei.

A love of reading.

Above all, Siemen has taught him the importance of love and loyalty; especially during the last few years.

Lucas's mind becomes an empty hush that recalls the prayer that Siemen has taught them on his first day at the farm school;

Psalm 27: 1-2

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the strength of my life;

Of whom shall I be afraid?

Only when Lucas feels Jeremia's hand on his shoulder, does he realise that he's praying out loud. Some of the others have removed their hats and bowed their heads.

They don't see Siemen again. He is registered as a citizen of the Colony. Siemen is prepared for the outcome. He is an educated man.

At Rooikop

Albertha has been raised strictly, but with love. Days of recovery on Rooikop are braided together, every day a lithograph of the one before.

The extensive farming has shrunk to a branch kraal for a few heads of cattle and a pied pig that churns up the soil. The Good Lord cups the women and their meagre possessions in his hand. Nothing on this farm escapes his protection.

The home on the *koppie* has been reduced to a beam, a crumbling wall and a few sheets of corrugated iron. The cool veranda used to be right here. If you look well, you can see where the pillars have been planted. See, this used to be the front room. Till eleven in the morning, the corrugated iron roof of the veranda has cast a shadow that has touched the skirting board. Most of the floors are made from stone from the hills. Here the men have been allowed to hang a few hunting trophies. Over there is where a few straight chairs have been lined up against the walls. Standing in the front door, one used to look down the hallway and see the opposite wall of the sitting room and the picture of the Herder with his sheep. Doors on either side to the pantry used to serve as entrance to the green kitchen and bedrooms. The boys have slept in the outbuildings.

It used to be a joy to polish the ornate furniture. This has been Albertha's favourite chore and she still loves the feel of the wood under her hand. She has treasured the elegant of the furniture from the Colony. Just recall; the dressing table with the side mirrors and tilting centre mirror should be right here. Alberta sees all this: the small drawers with carvings and fine handles under the mirrors. If you turn your head slightly, you can dress up or plait your hair. The ribbons are kept in the second drawer from the top.

See: the pantry contains a few cake plates of pressed glass and a dinner service for twelve people, embossed in gold.

"Not one chipped in all these years," her mother has often boasted.

On the opposite rack used to be row upon row of preserves.

Everything gone. When she opens her eyes after having closed them tightly, Albertha sees it all. This has been part of their everyday lives.

No one can tell why the porcelain doll alone has survived the ordeal of torching. Only the head and arms are of porcelain, the body and legs are of rag. Katriena has been waiting for Albertha. Katriena smiles with unsurprising hardness.

There are also other things that have remained unscathed. Things like the pink dawn seeping higher and higher over the hill and the abruptness of sunset. Enna and Albertha wish upon another shooting star. At night the stars are white and blue and yellow.

Our people are enterprising and make do with what is available. There are sisal plants on the distant hill. Their fibres are used for darning and repairs. A few doilies are unscathed and in the afternoons the ladies unravel these in order to have cotton or wool for sewing. One can run up dresses from blankets.

The dented syrup tin is a source of comfort to Mother. She has saved coins in the tin and flattened it by standing on it with the heel of her shoe. Albertha has buried it in the hen house. The coop is empty and Albertha has to resist the urge to make sure that the hidden treasure is safe. Mother has strictly forbidden her from entering the coop. One doesn't wish to arouse suspicion.

The women don't wish to slaughter the last cow or draught ox, but soap is a necessary commodity. The girls see hunting for *gifbol* as a challenge. This bulbous plant flourishes here. It is easy to identify the plant by its foliage, as its leaves fan out. It is poisonous and the bulbs are covered in paper thin layers of skin. Ma sometimes uses these skins as plasters on cracked heels. One spots the blooms before the leaves sprout, in early spring before the leaves appear: a flower with a capsular fruit carrying three pods. The stem lengthens and stiffens as it ceases blooming. It then becomes a round pin cushion. The stem then breaks loose from the plant. It is carried along by the winds and scatters its seeds. Our people call these *perdespoke*. Albertha and Enna use these bulbs to soap the washing.

From time to time the girls discover honey in the clefts in the koppie. At the first lick of a finger the sweetness courses through the body, boosting stamina. Sometimes one encounters a branch with dewberries. The shrub is a climber with purple or rose coloured flowers. Its berries cure the worst pangs of hunger.

The lack of salt makes food bland. Come late evening, Albertha scoops up a bucket of sand from the pan. The next day the women add water and cook the solution until the water evaporates and a cupful of black salt remains. The women move through the kraal searching, like chickens scrabbling in search of grains of wheat. Their soft voices travel the farm as they plead with Albertha to repeat her dream. At this stage the story, as is the case with every Boer narrative, has fleshed out and according to the last dream, the young man has dismounted in order to lift Albertha into the saddle. Albertha now believes that she can recall the colour of his eyes. Nights produce an ever growing sequence of beautiful, mysterious dreams. The young man has at last called her by her name. Albertha promises solemnly that, come the next dream, (because the dream is sure to repeat itself), she will pay closer attention to his features.

Tonight she and her people drink roasted wheat coffee and eat drop scones. One can't dream on an empty stomach. Mother reads from Proverbs 3:24: "*When* thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yes, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet."

Train Journey

At the train station Lucas receives the tidings of Essie's death. Jeremia watches him reaching out to receive a scrap of paper from a fellow prisoner. Lucas's face seems to crumple. He then does something that Jeremia finds hard to interpret from this far away.

Lucas kneels on the spot so that the prisoners behind him stumble over him. He kneels on the rough cement of the Free State train platform. He folds a minute bird from the scrap of paper. Paper folding is an art that *oupa* Petrus has taught him at the kitchen range on Grootvlei on stormy nights. A Khaki shouts at Lucas. Lucas ignores him. Finally Lucas comes upright. He tests the wind and sends the bird high into the sky to finally settle under marching feet.

Mercifully, Lucas realises that he has no option but to continue marching. Lucas has a vivid imagination. He experiences life to the full. He has learnt to withdraw completely. (He first observed this manner of withdrawal in *tant* Mysie after Kleinjaap's passing. For a while she her face has worn this expression of purposelessness and she has lived as though only present in the flesh. The spirit has left. She has completed her daily tasks, but as though nothing was of any consequence.) Now Lucas is standing upright in the steel truck, his bloodshot eyes full of stoically endured pain. The train will transport them to Durban Harbour. Lucas stands like an empty husk. They are packed tightly like Bully Beef in a Khaki's rations tin; you'd have to shake hard to slip the tightly packed rectangle of salted beef smothered in congealed fat, from the tin.

Jeremia is terrified. He has watched Lucas receiving word of Essie's death at the station. Lucas has not spoken since. Jeremia now clings to Lucas like a leech. He tries to elicit response from Lucas.

It's scorching on the open truck and Lucas's hat has been swept off by the wind. He sways as he stands, the sun scorching his face. Jeremia cannot imagine what it must be like to lose your beloved, but he is determined not to lose Lucas to sunstroke. Jeremia has brought with the ragged dress that he used to don when clowning about in

the laager. He tears it into strips and knots a strip to serve as a headscarf. He puts this on Lucas's head and ties the ends under his chin. Lucas allows him to do this, but makes no eye contact. To make matters seem even more desperate, everyone's face is black from coal soot. Jeremia needs to interact. He needs to read something in another's eyes: pain, caring or anxiety. Even Lucas's loathing or anger would have been more merciful that this loneliness.

The slopes on either side of the track are steep. If you tried to jump the train, you would end up ragged and naked as a new born rat. The British soldiers walk up and down the tracks at each stop and no prisoner is allowed to leave the trucks. The scenery flashes by. At Johannesburg Station, loaves of bread are tipped from containers into the open trucks. This happens without warning. Loaves that are not caught by the prisoners roll onto the filthy floor. This upsets Jeremia, who has been raised in the belief that wasting food is a mortal sin. A few tins of Bully beef graze his head. The prisoners eat in silence. It resembles like the Lord's Supper, this breaking of bread and passing crusts on in silence.

They pass Vereeniging and Howick. Each time the prisoners anticipate an opportunity to relieve themselves. Like the others, Lucas and Jeremia, past caring, urinate through small joints in the bottom of the truck.

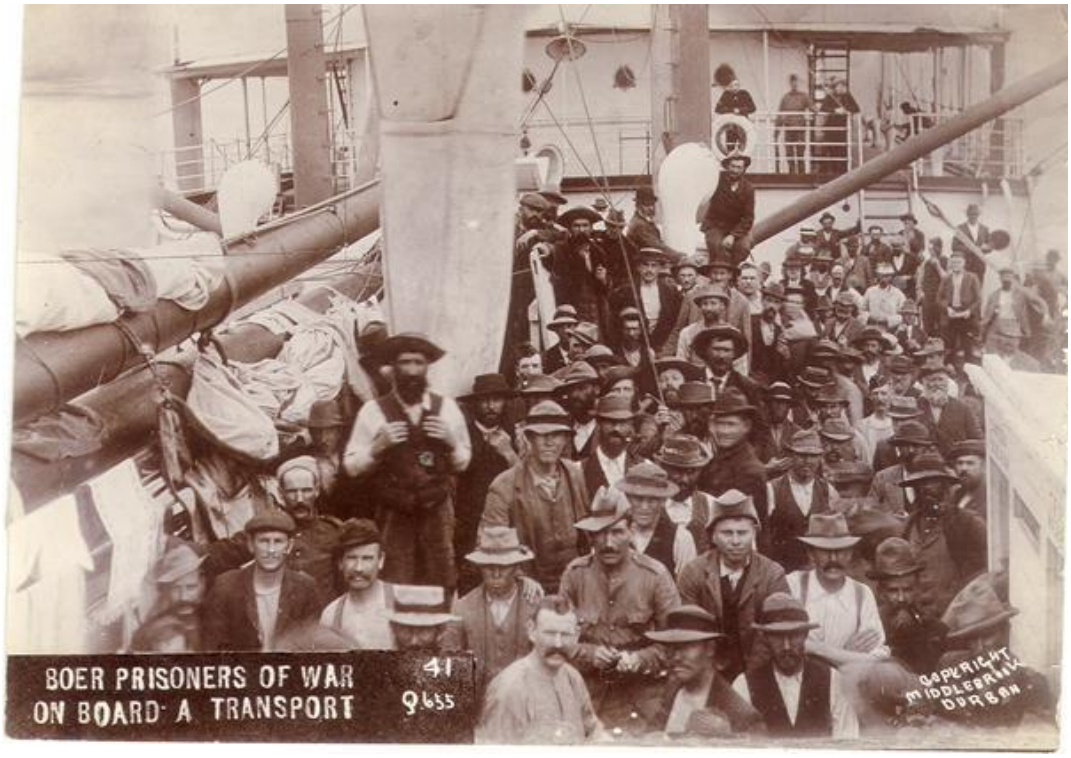
Once again containers of bread are upended over them so that crumbs scatter over them. This time the men are more skilful at catching.

Voyage into the Unknown

Durban announces itself with a sticky humidity. On closer inspection, the Boers realise that the blue spanning the horizon, is actually the ocean. For the first time Lucas and Jeremia see the ocean; deep swells and dashing spray and the brown foam breaking on the white sands. The ocean is vast. Tugboats bob next to the quay. The ship lies at anchor in deeper water. For a Boer that has not so long ago experienced drought, it is a sight that is difficult to compare to any past experience.

Lucas knows the cool depths of the farm dam and the dark reflections of the well at Nooitgedacht. He has drunk of the first sweet water from the borehole that Tjaart van der Walt has drilled at Grootvlei. He has lost his fear of the water snake at the Blesbokspruit. He is unfamiliar with these waters. The ocean makes you feel very insignificant. It makes you feel like a splinter of wood that is easily snapped. Your ears get quite stopped up.

There are about twenty ships at anchor. The city has many trees and the waters are teeming with schools of fish and dolphins the size of young children. It is overcast when they dock. Pineapple and sugar cane fields are dotted with shade.



The strangest experiences await Lucas and Jeremia. They walk up the narrow gangway to the tugboat. The prisoners are instructed to leave their ragged bundles of belongings behind on the bobbing boats. Lucas and Jeremia have never felt this uprooted: without the feel of solid ground under their feet, away from loved ones, penniless, teetering between heaven and earth the way circus acrobats or tight-rope walkers would. Small as well:

- The size of a thistle-seed,
- flimsy like a blade of grass,
- tiny as a mote.

The ship lies deep at anchor. It's a steamship: The Bavarian. Jeremia is of the opinion that it is the size of Noah's Ark. Lucas stops and shades his eyes: "Perhaps this one is a bit smaller, Jeremia?"

Jeremia pats Lucas on the shoulder: “So glad to see that I haven’t lost you. Welcome back to the land of the living, Lucas, old friend. Without you, I’ll not make it.”

An artist has set up paper and materials on the beach. This should be material for an interesting sketch: the British officers next to the ragged Boers. Lucas and Jeremia: Jeremia with his gangly, bony body: mostly shoulder blades, and Lucas with his broad shoulders and wavy hair.

Large straw baskets are lowered onto the deck of the boat. The prisoners must get into these, eight at a time. The baskets are hoisted. It is a teeth rattling trip to the deck of the ship. This instability is too much for most of the Boers. Motion sickness on an empty stomach renders one weak.

