

ANDRÉ
BRINK



Devil's Valley

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Flip Lochner—embittered boozier, self-described loser, burnt-out crime reporter, would-be historian, failed husband and father—finds himself on the farthest edge of civilization one day, descending on foot into a region that lies so deep within the walls of wild mountains it is all but impossible to reach. The Devil's Valley has been home for 160 years to a breakaway sect of inbred Boers shut off from the rest of the world, and Lochner has come to dig into their stories, to establish their history, to know their truth.

With *Devil's Valley*, South African writer André Brink, author of *A Dry White Season*, takes the reader on a wild ride into all the dark places of human nature that people most like to avoid. He makes a landscape and social history of these dark places as he brings his protagonist face to face with an agrarian community sternly committed to keeping outsiders out and inner secrets in. It's a place where dream worlds, death worlds, and this world blur and blend, where God and the Devil daily wrestle for the souls of the inhabitants, where simple human dignity is all but out of reach. What is history in such a place? What is truth? "The problem is that I have no bloody way of making sure what I have to show for my efforts," Lochner muses on his experience. "Statements, testimonies, accounts, or just a damn handful of ravings?"

Devil's Valley asks the reader to wonder about his or her own history, especially those parts we all like to leave out yet mutter silently to ourselves, the parts that skitter through our own moonlit night lives accompanied by owls and baboons.

—*Schuyler Ingle*

ONE

Come A Long Way

“I’VE BEEN SITTING here, waiting for you,” said the old man, not bothering to look at me. My fucking heart missed a fucking beat. Cautiously, as if I had reason to feel guilty, I shifted the rucksack on my back. I’d noticed the old dude from quite a distance, perched on the rocky outcrop as grey as the grass. Without dislodging a stone or missing a step I’d come down all the bloody way from the top where the four-by-four had dropped me, heading straight for the small herd of mottled goats; and what with the sun coming at an angle from the front there was no shadow either to warn him; yet there he was on the ridge, in his stupid old-fashioned skin trousers and waistcoat and floppy wide-brimmed hat, his back to me, staring out across the deep ravine, and saying in that level voice, as if he’d bloody well been watching me all the way, “I been sitting here, waiting for you.”

I put out my hand. “Flip Lochner, Oom.”

“Ja, I know mos.” The crusty old customer was still gazing into the distance, so I had to drop my hand. “You come a long way in this snow.”

Around us the mountains were shimmering in the late-summer heat. Bloody baking-oven. I wiped the sweat from my face with my sleeve. “Snow, Oom?” I enquired cautiously.

“Ja, didn’t you see? The mountains are white.” I decided on the diplomatic approach. “I can imagine it must be pretty cold here in winter.”

“Man, woman, child and beast, they all died of exposure.”

He drew the skin waistcoat tight on his sinewy body, shivering briefly as if he could actually feel the cold. He looked fucking ancient, but very straight, kind of patriarchal, his angry grey beard stained with tobacco juice like a tuft of dry grass pissed on many times, the mouth caved in, chewing on his gums. Something left on a shelf well past its sell-by date.

Devil’s Valley

“I suppose that’s the Devil’s Valley down there?” I asked sort of unnecessarily after a while.

“What’s it look like to you?”

“More like Paradise.”

A reluctant grunt made his Adam’s apple jump. Then, a touch more affable, he said, “We always believed Adam and Eve must have lived down here. I mean, before God got angry with them.” Adding as an afterthought, still without bothering to look at me, “Name’s Lermiet. Lukas Lermiet.”

It wasn’t the sort of name one comes across every day or forgets once you’ve heard it. I could barely hide my surprise. “But that’s the family name, isn’t it?”

“Well, what did you expect?” he asked in a huff. His voice was like old bloody dry grass rustling, and with a Dutch accent to it.

“I’m sorry, but it just struck me...” I tried to collect my thoughts. “I mean, the first man who trekked into this valley—when was that? In the 1830s—was also a Lukas Lermiet, wasn’t he? Lukas Seer, they called him. And then almost nothing more was heard of them for well over a century and a half. It was only the other day, in Stellenbosch, that I heard the name again...”

“Is that what you come for? To nose around? We minding our own business here.” For the first time the old fucker looked at me. The kind of look that unsettles one even in broad daylight:

colourless eyes peering through a tangle of grey eyebrows, dulled by cataracts, with a remoteness about them, an absence. What was uncanny about it was this: on the one hand it seemed to miss nothing, picking up all the shit that had ever happened to me, all the hidden agendas behind it, even those I hadn't resolved for myself yet. On the other hand he seemed to be staring right through me, in one way and out the other, as if I was a bloody sheet of glass through which he could see everything in the landscape that had been there before us and would outlive us: the cliffs and ridges folding away, layer upon layer under the fucking endless sky, the slopes reaching down, all steep and forbidding like, to the long narrow valley at the bottom, as bloody void and whatever as it must have been in the time of God and Genesis.

"It's a piece of history that's never been written up properly," I tried to justify myself.

"With good reason, if you ask me. Why would anyone want to write it up?"

"So that people will know."

"What for?"

I had to calm his suspicions. "Oom, I promise you I won't offend anyone."

The old number scraped his throat and spat a green gob mere inches past my face.

So Very Sudden

"I met Little-Lukas Lermiet in Stellenbosch," I began again.

No answer. He was sitting there like a dumb piece of rock.

"The day he died I was on my way to see him," I went on. This might be the only bait he'd swallow.

But he still didn't bother to answer; I couldn't even be sure that he'd heard me.

"You might say I owe him one," I explained. "To come here, I mean. To look up his people. It was all so very sudden."

"Little-Lukas had no business to go where he went. He had no right to flap out about us," snarled the old man. "He got what he deserved."

"Oom?" I asked, taken aback.

Silence.

"I take it he was a relation? The same name and all."

"None of your business," he growled.

"Well..." I knew when there was nothing more to squeeze from a stone. "At least I thought I'd come and see for myself."

Open Eyes

"You can still go back," said Oom Lukas in his raspy voice, so gruffly I wasn't quite sure if he'd spoken or just cleared his throat. "And if you want my advice you'll turn back while you still can. Once you put your two feet down there it may soon be too late."

"No, Oom, I can't let such a chance go by. I've been waiting for this for years. And after I spoke to Little-Lukas..."

"Then you going into it with open eyes."

Words I was to remember only too fucking well, much later, too late.

"If you don't mind, I can go down with you when you go home," I proposed.

