

THE RUNAWAY HORSES



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Joyce Kotzè

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*All, everything I understand, I understand
only because I love.*

Leo Tolstoy,
War and Peace [1869]



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Background

Fact

In 1835 thousands of Cape Dutch trekked from the Cape Colony into the hinterland of southern Africa to escape British domination. They were called Boers and founded two independent republics, the Orange Free State and the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, known as the Transvaal. Antagonism against the British grew among generations of Boers, and came to fever pitch following the discovery of the world's richest gold deposits, in the Transvaal in 1886.

Fiction

Sir Andrew Stewart, attached to the Cape parliament in the mid-19th century, had two daughters, Susan and Mary. They grew up in England but visited the Cape Colony regularly. Susan married a cavalry officer, Captain Stuart Henderson, and remained in England. Mary met a Transvaal Boer, Marthinus de Winter, who was at the time a student in Cape Town. She married him and settled in the Transvaal.

Thus it came about that the two sisters reared their children in very different circumstances: Charles and James Henderson as minor British gentry; their De Winter cousins, Martin, Stefanie and twin brothers Karel and Rudolf, as Boers.

In 1886, Susan Henderson brought her sons to Wintersrust, the De Winter family farm near Rustenburg, to meet their Boer cousins.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

SOUTH AFRICAN

Marthinus and Mary de Winter
Martin, Stefanie and twins, Karel and Rudolf – their children
Tante Koba van Wyk – sister of Marthinus
Oubaas de Winter – grandfather of Marthinus and Koba
Joep and Lettie Maree
Buks and Annecke – their children
Lena Maree – Buks's wife
Anita Verwey – nursing sister at Rustenburg
Paul Warren – lawyer for the administration of the Cape Colony
Jan Viljoen – farmer and friend of the De Winters
 His brothers – Frans, Jacob and their sister, Ester
Patrick McFee – Irish sympathiser of the Boer cause

BRITISH

General Sir Stuart Henderson and Susan, sister of Mary de Winter
Charles and James – their sons
Lord Harcourt – brother of Stuart Henderson
Beatrice, Lady Harcourt
Victoria Fairfield – only child of Lord Fairfield
Peter Radford – second son of an aristocrat
Officers of the 2nd Hussars:
 Colonel Norman Butcher: commanding officer
 Major George Hunter, Captain Murray Shaw
 Lieutenants Mark Sinclair, John Miles, William Moore, Neil Smithers
 Major Frank Crofton-Smith – surgeon

HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

Paul Kruger (Oom Paul) – President of the Transvaal
Jacobus de la Rey (Oom Koos) – Boer commander, Transvaal
Adriaan de la Rey – son of Jacobus de la Rey
Piet Cronjé – Boer commander, Transvaal
Christiaan de Wet – Boer commander, Free State
Jan Smuts – Transvaal State Attorney and Boer commander
General Kitchener – British commander-in-chief in South Africa

Prologue

Wintersrust, September 1902

THE FULL MOON sinks behind the mountain, leaving the land to dawn. At the blackened ruin of a farmstead, a man stands like a ghost, his eyes on a woman in the graveyard.

She kneels at the older tombstones. Her fingers travel over the names on the granite. At the graves of those who died recently she stands, wringing her hands. There are only wooden crosses on the mounds of earth.

The man sags to his haunches, his back against the stone wall, his hands between his knees. It started three years ago, the relentless flight of the wild horses. They followed the leader's dream, trusting implicitly, but now the dream lies shattered in the graveyard, the ravaged farmstead, the desolation of the veld. Some stayed to the end. Some broke away from the herd. Those are the runaway horses. The survivors. The wounded souls.

This day they will return to find solace in shared sorrow and forgiveness, to go to the place where guilt and blame do not exist, where only peace reigns.

The sun creeps across the farm, the light gentle, beautiful. His eyes travel over the empty cattle kraals, the unploughed fields and come to rest on the mountain in the near distance. He recalls the shrill voices of children at play in the summer of 1886 ...



PART ONE

THE SUMMER OF 1886

*My child, we must still think, when we
That ampler life together see,
Some true results will yet appear
Of what we are, together, here.*

A.H. Clough
'What We, When Face to Face' [1849]



The Meeting of Cousins

Wintersrust, Transvaal, 1886

THE FACT THAT HE HAD BRITISH COUSINS, not ordinary English-speaking folk, but *proper* British cousins, had never troubled Martin de Winter. It belonged to his mother's distant childhood, a time that did not fit into their lives here on the farm. It was like a tale in a book or a reading from the Bible: the story was known but there was no evidence to substantiate it. Charles and James Henderson existed only in letters that his mother received from her sister in England, every month a new chapter.

But now he was about to meet head-on with the evidence; his cousins, sons of a Redcoat colonel, the enemy, were on their way to the Transvaal.

Martin balanced on a branch in the tallest milkwood tree by the drift. His father had left for Rustenburg to collect the Hendersons off the stagecoach and he was watching for the return of the horse-cart.

Waiting stretched the afternoon into eternity. The heat was unsparing. Not a breath of wind played with the leaves of the marula and wild olive trees. And in the distance the mountain fused with the scorching sky, the sun still a hand-span from the tall peak in the west. His eyes travelled to Soetvlei, the neighbouring farm. The Maree family was on a visit to Kuruman and would only return the following month. He needed Buks Maree, his friend, on this day of all days, but Buks didn't like the *Engelse* either. He would only have made matters worse.

'You're not looking properly! Dust! Over there,' came his sister's dramatic voice from under the tree. In English! Stefanie had refused to speak Afrikaans since the news of the Hendersons' visit.

Martin turned his gaze to the vlei. Plodding past the ploughed fields were the cattle, a movement of multicoloured hides, black-tipped horns, sharp as Zulu spears, catching the sun. Bleating their way to the opposite side of the vlei came the sheep. They would not drink together. Cattle, sheep, horses; each to their own kind. Like Xhosa and Zulu.

Like Boer and Brit.

'It's Old Klaas bringing the cattle to water,' he called down to Stefanie.

'Do they wear shoes, Ouboet? I won't! Never!' Karel shouted up to Martin.

'Must we speak English all the time?' Rudolf asked. 'Like Ma and Stefanie?'

Squatting under the tree, his six-year-old twin brothers gaped at him like baby barn owls.

'Of course we have to speak English,' Martin said. 'The English only speak English, stupid! They don't know a word of Afrikaans. Not a word!'

'What do they look like, I wonder?' Karel called.

Martin had no notion what his cousins looked like. He and his brothers resembled their father in all details; brownish-blond hair, deep blue eyes and square chins. Their cousins probably took after his mother: light-brown hair, slight of build.

'Well, Charles is fourteen. Short and fat?' Martin said. 'James is eleven. Thin and scrawny, like our sister?'

'I'm not scrawny! I'm small and delicate. And almost ten.' Stefanie tossed her blonde plait over her shoulder. 'Our cousins are like me. Grand and English.'

'Missy-prissy!' Karel yanked at her pinafore.

'Oh, let go, you little pest!' She aimed a kick at him.

Rudolf grabbed her foot, pulled her down and a scuffle ensued. Martin scaled down the tree and separated his siblings.

Rudolf sank back on the ground. 'We'll be called traitors. Our uncle is a Redcoat.'

'We'll be lower than baboon shit.' Karel spat to his left.

'Ma says his coat is blue, not red,' Stefanie said, 'with gold – real gold – buttons. Oh, I wish I could see it!'

'Be thankful that he's not coming.' Martin glared at her. 'Oh yes, Pa would say he's welcome. Pa welcomes all, be they British or not. But we will show the cousins that a Boer can hold his own against the British.' He turned to his brothers. 'To those who dare call us traitors, we'll say: the only way to get to know your enemy is to live with him, eat with him, speak his tongue, get to know his ways. Is this simple truth not known to them?'

'What will you tell the cousins?' Karel demanded.