On the deck, a huge sail is filled with water. The Boers are herded into this, forty to fifty at a time, children and old men, all naked. Lucas feels refreshed after this unceremonious bath.

There are approximately twelve hundred prisoners accompanied by a thousand armed British guards on board. Lucas and Jeremia are interested in the mechanics of the steam ship. Lucas is first to announce: “Three hundred yards long. Thirteen yards in width. Give or take. Measured it myself. They say about sixteen feet is visible above the water and thirty two feet submerged under the water.”

“But Lucas, if this ship is holed, it will go under like a stone!”

“Wish Siemen were here, he would have been able to work out how this thing is operated.”

“Siemen is resting. Where he is, these things don’t matter. But I’m here and I’m not as green as you might think me. Talk to me.”

They sail this evening. Jeremia continues to clown about, even though he is close to vomiting from motion sickness. He does not wish to lose his grip on Lucas

again. He has to keep Lucas interested in the daily activities: “Wow, this thing bucks like a wild horse. This thing goes, hey, Lucas?”

Lucas plays along: “This thing steams along, Jeremia, it steams along.”

For a while the city lights are reflected on the water. Then only the fingers of the British searchlights are visible. Then only the ocean remains.

Buried at Sea

Lucas prefers the open to being enclosed. Even as a child, ma Susannah had to open his windows wide. On frosty Free State nights he used to open his window. Since his fall into the quarry, just before the *tantes* Uys cared for him, he has craved fresh air. He has suffered lung damage. Perhaps all this is his imagination playing tricks on him, but he simply has to steady his eyes on a ventilator. There are no portholes in the hold. His eyes keep searching the sides of the hold. There are ventilation holes, but they are very high up in the hold. It is oppressive down here.

Some of the men clearly suffer with fever. It seems that all resistance has crumbled. They are all tame as lambs, sucked dry by the lice that flourish here below deck. It resembles an enforced blood-letting, the way they are subjected lice day in and day out. They only go on deck with roll call. Their diet consists of Bully Beef and dumplings. Lucas and Jeremia take an oath never again to eat Bully Beef if they have a choice in the matter.

A Burgher from the Free State, old and worn out, is clearly in need of nursing. Jeremia is the one that insists that the old man should be nursed. The ship doctor eventually turns up with bottle of croton oil and a spoon. This man becomes the first of many to die during the voyage. It is this first burial at sea that makes the greatest impression on Lucas and Jeremia.

There is a *Dominee* amongst the Boers, but initially he does not assist. Lucas watches closely as the deceased's hair is brushed away from his forehead, out of his eye-sockets. Why they take the trouble to groom him, Lucas finds hard to understand, as the man will not be looking around again. The ship's doctor then crosses the man's arms over his thighs. The corpse is sewn into a khaki blanket and a bag of coal tied to his feet.

The *Dominee* mutters a few words about:

- mortality,

- eternal rest,

- faith.

The ship maintains speed; it does not slow down for a moment. The body splashes from the rail into the water. The captain announces that the body has been committed to the deep at such and such degree and so many minutes southern latitude and at such and such degree and so many minutes eastern longitude, a thousand or more miles from Madras. The Angel of Death doesn't take directions from the captain of a British ship and the deceased's people will not visit this gravesite. Looking back, Lucas sees that the body has not sunk. It bobs upright above the water.

Lucas cannot stop crying. A few Burghers watch him quietly. They suspect that the boy is related to the deceased. A few clumsily offer their condolences. Jeremia takes Lucas aside so that the breeze can fan dry his tears. Lucas has never befriended the man. His shoulders shake. His face distorts like that of a child that cannot get its way. He sobs out loud, uncontrollably, for Greet, for the loss of *oupa* Petrus, for Hoender, for Essie and Siemen. He cries for parents and a home that he can barely recall, as well as for Boel, Boesman and Weeskind. He simply cries about everything that has gone wrong in his young life and in anticipation of losses that he might still suffer. He cries, as Hoender would have described it, like a girl. Lucas cannot get a grip on himself. Mostly he cries for Essie. Lucas buries all his losses in this watery grave. It is late February 1902. Lucas cries until Jeremia is quite embarrassed. Lucas hardly ever sheds a tear again. A few days later, measles hit the prisoners hard. The disease flourishes in the cramped, closed in conditions.

The next day, repairs are made to the machinery. There is a crack in the boiler. The engine idles to a stop. It is the very first time that Lucas and Jeremia see whales. Three of them swim near the ship: smooth, flowing shapes. They surface after this first dive, emitting a cloud of vapour from their blow holes.

Jeremia digs up an old riddle:

The grave eats,

who sits therein, sweats.

The grave lives.

He who sits there shivers.

"I know that one, Jeremia; it's Jonah inside the whale!"

Three sailors stand on the lookout bridge. The wheel house is just behind the nearest guards. The bell divides the day into six parts: twelve o'clock to four o'clock, four o'clock to eight o'clock and eight o'clock to twelve o'clock.

The ship's crew forecasts the first storm on day six. The sea is misleadingly calm. On the seventh white horses come prancing along the tops of the swell. For a while the ship cuts through the swell. Then the storm breaks in all its fury. The ship bobs around like a leaf in an irrigation channel. All has subsided by sundown.

Ten days after departure, they drop anchor in Bombay.

India

Near the harbour, the colour of the sea changes from deep blue to wheat green. Seabirds circle above the deck. Drift wood and sea bamboo float around the ship.

Parts of the bush along the coast bleed red shacks. There are no corrugated iron roofs here. Indian divers reach the ship on rafts manned by the deformed or disabled that dive for the coins that the British officers toss into the water. Some thirty ships are anchored there.

The Bavaria moors just outside the harbour of Bombay. It's oppressive: muggy and hot, actually. It is depressing to boot, as hordes of cripples, begging incessantly, jostle the prisoners in their march to the train. On receiving alms, there is the occasional flash of acknowledgement in the dark eyes. But, the Boers do not have the means to relieve their suffering. The human suffering touches Lucas deeply, so that he elbows his way to the train.

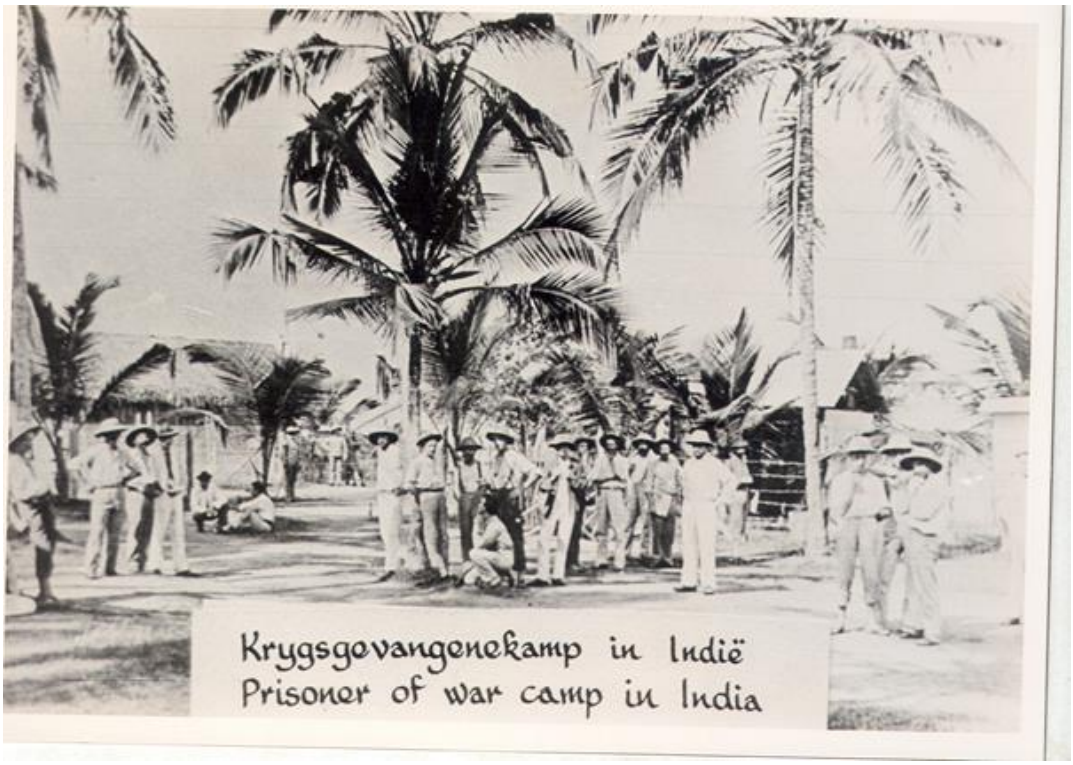
Scenery flashes past: patches of cultivated land, cattle, farmers with wooden ploughs pulled by a single buffalo. The plough is a wooden fork with one pitch covered with a sheet of iron. This serves as the share. The farmer walks between the irregular furrows in the maize fields, cultivating the soil with the help of one or two greyish cattle.

They witness a team of twelve oxen dragging along a huge road roller. This is not done in the Boer fashion. A driver is mounted on the drag link behind every pair of oxen. The drivers kick up a row.

The train halts at Janis Station. Here, unfamiliar loose-fitting tropical pants and large shirts are issued. These are of woven cloth, clean and durable. With limited knowledge of the strange monetary system, Lucas and Jeremia sell their own frayed clothes. The Rupee is coined in silver and is tantamount to one shilling and four pennies. The money wears quickly. Lucas is surprised to see that the year 1890 is almost illegible on a coin.

The prisoners rest in a barracks in Lahore. The heat subsides. From Reshawa they march to Hassan Abdal where the ill are loaded onto ox carts. The young men march until eleven in the morning and then rest in the shade of trees.

Near Abottabat the Boers see paddy fields. The rice has just come into ear and grows in fields flooded with water. Five days later they enter Abottabat. From here their final destination is visible; the prison camp at Kakul at the foothills of the Himalayas, the highest range in the world. It spreads over the north of India and shelters the country against the cold, dry Monsoons. The hills are not easily accessible and are well-forested.



Kakul

The quarters in this camp are barracks built of stone. About twelve men occupy a room. There are fourteen hundred Boers in this camp. Tents have also been pitched lower down. Here the twenty odd turn-coats who have sold their freedom in exchange for three tins of condensed milk and three tins of jam, are huddling. They receive these special treats every Sunday, as they have signed the Oath of Allegiance. A tin is shared by eight men. These men are not popular with the rest of the prisoners of war: a Boer does not sell out his country. This group maintains a low profile.

You can come to a decision to move around restlessly, being bored, or decide on being creative. Lucas and Jeremia participate in group activities. A Boer likes to keep busy. His hands remain busy even when relating a story. This way the story becomes credible. The story-teller becomes eloquent.

Here are people blessed with God given talents. You sometimes find these talents where you would least expect to. The Boers have equipped themselves quite well. There is a wind driven lathe behind the wash house as well as saws and chisels manufactured from barrel hoops. If necessary, they make use of pen knives and needles. There are people that perform miracles with the leaf stem of the tobacco. plant. This stem is folded over onto itself four or five times and then tied with the remainder and secured with a bamboo pin. It is the pin that comes in so useful.

On days that the prisoners receive meat, they can take their pick; the meat or the bone. Sometimes the die has to be cast to decide who will get the bone. Such a bone can be carved. Wood is available, but stone lends itself to intricate carving. The stone here is soft and workable.

Watch them sitting, hands between their knees, at tables, squatting. Some sit at benches, others on the floor, depending on their ages and suppleness. Prisoners think and plan, sometimes while walking or while doing laundry in the washhouse. They invent. They reason like this; if they are unable to support their loved ones or fight for their freedom, they can, on their return home, when conversation is strained after the

long separation, say to a girl, a wife or a mother: “Look, this what I made while I longed for you. See how much trouble I have taken, while thinking of you.”

Then she kisses him and he fastens the clasps of the necklace, or holds it to her throat, or pins the brooch to the collar of her dress, at least making some physical contact. She may place the chest or statuette on the sideboard or frame his photo in the wooden frame he has made and look at it whenever she walks past or sets the table.

Things that are for sale are also manufactured: pen holders, walking sticks, cabinets, frames, picture frames and delicate necklaces and brooches. Most are engraved with flower motifs and trees of life. Some are carved after birds, game or the heads of horses. Flags of the two Republics or an image of the old President appear on some. One rests at night, still inventing that special item or thinking on a design that you like. You work on it during the night when sleep eludes you and then address the challenge as soon as the necessary wood, bone or stone is obtained. You can buy stamps or fruit with the income generated. All this serves as therapy, to process the pain, to soften the separation, to pass the time and to regain self-confidence.

The Boers have established a choir and a band. The most popular songs are “*Lord, I turn to thee*” and “*Depths of despair*.” The singing drawls in order that some of the older men can keep up. There are those that are tired and discouraged, as they have lost their loved ones.

Some venture to express their feelings in writing. Others write because they long for a girl and believe that fortune does not favour them. They anticipate estrangement and seek consolation in anticipation of the hard heartedness of their sweethearts. Fortunately there are narrators like *oom* Krisjan, who takes you to the place he is telling you of and shows you the girl he speaks of. Then you accompany him in spirit and laugh. You forget the boredom of roll call and camp food, inspections and routine. For a while you take pleasure in the humour of the story. Tonight when you doze off or tomorrow in the washhouse, you remember the story and you smile or stand still and laugh out loud.