"You'll be waiting a long time."

"Don't you live down there in the valley, then?"

"Says who?"

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“That’s your worry.” He sat mumbling to himself for a while before he spoke up again: “You want to go down, you do it on your own.”

“Perhaps you could at least show me the way?”

He sniffed, and for a while he seemed to have switched off. Then he raised his hand-carved kieri. “Go down this little slope to the break in the cliff, and past the two big boulders of the Gate. You can wait down there, someone will come. And down in the kloof Lukas Death will take over. You can stay with Poppie Fullmoon. I already told them to expect you.”

“But how could you have known? I haven’t discussed this with anyone.”

Ignoring the question he said, “That’s to say if your mind is really set on it.”

“It is.”

“All right, then get going. But mind the snow, it’s very slippery. We’ll talk again.”

Hooking my thumbs under the straps of the rucksack that was giving me hell, I began to go down the slope, my heart in my throat. I’d been warned that it could take days to find one’s way down to the valley. *If* you make it. More than one climber had fallen to his death down these cliffs—and they were experienced mountaineers, not people whose systems had been fucked up by years of smoking and drinking and whatever, especially whatever. And could I really rely on the word of an old dodderer whose head had clearly taken a knock?

God’s Grandmother

Down below me stretched the Devil’s Valley, much as it must have been when it was first torn into the earth’s crust. Ungodly cliffs on either side, with ridges and bands in reds and oranges and browns greys and blacks, thrown up from their original horizontal layers by bloody unimaginable forces. Some had been shoved into diagonal or even perpendicular positions, others were rippling like petrified waves. The kind of landscape that turns a man into a fucking ant. As if the earth itself had turned and tossed in a pre-dawn slumber before it sort of sat up, all bleary-eyed. And down at the very bottom lay the deep slit of the valley, half-hidden behind dark thickets of natural forest. The kind of view that turns on a dirty mind.

It was like being the first man ever to set foot in this place. I could imagine the sensation the original Lukas Lermiet must have felt looking down here, the kind of randiness that marks every first man: seeing the earth unfolding ahead, just waiting to be conquered. With my tape-recorder and my camera, here we come.

In the motherfucking cliff-face ahead of me was a single breach. That must be the ‘Gate’ the old man had spoken about. The two huge boulders he’d pointed out were speckled grey on the outside, but where the crust had eroded the rock was flame-red. I stopped for a moment to look back. A hundred yards higher up I could see the old dried-up turd still perched on his rock surrounded by his grazing goats, motionless like a stone carving, and worn away by wind and sun, water, lightning. Brittle and fragile, a mere twig of a man, older than God’s grandmother.

Infamous Fruit

MY TIME is running out. From where I'm sitting now, just out of sight of the sprinkling of whitewashed houses and the squat stone church, I can look out over the scorched slopes. It is hard to believe how much has happened in the time I've been here. From deep inside the Devil's Valley, like Jonah from the belly of the whale, I've got to cry out or something; But who will hear? No matter, I've just got to try, there's nothing else I can do. The day I came down here, when I passed through old Oom Lukas's high gate, the rocks mottled with lichen, bird shit, dassie piss, the crap of baboons, pollen blown by the wind, all this was still waiting to happen. Yet in a way it was already there. Sure, the old number had given me due warning, but how could I have known what he meant? These tilings always come too late. One prepares to face the threats one knows, not the fucking unknown. And at that moment all was still unknown.

Would I have turned back, that afternoon, if I'd then seen what still lay ahead? Jesus, it would have spared so much. For me, for Emma, for everybody in the Devil's Valley. All the violence of suffering, suspicion, intrigue, grudging memory, blood, betrayal, scorched earth. All these things which today converge to spell 'knowledge'—or, more pretentiously, 'wisdom'. Yet I have a hunch I would have pressed on regardless. I mean, would Adam have turned down his woman's infamous fruit—apple or apricot, mango or fig—if *he'd* been wise before the event? No way.

Tall Tales

The problem is that I have no bloody way of making sure what I have to show for my efforts. Statements, testimonies, accounts, or just a damn handful of ravings? A man who spent his whole life trying to fly. A woman who drove a stake through her husband's head. A savage who fathered seventeen children on the grave of his enemy. A witch who turned into a white goat when the moon was full. A girl who gave her own body as ransom for her father's life. The dead and the living celebrating New Year together. And a hell of a lot more, plumes in the wind, lightning on the horizon. But with no substance at all, just bloody inventions and tall tales. How can I get this to make sense? This is what bugs me. Especially now, with my time running out.

When I first came here I was still cocksure that it would all work out. And when the old fart up there told me his name was Lukas Lermiet it was like a sign that I was on the right track. Okay, I was ready to see almost anything as a good sign. For what I had behind me didn't bear much thinking of: fifty-nine years old, a wife gone off with someone else, two children who'd kicked me under the arse, the job at the newspaper where all my juniors had long been promoted past me, a fuck-up of a life. With only one thought in my mind: now it was all or nothing, now I was going for broke, to feed the rat that had begun to gnaw again, the old dream I'd thought I'd given up. Another man, I suppose, could shit on a dream like this, but for me it was ambitious enough. Perhaps I still had it in me. I mean, for Christ's sake, it wasn't as if I meant to move heaven and earth, or change the world. Have a heart. All I planned to do was to write a little tract of history, something to hold its own, something different from the daily news. From our crime reporter. Jesus, at fifty-nine. Starting each day in front of the cracked mirror: the nicotine-stained fingers, the purple spiderweb across nose and cheeks, eyes bloodshot, liver spots, the man who passes for me. Flip Lochner, pleased to meet you. A sight for sor

eyes. But I haven't always been like this, God is my witness. And this may be just about my last
fucking chance to prove it, right?

Crawling So Deep

IT WAS THIRTY years ago that I first found out about the Devil's Valley. Those were my days of innocence when there were still so many things waiting to be done for the first time. I had a touch of style then, even if I say so myself. In my life, and in what I put on paper. There were people who actually believed I was going to make it as a writer. I was still teaching, fired by ambition and great illusions, and planning my thesis. History, what else? Always my favourite subject. And I was in no mind to produce something that would gather fucking dust on a fucking shelf, no way. Unlike the themes some of my contemporaries at varsity built their reputations on: *Electrolysis in the Gut of the Earthworm*, *The Diet of German Sailors on Ships in the VOC in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century*, *Criteria of Taste and Succulence in the Grading of Beef at the Cape Town Abattoir*. Not for me, thank you very much. Mine was bloody well going to be different. I was set on Making a Contribution. Among other things, finally to shit on Twinkletoes van Tonder who'd regularly taken first place in History right through our university years. I'd always had to work my arse off to get somewhere, he just took it in his athletic stride. His father a professor, mine a shunter on the railways. Their house filled with the bric-a-brac of annual trips to Europe; our only showpiece a ball-and-claw radiogram on which over weekends Pa would play his seventy-eights of old Boer music, Chris Blignaut and the Briel Family.