'The instant the Hendersons set foot on Wintersrust, I shall tell them that the victory at Majuba made the Transvaal our country, our birthright, never to be taken ...'

'You always speak like a *predikant*.' Stefanie sniffed and strode off, but halted abruptly, pointing wildly to the dust cloud on the road. 'They're coming! They're here!'

‘Run! Run!’ Martin sped off, followed by the others, all calling to the house that the moment was upon them.

THEY ARRIVED breathless at the house and gathered at the steps leading onto the stone-flagged stoep. Their mother, Mary, wearing an everyday cotton dress, hair rolled into a bun at the nape of her neck, apron round her waist, stood next to the little table holding the tea things, cakes and rusks. No coffee today; the English preferred tea. Oubaas de Winter, their battle-scarred great-grandfather, nodded in his wicker chair next to the big potted fern.

The horse-cart, top-heavy with a portmanteau and suitcases, slowed down as their father reined in the horses. He alighted, opened the door and helped his sister-in-law to the ground. Stefanie sucked in her breath. The twins moved closer to each other, Rudolf twisting his pinkie around Karel’s. Here, clad in a navy-blue outfit and an enormous hat with upright glossy feathers, a gauze veil covering her face, was the elegant lady who lived in their mother’s stories. They had never seen the likes of her, not even in Pretoria. She stumbled delicately on the gravel, but smiled when her sister approached with open arms.

Martin did not pay attention to their tearful reunion. His eyes were riveted on the cousins emerging from the hooded cart. And there they stood, dark-haired, handsome, tall and lanky. Dressed in knee-length trousers, high socks, black boots and grey blazers, they were grand indeed.

The taller one, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles, stepped forward, hand outstretched. ‘*Bly te kenne. My naam is Charles Henderson, jou ... hmm, neef ... cousin?*’

Martin was struck speechless. Afrikaans! Before he could gather his wits, Charles continued: ‘I’ve been practising Afrikaans. I want to speak it properly and hope that you will help me master it. Delighted to meet you at last. Are you Marthinus?’

Martin shook Charles’s thin hand formally. ‘Yes, Marthinus Johannes de Winter. I’m thirteen, the oldest and thus have my father’s name, but I’m still called Martin as I’m not married yet.’

Charles’s eyebrows lifted a fraction, but his smile widened.

‘Say it!’ Karel hissed from behind Martin.

Martin planted his bare feet apart and stood arms akimbo. ‘It would serve you well to keep in mind that this is Boer country. Victory at Majuba ...’ he hesitated as Charles’s face lit up, his smile spreading to keen brown eyes behind the lenses.

‘Majuba, 1881. Yes, the victory secured the Transvaal’s independence, and rightly so. I’ve read all I could find on your country’s history and customs. One should not rely solely on what’s taught at school. It’s so ... well, partial, don’t you think?’

Martin stared at Charles, flabbergasted. He had not imagined this from his cousins. Shame at his hostility engulfed him and all at once he was keen to make amends. ‘Welcome to Wintersrust. We all hope that you will have an enjoyable stay. Welcome.’ Taking Charles by the elbow, he guided him the few steps to his siblings. ‘My sister, Stefanie.’

‘Cousin Stefanie, delighted.’ Charles pecked her on the cheek, which left her blushing, and the twins sniggering.

‘My brothers, Karel, Rudolf.’ Martin yanked Karel closer by the hair and twisted his neck. ‘See here, this one, Karel, has this nick on the ear; that’s the way to tell them apart.’

Charles inspected the scar and nodded. ‘Yes, yes, I see. Karel, Rudolf. I’ve been looking forward to getting to know you.’ He half-turned, indicating his brother.

‘This is James.’

James pushed his thick brown hair from his forehead and offered his hand. Deep dimples formed in his cheeks as he produced a tentative smile.

‘You are very, very pretty.’ Stefanie reached for his hand.

James shot her a furious look, clasped his hands behind his back and went to the stoep.

‘He doesn’t like it, having such good looks,’ Charles whispered.

Martin nodded, impressed that Charles was sharing secrets so soon after they had met. He led the way onto the stoep and introduced his cousins to his mother. Mary fussed over her nephews, which Charles clearly welcomed by the way he hugged her, but James bore it with a frown. Then came the turn of the De Winter children to be introduced.

Stefanie held her pinafore wide and curtsied grandly. ‘I’ll play the piano for you, Aunt Susan. I play well, very well indeed.’

‘Braggart!’ said James.

‘Manners, James,’ his mother chided and inclined her head towards Stefanie. ‘I look forward to it, girl.’ The feathers on her hat bobbed as she offered her pale cheek to the twins.

‘It’s our Aunt Susan. Give her a little kiss,’ Martin encouraged as the two stared.

‘There’s a rooster on her head! She’s a witch,’ Karel shouted.

Martin elbowed backwards, hitting Karel on the chin. He retaliated with a kick to Martin’s calf. Martin sent an apologetic smile to his aunt.

'I'm sorry, Aunt Susan.'

'Oh, it's quite all right,' she said. 'We'll get to know each other later. Won't we?'

'Susan, meet our grandfather, our dear Oubaas de Winter,' Mary intervened, taking her sister to the old man's chair. He appeared asleep, his wild grey beard resting on hands clasped around a walking stick. Mary placed her face close to his ear. 'Oubaas, my sister and her children have arrived from England.'

'Hey? Hey?' He tilted his head.

'My sister and the boys! From England!'

'Hey? *Engeland?*' He peered at the visitors and then spat into the spittoon by the side of his chair. His walking stick shot out, snaring Susan's dress at the hem.

James scowled. 'What's wrong with him?'

Martin looked to his father, who was still at the horse-cart. He was scratching his beard, hiding a smile behind his hand. 'Never mind, young James,' Marthinus said. 'He's very old and his mind is wandering.'

Charles, avoiding the walking stick, introduced himself to Oubaas.

'Zulus! *Engelse!*' Oubaas shooed him away.

'Martin, help your cousins with their luggage and then bring them for tea,' Mary ordered and led her sister to a chair.

Stefanie lifted her chin, smoothed her hair and followed her aunt. Martin eyed James and found his brown eyes sizing him up.

CHARLES HENDERSON HAD always been eager to meet his Boer cousins; they were his only cousins, after all. But what he found here was not what he'd imagined. Yes, the cousins were wild and sunburnt, but, although not refined in manner and speech, they were educated and spoke English without effort.

Within a few days, he became fond of them. Stefanie with her wild blonde hair and blue eyes, was assertive, fighting her brothers to establish her assumed superiority. She practised the piano with the same determination. The little ones, Karel and Rudolf, were secretive and were usually found with their father, clinging to the stirrups when Marthinus rode his daily inspection of Soetvlei, in the absence of the Marees. And Martin – a confident boy, serious-minded yet affable, making every effort to welcome them.

'Beware, this cousin is dangerously intelligent,' James had whispered to

Charles on the second night. 'Those sharp blue eyes are always searching for intent, and he never misses an opportunity to boast about the Boers and his country.'

But it was the vastness and magnificence of Wintersrust that overwhelmed Charles. The mountain to the south was imposing in its rich beauty. The foothills led to the cliffs that formed a craggy outline against the sky. Streams ran down the tree-clad gullies coming together in the vlei, an expanse of water fringed by willows. The ploughed fields sloped down to the stables and cattle and sheep enclosures. Near the house was the orchard, heavy with the summer's yield. The thatched farmstead, with its wraparound stoep, seemed to rise out of the soil.

The interior of the stone house was simple, yet gracious in its own way. The walls were plastered and whitewashed, the floors covered with animal hides. A large dining table occupied the far end of the central room. There, every night after supper, Marthinus opened the large brass-bound Bible for the nightly reading and prayers. Above the fireplace hung a lithograph depicting the Battle of Blood River. The picture seemed to fascinate James, and he pestered his uncle about every detail of the battle. The many bedrooms led off this central room. From the kitchen wafted the aromas of baking and cooking, spicing the symphony of clattering pots and pans and the chattering of Mary and her two kitchen maids. A woman's domain, his uncle had warned – bottling fruit, making jam, slapping butter, curing meat.