The story of the young woman, van Helsdingen, is one such a story.

Saartjie van Helsdingen

She lives somewhere in the Free State in a remote homestead, quite a distance from any town that you could be remotely familiar with. If memory serves him well, her name is Saartjie.

She is a pretty girl but exceptionally strong. Her obvious health makes many young men feel uncomfortable. At the tender age of eighteen, she has already loaded her father's waggon with bags of wheat. If she were a stud animal she would have scooped up all the prizes for strong build, good teeth and glowing skin. The way a stud animal would.

Some of our young men prefer frail girls, those too timid to speak for themselves. Refined women with proper manners and buttonhole mouths that they would never open wide enough to say anything harsher than "prune." We are now talking of well brought up, submissive women.

Saartjie is not like this. She talks straight and looks you in the eye. She knows what she wants in a man, and what she expects is not spinelessness. For those of you who know the Language of Flowers, an anthology every young man should be familiar with; many a young man comes to court Saartjie with a rose pinned to his lapel and to a Boer girl this should indicate that he places his heart at her feet. At the end of the evening Saartjie would trample on this heart. She would pick a poppy in the garden and hand it to him. That indicates what she thinks of this man and his attentions: "You are too limp and spineless."

There are a young Ebersohn and his brother. The two of them continuously stare at Saartjie all doe-eyed during church services and at Communion. They are persistent. One is not convinced that theirs is not cupboard love, as Saartjie's father has an enormous herd and she is his heiress. She has also arrived to parents well past their prime, so that there is no possibility of other heirs entering into the picture.

It's growing late that Saturday night. Both young men are reluctant to leave. Neither Liep, nor Giel would budge. They sit. Saartjie has concocted a plan. She goes

to make coffee. Both Liep and Giel jump up as she gets up. Saartjie indicates that only Gielie must accompany her.

In the kitchen, Giel is all over Saartjie. He is adamant that he is the favourite. No, says Saartjie, he must first prove that he is a real man. He should pretend to saddle up and leave, dismount behind the house and climb into her father's coffin in the attic. He must move the lid into place. She will come to fetch him at one o'clock and then she will have proof of his courage. Then he shall have his kiss and perhaps even more. In the meantime, this she promises Gielie, she will send Liep home.

Giel takes his leave, saddles up and pretends to be leaving. Liep is only too happy. This means that Saartjie has made up her mind! No, Saartjie indicates to Liep over the third glass of ginger beer in the flickering light of the second courting candle, she is close to making her decision. Liep must first prove his courage.

There is an empty coffin that her father keeps in the attic, just in case. Liep must enter the attic by the loft stairs and knock on the four corners of this coffin using the handle of his whip. Loudly, so that Saartjie can hear it downstairs in the front room. Then he can come and get his kisses.

The moon casts little light and in the attic you cannot see your hand in front of your face. Owls are nesting on the rafter. Giel has, in the meanwhile, dozed off in the coffin. It's musty inside, but it's quite comfortable on the death cloak. Giel wakes up with a start when Liep thuds on the coffin with the handle of the whip. The first thought that enters his mind, is that someone is busy nailing down the lid on the coffin. For a split second, he is immobilised by fear. He then knocks off the lid of so that the loft shakes and straw filters onto the floor. The two young men flee helter-skelter: they mount the same horse and ride it home bareback. The next day Saartjie's father sends the other horse to the neighbour's farm. Saartjie is not pestered by the attentions of the spunkless twosome again.

Lucas meets Faan Grobler

Lucas stands washing his clothes in the trough in the washhouse. It is a long stone building with cross beams in the ceiling. The lowest ones are grouted into the walls at head height. The hasty and the unhandy hang their wet washing over these lower ones to drip dry onto the cement floor. There is no theft. You leave everything as you find it. Not everyone, however, wrings his clothes dry thoroughly. The drip-drying clothes cause a continuous drizzle.

Lucas senses that he is being watched, but he is one of the youngest in the camp and has little to say for himself these days. He listens to those that have the need to talk and he talks to himself, mostly, as he has seen *oupa* Petrus do.

Because it is a big camp, you do not make contact with each of the prisoners of war on a daily basis. From under his lowered lids, Lucas watches the tall boy that is foaming his laundry in the trough against the opposite wall.

It is Faan Grobler from the Free State who introduces himself first. He has seen Lucas and Jeremia wandering around earlier. He is in one of the barracks with his father and a few older men, and would enjoy talking to the boy.

When the two are sitting with their backs to the wash house wall, they realise that the world is a small place. Lucas does not immediately realise that the two of them are from the same region in the Free State. He can recall very little of Nooitgedacht and the surrounding area.

Faan invites Lucas to their barracks to meet *oom* Stephanus Grobler, Faan's father. They sit at the trestle table. *Oom* Stephanus draws Lucas a map of the lie of the land where Lucas grew up. Nooitgedacht and Rooikop, where *oom* Stephanus has left his wife and his daughters Enna and Albertha, are situated almost within walking distance of Nooitgedacht. A stone's throw apart! Their people are acquainted. Lucas and Faan feel like old acquaintances.

At the age of six, when Lucas and was sent by horse cart to *oupa* Petrus in Heidelberg, Lucas and Jan Ndlebe would have passed Rooikop. Faan might have been

playing with his clay oxen on the veranda at Rooikop. Most probably, Faan would still have been snuggling in bed under the patchwork quilt. Faan's little sister Albertha would have been very young.

For a while Jeremia must be content with being the odd man out, as Lucas sets out to Faan's barracks mornings. Faan has to tell Lucas everything he knows about the Free State, especially about the area between Kroonstad and the *Renoster* River. Lucas bends over the trestle table and doesn't take his eyes off Faan. It is as though he expects to see part of the Free State reflected in those bright eyes. Faan has to relate every detail about his sisters, his brother and his family. This way Lucas feels closer to his own parents. He feels comforted.

As a last resort Faan shows him a photo in sepia, one of his family taken in the studio in Kroonstad. It's a vague image cobwebbed in tiny creases, as it accompanies *oom* Stephanus everywhere. Alberta is the prettiest child. She is leaning against her mother's knee. She must be seven or eight years old on this photograph. Her expression is serious and she has a sharp little chin. Lucas has a weakness for girls. This one reminds him of Greet. Faan is unable to supply any news about *tant* Sussie, *oom* Peens and the people of Nooitgedacht.

A large mailbag is emptied at the camp post office after the peace treaty on 31st May, 1902. Lucas has not received any letters over a long period of time. Lucas, Jeremia and Faan, find a quiet spot behind the camp shop. Lucas's eyes swiftly glide over the handwriting on his letters, just in case there is a lost letter from Essie. He is not ready to face that. It still hurts too much. Jeremia watches Lucas's expressions closely. Only when Lucas starts reading, does Jeremia lean back, reassured, in order to read his personal mail.

Lucas is the one that receives the most mail, from the area of Aliwal North, where his family visits with friends. These letters do not interest him much, as they don't come from Nooitgedacht and he doesn't know the people in Aliwal North. He finds it difficult to put names to faces when he receives photographs of his brothers and sisters. In time he will get to know them. He should simply be patient.

Netta's letter touches his heart. He does not notice it at first, hidden as it is beneath the others. What he has wished to avoid, now happens without warning. He is not prepared for this. He covers the letter with his left hand so that only extracts are visible. He does not want to be confronted with all this simultaneously. Netta knows about Siemen, that he has been executed on the grounds of being a citizen of the Colony. Netta does not reproach Lucas for not having notified her first.

She tells of Geertrui sitting on *ma* Mysies's knee. The child is as skinny as a rake and tough as leather. Lucas is amazed at the inner strength of the Boer women. By comparison, his courage on the battle fields seems to be of no consequence. Netta's letter makes him feel humble, as she paints a vivid picture of the people in the camp, but in such a way as to say: "I wish to spare you the agony of the worst details."

She tells of Essie's defiance and how Essie has done everything in her power to take care of her and Geertrui. She describes Essie's heroisms clearly, so that Lucas can picture Essie confronting the camp officer like a tigress, her hair all wild. Netta does not give much information about Essie's last struggle for survival. She has inserted the cypress twig. It slips from the letter; faded and brittle. Lucas experiences a reaction that he could not have anticipated; pride effuses him. The letter strengthens his resolve never to take the oath of allegiance to the British king. This would be impossible.

He puts the twig in his Bible. He then does the bravest thing that he has ever done, without being forced to do so. He sits to write to Netta, to *tant* Hannie and to *tant* Mysie. He addresses them all in this one letter. Lucas also talks to Geertrui.

To anyone reading this letter, it will become clear that the boy has become a man. Writing this letter becomes an exercise in calculating his losses and appreciating what life and the wars have taught him. He has to be strong. He writes with his Bible open, there where he has placed the cypress twig between the pages.

Should one count the number of times that the words *thanks* and *grateful* appear in his letter, it comes to twenty two.

The Lord will provide.

Prisoner of war Craft

During his time in camp, Lucas carves delicate jewellery from bone. He carves the letters of the alphabet and strings a necklace. He tries to clear his thoughts, but smiles at the thought of the Bible names that Siemen has taught them at the farm school. Some of the small ones have merely mouthed the sounds and glanced slyly at the older children.

Achitophel, Adoniabezek, Benhadad, Migdal-Ezer; three pages containing Biblical names, four columns each.

Lucas builds two wooden *kists*, each a foot long, half a foot deep and half a foot broad. He fills these chests with trinkets of stone, wood and bone. The first resembles a harmonium, the other has a lid that fits that well, that it is almost impossible to open.

Lucas makes the *kists* for his people. He carves them for *ma* Susannah and for *pa* Lukas. He fills them with jewellery and trinkets while repeating the names of brothers and sisters he has yet to meet: John, Piet and Nonnie. Then also: Gertruida, Koos and Flippie. Lastly: Hendrina and Kleintjie.

To Lucas these chests represent three saving graces:

> The planning and carving occupies his mind, as Lucas is well equipped with the impatience of youth and he does not find life here challenging.
>
> The intricate work frees his imagination and allows him to picture a better future, because one needs to start from scratch.
>
> The *kists represent* Lennon's medicine chests from which he can take a bottle of magic oil with which to treat old wounds. Old regrets and self-doubt need to be addressed. These could drive one crazy. Like the young Englishman's eyes. The one he has shot. These eyes are imprinted on Lucas's memory. He has told Siemen about it after the battle; how their eyes have levelled on each other. Later, he has tried to discuss this with Jeremia,

but Jeremia does not suffer from self-doubt. He, Lucas does not wish to live with regret.



Binoculars

It has happened during a skirmish. Where and when this has taken place, is not important. He, Lucas, has been on foot. The British officer has been mounted. He recalls the horse clearly, even though he has lost it shortly after: a jet-black stallion with stormy eyes. It must have been a fresh horse, as the animal's constitution has been good. He remembers the flared nostrils. At that moment he has desired the stallion with all his heart. He recalls looking up into the face of the British soldier.

Lucas recalls the red complexion and the blue eyes. For a split second they look each other in the eye. The young soldier raises his Lee Metford, inserts a shell into the breech and takes aim. Lucas fires. Of the two, Lucas is the better marksman.

Lucas takes the horse. The saddle is still sweaty from the officer's exertions. He lays claim to the officer's saddle with the binoculars neatly buckled to it. Lucas often wonders whether he has not been reprimanded by God. One may not covet. He loses both horse and binoculars during a skirmish.

A strange sense of guilt has been hounding him ever since. Lucas vividly recalls the final stages of the battle and the mounted officer. That evening Lucas rides into the laager on a wave of euphoria. He is riding the black stallion. Some of the other Burghers have stripped the British and taken their clothing. Lucas has seized weapons and ammunition. Ten heavy bandoliers criss-cross his chest.

The Boers look up when Lucas rides into the laager. They admire the beautiful horse and the flapping bandoliers. Lucas is a good horseman. They are impressed because he, the youngest in the laager, (a mere child, then, at the beginning of the war), has seized so much. They caress the horse and admire and adjust the binoculars. He, magnanimously, allow them to do so. The men carry him shoulder-high and he feels that he is entitled to all of this.

Come evening, the bubble bursts. *Oom* Koos pricks it. To *oom* Koos, Lucas has always been a mere stock herder and stable boy; too young to be admired like this. *Oom* Koos wants the binoculars. If there is no alternative, he is willing to buy it from Lucas. *Oom* Koos decides on the price of a pound and a few shillings. The amount is just enough to haggle about. It does not remotely cover the value of the binoculars.

Oom Koos bidding against Lucas, while members of the commando are watching, is humiliating. Lucas is inexperienced and used to respecting his elders. He has become yesterday's hero. Lucas is not cunning. He cannot counter *oom* Koos's method of bidding and has a slip of the tongue. He has committed. He loses the binoculars for a song. *Oom* Andries, watching the charade, places some consolation money into Lucas's pocket, so that Lucas will not feel completely robbed. All of a sudden Lucas is fatigued. Soon after, the horse is shot during battle.