Twinkletoes van Tonder was what Pa would have called a dainty-fart; I grew up barefoot in the shitty little village in the Free State, where the snot froze on one's upper lip in winter. I'm not complaining, mind. And I don't want to go off on a side-spin either. I can take whatever comes my way like a man, right? All I'm trying to say is that Twinkletoes van Tonder was a haemorrhoid in the arsehole of my life. He got his name from sucking up to lecturers, crawling so far up their backsides that only his toes stuck out. With MA wrapped up, the two of us were neck-and-neck for the vacant assistantship in the department. But Twinkletoes, in that ringing bloody phrase from the Bible, was a smooth man and I was an hairy man. And ever since the time of Jacob and Esau the dice have been loaded against us hairy ones. He got the job; I turned to teaching.

Wild Oats

Then one day I stumbled across a reference to a small party during the Great Trek who'd turned away from the other prospective emigrants and wandered into the Swartberg range. Scouting around and reading whatever I could lay my hands on, even spending one summer vacation in the Archives, I finally came up with some hard evidence on Lukas (Seer) Lermiet who'd trekked from Graaff-Reinet in the company of the well-known leader Gerrit Maritz in 1838. What first tickled me was the unusual name. In the Archives I unearthed one Luc l'Hermite who'd come out to the Cape with the Huguenots on the *Voorschoten* in 1688, who might well have been the founder of the family's local branch. But between this Monsieur l'Hermite and my Lukas Lermiet there was many a gap still to be plugged, and all the wrinkles in the line would first have to be ironed out before one could be quite sure. A damn tantalising idea, anyway. In the meantime my early research had suggested that the original Monsieur l'Hermite was not exactly a fucking ancestor to be proud of, as he appeared to have fled La Rochelle to escape a charge of murder, and travelled to the Cape masquerading as a religious refugee. Once

arrived, he did a pretty good job covering his tracks while sowing all manner of wild oats, thistles and tumbleweeds well out of sight of the European authorities. And it might well be that a century and a half later the family finally took root among the koppies of the deep interior. All of which was still virgin territory for the researcher.

Anyway, our Lukas Lermiet left Graaff-Reinet in the company of Gerrit Maritz, but soon ran into trouble with the old sourpuss preacher of the group, Maritz's brother-in-law Erasmus Smit, and it seems that, possessed by a vision, and accompanied by a few like-minded spirits, the Seer turned off course to trek south-east, into the forbidding Swartberg range. Just as ancient maritime charts of Africa marked certain parts with the legend *Hie sunt honnes*, there were old maps of the interior on which the Swartberg was superscribed with the words *Hier zijn duvelen*, or *Here be devils*. Hence, I guess, the name 'Duiwelskloof—Devil's Valley.

Odd Reference

There was not much more on Lukas Lermiet and his descendants to be found in the Archives, apart from the odd (sometimes very odd) reference in minor official documents. In the 1890s an agent of the Cape government was dispatched to collect taxes or quitrent or whatever from the people who'd apparently disappeared into the Devil's Valley without a trace; but he was screwed out of his clothes and sent back across the mountains like my finger. Whereupon a whole armed detachment came all the way from Cape Town to avenge the honour of Her Fucking Majesty. Once again without result, for no trace of the blasted commando could ever be found; and soon afterwards the Anglo-Boer War gave the distant government other priorities to care about.

From the time of the 1914 Rebellion came a reference to a couple of burghers who'd escaped into the valley to hide from government troops, never to be heard of again. Much later, during the Second World War, a small band of right-wing extremists from the Ossewa-Brandwag fled into the valley to get away from Smuts's officers, and the bodies of two policemen sent after them were later found in deep kloof where they'd presumably fallen to their death. Once again the matter was not followed up.

After the war individuals from the Devil's Valley sporadically turned up in the outside world, and legend took root about a community of physically or mentally handicapped people in the mountains, the sad outcome of generations of inbreeding. Somewhere in the fifties a team of census agents were sent out to record particulars of the inhabitants, but they never came back; on another occasion an exciseman dispatched to investigate rumours of illicit distilling met with a fatal accident in the mountains. Still later the University of Stellenbosch mounted an expedition of anthropologists and sociologists and God knows what other -ists on a research project, but they returned not only empty-handed but stubbornly mum about the expedition. Then money ran out as the government started cutting down on university budgets, and that was that.

All of which I found promising enough. But my designated supervisor found it too insubstantial. How about the Development of a Christian National Character Among the Voortrekkers, 1836-1843 instead? I might still have pressed my luck, but that was when Sylvia appeared on the scene and began to play me off against Twinkletoes van Tonder; and if I were to abscond for a couple of months to do research in the Devil's Valley I had little doubt that in my absence he'd settle so tightly into her own little devil's valley that once again only his toes would stick out. That was the end of my project. But at the time I thought it would be only a temporary setback. If you ask me, every person has a rat inside, a rat which keeps gnawing away and which you must feed if you hope to survive, otherwise it consumes your fucking guts. And the Devil's Valley was my rat. I was going to feed it. But for thirty years nothing came of it, until there wasn't much left to consume in me.

Comes Out Red

That is, until Little-Lukas Lermiet appeared on my horizon a few months ago. The occasion was a day-long seminar in Stellenbosch on 'History and Reporting', to be introduced by Professor Hardus (Twinkletoes) van Tonder, Head of the Department of History, D. Litt. et Phil., S.H.I.T., Dean of the Faculty of Arts, as well as Vice-President of the South African Academy of Education, Arts and Science. My presence, as member of a panel on Investigative Journalism, was either pure coincidence or fate, depending on the paradigm, I think that is the term, you use. Our editor was called away on an important mission requiring all his attention (something to do with his wife's investments), the news editor was otherwise engaged (he has a friend with a box at Newlands), two others who'd been approached were not available, which was how yours truly, well down the pecking order, came to be delegated at the last minute.