While Charles spent his mornings in and about the house, mostly with Stefanie at the piano or sitting with the old grandfather drinking coffee on the stoep, James roamed the farm with Martin, hunting game birds in the foothills of the mountain, riding the Boer horses at a fast gallop and even helping Martin with his chores. Yet Charles sensed that Martin's patience with James was not going to last. James was confrontational, quick to anger and reckless, never considering the repercussions of his actions. To all appearances, they were getting on well, but a silent battle was being fought for dominance.

JAMES BLOCKED THE furrow, allowing the water to the next row of peach trees. He leaned on his spade and looked towards the house, longing to hear the call for lunch. He saw his mother and Stefanie drinking tea on the stoep and Charles walking old Oubaas up and down.

'How old is he?'

'Oubaas? Ninety-six,' Martin said. 'He was born in 1790. It's written in

our Bible, on the first page, where all our names are.'

'He's your great-grandfather, but where's your De Winter grandfather?'

'Killed by a lion, over there.' Martin pointed to the cattle kraal. 'He was a brave man.'

'If he was such a brave man, why did he let a lion get to him?'

'It was a pride, five lions. There was a terrible drought. They came for the cattle that night. The cattle trampled Uncle Servaas, my Tante Koba's husband. Grandpa de Winter tried to save him, but a lioness mauled him. They died together, Grandpa and Uncle Servaas. Pa shot the lioness. That skin in the study – that's hers.'

'A brave man indeed.' James studied the water in the furrow. Death was not something he dwelt on, but it was the way in which a man died that fascinated him. Not having a brave grandfather – their shared Stewart grandfather had died of a weak heart and Grandfather Henderson, Lord Harcourt, of cholera in India – he could not compete.

Just then a bellow from Oubaas came from the stoep as Charles settled him into his chair. 'What's he on about?'

Martin looked James squarely in the eyes. 'He is no friend of the English.'

James was astounded. 'Why ever not?'

The twins scrambled down the tree where they were searching for early fruit and came to stand behind Martin, following the words with huge eyes.

Martin dug his spade into the ground. 'Your people caused many sorrows in our lives. They hanged our people at Slagtersnek for killing Xhosas who raided the farms. They drove us out of the Cape Colony, Natal and everywhere else we tried to settle. They always try to take our country from us! That's why, James. That's why Oubaas hates the English.'

James recalled the barren land seen through the train window from Cape Town, the dusty streets of Kimberley and the potholed track on which the stagecoach had brought them to Rustenburg. 'Take your country? We don't want your uncivilised little country. You may keep it, thank you!'

Martin clenched his fists. 'Take that back. If you don't, I'm going to *bliksem* you!'

'*Bliksem* him! Hit him, Ouboet!' cried Karel, always the first of the twins to react.

James sensed his cousin's strength, saw the anger in his eyes and felt a quiver of trepidation. He searched wildly for words. 'Why did you run in the first place? You should've made a stand and fought us.'

'We fought you at Majuba. The Redcoats ran like dogs. We slaughtered them, Cousin James!'

‘Take this for your petty victory!’ James landed a hefty blow in Martin’s face. Martin let fly with his fist and caught James on the jaw. And then they were rolling on the ground, legs kicking and arms flying as each tried to pin the other down.

‘Stop! Stop!’ cried Rudolf. ‘There’s blood. And Pa is coming!’

Just as the two managed to get to their feet, Marthinus arrived. ‘Well, now! What I see tells me that there’s a dispute about a serious matter,’ he said in his slow, roundabout way. ‘I’ll see you in my study. There are wise words only, and should they fail to come I know of a way in which to call them.’

‘The *sjambok*!’ Karel said as their father walked on to the house. ‘You are going to get the *sjambok*.’

‘It’s your bloody fault!’ James wiped blood from his lip and gave Martin a shove.

Marthinus looked over his shoulder. ‘Come on now! Or do you prefer to have your punishment out here?’

They followed him home and into the study. James stole a look at this room that they were not allowed to enter without permission. He saw many books, racks of hunting rifles, a lion skin on the floor and, there in the corner, on a little table, a few bottles of what he took to be brandy.

Marthinus unhooked the *sjambok* from the wall and placed it on the desk. Settling in his chair, he filled his pipe. Only after he had lit it and it was drawing to his liking did he give his attention to them. ‘When the battle is lost and won.’ He blew smoke through his nose. ‘Now then, it makes no difference to me who lost and who won, or why the *battle* was fought. What does interest me is how it was fought.’

Neither of them offered an explanation.

‘James, you might not be aware of our policy in this house. Let me explain it to you; nothing good comes from violence. It only breeds more conflict. There’s nought to gain if you don’t take time and patience to settle your differences in a civilised manner, with wise words.’

James stared at the *sjambok* and wise words came flying to him. ‘We had a difference that couldn’t be settled otherwise, sir.’ He had come to know his uncle as kind-hearted and open to reason. His own father’s military code of discipline was absolute. Standing in his oak-panelled study awaiting punishment, the tiger’s head mounted above the desk staring fixedly down, was enough to reduce him to submissiveness.

‘Would you care to tell me about your unbridgeable problem?’

‘I’d rather not, Uncle Marthinus. It’s something that only we can resolve.’ He hastily added, ‘but not in the same violent manner.’

Marthinus nodded and turned to Martin. ‘The reason for your behaviour

can be sorted out in a more acceptable way, as James has just assured me. But son, you insulted a guest on our farm, and there's no excuse for that.'

'Uncle Marthinus,' James ignored Martin's murderous glare. 'Martin was completely in the right. We were defending the honour of our countries.'

'One should also not blindly believe in the supremacy of one's own country, refusing to acknowledge the achievements of others.' Marthinus clamped his pipe between his teeth and gestured towards the door. 'Out, both of you!'

When they closed the door, a roar of laughter followed them. James ran to the kitchen, where lunch was about to be served. He was one-up on his bold Boer cousin. He had the courage to fight him. And there in the study, he had used his superior intellect to save them both from physical punishment. 'Next time it'll be your turn to save our backsides,' he said when Martin thanked him for the unexpected favour.

IT WAS SATURDAY, the midday sun unsparing. They finished their chores for the day and sought out the shade of the milkwood by the drift. Clouds gathered to the north, only to disperse again in wispy fragments. The day stretched in endless hours of exploring and playing, but Martin rejected every suggestion offered. Stefanie wanted to have a concert, or to dress up as a queen, but the boys were not interested in her make-believe games. She stormed off.

His plan for the afternoon was of such a delicate nature that it could not include her or the twins. The previous Sunday, James had called him to the shed and shown him verses in the English Bible that Martin was convinced could not be in their Dutch Bible. His father never read from the Song of Solomon about the beauty of a bride, with breasts like clusters of grapes, skin smothered with fragrant oils and lips that tasted of wild honey. There was, however, a reference to a part that intrigued Martin. It lay between the rounded navel, filled with sweet wine, and the bronze legs that were as fleet as those of a buck. It was the strangest comparison he had heard: *the joints of thy thighs are like jewels*.

Strange images had caused unfamiliar sensations in his body all week. After much thought, he devised a plan to discover these extraordinary jewels. There was still an hour before lunch and, as he would have to set his plan in motion as soon after the meal as possible, he had to find a way of getting rid of his brothers.

He looked to where Charles sat with his back against the tree, watching

the kingfishers darting across the water. James was squinting through the barrel of Martin's rifle at guinea fowl that had strayed into his view. They were just ordinary boys, he had come to accept, and posed no threat to him, the farm or the standing of the De Winter family.

'Karel! Rudi!' he called to the twins who were splashing in the water. 'Think up something to do.'

They stared at him surprised. 'Anything?' Karel asked.

'Yes, anything you want to do.' Martin squatted in front of them. 'So, what will it be?'