The only thing that Lucas can lay claim to, is the memory of the look in the eyes of the young British officer; eyes resembling facts or destiny. These are

imprinted on his mind. He sees them in his dreams, this despite the fact that he encounters far more gruesome incidents after.

The kists with all the memories that they contain, can be compared to Pandora's Box. One does not wish to open it too often and release the memories that they evoke.

To the Bitter End

They say that most people would, at the acceptable price, be willing to give up any valuable possession. Those same people would say that a person should know when to surrender. One should accept defeat and go down on one's knees in front of the conqueror.

Authorities have drawn up a treaty towards the Peace of Vereeniging. Eventually, most of the prisoners sign the Oath of Allegiance. Some things are not negotiable. One of these is your freedom. The prisoners of war have to sign Allegiance to the British Crown. Those, who sign, are, without delay, repatriated by ship. Lucas and a few Bitter-Enders refuse to sign. The asking price is simply too high. Lucas and his fellow *Wildeboere* are sent to the fort at the foot of the Himalayas.

Imagine this:

A massive anthill entrenched a by a wide, deep moat. The soil from the ditch is used to build a steep ridge around the trench. Only the top of this ant hill, Fort Ahmednagar, rises above the slope. This peak of the tower is occupied by British armed with cannon. Attacking forces would only have a tiny peak to target. Ahmednagar, an impenetrable fortress, now represents home to Lucas and a handful of *Wildeboere*. The only spectacular view these Boers are presented with, is that of large herds of wild Indian goats kept in the trench. There is sufficient grazing and water in the trench. During this time, the prisoners in the fort receive a lot of mail. These are letters encouraging them to end their self-imposed incarceration.

In 1903 the South African authorities delegate General de la Rey to convey this message to these Boers; it is not compulsory to sign the clause on allegiance to the king when signing the Oath of Allegiance. The *Wildeboere* are permitted to cross out this clause when signing. The articles of agreement are now acceptable. Lucas and his fellow prisoners undertake to sign.

There is a long trestle-table in front of the gates of the fort. A clerk sits behind this table with all the documents to be signed. The prisoners queue up. It's Lucas's

turn. He has become a man during this time and lunges forward, stooping over the clerk in an intimidating manner. The clerk wears steel rimmed spectacles that he polishes when nervous. Lucas talks loudly, so that his voice echoes from the slope. “Look well, we resemble men who have lost everything!”

He picks up the steel nibbed pen from the table and dips it into the ink well. He cancels the offending clause so that the nib of the pen cuts through the paper. The government official gets up and takes a step backwards. The clerk nervously polishes his spectacles. The rage of a lifetime surges up in Lucas. Then Lucas signs with such passion, that the nib splits wide as though standing astride the signature. The nib cannot be put to use again.

Lucas now stands outside the fort, awaiting transport. He carries two *kists* and has a box of raisins in his pocket. It is strange to be in the open again without being under surveillance. He chews pensively, as though trying to extract all the energy from the raisins. He chews the pip so that the bitter aftertaste remains in his mouth. These are his last two Annas. It’s been a while since he has had a good meal.

Raisins will never taste this good again.



Ahmednagar Fort

Journey to Honingspruit

Lucas is travel weary, but still very alert, during this last stage of his homeward journey. He has slept poorly these past few nights. Unlike during his previous trip, he is allowed to enjoy the scenery from the window of his compartment. He enjoys the smell of the leather bench and rinses his face in the small metal washbasin. When thirsty, he can pour water from the upside-down water container at the end of the carriage. Nobody detains him when he gets off to stretch his legs at the stops.

For a short while, he enjoys the company of a fellow prisoner. They eat sparingly at the folding table. He is now alone. His heart beats as though bursting. He is quite anxious and fearful that he will not immediately recognise his parents. They will have to introduce him to his brothers and sisters.

Under his feet, the expansion-joints in the rails clack:

- short-ly,
- short-ly,
- short-ly,

He is worried about first impressions. He brings his face closer to the reflection in the window glass, until it floats next to the Railway emblem, inches from his own. He sees a weather-beaten stranger with a powerful chin. The moustache that he has struggled to grow, now juts out like ox horns. It is a handle-bar moustache. The ends are twirled.

At Fort Ahmednagar, he and his fellow *Wildeboere*, have decided on wearing a white button and a mourning band. This represents the group. It represents lost freedom. Lucas now feels a little self-conscious about the conspicuousness of all this. He wears a black mourning band on his sleeve. He must honour Essie's passing, because the two of them would have gone through life together. Even now he cannot imagine ever falling in love again.

At first he intended to return to Grootvlei and to Netta and Geertrui. Pa Lukas has, however, assured him in his last letter that his place was at Nooitgedacht. Netta has written him about the women's return to Heidelberg from the camp at Standerton. That has been, if memory serves right, in mid June 1902. In the letter she writes that the occupants of the railway houses have brought out chairs for them. Dining chairs and camp stools. There on the platform, the women have had to wait until *oom* Koot and *oom* Koos could organise transport to Grootfontein. They would plan further from there; possibly first build the school building and the caretaker's house up from the foundations. It would all happen with time.

Lucas can picture the group next to the railway line outside Heidelberg. Sadness oozes around them. Of the women it is only Netta, *tant* Hannie and *tant* Mysie. Geertrui also, of course! Lucas could imagine how the station area would appear on a cold winter's day. To the right of the line are the two railway worker's houses. The station master's house faces the rail. The shunter's house faces along the rail. It is nippy this June day and Geertrui is well wrapped in a blanket against the cold. The women sit in a circle, hugging themselves, because it is warmer here in the morning sun than under the shelter of the platform.

A young woman stands on the veranda of the new station master's house. She will presently send over some refreshments. Netta has already thought of going over there and asking if she may put Geertrui down for a while, but the new station management is pro-British and Netta, in her present impoverished state, does not feel free to impose herself on anyone. She has suffered too much humiliation.

There is an oblong station building and offices on the platform. Next to it is a veranda with pitched roof of green corrugated iron. There is a weather vane below the eaves and a finial on the gable. A number of men from the concentration camp drag the remainder of their possessions along in sacking. They stand around purposelessly. Two of the men are on crutches. A third stands head on arms leaning against a wooden pillar. It is not easy to start from scratch after a lifetime of hard work.

Kleinpetrus has fallen asleep on a scrap of mattress against the office wall. His intent little animal breath rasps with mucus. He is too exhausted to sit up. At long last he is going home.

May the Good Lord be with his people in their time of need.

Honingspruit train station

Lucas's people are expecting him. The *Honingspruit* station platform is all lit up with lanterns. From a distance the lamps resemble a cloud of fireflies. It's a spring night. The year is 1903. The train has just pulled up at *Honingspruit*, a train station in the Free State. Judging by the number of carts gathered here, the Boers are excited about the *Wildeboer's* homecoming. For a while Lucas wishes to hide in the dark compartment; his tail between his legs like some strange young dog. Then he finds himself on the platform with the people that have come to fetch him. They are his people who have taken the trouble to come to welcome the *Wildeboer* and to shake his hand.

Lucas is caught off-guard. All this is overwhelming. He then realises that the gathering approaching him is his family. Pa Lukas is clearly proud. Ma Susannah is more beautiful than he recalls. The little ones are urged forward one at a time: John, Piet, Nonnie, Sannie, Gertruida, Koos, Flippie, Hendrina and Kleintjie. They appear refined in their Sunday best and lace-up boots. The girls have ribbons in their hair and the eldest boy wears a tie. Lucas feels unkempt, clumsy and unutterably dull. The boys hold out their hands and the girls receive a peck on the cheek. The youngest retraces her steps shyly.

Faan Grobler breaks away from the crowd of spectators and gives him a hearty slap on the shoulder. He also appears unusually well-groomed with his shaven face and combed back hair. Then Lucas notices Albertha. She and her sister Enna are standing to one side. It is clear that Enna and the other brothers are teasing Albertha, as the girl is blushing to the roots of her hair. For this reason, to participate in the teasing, more than any other, Lucas walks over to the fifteen year old girl and greets formally: "Pleased to meet you, *Niggie*."

The sincerity of his peoples' welcome sets him at his ease. On the trip back to *Nooitgedacht,* Pa Lukas questions him on his experiences. Lucas notices that John is watching him fixedly. The boy moves closer till he sits propped up against Lucas. Lucas realises that John is mesmerised by his moustache.

Lucas savours the air. Close behind pa Lukas's cart, the hooves of the horses of the cart of the Groblers' clatter. Faan swerves off to Rooikop. The conversation flows easier during the last stretch to Nooitgedacht. They drive almost as the crow flies, skirting fields of grain. In the evening, everything takes on shades of grey. At the corner of the kraal, ma Susannah warns: "The homestead is badly damaged. It will take time to repair it all. I've arranged for you to be with the boys in the outbuildings."

"And *oom* Peens and *tant* Sussie?"

'Their health is failing but, mercifully, they are still with us."

"And Jan?"

"Please go to see him. He's not getting any younger."

"And *Boel*?"

John answers: "We now have *Ore*."

The cart turns in between the gate posts. Lucas left here when he was six. He's now nineteen.



Lucas with his family after his return from India

Lucas

Pa Lukas Ma Susannah

Nooitgedacht

Everything here at Nooitgedacht is smaller and less impressive than the way Lucas remembers it. It's not solely as a result of looting and torching, as ma Susannah is a Colonial and the main homestead at *Nooitgedacht* has never been torched. Repairs have also been made in the year that Lucas has been imprisoned in Fort Ahmednagar, pa Lukas and the farmworkers have started repairing the outbuildings.

Snippets of memory come back to Lucas, like the clippings of the first school task that Greet has brought home, before the big rains. Lucas sees it all. He remembers vividly: He assists. They first have to find a picture. They both realise that books are valuable. That they manage to execute their plan is some kind of miracle. Lucas worships Greet. He mostly looks on. Greet plans well. Imaginative pupils earn extra marks at school. Greet always excels

Lucas recalls himself and Greet deciding on using a picture from the song book of Willem Sluiter on the crocheted doily on the home organ: W Sluiter's *Buiten Eensaem Huis Somer-en Winter-leven*.

The book is on the doily on the home organ in the front room of Nooitgedacht. *Tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens have few books in the share cropper's cottage. He and Greet decide on the inside title page.

Greet takes the needlework scissors from the waggon chest in their front room. It is blunt, because *tant* Sussie has used it on the chickens during a previous outbreak of crop-swelling.

Greet loves this picture with the caption in calligraphy. Lucas hears the first snip through the paper. No going back now! The two of them kneel on the buck skin in the small back room. Greet's hair covers her face and she pushes it behind her ear and looks at him as if to say: "We've done it!"

Lucas has later seen the same picture in a song book at Grootvlei. It illustrates a tall building with a door with an iron door-knocker. Two large windows are thrown

wide. A woman is peering out the top window. A man, his mouth agape with awe, looks out the lower window.

It's the skeleton in the front of the house that grasps the imagination. It depicts a skeleton with a sickle in its hand. The skeleton is accompanied by and a neatly dressed man pointing out the door. The man wears an overcoat. There are tools lying at his feet. If memory serves Lucas well, those are a spade and an hour glass.

Greet bites the tip of her tongue between her teeth till it turns white. She cuts the picture into smaller bits. She adds up while cutting: twenty triangular cuttings. She explains that her teacher, Meester ten Boom, calls this puzzle cutting. The children in class have to practise fitting these together.

Lucas, as always, is impressed. They replace the song book on the doily. They stack a pile of Hymn and Psalm books on top.

Now the memories come flooding back to Lucas like the pieces of Willem Sluiter's representation of death. He finds it hard to put all the pieces together.

He remembers the chicken runs with the dung- covered coop as being very large. It is unimpressive. The garden is lush. He recalls an orchard with lanes of fruit trees, but denser, deeper, more mysterious. The house is newly whitewashed with lime from the stones in the quarry. *Tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens's cottage is a brilliant white. Lucas remembers the footpath as being longer and the gum trees as greener.

The sculpture of an angel under the cypress is new. He would have remembered it. It could have been *pa* Lukas that had the relief carved out after the war:

Here we laid to rest

Our beloved child

Margaretha Susara Breedt.

6 Jan. 1880- 8 May 1888.

In Jesus' arms.

Greet would have liked the clouds carved out above the angel's head. Lucas and Greet have often lain looking up at cloud faces. If you look closely, you can see that he angel's nose is slightly chipped. He must go and greet *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens. He can procrastinate no longer.

"Till later then, Greet. I'm doing chores around here this morning... fixing the boundary fence."

Shreds of memory sweep the yard the way dust devils do. He hears children's voices in the distance; John and one of his sisters. He avoids them this morning.



Greet's Angel

Oom Peens and Tant Sussie

The next day Lucas pays *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens a visit. His people are visiting friends in Kroonstad. One of Jan and Martha's grandchildren is helping out in the kitchen these days: Klein-Martha. She has come to complain to him earlier this morning. She has complained that there is no fire in the range. She wishes to boil water for coffee. Lucas tells her to return to the kitchen. He feels no need for coffee or rusks.

Lucas looks up and sees that there is no smoke coming from the chimney at *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens's place. He decides to go over to their cottage. He can see that *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens are trying to look after their place, as *oom* Peens has installed a diamond-shaped window in the side wall of the cottage. There is a new boot scraper near the door. Lucas takes a long while cleaning his boots on the door scraper. It is a way of announcing his presence. The door is open.