This kind of seminar is not my line at all. Do I still *have* a 'line'? I have no idea any more what I'm doing in journalism. Cynicism stains one like nicotine. There was a time...but forget it. Compromise is the name of the game, until you swallow your last lump of self-respect like the vomit of a bad hangover. Right up to the eighties there were moments when in a flush of misplaced romanticism or something I still thought I had a 'role' to play. You go out on a story to Old Crossroads or the KTC squatter camp, you look on while police set fire to the shacks of people who refuse to move elsewhere, you see a child, sent by his mother to the corner shop for a half-loaf of bread, run down by the cops in the yellow van, who then jump out to shoot him execution-style. Then you go back to the office and file your story with the news editor, a shithead ten years younger than yourself, who draws red lines through most of it and tells you to rewrite the piece. Anything you give to that cunt is like a fucking tampon: it goes in clean and comes out red. And when you object, he blows his top and tears up the sheets. You try to protest. He looks you in the eye and asks, "What are you trying to do, Lochner?" You tell him, "I was there, sir." He says, "For your information, this never happened." And after the incident has been repeated three times you give up trying. You cannot resign either, because jobs are scarce and you have a wife who has Joneses to compete with and two kids at varsity, so don't rock the boat, buddy. When you shave in the morning, you look past your own image in the mirror, pretending you're not here. You feel like a whore on the point of retiring, but she's already got AIDS and all she can still hope for is to infect a few more fuckers before she croaks.

Fucking Symposium

And then they have the bloody cheek, on a Saturday you planned to spend working on your Cortina and watching rugby on TV, to pack you off to a fucking symposium on Investigative Journalism. Look, if you have to, ask me about crime statistics, and I'll be happy to oblige. Last year: an average of three murders an hour, a rape every twelve minutes (or, considering that only one out of every thirty-five is reported, one every twenty seconds), an armed robbery every five minutes, a case of child abuse every ten minutes (but of course even fewer of these are reported than rapes), and this happens twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, right? As Alan Paton said, "Ah but your fucking land is beautiful." And we still have Mandela. But all I'm trying to say is, ask me a thing like that and I'm your man. But don't come to me with symposiums and conferences and shit. So what does a man do? You go. That's what you do.

In a Corner

Crap of a high order, lasting a whole morning and afternoon. Afterwards the big brass decamped t

a reception in the rector's house, while I ended up with a few other rejects and off-cuts and a group of rowdy students in a pub.

I landed in a corner, a position I'm no stranger to; and by the fourth or fifth round, when I was comfortably leading on points, I was approached by a spotty youngster. Little-Lukas Lermiet, the name registered after the second or third attempt. As nervous as a fucking puppy not sure whether he was going to be stroked or kicked. Quite an intelligent, narrow face, but his eyes looked like a frog's through those thick glasses, and he had a bit of a st-stammer. The kind of dude that just begs to be screwed out of his senses by a really wild girl to change him into a fucking prince.

He clearly wasn't much of a talker; and I was, not to put too fine a point on it, introspectively inclined. It was a mere week after Sylvia had left me the note (with two typos) and both children had telephoned to make sure I had no doubts about who was to blame; and striking up a conversation with a pimply youth was not high on my list of priorities.

"Sir, there was s-something you said this morning..." began Little-Lukas.

Few people call me sir; and my contribution to the morning's discussion, I knew perfectly well, had been a load of shit. So there was much bleary-eyed suspicion mixed with my feigned curiosity.

"...about the D-Devil's Valley in the Swartberg."

I could vaguely remember the reference, yes. Some stray off-the-cuff remark about topics still waiting to be investigated.

"I-I live there."

Deep in my guts I felt something stirring; the old rat was gnawing again.

He was the first inhabitant of the Devil's Valley I'd ever come across in the flesh. It would seem that an old pedlar, a smous, had plied him with books in the Valley, until much pleading and effort and bargaining at long last landed him permission to study outside. Before his time the odd bright youngster had from time to time been allowed to go to school in one of the towns outside the Devil's Valley, but Little-Lukas was the first and only one ever to go to university. As far as I could gather, however, more and more young ones in the past few decades had simply left the place for good. Then why did one never run into them? Perhaps no one thought of asking; also, most of the exiles presumably chose not to broadcast the matter. It sounded as if the valley had become practically deserted, in spite of a tradition of large families. "There's only the old ones and the very young ones left," he said, "and of course the h-handicapped ones."

Had I met the little nerd thirty years earlier it might have made a difference, but when I first became interested in the history he'd not even been an itch in his father's balls yet. Now it was a bit late in the day. Still, we started talking. In fact we got so carried away that after the pub closed we went off to his digs where he produced, of all things, a bottle of Old Brown. Now I pack a mean slug, and I take my Scotch as it comes from its mother, it's part of the job description, but OB plugs my arsehole.

Godforsaken Place

The first part of the conversation I could still follow. Little-Lukas spilled whatever beans the Devil's Valley could muster about its founding father, the Seer. His first arrival at the deep valley in the Swartberg. The perilous descent, for which the rear wheels had to be removed and the wagons propped up on bundles of wood to brake the pace. After the first day the oxen refused to budge, whereupon Lukas Lermiet first used his heavy hippopotamus whip on them and when that didn't work gouged out their eyes with a knife. Instead of solving the problem, it made everything worse. One wagon after the other, drawn by the crazed and blinded oxen, fell to fucking smithereens down the

steep cliffs. Lermiet's fellow trekkers turned back in small demoralised groups to retrace their own trail through the mountains, all their possessions lost. Not one of them ever reached the outside world again. It was winter, the weather was bloody awful, the snow lay knee-deep on the slopes. What happened to them was never recorded: they must have frozen in that desolate landscape, or fallen to their deaths down any of a hundred precipices.

Seer Lermiet grimly persisted. The heavier the odds the more clearly he saw their glorious future down below in the Devil's Valley. In the end only his own family remained to trek ever more deeply into the mountains in the drifting snow. One of his sons rebelled, but was hit over the head with a length of wood and died after a day or two. Then three of his other sons ran off after tying him up in his sleep. They, too, must have died in the mountains; their bones were never found. All that was left were Lermiet's wife Mina and a daughter and two small sons. Mina pleaded with him to turn back: couldn't he see the whole thing was doomed? This valley was worse than hell itself. Lukas knew only one response. He gave her a thrashing that left her close to death. She never fully recovered. Abject with terror she and the remaining children went with the Seer into the valley of death where he'd seen the Promised Land in a fucking vision.