They looked around for inspiration. Karel's eyes lit up and he pointed to the mountain. 'We want to have a picnic on top of the mountain.'

Rudolf looked at his twin in consternation. 'Up there? God lives up there.'

'God lives up there?' James frowned.

'Yes, didn't you know, James?' Rudolf eyed him curiously.

'He told us so!' Karel pointed to Martin.

Charles gave Martin a searching glance. Martin turned his back to the twins and whispered, 'Just a story to keep them from wandering too far, but don't tell Pa. You see, Karel can't understand that God is invisible. He refuses to believe in anything that's not real. Well ... you know what I mean.'

Charles frowned. 'Clever, I suppose, but not wise. They might get it into their heads to look Him up one day. I would advise you to let Him live in a ... safer place for the time being.'

Martin saw the wisdom in this. Leopard and baboon roamed the mountain and it was easy to get lost in the gullies. He was contemplating what to say when Karel kicked him on his calf. 'What are you whispering about?'

Martin faced his brothers, scratching his head. 'Well, I've forgotten to tell you. You see, God does not live up there any more.'

'Why? What have we done wrong? Why has God moved away from here?' Rudolf's bottom lip trembled.

'God ... moves around ...' A bright idea struck him. 'God lives in Pretoria now!'

Rudolf nodded, but Karel stared at Martin. After a bit, Martin out-stared him and he gave up, muttering.

'Ouboet, are you going to take us up the mountain?' Rudolf asked. 'You said anything we want to do.'

Martin sighed and put his hands on Rudolf's shoulders. 'I'll tell you what. It's a grand, a very grand idea to have a picnic on the mountain. Even Charles, and you know how clever he is, couldn't have thought of that. But it'll take us all day to get there and back. Do you agree?'

The twins measured the distance to the mountain with their eyes.

'Let's go on your birthday. The Marees will be back. Little Annecke will be here! Let's wait for Annecke and Buks,' Martin said, knowing that the prospect would please them. 'We'll pack food, start out early and spend the day on the mountain. Would you like that? It will be a special birthday for you.'

Rudolf agreed, but Karel stood his ground. 'Promise! Promise on Grandpa's grave.'

Martin raised his right hand and spat on the ground. 'I promise on all the graves in the graveyard. Now, run along. Here, carry my rifle. Tell Ma we'll be there soon.'

Karel and Rudolf set off to the house. Charles was about to follow, but Martin said that they had an important matter to discuss. They squatted in a circle. Martin lowered his voice. 'Have you ever seen a naked woman?'

Charles blushed. 'No ...'

James nodded casually. 'At home I saw the maid in her room. She'd taken off her dress and only had a petticoat and the ... the top thing on.'

'You peeped into the servants' rooms!' Charles said, aghast.

'The door was open. I didn't peep!'

'I mean naked, no clothes at all,' Martin said. 'Right to the place where you put your stick in.' He put a stiff finger on his crotch. 'Like a stallion or a bull, you know?'

'It's not proper to look—'

James cut Charles short. 'Yes, we want to!'

'Well, Saturday the kitchen maids have the afternoon off,' Martin explained. 'After they've cleared the tables, they wash in that deep pool by the wild fig where we swam last week. Remember? We get there before they do, get up the tree and watch from there.'

James eagerly agreed, but Charles hesitated.

'Oh come on! If you want to be a doctor one day, you will have to get used to seeing naked women,' James urged.

'All right,' Charles said at last, 'but our parents must never learn of this.'

'Never!' Martin was horrified at the thought of his father finding out.

AFTER THE MEAL they set off, following the stream. They climbed into the wild fig and settled behind the foliage of the spreading crown. The chatter of the servant women announced their approach. The boys watched as they shed their dresses. James gasped at his first sight of bare breasts, but Martin silenced him with a fierce look. Boer boys had seen many a mother feeding her infant. His interest lay in the as yet unrevealed secrets.

The women stepped out of their underclothes and into the water. They splashed and washed, their breasts bobbing. One stepped out of the pool and sat on the grass, her legs apart as she rested her elbows on her knees, still taking part in the conversation. Martin craned his neck but could not get a direct view of the secret parts he wanted to see. From where the others sat, they had a perfect view. Charles blushed and closed his eyes, but James kept on staring. Martin inched forward, unwittingly obscuring James's view. James pushed him away. With a strangled cry, Martin tumbled down, arms and legs flailing in an attempt to get a grip on a branch. He landed among the women and disappeared into the water.

Martin surfaced, spluttering for breath, calling for help. The women shrieked. When they recognised Martin, they grabbed their clothes and stormed off. James scrambled to the lower branches, tearing his trousers, and jumped into the pool. Charles followed, landed on top of James and lost his glasses. Cursing, they dragged Martin out of the water. Blood flowed from his nose and from a cut down his cheek. One knee was badly bruised where he had hit a rock. Charles put his arms around his chest and squeezed hard while James slapped him on his back.

Martin coughed convulsively, water gushing from his mouth. *'You snake! You pushed me.'* He made a feeble attempt to get to James.

'You were in my way!'

'By God, James, you've ruined it all,' Charles said. *'Find my glasses and keep your mouth shut.'* He pulled off his shirt, ripped off the sleeve and applied pressure to Martin's nose to stop the bleeding. That achieved, he tied the bloodied sleeve around the knee where swelling had already set in.

After searching for some time, James found the glasses; one lens shattered and the frame bent. He also offered his handkerchief as a bandage for the cut on Martin's face.

'Bliksem! Now we are in deep shit! They will tell Old Klaas and then Pa will skin us alive. We must get away from here,' Martin said as the gravity of their position dawned. *'Back to the drift, into the milkwood. Keep a lookout and see if they come to speak to Pa. If they don't, we can always say I had a bad fall.'*

Keeping to the trees, they reached the drift and helped Martin into the milkwood. Before long the tall figure of Old Klaas, the village headman, appeared in the company of the women on the footpath leading from the huts. They met Marthinus at the sheep enclosures. The women's shrill voices carried to the drift as they related their experience. Their indignation conveyed, they departed for their huts again.

'We're doomed,' James sighed.

‘We did wrong,’ Charles said.

‘Was it like the Bible said?’ Martin asked. ‘A jewel? Down there between her legs?’

James thought for a bit before he came up with a description. ‘Well ... it’s an ugly thing ... looks sort of like a hairy mole rat ...’

‘We will burn in the Eternal Fires of Hell,’ Martin said.

‘No we won’t. King David watched Bathsheba bathing. He went to heaven when he died.’

Charles gave his brother an irritated look. ‘You know all those sort of verses in the Bible, don’t you just? We might be saved from eternal damnation, but not from the *sjambok*. I suggest we get it over and done with.’

‘James saved me from the *sjambok* last week,’ Martin said. ‘The women saw only me. Go home and pretend that you’ve been elsewhere and that I went off on my own.’

‘It’s a brave offer, but I can’t accept.’ Charles gestured to his dishevelled state. ‘I won’t get away with it, anyway; I’m going with you.’

James considered Martin’s bruised face. ‘I led you to those stirring verses in the Bible, and I pushed you,’ he hastily added, ‘accidentally. I shall not shirk from my punishment. Count me in.’

‘Your backside will hurt for days,’ Martin warned.

‘The *sjambok* doesn’t scare me. How many do you reckon we’ll get?’

‘Four, six perhaps. You may be last in line.’ The last one suffered the least. By then his father’s fury would be spent.

They left the safety of the tree. Charles, with his broken glasses askew and his torn shirt, led the way. Martin, the bloodstained handkerchief obscuring his eye, was leaning on James as they limped along. Their slow pace became a shuffle as they neared the house.

The family was on the stoep having their afternoon coffee, the mothers handing round milk tart and golden rusks. Stefanie sat on the steps, drying her hair in the sun. Karel and Rudolf were amusing Oubaas, attacking his walking stick, brandishing small wooden spears.