The interior of the house is dark. On entering, he notices worn Nooitgedacht curtains in front of the windows. The front room smells crisp and clean form green soap and polish. *Tant* Sussie sits bent over a blanket she is crocheting. Lucas tries not to show the rude awakening he feels. The *Tante* has shrunk and only bent shoulders and an apron has remained.

She must have received word that he is back at Nooitgedacht, but from her expression it is clear that she does not immediately recognise him. She puts the blanket down on the table. The crochet needle tinkles onto the floor. Lucas bends down to pick it up. As he bends down, she grabs him by the neck: "Oh my God! It's him, our Lucas! Oh God, your *Tante* has prayed for you... longed for our Greet's Lucas more than all the others put together have."

She has a powerful grip for such a shrunken figure. She holds on. She sobs in his neck, so that he eventually kneels in front of her. Sorrow rises in her like wings. Only then does she start to calm down. She holds his head between her palms and scrutinises his face till he blushes.

“Still the same. I would have recognised those eyes anywhere. You never spoke much. Just stared. ‘Where is our Greet then?’ you used to ask. The two of you belonged. Peas in a pod.”

“I have paid my respects, *Tante*. Under the cypress. “Lucas is just straightening, when *oom* Peens shuffles in and grabs him by the shoulders. Lucas’s tears distort the ornaments on the sideboard. He swallows. *Oom* Peens has grown small, with hands narrower than those of a child.

“*Pa*, look at the eyes...”

Lucas sits next to the *Tante* on the rawhide bench. The discussion falters. His thoughts swirl like birds, each settling on a branch all by itself, so that they refuse to stick to one subject.

“May I please walk through, *Tante*?”

Everything is the same, but not quite the same. Many repairs have been made. The bedroom still smells of a home chemist. The lithography of *The Broad Way and the Narrow Way* is on the wall. At some time or other the glass has shattered. The shards have been lifted out carefully. Only a few shards of glass show between the picture and the frame. But the picture is undamaged. He recalls these exact details.

“You probably remember this. It has been stored in the waggon kist for a long time. Then the *Oom* had it framed for me. It slipped that the glass broke, but at least the picture is not scratched. It’s yours when you set up house one day.”

“Lucas, my child, the *Tante* and I have been thirsty all day. You don’t happen to have a match on you, do you? We have added it onto the grocery list for the town, but your people will only return from Kroonstad late tonight or probably tomorrow afternoon.”

“Certainly, *Oom*, I’ll just light my pipe outside first. Afterwards I’ll help the *Tante*.”

The friction matches are lined up with the dark tips at the top. It's a fold up book of matches with the friction strip at the top. The thin strips of soft wood lie side by side and the cutting machine has left the bottom part uncut so that Lucas has to snap off the thin strips. Today he has the wealth of a full book of matches: enough for lighting his pipe and lighting the range for coffee for the next few days.

Oom Koot and *tant* Sussie stand in anticipation, watching him light his pipe. Lucas carefully bends the match free and pulls the head along the grain of the ground glass and phosphorus strip. With a distinct crackle all the matches ignite so that he is left with a burnt out book of matches in his hand. For a while the three of them keep quiet. Then *oom* Peens gives a forced laugh. One can hear the drooling in his voice: "a pipe and a mug of coffee would have done the trick. Going to be a long day. A long day."

Three words imprint themselves in Lucas's memory. He never repeats them again. At least not in that sequence:

- ONLY
- MINE
- FIRST.

For the first time the racket the flock of tame guinea fowl makes, gets on Lucas's nerves. Just recently he has learnt that guinea fowl fetched a price of three shillings and six pence each.

His heart softens when he sees the containers of milk and crushed maize that *tant* Sussie places in the shade of the trees. A troop of guinea fowl chicks scurry in hot pursuit of the hens. One can only hope they do not pick up lice. The chicks vie for attention from their parents.

"*Si-i-i-ick, si-i-i-ick ...*"

This elicits from the tame Guinea fowl an unsympathetic:

"Fr-ea-ks, fr-ea-ks!"



Coal stove

The Legend

The homestead at Rooikop is habitable again. With the early rains the young grass sprout their green shoots between the black of the burnt grass. The yard birds have returned in rushes, tiny industrious whistles and chirps bringing to life the garden. Albertha's mother has green fingers, so that the yard starts resembling Paradise. This is why the yard birds have returned. Albertha has noticed two *Diederiks* around the bird bath in the rock garden just this morning; young birds, the red beaks still tinted with choral. First the cock complains: "*diee-diee-diee-diederik*." Then, from the reeds, the reply: "*Diee-dieea-dieea*."

Faan has brought a message from Nooitgedacht last weekend: Lucas is riding over come Saturday evening. Faan has mentioned this casually to Albertha, at the exact moment he was taking his hat from the stand on his way to supervise the building of the new kraal. His words have wafted back to her on the breeze: "He said that I should tell you that it would be late evening, as he has to attend to the milking first."

Lucas counts the days before the courting evening. In his own Boer way he is a thinker, a philosopher. He owes this tendency to analyse to his friendship with the late Siemen. Siemen has been, save for his *Oupa*, the wisest man he ever met. Siemen has filled Lucas's mind with dreams and philosophy. It was he that taught Lucas and Hoender in Boer Dutch about Yoritomo-Tashi, from the year 1186, one of the three greatest Japanese philosophers. This is the legend that Yoritomo related.

Queen of the Clouds

The man in love with the queen of the clouds always searched the clouds for her. He found all clouds beautiful:

The gray, fleecy clouds.

White cumulus clouds.

Red skies at night.

Clouds at the break of day.

The young lover did not let his gaze falter to the left or to the right. He did not wish for the love of a girl within his reach. He only had one purpose in life: to reach his beloved in the clouds. The man was heartbroken on cloudless days, because then he could not see his loved one.

On overcast days he wandered around like a lost soul, with his face turned upwards to the clouds. He almost stumbled over the girl from the neighbouring farm in his efforts. He grazed shins against stones while gazing into the sky. He ignored what was going on around him.

He also toiled. He worked day and night building a ladder to the reach the Cloud Queen. At first the barn was large enough to support the ladder. It was not long enough to reach the clouds. The man built; he constructed ladders by day and by night. He worked himself to a standstill. He grew skinny and aged from longing. He worked himself toothless and calloused. At long last, by supporting his ladder against the highest hill, he was able to reach the clouds.

The climb was difficult as by then his joints were quite stiff. This did not discourage him. He drank strong tea, adding a few spoonful's of sugar for energy and climbed his ladder. When the man eventually reached the top and kissed his cloud queen, it started raining and he was soaked through. This also put an end to his dreams of a cloud queen. Only the rainbow remained in the clear sky.

Lucas remembers the day Siemen has told the story: He, Hoender and Siemen sitting on the stone steps at Siemen's back door. Just like that, flat on the clod steps, with their chins between their knees. Siemen has never been too high and mighty to sit like this. It is not as if they have been in a position to pick and choose when visiting Hoender. It's been almost unbearably stuffy in the homestead at *Eensaamheid*. Hoender has had no domestic help and the few chairs and the shaky bed have been on their last legs. Lucas remembers *tant* Hannie persuading Josef's Selina to clean up at Hoender's place, at *Eensaamheid*. Selina has left there shaking her head and promising herself: "never again."

This has been just after Martie has broken off with Hoender, about a month after the split: too soon for Hoender to pull himself together, too late for reconciliation. Why Martie has played mind games with poor defenceless Hoender, is beyond anyone. Siemen tries to convince Hoender that he should focus on the girls that show some interest in him, rather than flailing himself by striving for the unattainable. That's how a young man grows to be a bachelor; by falling in love with the girl on the Massawattee tea tin, whom you surely never will be able to court. A friend of Malie's then says she admires Hoender. She is not unattractive, but Hoender isn't remotely interested. He makes it quite clear that Martie is the only girl for him. No wonder girls soon lose interest in Hoender.

Lucas recalls: the scudding clouds, he himself growing optimistic, the scorched earth and the clouds looking promising; white cotton wool clouds. One can measure the size of a cloud between the index-finger and thumb. Lucas realises the full extent of Hoender's suffering. He himself feels that close to Essie.

To this day, there are times when Lucas is angry with Essie for having left

him to grieve all by himself. Essie is not to be blamed. One grows unreasonable. One loses perspective. At times he feels as if Essie has deserted him. At other times he struggles with self-reproach: he should simply have lifted her onto his saddle and ridden off into the sunset in order to save her from hardship.

Essie is Lucas's *Princess of the Clouds*. He idolises her. He misses the good times that they have shared. By giving her the cypress twig, he has promised: "I shall love you, even beyond the grave."

Lucas stands reminiscing at the corner post of the Nooitgedacht meadow. He reminisces until the sun hovers above the horizon. Only then does he turn back to Nooitgedacht's homestead.

Lucas is confused. He has never asked for this, but yesterday he became aware of scanning the road for Faan and Albertha's arrival. Lucas realises that Albertha is beautiful. She is choosy and her father is very stern, but she is not in heaven; she's here on the neighbouring farm, *Rooikop*. Lucas is going courting on Saturday.

Straw or Wood?

Albertha also finds the week strenuous. She is concerned about how pa Stephanus will react on news of the visit. Pa Stephanus has a way of frightening off inexperienced sweethearts. Should he get to hear of the visit, he might just amble off to the hill that night and meet Lucas at the *kraal*. He will start a conversation about the weather and the crops and continue as though he has no idea that Lucas is on his way to her, Albertha.

There is also the complication of Faan and her younger brothers. One would expect Faan to have matured due to the hardships of war. But, no, he continues to tease Albertha. He might just put the other two brothers up to spying on her and Lucas through the fanlight over the door. It is too hot to close the half-door. The other two are always misbehaving. They may decide to walk past in on the pretext of having to visit the privy or saunter into the kitchen in order to drink of water from the jug in the kitchen.

Not that Albertha would allow Lucas any improprieties or that he is likely to take any liberties. Her father is the most cantankerous man in the *Renoster* River ward. He is Justice of the Peace. It surprises Albertha that the *Wildeboer* has the courage to come courting. She has witnessed Enna stifling her sobs in her pillows after pa Stephanus has driven suitors away. The young men that meet with Pa's expectations here at *Rooikop,* are few and far between.

Another matter causing Albertha to lie awake at night is whether she'll be allowed to make use of rouge. Pa and *oom* Sarel Cilliers are six of one and half a dozen of the other. They believe that humility and firmness of principle should be a woman's only assets. An attractive woman encourages the lusts of the flesh and this should be a matter of great concern to both the community as well as to her parents. Enna has not exactly set Father's mind at ease. She is both enticing and stubborn. Resourceful to boot. Pa expects his daughters to be submissive and well-behaved.

Albertha experiences mood swings. At times she twirls about in light hearted anticipation. These bouts of optimism are followed by deepest despair. In the week

building up to the visit, she grows flustered and absent-minded. She would love to wear her Sunday dress and put a little rouge on her cheeks. She will have to make use of the red cover of the hymn book. Should she make too much of a fuss, her brothers will draw Pa's attention on this. Perhaps it is advisable to rush off to her room after scripture reading and get Enna to help her with her hair. She has been watching Enna. Enna puts a little spit on her forefinger and then rubs the cover of the hymn book vigorously. Enna dabs this red stained finger over her cheekbones. She has to do so in a hurry, before the finger dries. That leaves a most attractive blush.

Pa Stephanus is also fond of repeating the sermon on the straw and the wood.

Albertha expects to hear this any night soon. She has noticed Enna rolling her eyes until the whites show when Pa starts sermonising. To pa Stephanus's knowledge, only two kinds of men exist: one kind can be likened to a stack of golden straw and the other resembles an uninspiring stack of wood. The straw, because it is such an impressive stack, seems to be of great value. The straw, according to Pa's opinion, resembles a dandy who is all pretence.

Then there are men like Vaalgiep Verkeerdevlei, one of Enna's earlier suitors to whom pa Stephanus has taken a liking. Salt of the earth, very respectful, nothing to say for himself, except: "Yes, oom Stephanus," every five minutes; a totally useless suitor, of course.

The self-assured, reckons Pa, are like the stack of straw. They easily proclaim their devotion. The flame of love burns high. Shortly after, they start neglecting the girl and she is left in the cold with blisters on her fingers and, for the rest of her life, sits in sackcloth and ashes.

Those like Giep, who are cautious and boring while courting, do not cause the girls to swoon. They are like the pile of wood: trustworthy! They remain a dependable source of heat .Such a man will look after his bride.

Enna has warned Albertha that Lucas does not resemble the dull pile of wood. As far as pa Stephanus is concerned, the Wildeboer's self-confidence will bring about

his fall. Albertha must be prepared for Pa's disapproval.

The Heart of a Mother

The human eye does not discern colour in heavy gloom; all colours turn shades of grey. There is rest for the spirit in this grey landscape, as the superficial events of the day are unable to penetrate this impaired vision. Self-examination returns and thoughts swarm back to what really matters in life.

Tonight Lucas feels like ripe milkweed that has burst open and is spreading throughout the world. The seeds are feather light. In vain he tries to repair his pain, as his thoughts reach out to a gossamer seed. His imprisonment has turned him introspective and he feels clumsy in the company of others. Everyone that has been precious, has been weeded from his life. Even the members of his family are now strangers to him.