That was still only the beginning. The worst of the winter lay ahead. The two youngest children died of pneumonia. Mina was still bedridden from the flogging. Only then, Little-Lukas said, God appeared to the old shithead and advised him to turn back. All right then, the Seer announced, at the first signs of spring they would leave for Graaff-Reinet. For about a month they enjoyed a spot of peace and quiet, preparing for the return journey.

But on the day before they were to leave, Lukas Lermiet went into the mountains in search of a white gazelle he'd seen in another of his dreams. High up on the slopes he stumbled over a loose stone, fell down a cliff and shattered his bloody leg. He would never again be able to walk properly. Which meant he was doomed to spend the rest of his fucking natural life in that godforsaken place, and his family with him.

Shards and Tatters

This tale was followed, throughout the long night in Little-Lukas's digs, with the bottle of OB between us, by countless others. But of the rest of our conversation I had only a seriously pissed recollection when I woke up again some time the next day in the dank suburban house in Gardens where I'd spent most of my married life with Sylvia. I couldn't even remember how I'd got back. Also, there was other urgent and unpleasant business to attend to. The house had to be sold, Sylvia was demanding action. For the time being I still tried to stall, reluctant to face a battery of agents and house-seekers with snotty comments about damp patches on the walls, structural cracks, loose tiles, hazardous wiring. But through the ruins of my screwed-up world and the heavy hangover I continued to chase random memories of my night with Little-Lukas. The fucking shards and tatters and loose ends of stories. A smous returning with exotic wares from the farthest corners of the world. A girl with four tits. A child with goat's feet. A large naked woman on a bed crawling with cats. And something about a magician who could track you down to the very end of the earth? Yes, I quite vividly remembered this yarn: someone had broken into a house in the Devil's Valley, leaving a shoe behind; the magician clamped it in a vice—and an hour later a man with a shattered foot arrived crawling on all fours and howling with pain. And much more. But all of it mixed up and rather crazy, with no bloody head or tail to it.

Commotion

I did recall that at some stage during the night I'd scribbled the chappie's address on the back of a cigarette box, and after much searching I managed to retrieve it among dirty underpants and gluey handkerchiefs in the laundry basket. A couple of times when I telephoned there was no reply, but at last one afternoon I heard Little-Lukas's st-stammering voice in my ear. He sounded embarrassed, apologising for having wasted my time like that and shooting off his mouth. The inhabitants of Devil's Valley were not supposed to confide in outsiders, he explained breathlessly. If his people were to find out...

I pulled out all the stops. For the first time in years something had caught me by the balls again. Little-Lukas remained diffident, stammering more and more as I waxed eloquent, like in the old days when I'd still dreamed about an academic career, long before the world had up-ended its shit bucket on my head. At last Little-Lukas, still far from convinced, relented: all right then, I c-could come back some time and bring my tape-recorder. But 'some time' was too vague for my liking. What about tomorrow? No, sorry, he had a t-test or something. The day after? A history assignment, for Professor van T-Tonder. Fuck the man gently but thoroughly. The day after that? And so I drove him back day by day until the following Wednesday. Time? Let's make it three. Place? At his d-digs.

When I arrived, there was a commotion in front of the sprawling Victorian house where Little-Lukas had his rented room. A crowd in the street, two yellow police vans, an ambulance. Dead on the spot, an elderly woman told me at the garden gate when I enquired. She had wispy hair drawn into an untidy grey bun like a fucking merlon. Little Lukas was just crossing the street on his way home from lectures, she said with what I can only describe as funereal glee, when the car came charging over the stop street, driving off without even slowing down. Shame, such a nice boy, one doesn't even know if he had relatives. She'd been like a mother to him, even if she had to say so herself. And what about the last month's rent? But the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, and who were we to complain?

Smooth and Blunt

JUST BEYOND THE two massive boulders that must have broken away from the highest cliffs in prehistoric times to come to rest at this spot above the Devil's Valley, I noticed a movement in the fynbos. Something was coming my way. For a moment I was unsure whether it was man or beast but it turned out to be the former. Benefit of the doubt. Not much more than a metre tall, and totally hairless as far as one could see, the face ageless and expressionless, smooth and blunt like a prick. His misshapen legs were too short for his body. He was barefoot. Two large flat feet that seemed to have no bloody bones in them, like a fucking duck's. In one hand he carried a catapult, with the other he was scratching his groin.

Involuntarily I stepped back, glancing round in the direction of the old dude who'd shown me the way, but he was no longer to be seen.

"I'm looking for the road down to the valley," I explained. "The old man up there told me... perhaps you could..."

He grimaced with open mouth, made a vague gesture with the hand holding the catapult, and waddled off into the fynbos. I wasn't quite sure what to do. But after a moment he came stumbling back and waved at me again, making an unmistakable gesture with his obscene blunt head. I began to follow him. Abandon ye all hope.

It was dead quiet among the high cliffs, and all the way along the great slope as we went on, a silence which made me feel totally fucking alien: not the usual kind of silence one expects in the mountains, which is at least broken from time to time by a rustling of wind or the shrill of a cicada or whatever; but the silence of something missing, something lost. I couldn't explain it. And it was only much later, at least a week, before I realised what it was: in this godforsaken valley there were no birds, not a bateleur or a grey partridge, not a weaver or a sparrow or a swallow of any description, sweet fuck-all. But by that time it was like already too late.

Of The Soul

There was something haphazard about our progress down the mountains, as the garden gnome didn't seem to be following any known route. From time to time he would stop to fit a small pebble into the skin of his catapult, close his eyes and let fly. Zen and the art of whatever. Then he'd grin in my direction, mumble something, grab at his fly, and start waddling off along the trajectory traced by the pebble. Until we'd get to the spot where it fell, when the whole process would be repeated.

In this way we zigzagged crazily down ever more arid slopes, among what is usually described as towering cliffs, ranging from yellow through orange to deep red, across huge carbuncles which at a distance appeared fucking unscalable. Once we seemed to head straight for a blank rock-face, but at the last moment the little runt swerved into a small thicket, and motioned towards a hole through which it was just possible to crawl on all fours.

In passing I glimpsed a series of rock paintings in various pigments, white and black and sienna and ochre, on the sloping ceiling right above my head: eland, elephant, little men with bows and arrows and spiky hard-ons. Right across the scene was a name chiselled into the rock in large uneven capitals: STRONG-LUKAS. But there was no time to look more closely or ask the odd question,

otherwise I'm sure my waddling guide would have buggered off without me.