Marthinus was next to Oubaas, a cup of coffee in his hand, his pipe clamped between his teeth. ‘Well now, what have we here?’ He scratched his beard, but Martin saw the grin behind his hand. ‘A tough battle, by the looks of them. Felons or victims?’ He looked at Oubaas. ‘How does one tell, old Grandpa?’

‘The eyes! The eyes! A guilty man does not look you in the eye.’

Martin studied his dirty feet.

‘There was a bit of a ... mishap, sir,’ said Charles, his usually confident voice wavering.

‘They rescued me from certain death, Pa,’ Martin said.

‘And how, son, may I ask, did you get into such a position?’

James moved his foot over Martin’s toes. Probably to give courage, Martin thought. His cousin had plenty to spare.

‘I know what you did, so there’s no need to talk your way out of the punishment you so richly deserve. Four and no supper?’ Marthinus bit into a slice of milk tart. ‘Or six and some of your mother’s food?’

Martin caught the hungry look James cast at the table.

‘Four, Pa,’ he said and stole a glance at the twins. They nodded. Some rusks would not reach the kitchen and neither would some of the bobotie that their mother had prepared for supper.

Oom Paul and Tante Koba

MARTHINUS ANNOUNCED THAT the family would journey to Pretoria, the capital, for the *nagmaal* instead of joining the district at Rustenburg for this religious occasion. James was elated, as it entailed a two-day journey by ox-wagon. He hoped fervently that President Kruger would be in Pretoria. He might get to see him, even if it was just from a distance.

The women showed no interest in the trip. Susan said that she could not bear the heat, dust and insects, which left Mary with no choice but to stay and keep her sister company.

‘The journey would be too tiresome,’ Stefanie said, imitating her aunt. ‘I’ll help with sewing dresses from the material Aunt Susan brought from London.’

‘Where will we stay?’ James asked Martin. ‘Is there a hotel in Pretoria?’

‘Why, with my Tante Koba of course! She’s my father’s only sister. The lion killed her husband, remember? The skin in the study? Tante Koba is much older than Pa, but has no children. We are her brood, she says. She clipped Karel’s ear so that Ma can tell them apart.’

James looked at him askance. ‘Clipped his ear? Surely not.’

‘Ma is too vague, Tante Koba says. Tante Koba is a Wise Woman. Medicines and that stuff, you know. Careful when she’s around. She *feels* what one thinks.’

The ox-wagon was being loaded with farm produce to be sold at the market: onions, pumpkins, potatoes and dried beans. The boys forced chickens into baskets and slung them under the wagon, placed eggs in a straw-filled wooden crate, and secured with rope the hides to be delivered to the tannery. By late afternoon the wagon stood ready to be yoked.

Long before sunrise, Marthinus cracked the whip over the span of sixteen oxen. The span settled into their accustomed rhythm, and the wagon rolled on with the occasional low sigh of an ox and the creaking of the wheels.

James did not like the unfamiliar darkness and strained his eyes for a sign of sunrise, but it was only after they had travelled for two hours that a glimmer appeared in the east. Now they could see the scattered homesteads along their route. Smoke spiralled from chimneys and farmyards bustled with activity. They waved and called out greetings. Here and there Marthinus alighted to exchange news with farmers who came to the road to meet them. The boys took turns holding the reins until he caught up with the wagon, easily outpacing the lumbering oxen.

By dusk they reached the farm of Lang Hans van Rensburg. The roads from the northwestern interior converged here, and travellers used it as a staging post on the way to Pretoria. There were stables, paddocks and drinking troughs where tired horses were exchanged. They found Lang Hans at the far end of the outspan, where he was attending to an injured ox. James stared. As thin as a rope, taller than a church tower, a greying beard down to his waist like wisps of smoke in the dusky light. *Moses. It could be Moses.*

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING they were on their way again. The road cut through the mountain at a natural pass and the oxen laboured with their load. Once through the pass the countryside was different; clumps of forest gave way to dense thickets of mimosa, their yellow puffy flowers wafting a heady perfume. The mountain range to the left looked formidable; a wall of vertical grey cliffs with barren crests overlooking the expanse of highveld bush.

With the sun setting behind them, they arrived in Pretoria, dusty and tired. Marthinus had sent word of their coming to his sister, Koba van Wyk. After the lioness had killed her husband on Wintersrust, Martin's aunt had settled in Pretoria, visiting the farm whenever she felt she was needed – a frequent occurrence. They found her waiting at the gate, waving her arms in greeting.

James stood rooted. Tante Koba was a large woman with thick arms and ample bosom, a round face, like a full moon, and blue De Winter eyes, crinkling at the corners. A real aunt, not some cross-eyed medicine woman. She gathered the twins and showered them with kisses and endearments. Martin received the same loving treatment, and Charles happily accepted a hug and a kiss. He wanted to be part of the spontaneity, but his father had always dictated that emotions should be private and kept under control. Koba beamed a welcome, but he hesitated. She placed her hands behind her back, closed her eyes and offered her cheek. He willingly, almost eagerly, placed a kiss on it.

There was just enough daylight left to see Koba's double-storey house and her two acres of land along the Apies River. Martin showed them the orchard and the beehives under the willows. They went to the stables to greet her groom and gardener, Bontes, and to see the latest additions to her stables. After a hearty supper they were ordered to bed, and the last thing James remembered was Koba's smiling face, wishing him a good night's rest.

THEY HURRIED their breakfast, eager to be off, but Marthinus ruled that they should help with the sale of the produce at the market. James sighed. Koba assured him that Church Square was a lively place, the heart of the town. Everything of importance took place there: political speeches, the gathering of the commandos before a war, as well as various sporting events.

The twins stayed with Koba, not wanting to miss her taking the honey from the hives. The other three followed Marthinus through the wide street leading to town. The gardens were pleasing, with their rose hedges, blue gums and willows. The town's water supply came from the Apies River, Marthinus explained, which had its source in a spring at the Fountains, a thickly wooded area to the southwest of the town.

'Why is Pretoria so much smaller than Kimberley, Uncle Marthinus? And why are there no trains here?' Charles asked.

'We have no diamonds, son. It's better that way, as we don't attract the unwanted elements – call them the diggers, if you like. They have no love of the land and care little about the way of life followed by our people.'

'If you had diamonds, you'd be rich,' James said. 'You could have a big army, and then you would not have to call out the farmers to fight.'

His uncle chuckled. 'No, you little hothead, the farmers *are* the army. All of us must fight to keep our country safe.'

'If we had diamonds, Pa, we could build schools,' Martin said. 'Then I wouldn't have to go all the way to Bloemfontein. It's so far away!'

'Don't you know how lucky you are to be sent away? James whispered. 'No parents to answer to.'

Marthinus ruffled Martin's hair. 'How will you get to be president if you're not prepared to study, son? You are intelligent, and,' he chuckled, 'ambitious far beyond your years. We might get you a proper education yet. In England. Our country needs educated men. God knows, there are few of them around.'

They reached Church Square as the shopkeepers were opening their stores. Low buildings with corrugated-iron roofs, some thatched, surrounded the large square, where more than fifty wagons were encamped. Smoke rose

from the open fires, where women were tending black round-bellied pots. Dogs and children ran between the wagons. Bearded men stood in groups smoking their pipes. Horses were tethered to the wagon poles, munching from bales of grass. They made their way to where Marthinus had taken the wagon after their arrival, stopping frequently to greet acquaintances and friends.

Business was brisk. The eggs and chickens sold quickly, and after an hour they were left with a few pumpkins and some bags of grain.

A tall bearded man dressed in a black suit arrived at their wagon, his hand outstretched. 'Marthinus, good day, good day!' His deep-set eyes beamed down at the boys. 'Aha! The British cousins. Are you enjoying your stay in our country?'

'What brings you into town, Koos?' Marthinus asked after they had made their inquiries after the farms, wives and children.

'Volksraad business. Trouble up north again. The President has called a meeting. But I'll tell you more later. Come for coffee at my wagon when you have done here.'