This is where the milk-weed thistles float:

> To Greet that sometimes peers over his shoulder when he is performing his tasks at Nooitgedacht.
>
> To discussions with *oupa* Petrus somewhere on the slopes of the *Suikerbosrand*.
>
> To the farm school with Siemen as teacher, struggling to express his thoughts on the slate.
>
> To Essie at Grootvlei's corner post.
>
> To the Boer wars with Hoender and Maans at his side.
>
> To Netta and Geertrui.
>
> To his lonely imprisonment in Fort Ahmednagar.

Then, not even half the thistles have been dealt with. The rest still need to settle down.

Jan was the man who, at the time that Lucas felt lost after the farewells at Nooitgedacht, has healed his heart with his stories. It is Jan that he is looking for this evening. The workers huts sprout here, as used to be the case on Grootvlei, behind the gum trees.

It's quiet in the yard and even quieter in the kraal. The moon has run empty and the waggon shed suddenly looms in the darkness. Lucas walks towards the sound of voices, because the reed fencing around the worker's huts shuts out the light of the fire. He sees the reflected glow of the fire as he gets near and later notices the slits of light through the reeds.

Sometimes one takes a leap in time and you expect people to look much the same as when last you saw them. Everything in real life is not like in the fairy tales where the heroine is in her castle, fenced in by creepers, forever young. Places change and people age. He should have been prepared for the fact that Jan and Martha have aged.

There are a number of huts, unfired bricks or sods, plastered over with clay. The windows are small and a sheet of corrugated iron covers the door opening. Clever fingers have drawn coloured patterns on the walls. The fire makes shadows writhe against the cooking screen. Lucas only takes in the hues of the flames.

The conversation peters out when he walks into their circle. Even the young one moaning on Kleinmartha's back, stops moaning. There are about ten young ones ranging from knee high to window ledge tall. All movement ceases. Only the eyes glint. Jan has turned grey. Lucas greets him first. The woman sitting closest to the fire is a shrunken version of the Martha he has known as a child. Some exclaim. A few of the young ones cower shyly behind a dress. He is showered with hospitality and served with clabber and putu. They call him by the name they gave him at birth and it rolls easily off the tongue. Lucas has come home.

The people ask many questions, till late into the night, as though the Good Lord has made time stand still.

Tomorrow work needs to be done. The young ones go to bed and at last only Lucas, Jan and Martha remain sitting in the grey smoke. Lucas starts asking questions. He talks hesitantly. He wants to get this straight.

"You people, you and Kleinmartha and your daughters in law, you carry the babies on your backs. They play here all day long. You can keep an eye on the young ones. When they wish to drink, you simply untie the *abba* blanket and they only have to turn their heads. Their eyes fall shut and they simply wipe off the milk foam on your breasts. I was rejected by my parents when I was very young."

It is Martha that speaks. Lucas is surprised that she understands his feelings this well. "You feel that your mother has abandoned you too soon? That you have simply been swept away from the farm with the big rains and when you looked again, the other children have taken your place?"

She then says with great conviction: "I know your mother. I have been on this farm before she arrived. I had Kleinjan and three older brothers before she had you. Nooitgedacht is her people's land. She had to learn a lot still when she had you, because she was still quite stupid. One can say that I had to help her grow up for your father. I often heard you crying in the room and then I picked you up and you were red in the face with anger. Then I took you to your mother. Sometimes she would be sitting on the swing with her doll. Then she put the doll down and let you drink. But, she loves you."

"Later when she had grown up and you were gone I heard her crying. Because she missed you. One would talk to her, but she would not hear, because she was thinking of you. "

Jan does not talk. He sits shaking his head. Jan does not take his eyes off Lucas's face. Lucas stares into the fire. A light wind springs up and scatters the ashes around the fire. Martha has not finished speaking. She talks like she is admonishing him. She explains like someone that is going to explain this once only. Lucas listens closely.

"I'm going to tell you about the love of a mother. How strong it is. It's a story which goes back a long way."

This story comes from our people who have lived and died here. They say it has been in this area. The kraal is here. If we leave early in the morning, we may find the place. It's near a donga. A strong woman lives there. She is the mokgabisi of her people, because she can make beautiful things with her hands:

clay pots,

strings of beads,

patterns on the walls of the huts.

She makes beautiful patterns for her people, because her heart is beautiful:

crosses,

circles

and stripes.

She digs the red, the white and the black clay from the donga. Mokgabisi thinks of good things while she is working. She always sings of the great spirit in the sky and the cool depths of the pools. She has only the one son. They call him Mathambu. She abbas him while she is working. She rocks him gently when he cries. When he is thirsty, she sits with him in the shade of a tree so that he can drink. Mathambu is fat and she still abbas him. The people ask: "Mokgabisi, don't you get tired of carrying Mathambu? Just look at the size of his belly. Let him walk by himself. Look, he already wears a loincloth."

Then Mokgabisi answers: "I've promised the headman that when Mathambu does not drink from my breasts any longer, he can fetch him to the other kraal. The

headman will teach Mathambu many things. I must look after Mathambu so that the water baboon does not grab him.

Then Mokgabisi looks out far over the veld as though she is afraid of the day that the headman will come to take Mathambu. That day comes. Her eyes are full like the river when they come to take her son away. Her back feels cold and naked without the *abba blanket. She hangs many strings of beads around her body, but her voice is quiet.*

Mokgabisi has other children, but her thoughts are always with Mathambu. She says: "one day when I am old and my hands are bent from all the work, then Mathambu will come to fetch me. He will look after me, because he will hear that his father has left over the big waters."

The kraal of the headman is half a day's walk away. Mathambu remains fat, because he is the headman's only son. The headman's wives cannot give the headman a son. Mathambu get's everything that his heart desires. He grows big and strong. There is only one thing that he cannot have: the love of Nonkosi, the most beautiful young girl in the kraal. Nonkosi's face is full. Her lips are shiny and when she looks up, white clouds drift in the black of her eyes. She walks like a woman who is not ashamed of her body.

Zazini, the witch doctor, also lives in the headman's kraal. He is the bone-thrower who speaks for the ancestors. He kills small animals like the meercat and the musk-cat and hangs their bones together with the little bits of sinew and morsels of meat on the fence to dry. He uses this for muti. The people call him Butcher-bird. He strings the teeth of the leopard. They dangle around his neck. A copper ring pierces his ear. His eyes look right through you and people make way when he comes. The people fall face-down in his hut when there's trouble. Zazini's muti is strong. Such a man will never be weak. His medicine will always work. He will never say that his ancestors do not talk to him. He will not sit holding his head between his hands. He will say that the problem that the people have brought him is not important enough for the ancestors to listen to. Sometimes when his muti does not burn the throat or

make the sick person pass out or get better, he will say that his great-great-great ancestor has spoken too softly. The ancestor wishes to sleep. It is never Butcher-bird's fault that the people that have visited his hut waste away, or that the rain stays away, or that the people are hungry.

Nonkosi does not like Mathambu. She looks away when he dances at the fire until his loin-cloth bounces. She gets up when he comes to sit near her. She says: "tisk-tisk-tisk," and spits when she gets up. The other people see it and laugh softly into their milk-calabashes, so that only the whites of their eyes can be seen. Some choke when the milk runs down the wrong throat. They are scared to laugh when Mathambu watches them.

Her father also has no wish to give her to Mathambu, not even for big lobola. Mathambu thinks, "If I take very powerful muti to the witch doctor, then the butcher-bird will make the hearts of the girl and her father go soft. But the muti has to be very, very strong.

Mathambu then thinks: "People talk of my mother. They say that she is a wise woman with great powers. I will cut out her heart and take it to the Butcher-bird. That will be strong muti. I don't need a mother, I need a wife."

That night his mother is sleeping soundly. She is tired, as she has had to walk far to gather dried cow pats for the fire. Mathambu remembers the way to his mother's hut. He runs like the leopard. He flies like the owl. He cuts his mother's heart out. He puts it in the pouch made from tiger-cat pelt tied to his body.

Now Mathambu runs back to the headman's kraal. The sweat dries on his body, but he does not stop. He trips over the root of a tree. He falls full length so that his mother's heart slips from the skin pouch and bounces on the gravel. (Here Martha makes an appropriate sound with her tongue: the sound of raw flesh bouncing over gravel). Mathambu picks up the heart and wipes the sand off against his pouch. He does not want the witch doctor to complain that the heart is covered with sand and that for that reason the muti will not work.

When Mathambu wipes the gravel off the heart, the heart speaks: "Mathambu, my child, did you get hurt?"

That's the heart of a mother.



African folklore - A mother's heart

Jan has fallen asleep. Lucas realises why Jan and Martha's children are so obedient. Martha tells them these stories. Martha grabs hold of Lucas's hand when he

takes his leave. Her eyes glint with love for the boy she once knew.

Having heard this story, Lucas just wants to crawl into bed behind *ma* Susannah's back the way he sometimes did when he was a little boy, and clasp his arms around her. Today still, he'll build her a rock garden and whitewash the outer wall. Perhaps he should also replace some of the teetering perches in the chicken coop and fertilise the front garden with manure from the kraal. The screen door of the cold storage chamber is badly damaged and the back door requires a new lock. If he starts on these right away, he can have all these chores completed by sun up. One cannot predict if the opportunity to show ma Susannah gratitude, will ever present itself again.

English!

The Boer language is a language that grows and pushes out new shoots. It is precious to the Boer. When English is enforced on the Boer as the official and educational language, a mental block develops. There is resistance. The *Wildeboer* desires to learn. At the same time he finds English unpalatable.

The Boers describe this area of the Free State, as the land where brake shoes hew potatoes open. The land produces enough and then some. Lucas and his father farm progressively. To them farming is a way of life and living, not simply a way of getting cash on hand.

The Groblers of *Rooikop* and the van der Merwes of *Nooitgedacht* visit frequently. It's just that when the youngsters visit, Lucas is tongue-tied. Albertha's father is Peace Officer and a man not easily impressed. When *ma* Susannah's friends from the Cape Colony visit, they are mostly fluent in both Afrikaans and English. Lucas does not wish to cosy up to the English speaking friends, he merely wishes to hold his own. Some of the young friends attend the Paarl Girl's School. *Ma* Susannah is a Labuschagne of Huguenot descent and some of the *Niggies* holidaying here attend the La Rochelle Girls' High in the Paarl.

For some time now, Lucas has been quietly observing the opportunities his brothers and sisters are presented with. He notices that no effort is spared in carting them by horse cart to the school at *Honingspruit*. Lucas has met the principal, a Mrs Roux. During the Boer War she and her husband have moved into the waggon shed next to *tant* Sussie and *oom* Peens's place. Here she has given birth to a boy, during the last stages of the war, while ma Susannah and the brothers and sisters were in Aliwal North. She is young still, and has sensitive brown eyes. She also teaches English.

The *Wildeboe*r feels that this presents an opportunity to master English. As far as education and the luxuries of the world are concerned, he is a hind horse. Mrs Roux encourages Lucas to attend classes, especially since she has appointed a young teacher to teach English.

Some skills one acquires naturally, things like handling Merino sheep and knowing which characteristics are desirable in Afrikaner cattle. Lucas is familiar with grain farming, because his and pa Lukas's first wheat crop flourishes. Arithmetic and Dutch are child's play. He is not fluent in English, though. He is still at war with the English.

This morning he is on his way to the farm school at Honingspruit. Lucas is wearing the latest in breeches and his collar chafes. This does not prevent him from having a premonition of disaster. Once or twice he considers turning back, then two swallows circle over the grasslands, chirruping encouragingly, and the sun gently warms his back and shoulder blades. He reasons: "Most of the pupils at this school are greenhorns who still wear knee pants. Compared to them, I'm a man. I have nothing to fear."

She awaits him at the school door. Miss Williams is a delicate beauty. Just standing close to her, makes a man feel ill at ease. He should watch out for short temperedness; her eyebrows meet.

Lucas sticks to the English only. The other subjects present no difficulty. He is convinced that he is making good progress. What unsettles him, is her devoting most of her attention to him. It's like lighting lashing down on a rocky ridge.

Lucas struggles with the different pronunciations of the sound "o." Like in "only" and "one" and "obtain." Her soft lips distract him. She sounds the vowels while bending over his desk. This will not do!

She sees his eyes slip to her décolletage. Her breath is faint, damp, sweet on his face.

Lucas stammers. The class's attention is on Miss Williams every word. She then takes to him to task, actually threatening him with the quince stick. Even the question that he is required to answer, slips Lucas's mind.

"Hold out your hand."

Nonnie in the first row starts sobbing softly at the cruelty directed at her hero.

Lucas then decides to make a joke of this absurdity. He'll not take a hiding from this little wild cat; that would be humiliating. He extends his left hand, then jerks it back, holds out the right hand, palm up, retreats. She advances upon him in fury. Is this lout poking fun at her?

In every man's life there comes times that are imprinted on his memory. This is one such moment. It is a blessing that the weather is fine and that there is no fire in the fire-place:

Lucas retires to the hearth, stumbles backwards over the fire-screen and sits down in the ashes. The room pupils are dead quiet. Miss Williams may have won the battle, but she has just lost the war. Neither pleas, nor threats persuade the class to open their English books again.