Beyond the breach in the cliff the path became easier for a while. Until we reached the next damn obstacle. Then the next, and the next. Every now and then I made a hurried smoke-break. In my fucked condition it's all that helps. Then off we'd go again. One hour, two, four. My chest was rattling like an old-fashioned bellows, my lungs were burning. If only I'd been one of the fitness freaks who regularly climb Table Mountain over a weekend, but apart from raising my right arm or the occasional short series of pushups with something female poised below, I take no exercise. Perhaps this trip would bring on the inevitable coronary, which might at long last get home to Sylvia what she'd lost. Fat chance, though, thinking of her parting shot: "You've got syphilis of the soul, Flip Lochner." The filthiest and truest thing she ever said to me. ("Fuck you," I answered. "What makes you such a sad case is that you can't even swear properly," she said. "You have no imagination."—"Fuck you," I told her again.)

As we went down, the kloof grew more and more bloody impossible. And more parched. What from above appeared fertile, even lush, turned out to be screwed by green drought. Even shrubs and bushes that still put up a green face crumbled to dust as one brushed against them. The ravine was becoming narrower too. Overhead the cliffs were closing up. The remaining sliver of sky turned the deep blue of a bloody bruise.

Stopping for another life-saving draw, I asked through the smoke, "You sure you know the way?"

Prickhead uttered another sound which might mean anything, his fingers working frantically in his groin. But that was as much as I could get from him.

"Where are we going?" I tried again.

He seemed to find that very funny, for he convulsed in laughter, so violently that I began to fear epilepsy. But after a while he placed another goddamn pebble in his catapult and let fly. And off we went again.

Some way down the next slope I was forced to take off my rucksack as our ledge was shrinking to a pencil track. My guide continued to move along surprisingly bloody light-footed on his padded feet, but I stepped on a loose stone, staggered in panic, let go of the rucksack to regain-my balance, and just made it. The bag went tumbling down the fucking precipice until it was finally stopped, fifty or sixty metres down, by a grotesquely distorted wagon-tree. Shit. This was all I needed.

Splinters

I cautiously picked my way down after the rucksack, managed to get hold of it and struggled back to the ledge. There I squatted down for a while to catch my breath, feverishly undoing the bloody thing to check the contents. Prickhead stood watching in fucking fascination as I rummaged. Thank God the tape-recorder was packed deep inside, wrapped in clothing; at a glance it seemed okay, but I would have to examine it more carefully later. But the camera was fucked. The broken lens came tinkling from the bag as I undid it. All I could do in a kind of impotent rage was to throw the useless thing into the void that gaped below, as the phrase goes.

Still shaken, I turned to the precious cardboard box in the side-bag. From outside it still seemed all right. Then my heart sputtered as I saw a moist stain spreading through the cardboard. With clumsy fingers I tore the box open, prepared for the worst. My fucking bottle of fucking White Horse down the drain. Everything in the box in which I'd so lovingly cradled it was soggy, and riddled with sharp splinters. Inevitably I cut a bloody finger in the process. Under the gnome's beady eyes I sucked my finger, then began to remove the splinters one by one from the soggy mess in the box. The way an army doctor might pick shrapnel from a wound, except I'm not sure the doctor would so lovingly suck

each piece of shrapnel clean. Even the grainy substance of the contents of the box didn't put me off. Although what was left after I'd cleared away the worst looked pretty unappetising. I grimly replaced the box in the bag.

It was some time before I scrambled up again to resume our journey. Just in time, it seemed, as Prickhead had started working away so furiously at his groin that his eyes were beginning to get a glassy stare. Worked up into a proper lather of another kind, I stumbled on after him, following the latest pebble from his catapult.

Until, at bloody last, we crossed a rockfall to the bottom of the valley where a dried-up riverbed ran along a line of withered trees. Old wisps of beard-moss and lianas studded with ferocious thorns hung scraggly from the highest branches. One of the largest trees, an ancient wild fig, had been split from top to bottom, scorched by lightning in some forgotten time. It must have been the mother of all bolts. Presumably the whole valley bed became one churning flood after a bad storm, but right now it was a bleached as bone. The trees were still alive, but only just; their roots must reach half-way down to bloody China.

We followed the dry riverbed, Prickhead waddling on his weird bow-legs, the catapult now draped across a sloping shoulder. It still seemed improbable for him to move with so much ease.

And then, just as I was beginning to think I'd run right out of steam, we came through a last thicket of trees and saw the valley opening up ahead, with signs of fields, and vineyards, orchards, all bleached by drought, but still bearing the unmistakable imprint of civilisation. There were houses too few and far between, some of them in a parlous state but all of them apparently inhabited. Four, five, six, followed by a hulking whitewashed church, much larger than one would expect in such a wild place, with a square, squat tower. For a moment I couldn't make out anything more, as the valley swerved to the left.

When I turned back, Prickhead had disappeared. In a sudden panic I looked round: would I ever, if I had to, find my way out again?

Rucksack

Right now the fucking rucksack required more urgent attention. I lowered it on a large flat rock in the middle of the dry riverbed and removed the tape recorder from its womb of odds and ends of clothing. It was one of those nifty little jobs that can fit into a shirt pocket. The red light went on when I pressed the button, but the tape was stuck. So much for technology. A journalist's fate worse than death. I pressed it to my ear but there was no sign of the familiar reassuring hiss. Even a few vigorous shakes made no difference. I'd shaken other things with more success in my life. Furious with frustration I gave it a slap, my stock solution for hitches in anything from a PC to a parking meter; and for once it actually worked. The little wheel was turning again, its whisper music to my ears. I pressed Record, went through my alphabetised repertoire of synonyms for the female pudenda (more satisfactory than the standard one-two-three-four-five), rewound, then pressed Play, and listened approvingly to the recitation, in my own voice, of what years ago had still been within my range of the accessible; just after the letter 'p' I switched off.

Kitsch

Now follows an event that gets my knickers in a knot. It doesn't reflect well on me, but what the hell. I've hit rock-bottom anyway, as Sylvia or the kids or any of my colleagues would be only too happy to testify. A hairy turd is worse than any second-hand car dealer. So here goes, and devil take

the hindmost.