Charles looked at the imposing figure walking away. 'Who's that, Martin? He looks important, and spoke English.'

'Oom Koos de la Rey. He farms a day's ride from us, near Lichtenburg. Oom Koos sits in the Volksraad. He's going to be our president when Oom Paul dies, and when he's old, I am going to be the president,' Martin declared, his blue eyes serious. 'The president is the most important man in the country. He decides when we go to war and whom we will fight, and one day I will be that man, the president!'

'Why can't your father be the president?' James said. 'He'll be old enough soon.'

'No, he can't be president.' Martin avoided James's eyes.

'But why?'

'Because he's married to an Englishwoman. Everyone knows. Even the President. I won't be so foolish. It's important to have the right wife. I'm going to marry a girl from the district – our neighbour's daughter, Annecke.'

James thought he understood; marrying into one's own class was an unwritten rule of society. 'Where's his house? The President's house?' he asked when Marthinus set them free.

On their way across the square, they passed a large white building with a thatched roof and a wide stoep. The windows had no panes and the wooden shutters were wide open. Inside was a big wooden desk, some smaller tables and old chairs scattered about. On the wall was a wooden carving of the Republic's emblem with the flag draped above it.

‘This is the Raadsaal,’ Martin informed them proudly.

Then he led them to a small church where many wagons were clustered around. ‘The Doppers are also having *nagmaal*. What a dull lot! They don’t dance or have any kind of fun. They don’t even sing hymns in their church. And,’ he lowered his voice, ‘they’re not allowed to take a *dop*. They call it the devil’s brew. But Tante Koba says that in many a wagon-kist, there’s a bottle of homebrew with the kick of a mule in it.’

They halted opposite a small whitewashed house with a triangular gable on each side, a stoep running its full length and a low wall separating it from the road. The Vierkleur, the four-striped banner of the Transvaal, was attached to a pole on the thatched roof. President Kruger was on the stoep, but he was partly obscured by visitors.

They sat on the pavement, feet dangling in a water-furrow, and watched the comings and goings on the stoep. Eventually there were only two men left, but they showed no sign of departing. James was impatient and badgered the others to steal a closer look at the President. They crawled behind the wall and were directly opposite where he sat.

‘*Ja! Ek sien julle,*’ the President roared. ‘Don’t hide. Stand up! Let me see you!’

They walked onto the stoep. ‘*Dag, Oom Paul,*’ Martin said. ‘*Dag, Ooms,*’ he greeted the other men. ‘I’m the oldest son of Marthinus de Winter and these are my British cousins.’

‘*Ja, I know your father well.*’ The President looked at the other boys with interest. ‘Did you say Englishmen?’

‘It’s an honour to meet you, Mr President, sir.’ Charles bowed.

James stared at the President. The resemblance between the squat old man dressed in black and Queen Victoria was striking – the hooded eyes, sagging jowls and, through the scraggly beard, the double chin. ‘He looks exactly like the Queen!’ he exclaimed.

A very long minute ensued. The President removed his ornate meerscham from his mouth, spat roundly in the direction of the spittoon, let out an ear-piercing bellow, slapped his knee and roared with laughter.

‘*Allemagtig!* Just like old *mies* Victoria.’

James stepped backwards, slipped on the polished floor and fell to his knees. The President hoisted him by the arm. He stared into Kruger’s red-veined eyes and the large mouth, split into a grin.

‘I’m ... I’m sorry, Your Majesty.’

‘Your Majesty? *Wragtig!*’ he roared again. ‘What’s your name, young man?’

‘James ... Stuart ... Henderson.’

‘Aha! I will write to your Queen and tell her of your compliment. Thank you, young Mr Henderson.’ He made a gruff sound and released James abruptly.

James fled out of the gate and down the road, the chuckles of the men on the stoep following him. He ran past the Doppers, upsetting pots and water pails, stumbled over a dog and bumped into an old man dressed in a long frock coat. He was pushed away, but picked himself up and ran on, searching wildly for the road they had come by that morning. He arrived at Koba’s front door bewildered and exhausted, and on the verge of tears.

Koba came out, took him by the arm and led him into the kitchen, where he burst into tears. ‘I hate the President! I hate this country! I want to go home,’ he burst out. Koba gave him a glass of lemonade, and, keeping his eyes on the table, he waited for her to ask the reason for his distress. Surprisingly, Koba just said, ‘Never mind, *hartjie*; whatever it was, it’s all over now.’

He watched her stirring the pots and pans, humming to herself. Her quiet presence was calming, and he found himself telling her, bit by bit, what had happened.

‘No! The wily, dear old man!’ She clasped her hands together. ‘How could he do such a cruel thing? The President is the grandfather of a big brood. Does he not know that boys are precious?’

James saw the true emotion in her eyes, not just an affected pose for his benefit. It gave him confidence to tell her about his fears. ‘Tante Koba, will the President write to the Queen? I will never be a soldier now. I know he’ll write to the Queen. Even if Uncle Marthinus spares me the *sjambok*, Father will not forgive me for the shame I’ve brought on our name.’

‘No! He’ll do no such a thing. I’ll see to that. Listen, *hartjie*,’ she wiped her hands on her apron and sat down beside him. ‘I have to buy some things for Mary: six reels of cotton, blue ribbon, spices and so on. I’ll see the President and have a good talk with him.’

‘Will he listen to you, Tante Koba?’ She was an old widow, and the President might not grant her a minute of his time.

‘But, of course, *hartjie*! Was my dear husband – God rest his poor departed soul – not the godfather of his second son, Tjaart? He will listen.’ She patted his hand. ‘There’s nothing, not a thing, that Tante Koba cannot fix.’

After lunch, during which he had to endure the smirking faces of his brother and cousin, James hung around the kitchen until Koba left for town in her Cape cart. He collected a pile of stones and sat at the front gate to await her return. When Martin or Charles dared to put their heads around the corner of the house, taunting him with a ‘your majesty’, he drove them back with a well-directed stone.

The twins carefully edged their way around the opposite corner. 'Cousin James, we know that you're much older than us, but you're also younger than them,' Karel said sincerely. 'Rudi and I will help you, anytime, night or day. We know how to fight.'

'Go away! I can handle my own affairs,' he grumbled.

'You see, we are the youngest. We know,' Rudolf said, and James nodded.

A long hour later, Koba returned and James rushed to help her with her packages. She heaved her big body from the cart, untied the ribbons of her *kappie* and beckoned him closer. 'It's all settled now, *hartjie*, he will not breathe a word about it. He will never do such a thing again, the dear two-faced old Dopper. I gave him a piece of my mind!'

James offered to stay with her when the others were to return to the farm, saying that he would rather be with her. 'Thank you, *hartjie*,' she said. 'My bottling and preserving are done. It's time to see my old grandfather again. The dear old Oubaas. He needs my remedies. I'm also going to Wintersrust. I'll watch out for you.'

ON SUNDAY MORNING Marthinus and Koba, dressed in their Sunday black, left to attend the *nagmaal*. The boys hung about the stables for a while and then climbed into the willows to watch the bees at work around the hives.

'Where are Karel and Rudolf?' Charles asked after a while. They had been charged to keep an eye on the twins who had been acting secretly since their arrival in Pretoria.

They called and searched the house and the grounds, looked in the dark cellar, but there were only food supplies and Koba's many bottles of home remedies. They walked the nearby streets and scoured the banks of the river, but after a fruitless search they returned home. Martin contemplated whether to send for his father, but just then the Cape cart arrived and they rushed to report the disappearance of the twins.

Marthinus hung his hat on the hook behind the kitchen door and took his seat at the table where Koba was laying out lunch. 'How long ago?'

'Not even an hour, Pa,' Martin said, keeping the *sjambok* in mind.

'Well, they can't be far. Something caught their fancy and they wandered off. But let us not spoil our food.' He ate his meal unhurriedly and took his pipe and coffee onto the stoep. Eventually he saddled a horse and rode in search of the twins.