For a while these Boer children have relived the wars. For them, as for Lucas, the British language has ceased to be of any importance. It resembles the ewe that lies prostrate behind the trough, all bloated and blue of groin, reeking to high heaven. The only solution is to bury it, the sooner the better. It attracts blow-flies.

Time will heal, God willing.

Albertha's Dreamscape

What Albertha would like to share, is the realism of the dreamscape. It is both palpable and visible. It emits clear sounds. It smells and tastes of reality. Sounds echo. Dreamscape dust can unleash an attack of hay fever.

Sleep refreshes, but it is a restless state, because limbs move at least once every fifteen minutes, sometimes even more frequently. Arms and legs seek out soft indentations in the mattress. Heads toss on pillows. The limbs start to relax. The muscles relax. Then follows an unexpected jerk. The mattress creaks. Sleep resumes its grip.

Albertha has had such a dream that night. Despite the pain throbbing in her foot, she has met with the man on the white horse (the one with the mourning-band round his sleeve, wearing a white button and a coil of black ribbon on the lapel of his jacket). The dream has repeated itself, but Albertha wishes to be convinced of the existence of this hero. One should not take liberties with dreamscapes and premonitions and Albertha has violated this belief. She has changed the version a little in order to entertain her audience. As a consequence her nights are now dreamless. She is cannot recall any dreams in the morning. She wishes to do penance. She does so by reading from Genesis 24. This she has done the past two Friday nights, following pa Stephanus's scripture reading, shortly after supper.

Tonight is the third Friday night. She has to identify her dreamscape-hero, because this would prevent her from making the wrong choices. She is aware of Lucas looking at her in a way that a girl simply cannot ignore. Tomorrow night is courting night and she reads Genesis 24 carefully. She reads chapter and verse, all about Jacob's servant that had to go and select Isaac a bride. She's very sleepy and her head drops onto the Bible, every so often, where she kneels in front of her bed on the sheep-skin. She then rereads from the very beginning, so as to be doubly reassured. Eventually Enna wants to know what is going on and Albertha replies that she is reading from Psalm 23, as this helps her to sleep restfully. She does not wish to chase off her husband-to-be by being frivolous. Enna has to be kept in the dark. The candle flickers lower and Albertha gnaws at her bottom lip in order to stay awake. The

flickering of the candle causes her to yawn. Enna's shadow moves against the opposite wall. Enna is coiling her hair around flannel strips. She is seated in front of the mirror. Albertha notices Enna watching her and cups her hands over the Bible.

Albertha shivers when she slips into the bed. Enna is asleep. Albetha quietly slips the Bible under her pillow. She jerks awake just as she finally settles. For a while she lies awake. She listens to the cry of a jackal on the *koppie*. The wind starts to gust. An owl hoots. It must be sitting on the ridge of the roof. She squints in the dark until her temples start throbbing.

All to no avail. Albertha smoothly slides from under the eiderdown. The mantelpiece clock clears its throat and eleven strokes reverberate. She shuffles to the pantry and pats along the middle shelf until her fingers touch the cold butter-milk jar. Her mother mumbles in her sleep. She stiffens. Albertha lifts the doily and takes a few small sips, straight from the jar. It's beautifully creamy and settles comfortingly in her tummy. When she slips into bed again, Enna has moved her arm onto her pillow. Albertha lifts it by the lacy frill of the sleeve and carefully drops Enna's arm onto her stomach. Albertha drifts off.

Albertha's eyes move under her eyelids. She is completely relaxed as dreams chase one another over the landscape of her dreams. These are dreams that she will not recall. Her long-awaited dream surfaces shortly before daybreak. She inhales the dust rising at the foot of the hill where the road dwindles up to the homestead.

Albertha listens to the hoofbeats. They strike against hard rock. That is the only dream-sound. The horse is white. It is the colour of milky cloud dribbling into tea. Its mane parts to reveal fiery eyes. The horse is prancing now.

It is unmistakable: Lucas is the horseman. He lifts his hat. His dark hair curls in the nape of his neck. Tonight he is wearing a new jacket that fits tightly around the broad shoulders. His eyes remain focused on her. There is no mourning- band. The night is very beautiful.

When Enna wakes up, she notices Albertha smiling in her sleep. Enna remains still and watches the fleeting expressions on her sister's face. She does not disturb this dream. When the morning light wakens Albertha, she looks directly into Enna's face. Enna only whispers softly: "Was it him, our Berthie?"

Enna reads the answer in the grey eyes. For a while the sisters lie in quiet embrace. One doesn't mess with a dream. There is sweet, there is bitter and there is heaven.

Anticipation

Enna and Albertha are busy baking and cleaning the house. The house smells of baking. Enna started early this morning and is lining up baking tray upon baking tray of biscuits. She does so with a flourish on the trestle table in the kitchen. She shakes the cookies out onto the cloth in the centre of the table. She wedges the sticky cookies apart with a bread-knife. The dough is hot and pliable still. The biscuits cool off under the gauze netting before being stored in the pantry.

Albertha is busy moving things and dusting in the dining room. In the house there are only two rooms where courting, after a very respectable fashion, is permitted: the dining room and the kitchen. Pa Stephanus has laid down this rule, as there are long tables in both these rooms. Here the young people can have a decent discussion, couples facing each other from opposite sides of the table. Suitors sit with their backs to the outside doors and the girls sit opposite the hall way. This way supervision is much easier. The hall way door remains open. Albertha has requested that they sit in the sitting room, as she wants Lucas to gain a good first impression. Enna and her Jorrie can move out to the kitchen later on, as Jorrie is a familiar face at Rooikop. No need to take excessive trouble to impress Jorrie.

Hopefully there will not be many saddles on the front veranda: that always causes difficulties. Enna promises to keep any unexpected visitors under control. Lucas and Albertha will be able to visit restfully. Albertha can always rely on Enna. She tells a young man to his face if he is not courting material and then sends him to lounge about with the brothers in their outside rooms. An unwanted suitor's ardour soon cools after a few visiting nights spent with Faan and his brothers in the outside rooms.

Albertha dusts. The dining room does not lend itself to intimate discussions, as pictures of pa Stephanus and one of her mother's parents cast beady eyes on proceedings. These are positioned above the hearth. They look grim. When she asks Mother about the expressions on their faces, she says that one should not be vain. A face should always appear expressionless on a photograph. The way the Good Lord

made you, so should the image be. The expressions should actually convey disapproval so that descendants do not confuse life with having fun.

The Dutch Authorised Version rests on its crocheted cloth, on the mantelpiece-shelf, next to the grandfather clock. This *clangs* the hour and half hour with reverberating strokes. Enna has admitted to Albertha that its ticking off of the time does not have the desired effect on her and her Jorrie.

Enna says that the big clock makes her feel that her young life is slipping away from her; she can sense the wrinkles grooving into her skin with every stroke tick of the clock. Then Enna would drop her handkerchief for Jorrie to pick up. He bends down and she gives him a kiss under the table. Some nights Jorrie's eyes stay glued to the handkerchief. It's always easier if it's winter or cooler, because then she can put the hanky in the wrist frills of her long sleeve. A hanky does not easily slip from a collar. When first he made her acquaintance, Jorrie steals kisses over the table, but one can never predict when pa Stephanus will walk past in the hall. To add to the discomfort, the table is quite broad and one's breasts bruise painfully when stretching over.

Albertha listens carefully to everything that Enna tells her. Enna says that it is always pleasant to make coffee in the kitchen. Then Jorrie assists with the heavy kettle and so on. These days Mother puts out a jug of home-made lemonade, drinking water and a few glasses so that it is not necessary to continually jump up to visit the kitchen. Enna believes that Mother has decided that Jorrie is not altogether the innocent young man he pretends to be. One feels a shiver running down one's spine when someone flits past in the passage or a shadow falls over the half door.

Enna is busy dressing Albertha's hair at the mirror. All the while she advises Albertha on courting. Like where to dab on Eau de Cologne; between the top wings of the bodice, a drop on her neck and two splashes on the wrists. It is very important to have a few embroidered handkerchiefs splashed with cologne. The smell of Eau de Cologne drives Jorrie wild and once he kept Enna's hanky for a week, till the next visiting night. He kept it in his shirt pocket the whole time.

Albertha and Enna look out for each other's interests. That's why Albertha is wearing Enna's new dress tonight. Enna persistently tests boundaries and has become very enterprising. The neckline of tonight's dress plunges slightly deeper than that of the last. It's less obvious when the lace handkerchief is pushed in there. Albertha can easily imagine a hanky slipping out during the course of the night. Especially a flimsy one.

It has turned dark. Tonight Albertha cannot recall a word of the scripture reading. The young people must always be able to answer a question or quote part of the reading after pa Stephanus has closed the Bible. His eye rests on each child around the table in turn. The older boys have left early tonight. They are courting on neighbouring farms. Pa's eye must have rested on Albertha for some while already before she feels the pressure. He never gives warning. He only sits looking at you and waits for an answer. Albertha is so unsettled that it takes an eternity before she realises that Pa is waiting on her to quote something meaningful. Albertha believes that he takes pleasure in her embarrassment, as she struggles with the High Dutch. This night Enna comes to her assistance by whispering softly into her lap: "*straf mij in uw gramschap niet!*"

Pa Stephanus must have heard Enna's prompting, but he merely looks at Albertha long and penetratingly. When pushing back the chairs, the legs scrape over the floor.

At long last Albertha is seated in front of the dressing table while Enna plaits her hair. Albertha sees Enna's face in the mirror. Her eyes glow by the light of the candle. Enna has hair-pins in her mouth and talks from the corner of her mouth: "At first you must make as though you do not care whether Lucas stays or leaves. Just smile in his direction. Vaguely. Almost as though you thoughts are with someone else. At times I still do this with Jorrie; pretend that I would not care he fell down dead at my feet. Then watch him trying to impress! That's the only way to hold on to a man.

We can play *Piet Swartvark* for a while till you start enjoying your conversation, but Lucas looks a bit grown up; perhaps he is a little too old for fun and games …

because of the war and the fort, you know."

Albertha is impressed by Enna's wiles. She sits wide-eyed. She is blushing. This is not from the cover of the hymn book; they haven't got to that yet. Her whole body prickles with goose flesh. She is keen, but a little scared too. Then she notices Enna winking at her in the mirror and she breathes freely again.

"Well, you look just like a doll. I can't do anything more for you. There's someone on the front veranda. I must still comb my hair. Away with you. If it's Jorrie, tell him to wait."

It is Jorrie. Albertha calmly lets him in and leaves him to sit on his own in the sitting room, waiting for Enna. Albertha watches for Lucas from behind the Veranda pillar. It's windy on the front veranda, but her discomfort is forgotten when the white horse comes prancing up to the house. Albertha forgets everything … also that she should not run to meet him! All thoughts flee her mind when he stands in front of her. Enna might have laced up her stays too tightly, as she can hear her own heartbeat. She wonders if Lucas can also hear it. It is a good thing that awkwardness is no mortal sin.

It's just past eleven when the two suitors mount their horses to leave. Luckily the moon is full: the sisters watch their departure through a gap in the bedroom window. The suitors are well aware of being watched.

The jar of Rimmel Poumade

It is not only women that tend to be vain. Lucas is a handsome man. He takes pride in his handlebar moustache. He is well-groomed. Spotless on courting nights. One cannot help but notice the *Wildeboer*. He has spent most of his young life as *oom* Koos's stock herder. Here, at Nooitgedacht, he becomes his own man again.

Everyone needs personal space. More so Lucas, as a direct result of time spent in Fort Ahmednagar. Here at Nooitgedacht, he is surrounded by a number of younger brothers. They watch him. To make matters worse, ma Susannah has banished all her sons to the outside rooms. By way of speaking, they live on one another's doorstep.

Lucas usually leaves his jar of Rimmel moustache-pomade on the wash-stand next to the ewer in the outside room. It is an expensive product that he uses sparingly; a screw-top jar with a metal lid. Lucas stores the empty jars with the boys' combs, scissors and toilet soap in the drawer of the wash-stand.

Lucas has little time to waste during the week. He devotes himself to the farming at Nooitgedacht. Pa Lukas and he are raising a productive dairy herd. The calves are Lucas's responsibility and there is to be no questioning his decisions. Tonight Lucas sits with a blank sheet of paper in front of him. There is a trellis table in the third room of the outbuildings. The design of the outbuildings is similar to that of boarding rooms: a rectangular building with rooms opening onto a communal verandah. Lucas is designing a kraal for calves.

It is a neat drawing, as Lucas makes use of a protractor and ruler. He measures out a rectangle of thirty inches by forty inches (1" = 3'). Inside this rectangle he draws sixteen stalls in two rows. Walkways are designed between the pens and a run goes all the way round. Drainage ditches are provided at the entrance to each stall. He provides for a concrete floor with a good gradient down to the drainage ditches. Against the back wall of each stall he provides for a feeding trough and space for a milk tray. He leaves the stalls open on the Northern side to allow for winter sun. There is sufficient space between walls and roof for good ventilation.