Just as I'm bending over to do up the clasp of the rucksack again there is a splash. I straighten my back to look. On the far side of a small thicket of withered underbrush and reeds I discover a long deep pool that somehow escaped my notice earlier. A movement in the pool catches my eye. Now for the kitsch part. I know it sounds like overdoing it, but I swear by my mother's corns that this was how it happened. Crime reporter signing on. A naked girl comes scrambling from the pool, her back to me. She bends over to wring the water from her hair, then sweeps it back over her shoulders. A long black mane that ripples in shiny wet waves all the way down to the bulge of her buttocks. In the interests of truth I must specify that her body is a bit on the thin side to my taste. If this had been my fantasy I'd have filled her out a bit, more curves, more moulded kind of thing. But this is the point: it's not a dream, she is real. So I have to take her as she comes.

Then, like an obliging model, she turns to face me. She throws her head back, both arms raised, her feet wide apart to steady her on the slippery surface of the wet rock. Long legs, if kind of sinewy. The thing about legs is this: no matter how thick or thin they are, how short or long, they meet somewhere. And there's nothing wrong with the bush that marks this meeting point. Black tufts sprout abundantly from the armpits too, something I've always had a weakness for. Altogether, it's the total wet-dream image. Except, as I said, the girl's not exactly the Birth of Venus. I did my stint of Art History at varsity, don't underestimate me, and Botticelli clearly had no hand in this one. Even so, beggars can't be choosers.

Gentlemanly Thing

I just stand there, kind of dumbstruck, like Lot's wife. After a while she lowers her head again, but remains standing with her hands stuck in her thick dark hair, the points of her elbows raised to the late light, looking straight at me.

Jesus, now I'm really flexing the old purple-veined stylistic muscles. I'll soon be the man I used to be. Watch this spot. But I can't keep the girl waiting: she's still standing there at the edge of the pool looking straight at me. Yet there isn't the slightest hint of embarrassment or shock in her gaze; nothing exhibitionist either, I should add. She simply stands there, looking at me, right into my face as far as I can make out through the threadbare screen of brittle twigs and reeds and stuff between us. I can see the late sun glistening in the droplets on her skin, touching like brush-strokes the elevations of her nose and cheekbones, her collarbones and shoulders, et cetera.

The one who feels caught out and embarrassed is me. As if I have no fucking right to be there. And that's saying something, because there isn't much I haven't seen in my line of work, the whole range from the shit-smelling awful to the bloody beautiful. Take my word. Feeling trapped like a schoolboy in a girls' locker room, I bend over to start fiddling with the straps of the rucksack again. Then it occurs to me that I might do the gentlemanly thing and offer an apology. I straighten up. But it's too late. The lady has vanished.

And not only the lady. The bloody pool too.

I broke through the underbrush and tangled weeds to where it had been a minute ago, but there was no sign of water. The hole was there, a rough rectangle among the rocks, but it was empty and quite dried up. So obviously there was no sign of wet footprints either.

Quite Normal

Now don't tell me it was a mirage, a hallucination prompted by a too rampant urge and too little

occasion. *She was there.* I can recall every damn detail. Not only the mane of tumbling hair, the straight black eyebrows, the cheekbones, the wide mouth, but something else I'd like to add for future reference, as it is of some importance. The girl had four tits. One pair quite normal, of the size and shape one would expect, the nipples perched like two bees (who said it first?) exactly where one would look for them. And then, a narrow hand's breadth below them, like small smudges on an artist's paper, something first drawn, then erased, but not quite, not altogether, another pair. Not proper-sized boobs, these, only a suggestion of two mild swellings, stings of the aforementioned bees; but no doubt about the nipples. You think this is the kind of thing I could have imagined?

I can remember telling myself: Now this is something I wouldn't mind having a closer look at. Investigative journalism. But the thought also brought a tinge of guilt, as if with that candid gaze she could read my mind (the lingering stain of fucking Calvinism, like a dirty rim in the bath); and that may well have been the reason why I bent down over, the rucksack again. The truth, almost the whole truth, and nothing but.

While I was still scouting among the sparse dry reeds fringing the edge of the dried-up rock pool, in search of some trace of her, a voice behind me said:

"So there you are."

Story of My Life

MY FIRST THOUGHT, when I returned home after Little-Lukas's death, was that the bloody accident had once again put paid to all hope of doing something on the Devil's Valley. Story of my life. But the boy kept haunting me. A few days after the accident I phoned his landlady to find out whether she'd heard anything from his relatives; and about funeral arrangements, that kind of thing. (From our crime reporter.) No, to both questions. There had been no news from family and friends, and unless someone turned up to claim the body the municipality would probably have him buried. The rent, she reminded me, was still outstanding too.

I usually put on a tough-guy act, but in the end I'm a soft touch. I mean, I shout at the fucking bergies who squat on the stoep, then slip them the odd rand, even though I know bloody well it will go straight into a bottle of blue-train. As a result, every month I'd screw up my budget, and Sylvia would have her field day. At least that is now over and done with. Anyway, in an unguarded moment I undertook to pay the landlady her blasted rent, as well as the funeral costs if no relatives pitched up during the next week. Three thousand two hundred and thirty-one rand for a simple cremation, no service, no coffin, no nothing; only a nondescript little brown cardboard box with Little-Lukas's ashes, delivered on my doorstep by a tall man who looked like Groucho Marx.

Abandoned Notes

What was to be done with the box? I considered arranging a burial, but the picture of Groucho, the landlady and myself in the cemetery on a wet winter's day in Cape Town was too much for me; besides, I couldn't afford any further expense. That was how I started thinking about taking the ashes to the Devil's Valley. Kind of pilgrimage. Also, it was as good an excuse as any.

I dug up my notes abandoned thirty years ago, on the Seer's trek into the Swartberg, stowed in a dilapidated old box in the dust and cobwebs and mouse shit and silver moths and cockroaches in my garage. I added to it the cigarette box from my night of cheerless carousing with Little-Lukas, and then began to sort out the confused memories of our meandering conversation.

There wasn't much sense to be made of it; and most of what returned to me through the remembered fearful swell of OB was hedged in by question marks. Any report slapped up out of that whore's crotch of notes and recollections would have seen me fired on the spot. But frustrating as they were the memories kept haunting me. In the messy business of my life it became a single constant spot of reference. The reassurance of a few small hard facts: this and this and that I knew, this and that and that was certain, unshakeable by wind or weather, adversity or time.