Martin and his cousins sat on the steps and waited. Before long, they spotted the twins coming down the street, hand in hand. It took Martin a

while to distinguish between his brothers, as the habitual smile on Rudolf's face was absent.

Karel walked up to Martin, spat on the ground and clenched his fists. 'You lied to us! God does not live in Pretoria. We asked many people. They laughed at us! Said that God lives up there!' He pointed to the sky. At the door, Karel turned around and said with absolute finality, 'He was nailed to the cross. He died! Like Oupa did, like Uncle Servaas did.' The door slammed shut.

Martin buried his face in his hands and scratched his head. 'How on earth am I going to explain this to Pa?'

'Never mind that,' Charles said. 'How to set this right, that's the problem.'

Koba appeared a short while later. 'I fed them. They are resting in my room. I heard it all. How could you, Martin?' she asked more in sorrow than in anger. 'They need extra care. Where there should've been one, there are two, through God's strange will. What the one believes there the other must follow.'

Martin explained the problem to his aunt, knowing that she would understand. She listened with care, chewing her lip thoughtfully.

'Yes, *hartjie*, I understand now.' She sank down in a chair and wiped her brow on her apron, stared into space and started talking. Martin drew closer, for Koba's stories were spiced with intimate details, biblical quotations and meaningful silences.

'How well I remember the night they were born. Karel arrived first, a healthy but angry baby. What a noise he made! It was only after Rudolf came into the world a little while later, that Karel stopped crying. The one minute he was blue in the little face with the effort of crying, and then, when he felt his brother's body against his, he made not a sound. It was then that I understood ... that I saw how it would be with them. You see, Karel is the stronger one. But, and this is what I saw that night, Karel takes his strength from his brother, the gentle spirit of Rudolf. It wells up from deep down, just here,' she placed her hand on her large bosom, 'and without that, Karel would be lost. Like an eagle in a cage, a newborn lamb bereft of his mother's milk, a hunter without his rifle, a bird without his song ... Yes, that's how it would be for him. And our little Rudolf? Who'll look out for him if his brother is not there? They might not stand the separation that surely is to come.'

'Who'll separate them, Tante Koba?' Martin asked.

'Life,' Koba sighed, a meaningful sigh. 'Life doesn't always turn out the way we plan. Who knows what lies in store? Oh, yes, God does, but then, just this morning the *predikant* said: "For I the Lord thy God am a jeal-

ous God.” Our God can be so gentle and kind and if we don’t follow His ways, His fury and vengeance can be like lightning from angry heavens. In this hard country of ours, life doesn’t always run its course. Death lurks in everything we do: hunting to keep our bellies full, fighting a war, breaking in a wild horse. And there’s always disease: the dreaded fever, blood poisoning, childbirth, inflammation of the lungs ...’

She tut-tutted and patted their heads. ‘I’m not saying that something dreadful will happen to them. Life, I said, might separate them. What will happen when they’re old enough to take wives? Will the love of a woman tear them apart? You see,’ she whispered, ‘there was only one afterbirth. So, before they came into this world, they’d been joined together by God, one in flesh and one in mind. Yes, always remember that.’

Koba wiped her face on her apron and heaved her body from the chair. ‘You boys go rest. And don’t worry your young heads any more. Tante Koba will settle this with dear Marthinus.’

As Martin followed her figure waddling through the front door, he saw the two identical faces disappear behind the windowsill in the bedroom facing the stoep. By their startled eyes, he knew that they had overheard every word through the open window.

The Home of the Fireflies

A WEEK AFTER their return to Wintersrust, a wagon approached on the road from Rustenburg. The Maree family, from the neighbouring farm, Soetvlei, had at last returned. Everyone rushed to the road to greet them.

'Uncle Joep! Uncle Joep!' Martin, followed by Karel and Rudolf, ran to meet the full-bearded man. James joined in the race, and Charles followed at a more sedate pace. He watched as Martin and the twins grabbed Joep Maree by the arms and in return received cuffs to the ears and rough tickles in the ribs with loud laughter.

Joep was a wide-shouldered, barrel-chested man, with sunburnt hairy arms and a mischievous glint in his dark eyes. His son, Buks, was a few paces behind him – a sturdy boy whose sun-freckled face and curly dark hair made him a replica of his father, all but in manner. He looked at Charles and James with suspicion, if not hostility. Annecke, his little sister, came running up, smiled at them shyly and rushed to the twins.

Marthinus assisted Lettie Maree from the wagon and helped her to the stoep, where Mary was getting coffee and rusks. Lettie was a plump woman with a jolly face. When Charles and James were introduced to her, there came a moment of unease. Lettie pinched James's cheeks and laughed shrilly. 'What a pretty young boy! Dimply cheeks and such thick lashes. You'll break many hearts, now, won't you?'

To Charles's relief, James took it in his stride. 'I'm planning on doing that, Aunt Lettie,' he said and rushed off with Martin and Buks to take the wagon to the Soetvlei farmstead.

During the following week Buks and Annecke became their daily companions. Buks soon lost his wariness and joined in the play, but he was mostly found with the livestock. Charles watched him, fascinated, as he helped his father brand the cattle and clip the sheep's ears. Annecke, being only five, could not be separated from the twins, a bond, Charles realised, that had been formed in their infancy. Stefanie spent her days with her

aunt, but she joined them on Karel and Rudolf's birthday. The promise Martin had made had not been forgotten; they were going to have a picnic on the mountain.

KAREL AND RUDOLF sat on the stoep with their presents. Cloth-bags with drawstrings from Stefanie – to put their treasures in, she said. Pocket-knives from Charles and James. A sixpence each from Martin and a jar of ointment for cuts and bruises from Tante Koba. The most treasured present, however, was from Buks and Annecke: a scrawny but lively puppy.

'Dogs are hard to come by,' Buks said to Charles, 'and not easy to rear here. Ticks, snakes and baboons are their fate. We brought this one from Kuruman.'

'What's his name? He must have a name,' Annecke said.

'Hero! He looks like a brave doggy,' Karel said.

James studied the long-legged pup uncertainly. 'Let's hope it lives up to its name.'

Martin ignored James's comment and turned to Buks to discuss where to go. It was a clear summer's morning, but the tranquil air was deceptive, and a band of cloud showed to the northeast.

'We follow the kloof to a special place,' Martin told the others. 'Last summer, Buks and I discovered a pool beneath a little waterfall. We'll go there.' He checked his rifle and slung it over his shoulder.

Buks shouldered the haversack with their provisions for the day, and they set off. Martin led, followed by Buks and James. Charles was in the middle with Stefanie who, on her aunt's advice, wore a straw hat to protect her face from the sun. The twins and Annecke, the puppy trotting at their heels, brought up the rear. They skirted the cattle kraals and the ploughed fields and reached the lower slope, stopping frequently to stuff their pockets with wild raisins, sour plums and small monkey oranges.

James was in excellent spirits, Charles noticed; the next day they would be going home. He had had enough of the country, James had said to him the previous night. He wanted to go home where all was as it should be.

Charles, however, felt sad at the thought of returning to London, where his future was already mapped out. The Transvaal was not backward or hostile. The Boers were hospitable, warm and caring. And the land was fresh and unspoiled, with so much splendour in the variety of life. The birds fascinated him. Guinea fowl and francolin, twittering like startled girls, crossed their path frequently. Colourful bee-eaters and metallic sunbirds darted from bush to bush as if to show the way. Hornbills flapped ahead in their peculiar dipping movements.

It is a good thing that Tante Koba's God is a jealous God. He destroys those who come to plunder the beautiful land. Koba had learned it in the most sorrowful way. Had she not told him that her husband had been a hunter and had killed many, many elephants? And the penalty for that was death by one of His creatures. 'If the lion had not got him that fateful night at Wintersrust,' she had whispered to him, 'a buffalo or an elephant would have trampled him.'