As he does the calculations, he envisages the dot-sized calves growing and moving off to the grazing. They will spend part of the day with the cows. He is so absorbed by making provision for this herd, that the dots of calves start swimming in front of his eyes. Drowsiness has this effect on him; lines merge. He puts his drawing materials away to prevent the whole herd from gambolling off the paper.

Lucas extinguishes the lamp. For a while he sits in the dark listening to the nightjar. He must warn all the youngsters on the farm to steer clear of its nest. A few nights in succession, he has noticed the owlets with their pale heart-shaped faces peering out from under the overhang of the shed. Then the "sjreee" shrieks across the yard.

Just as he wants to push back his chair, Lucas hears the shuffling on the veranda. Somebody is on his way to the wash-stand and the water buckets in the last room. It has to be Johnnie, as Johnnie has the habit of dragging his feet, boots unlaced, at night. Lucas follows him quietly. In the washroom, Johnnie unscrews Lucas's jar of pomade. By the moonlight through the window, Lucas sees him applying a liberal dab of pomade to his upper lip. Lucas retires to his room.

If not for the waste, Lucas could have overlooked the matter. As it is, he has to buy a new jar from Coulson's in Kroonstad every second month. Johnnie doesn't even have traces of down on his face. It is clear that the young man wishes to grow a moustache.

During the course of the next day Lucas takes an empty jar from the middle drawer of the wash stand. He fills it with a mixture of *duiwelsdrek* and moist dung. He replaces the original jar with the new one and places this next to the bar of green soap.

It's amusing to see Johnnie leaving the washroom with a gleaming upper lip. He walks up wind, sniffing, searching around the outside rooms for the carcass that smells to high heaven. He realises that he has been had coin when he hears Lucas laughing. Knowledge of guilt colours the boy's face.

Lucas does not proverbially rub his victory in. He merely remarks in passing: "One day you'll get your own, when you have need for it, hey, Johnnie?"

The Party

The family are relaxing on the veranda at Nooitgedacht. It is late Sunday afternoon. Faan and Albertha have popped in for a visit. Albertha sits quietly next to Lucas on the thong bench. Lucas has moved up so that there is not much room between him and Faan. Albertha sits here wedged in, fiddling with her hanky. She's actually very happy. She has become part of the family here at Nooitgedacht.

Pa Lukas believes that there is a storm brewing. A few days running it has been oppressive. The croaking in the *vlei* has grown subdued. The rain will bring relief. Faan insists: "Lucas, you are a man that can tell a story. Tell us a story about a rainstorm."

Lucas starts relating hesitatingly, while gently stroking Albertha's forearm with his fingers.

It's summer and a visitor, call him Jan, loses his way just this side of Lindley. The lighting is lashing out. It grows dark as pitch. He is discouraged, because his horse is worn out and the cloud to cloud lightning lights up the plains. There is no place to shelter. The countryside is as flat as the palm of your hand. Then a swishing sound starts from afar and the rain starts pelting with a vengeance.

The storm starts rumbling. Jan slides from the horse, as it is on the verge of collapsing. He shields his face and looks out over the plains, still holding on to the reins. He is drenched and starts shivering. A bolt of lightning flashes. Claps of thunder follow in quick succession. Jan spots a light flickering. He sets off in that direction. He leads his horse in through the farm gate. The name-board creaking on rusty hinges at the gate reads: "Lekkersing."

The name is appropriate, as the homestead is lit with lanterns and every single gate and door has been flung open: the garden gate, the waggon house doors, the barn door and the homestead door. The yard has been churned into a muddy mess by all the people moving between the homestead and the waggon house. There is laughter and singing. There is dancing in the waggon shed. The thunder is almost

drowned out by the piano-accordion. On approaching, he realises why no one is taking much notice of the weather. To speak bluntly: they are all drunk as lords. Every so often cries of: "Grab onto the rafters!" resound over the front garden.

It is difficult to communicate with anyone, but one girl is particularly friendly and she grabs Jan a dry shirt from a cupboard. She wants to help him get dressed, but Jan insists, no thanks, he will manage that all by himself. He has been getting dressed by himself since the tender age of four and there's no need for reverting to helplessness now.

Everybody in the kitchen is pretty jolly. Some of the women are sitting on the table or on available laps. Very gaily dressed they are, as well! One young fellow encourages Jan to take a few slugs directly from a bottle, as brewing coffee is a lot of trouble. The braaivleis fires are rained out and the pot bread is finished.

Because he has not eaten for some time, the moonshine makes Jan queasy. Jan feels as if he is dangling from the roof beams by his legs. The music makes his stomach turn and the dancers continue to entwine. Nothing makes a lot of sense.

At last he falls onto a bed. He is aware of music booming all night. The violin makes such sharp turns and the dancers' feet thud so vigorously, that the bed shakes. This continues till dawn. Jan eventually pulls the eiderdown over his head so that the cold streams of perspiration wet the pillows. He falls asleep almost suffocated by the smell of damp goose down.

The next morning he wakes with the sun on his face. His head throbs. He opens his eyes slowly. Then he is scared sober. He is lying on a cracked manure floor. Around him a few unfired bricks set out the foundations of what used to be a farmhouse. It must have rained a lot, as there are big puddles of water. A rusted name board, hung from the gate post, creaks in the sharp breeze that has sprung up. It reads: "Lekkersing."

There is no sign of life. A hen is squatting on a pile of straw. She is watching him with black, beady eyes. She gets up, scratches in the dirt for a bit, looks at him with

her head held skew and keeps on cackling. It's as though the hen wishes to tell him something, because she keeps on watching him and pecking in his tracks.

Jan's first thought is to chase the hen away, but his legs are wobbly. With a rain-soaked hat, he listlessly waves in her direction. He starts chasing her and stumbles over the skeleton of a horse. His face turns white with fright, as he fears this might turn out to be Hessie's skeleton. When Jan scans the yard, he sees Hessie grazing under a poplar tree. The reins are still dangling loosely. He then realises that the Boer woman of Lekkersing must have put the skeleton there to keep the hawks from attacking the chickens.

Immensely relieved at the fact that his horse has survived the storm, Jan addresses the chicken: "Old hen, it seems to me as if you and I are the only ones to have survived the storm."

Having swallowed the last ground bug, the hen looks him in the eye and cackles:

"My name is Miss Vermaak,

I dance through the night in the dark"

Fortunately Hessie was already saddled, because Jan's next stop is half a day's journey on, at a newly built homestead. The people here tell him about the parties and vulgarities always taking place at Lekkersing. It has been during one of their licentious dances a year or so ago that lightning struck the homestead and burnt it all down to the foundations. Not one of the guests has survived. Apparently they have all been too drunk to flee. One does not wish to say anything bad about the dead. Most people in this area believe that it has been a warning to sinners.

The people offer Jan coffee and rusks and he quickly recovers. As he looks down to wipe the crumbs from his shirt, he realises that he is wearing a shirt that he has never seen before.

The Engagement Ring

This morning a few clouds scud in the breeze. These clouds drift lazily over Kroonstad; disorderly clouds like skeins of wool waiting to be ordered and graded. They grow into massive thunder heads. Lucas and Albertha are standing on the sidewalk in front of the Crystal Palace, the jewellers, at Kroonstad. Albertha's hand rests lightly in the crook of Lucas's arm. Flashes of lightning light up their reflections in the jeweller's window. Albertha is wearing her new dress with the full skirt and her new leather boots. She is wearing a straw bonnet and her face is aglow with trust and happiness. There's a ribbon in her plait. If she turns her head sharply, the tip brushes against the sleeve of Lucas's jacket. They stand behind the decorative iron pillar and Albertha shivers lightly. Lucas looks down at her and covers her hand protectively with his.

His fingers brush the engagement ring. They have just selected this stone and setting. It is the year 1904 and because of the dimmed tissue-paper light, the electric lamps above the cabinets have been switched on. Lucas has taken pains selecting this stone, as pa Lukas and his uncles have made their fortunes at Cullinan and are familiar with the diamond industry. The rings in the cabinets are displayed in their velvet grooves. They reflect the light in a riot of hues: delicate rose, shades of opalescent blue and champagne. They flash rainbows of colour against the walls and in Albertha's eyes. Albertha embraces herself, quite overcome.

Now she is admiring the diamond on her finger; cut and polished, glinting twenty four facets. These represent the facets the woman in Albertha possesses, as hardship has cut her to the core. The stone consists of hard lines and soft grooves and a forceful blow on a specific flaw can crack, chip, split or splinter it. Albertha is vulnerable. Lucas wants to slip off the ring. He wishes to propose properly and propose in the moonlight on the verandah of his parents' town house. Albertha smiles playfully and shakes her head. She clenches her fist till the ring finger turns white.

Lucas lets be. He kisses her lightly on her forehead: "You are very precious."

A more romantic setting for an engagement would be hard to imagine, as a strong updraft carries the raindrops upwards, where drops freeze before swooping down like glass hair onto the jeweller's corrugated iron roof and sending crystals clattering down the street. Frozen drops, on their return to the white cloud palaces, are again carried to the pinnacle of the storm. Thin, needling rain drifts aslant in the lamplight; like something about to be remembered. In her white dress, Albertha is standing in the icy aftermath of the storm: an ice princess. She cuddles up against Lucas's shoulder.

Pa Lukas and ma Susannah have already retired to bed. Lucas and Albertha sit in his parent's town house in Truter Street. Albertha has draped a crocheted shawl around her shoulders. This week his family spends at their town house. *MA* Susannah has supervised the sweeping, dusting and airing of the bedding.

Ma Susannah has accepted Albertha as one of her very own. The previous day they have been to Mr Jubber to select the wedding cake. One does not entrust a wedding cake to the fickleness of a kitchen oven. The engagement photograph is to be taken at Mr Lund's studio. *Ma* Susannah has taken Albertha to Mooney and Gowlett to inspect the finest gowns. It's quite nerve racking to surrender in this manner, but *ma* Susannah is a lady of impeccable tastes and there is no second-guessing her choices. Lucas has been outfitted from top to toe at the men's outfitters. He'll never have to strip a Khaki for clothing again. He has every intention of dressing well.

Albertha is swept along by her in-laws' enthusiasm. Every now and again she touches the ring. Lucas sits at her feet. He tells her of the farm that he has bought her, Albertha; the farm *Steenkampsdam* situated in the district of *Honingspruit*. Lucas talks about the location of the farm, the lay of the land and the fertility of the soil. Albertha does not take in much of all this. Her mouth is curved into a little smile Her eyes are on Lucas's moustache and the slight cleft in his chin. He has a strong neck and large hands that would comfortably encircle her waist if she slips on her new bodice. There is a glint of grey in his eyes and a hint of blue around the pupils. When

he laughs, the smile grows in the clear irises and fans out over his face. His dark hair is parted on the left, like that of his father Lukas.

Lucas believes that Albertha is listening intently, hanging onto his every word. He tells of the previous owner of the farm, Steenkamp, who has built a dam against the slope on this farm, so that everyone capable of looking after a potted plant has doubts to air about this. He, Lucas, sees the possibilities. Using his index finger, he draws a map on the sheep skin mat. He moves ma Susannah's fruit bowl under the skin so that it bulges. The opening of the bowl is facing upwards. Here he pushes the skin into the bowl to represent the dam. Further along the bulge, in the shape of ox horns, he draws two channels on either side of the catch dam. The channels are to feed water into the dam during the rainy season. Below the dam, on the slope towards the hind legs of the skin, lie the irrigation fields. The irrigation channels would need to be cleared, if necessary by a dam scraper or a pair of oxen and a plough.

Albertha watches the fleece resume its shape where the fingers have dented it, so that the outline becomes an undisturbed fleece. She can picture the homestead, to the left. She can see the rose garden if she looks well. The wheat-, tobacco-, pumpkin- and maize fields remain vague. The stud animals stampede into the skein of wool and the vlei and the spruit with its thorn trees and shrubs blur. She sees the yard and a pepper tree and hears children's voices.

Lucas explains that Petrus le Roux also sees farming possibilities in this area. They will buy the land as partners. With his fingertips, Lucas feels the dark clay of the vlei. He smells the humus of rotted plant material behind the plough share.

Here he will breathe freely, God willing.

The Wedding Celebrations

It is a sanctified ceremony, in good taste, without excess, but with a hospitality that tells that the pantry shelves are still packed. No shortages here. The day is cloudless; the seasons are moving towards spring.

Under her veil, thoughts work their way across Albertha's face. The train of the dress trails over the lawns. Some of the dried rose petals that the guests have sprinkled over Lucas and Albertha and these cling like blessings to the heavy satin folds. The bridal bouquet is made up of rose buds, with a sprinkling of gypsophylia and a fern leaf. Her love for Lucas is gentle, discreet. If it were a plant, it would be much like the fern in her bouquet; light green and delicate. The ice princess' skin is pale like porcelain and her cheeks are hot with exertion. She has slept little during the previous night. Albertha looks up, catches Lucas's eye and walks up to her husband. "My foot is hurting, Lucas."

Lucas clears a space on the table, puts his hands around her waist and sits her on the cloth. He unties her laces and cups the foot in his hand. He starts rubbing the foot with infinitesimal patience. "Tell me of your dream, our Berthie?"

Her mind soars as if he'd thrown it into the air.



Lucas, Albertha and family in later years

Lottie Lucas Albertha pregnant with Jan Fanie Lucas (Author's Father) Grietha Bertha