He pondered on this tale as he searched the ground for tubers and bulbs he could take to Koba. She had showed him her jars of remedies and taught him where to look for medicinal plants. He thought about the problem facing him in the coming year. Somehow he had to convince his father that he was not cut out for Oxford and a political career. His mind was set on studying medicine, but he knew his father would disapprove.

He stopped in his tracks at the harsh call of a shrike, and searched the lower branches of the bush to his left. There it was: crimson breast flashing like a jewel with the sharp contrast of thin, perfect white lines on the pitch-black wings. 'One of God's beautiful creations,' Koba had said, 'but beneath the beauty, a savage heart.'

'Charles! You're dreaming again. Come on!' Stefanie called.

As they climbed, Charles noticed that the fleecy clouds they had observed earlier were now thickening. He also saw that little Annecke was struggling to keep up. Karel lifted her onto Rudolf's back and they carried on, alternating Annecke between them. The twins never complained or asked for assistance; they shared whatever came their way. He had watched them at play. They chatted ceaselessly, but since their return from Pretoria they were alert when Martin was around. Karel was more suspicious than before. The smile was back on Rudolf's face but there was a watchful wariness in his eyes.

They reached the promised place: a pool fed by a thin waterfall and shaded by a wild fig tree. The puppy rushed to the water and gulped thirstily. Then a lizard caught his attention and he darted off in pursuit of it.

'Get him back. That way!' Buks said to the twins, pointing to their right. 'Up those rocks and into the bushes.'

To their right was a smooth slab of rock, sloping upwards, fringed at the top by a clump of wild raisin bushes. The twins scrambled up to search. Rudolf was back within a minute, his eyes huge. 'Come! Come see!' They followed him up the rock and crawled into the thick undergrowth. They came up against a steep cliff and found themselves facing a large hole at the base. Karel was waiting there, holding the puppy.

Martin looked at the fissure in the rock and hesitated. James tried to

push his way past him. Martin shoved him aside. 'You never know what's in there. Stay here!' He checked his rifle and beckoned to Buks. With great care they stepped into the opening and were gone but a few seconds before they came stumbling back, yelling wildly, enveloped in a blur of flying things. The others ducked and screamed as the dark cloud swooped away into the sky.

'What's that? Are you all right?' Charles asked.

'Bloody bats,' Martin heaved. 'We gave them a fright!'

'More like they gave you a fright,' James said.

'Come, let's try again,' Buks said. 'The bats are gone now.'

'I'm not going in there,' Stefanie said in a small voice. 'I'm a girl.'

'Wait here and a leopard will get you,' James said. 'They go for loners, your father said.'

Taking a deep breath, Martin re-entered, with the others following closely behind. For some way they tracked a narrow passage running obliquely from the entrance. Then it widened abruptly. Martin stopped and everyone bundled into him.

They gasped. An extraordinary light surrounded them. No one spoke for a full minute.

THEY WERE in a large cave, the far end barely visible. Through narrow openings in the high roof, sunbeams struck down at angles, dancing on the walls and sandy floor, giving a mysterious atmosphere to the silent interior.

Stefanie was the first to find her voice. 'So beautiful, like a palace.'

'Is this where God lived?' Rudolf whispered.

'Yes, but he died a long time ago,' Karel said.

'A fort! An entire regiment could hole up here,' James said.

'Oh yes? A commando. This is our country,' Martin reminded him.

Charles, annoyed with the constant bickering, decided that now was the moment for harmony, even if it lasted only long enough to enjoy the mystic beauty of the cave. Holding his hands above his head, he walked forward, the shadows of his hands making patterns on the floor. As he turned to face them, a shaft of light caught his face and reflected off his glasses. 'Listen! Can you hear it? Can you feel it?' His voice echoed off the walls. 'This is not a palace, nor a fort. This is a Place of Peace. It may be that God once lived here; therefore we shall not quarrel here.' He glared sternly at the silent group. 'It'll be our secret place. We shall always be safe here.'

'Safe? Safe from what, Charles?' Rudolf hooked his little finger with Karel's.

'Safe from the outside world,' he said, but still they stared at him. He

searched for something dramatic to say, and struck on a passage from Isaiah that Marthinus had read a few nights ago. As he could not remember the exact words, he adjusted them to suit the occasion. 'Here shall be as a hiding place from the wind, as rivers of water in a dry place, as a shadow of a great rock in a weary land. And a shelter from the tempest of life.'

The others nodded uncertainly, stood for a while longer and then started exploring the cave. Martin found a loose flat rock, big enough for a table. Karel cleared a space where the light was at its strongest. The boys heaved and pushed and managed to get the rock there. Stefanie spread a cloth taken from the haversack on the table and laid out the food: jam sandwiches, a small cake, cold meat, fruit and a bottle of milk. They whispered, but as they grew accustomed to the overpowering silence, their voices grew stronger. They chatted about the schools they were to attend the following year: James to join Charles at Eton; Martin to Grey College in Bloemfontein; and Buks back to Rustenburg for two more years only, as farming was all that interested him.

'At least I can stay with Tante Koba over the weekends.' Stefanie had obtained a place at the Loreto Convent in Pretoria, where she would study music. 'I shall have to wear shoes and stockings all the time, but Aunt Susan says that it's about time that I do.'

Charles was impressed that his dramatic address had had the desired effect; the tranquil atmosphere at the rock table soothed even James's quarrelsome nature.

'Strange, it has been here all the time,' Buks said, 'and we passed by, just a few yards away. It's a secret.' He glared at the younger boys. 'If you breathe a word about this, there will be a curse on you!'

'It must have a name, don't you think?' James said.

'Then Karel and Rudi should have the honour of bestowing the name. It's their birthday,' Charles said before other suggestions were forthcoming.

'Let Annecke name it,' Karel said, and Rudolf nodded.

Annecke's brown eyes shone with excitement. She looked about her for a good few minutes before she said with such finality in her little voice that no one challenged her: 'The Home of the Fireflies.'

James sighed, clearly disappointed.

'That's beautiful, Annecke,' Charles smiled at her. 'Why do you want to call it that?'

She pointed to the roof, but, before she could utter a word, the light coming through the fissures faded. Within seconds they were in darkness.

'The clouds,' Martin cried. 'We must get down before the storm breaks!'

They grabbed the haversack and the puppy and rushed outside.

Blue-black clouds billowed above and around them. Wind spat dust and leaves into their faces. Then a sheet of lightning rent the air. The world trembled. The pungent smell of sulfur overwhelmed them. They stared around them and saw a wild olive cracking in half. A second later it was engulfed in flames. Then the sky opened, accompanied by ear-splitting thunder.

‘Back! Get back to the cave!’ Charles shouted.

They bundled into the cave and huddled together with the puppy and the three little ones in the centre. Outside, the storm raged. Inside the cave, lightning flashed through the fissures in the roof, piercing the darkness. Water poured through an opening at the far end. Then, as unexpectedly as it had started, the storm died away. Only the sound of water dripping into the puddles on the floor broke the silence.

Charles came to his feet, his hair plastered to his head, his glasses shining in the muted light. ‘I told you we will always be safe here. We’ve just survived the most terrifying storm. Do you believe me now? The outside world cannot reach here.’

The others stretched their cramped limbs. Buks slung the haversack over his shoulder. Martin hoisted Annecke onto his back. No one showed surprise when James offered to carry the puppy. With a last look at their shelter, they filed outside. The fury of the heavens was exhausted. The clouds had moved westward, their rumblings soft and harmless now.

They gathered on the rock slab and stared at the havoc wreaked by the storm. The wild olive was broken in half, its pale bark blackened by fire. Lower down, a tamboti had snapped, taking some smaller trees with it. Water rushed down the little waterfall that had been a gentle trickle an hour ago. Far below, smoke rose from the chimneys of Wintersrust and Soetvlei, caught in a splash of sunshine. The herd boys called as they brought in the livestock. It looked peaceful, as if the storm had not touched the farms.

As they stood there, a large shadow passed swiftly over them. They looked up and saw a black eagle gliding out into the clean, fresh sky.