I went to see my editor on the question of accumulated leave; he seemed singularly happy to let me go. From an adventurous colleague I borrowed a rucksack, purchased what was necessary in the line of provisions, added my tape recorder and my camera, plus flash and tapes and film, and set off for the Little Karoo to feed the long-starved rat. In Oudtshoorn I spent a day on enquiries until I found a helpful garage man who agreed to take me into the mountains in his four-by-four, as far as the beacon from which I would have to strike out on foot. That was the Wednesday, a tranquil day in late April, in the afterglow of summer.

Or For Worse

I'd counted on a week, but the garage man persuaded me to stretch it to ten days.

"Saturday suits me better, you see," he said. His name was Koot Joubert, a solid block of a man, as heavy as a Bedford truck, if one can imagine such a vehicle with sideburns. "I'll be coming back from Prince Albert next Saturday. Round about noon, I think."

High up in the mountains where he dropped me we confirmed the time.

"I'll be right here at the beacon," I said. "If I'm not here, don't wait for me. That'll mean that I decided to stay longer."

"Don't think you will." With a rumbling laugh like an old engine starting up. "The people down there is a strange lot. Judging from the ones who sometimes turn up in town for shopping, that kind of thing. They're a wild bunch, man."

"See you next Saturday, Koot."

"No, right, okay." He offered me a hand the size of a gearbox. "Hope you come back alive."

I could think of several questions I'd still have liked to ask, but decided to wait and see for myself. I refused to be discouraged in any way. I'd bloody well waited long enough to get to the brink of this tract of history that had tantalised me for so long. For better or for worse, so help me God.

At the side of the gravel road I remained standing until Koot Joubert's dust had settled among the rocks. Then I turned towards the Devil's Valley, with a huge curving slope straight ahead; I felt like a mole on a woman's tit.

One last time I checked the contents of my rucksack. The provisions. The tape recorder and notebooks and ball-point pens. The two cartons of Camel, four hundred, plus a few loose packets stowed in my pockets. Enough for ten days, if I rationed myself carefully. The White Horse safely ensconced in the box containing Little-Lukas's pinkish-grey ashes.

Now here I was at last, and behind me a voice was saying, "So there you are."

Usual Places

IT'S DAMN HOT here in the dry riverbed where I'm crouched waiting. There is still time, but not much. If she doesn't come soon, I've had it. And there's such a lot still to untangle in my mind.

The others are about their business among the ruins. In my mind I fit them into their usual places, the way things were before the bloody catastrophes began. Grandpa Lukas, as they call him here, among his mottled goats on the mountainside, chewing or sniffing his strong tobacco. Brother Holy pacing up and down his rows of vegetables, hands behind his back, preparing his sermon of fire and brimstone for next Sunday, while Smith-the-Smith furiously hammers a white-hot horseshoe of pure gold into shape on his anvil for a horse he'll never see. The sprinkling of old people in the cemetery, sweeping the aisles and dusting the headstones and cleaning the little beds of succulents on the graves as they chat to the dead and pass on all the news from the living in exchange for tidings from the other side. Tant Poppie Fullmoon with her bag of herbs, waddling on her small round feet to bring a new baby into the world or strangle another. Jos Joseph planing boards for coffin or bed or doorpost, his mouth bristling with wild-olive nails, one of which he occasionally swallows when he becomes excited. Jurg Water loping behind the forked stick he uses as a divining rod, up and down the dried-up slopes where no drop of subterranean water remains to set the stick twirling in his huge paw. Henta Peach and her gaggle of barely nubile furies twittering among bright shafts of light in some dark shed, ample warning that at moonrise tonight they will be cavorting naked among the bluegum trees again. Hans Magic accompanied by his perennial cloud of flies like a fucking halo around his filthy head. The randy old shoemaker Petrus Tatters pretending to be hard at work while everybody knows his thoughts are with Criel Eyes's widow who he's planning to screw tonight. Gert Brush among the paintings never finished because he keeps on adding new faces to the ones hovering in the layers of paint below. Isak Smous counting the money he'll never spend. Job Raisin at his stands of drying tobacco and raisins, branch in one hand to chase away the birds that disappeared from the Devil's Valley a century ago. Tall-Fransina bent over the tip of the coil from her still, surrounded by her innumerable cats as she awaits the blessed moment when the heart of the run can be cut from the heads. Peet Flatfoot, the dwarf I'd christened Prickhead on my arrival, hiding in the thickets beside the dried-up water-holes to spy on the naked girls who have long stopped swimming there. Ouma Liesbe Prune huddled with her small tin trunk on the roof of her little house, waiting for the skies to open so that the Lord can sweep her up to heaven, while her distant nephew Ben Owl lies snoring down below until nightfall when he will get up to prowl in the dark on his club-foot. Bettie Teat and her brood in the sun on the doorstep of the church, a child at each bare breast, waiting for Brother Holy to descend from the cabbage patch to castigate her for the sins of her voluptuous flesh. Also Lukas Death, somehow appointed as my guide and mentor during this stay which is now over and not yet over: he occupies the biblical position of Judge in the Devil's Valley, a combination of justice of the peace, and mayor, and field cornet, besides doing his job as teacher and undertaker.

And then Emma, Emma in church, Emma here in the dried-up riverbed, Emma at the Devil's Hole, Emma in the cemetery at night, Emma's laughter and her silences. Emma bearing the mark of the Devil on her breast, Emma.

She is the one I'm waiting for now. But the one who showed up that late afternoon, among the

tangled bushes beside the dried-up pool, was Lukas Death, saying “So there you are.”

Screwed Up

I swung round quickly: one can only take so much on any given day. In front of me stood a thin man in a quaint black linen suit, with a wispy ringbeard resembling old photographs of Paul Kruger. Undertaker, was my first thought, which turned out to be not so wrong after all. But on closer inspection he appeared too scruffy for the job: collarless shirt, the sleeves of his jacket frayed and much too short, so that his hands protruded like gnarled, brown sweet potatoes; and barefoot, carrying two heavy veldskoens over one shoulder. In this place, I was to discover, people tend to save their shoes as much as possible. A pretty seedy sight, all told, and rather peed-upon. Judging from the way he screwed up his eyes below the unkempt eyebrows as he stared at me, he was short-sighted too.

“You look as if you’ve just seen a ghost,” he said.

“For all I know I have,” I was still too fazed by what had just happened. “I saw a girl in that hole a moment ago. Clear as daylight.”

“It must have been that Emma,” he said with what looked like suppressed rage. “There’s no stopping her when she gets the urge.”

“But the hole was full of water.”

“That one will squeeze water from a stone,” he said, his lips white with disapproval. “And I’m afraid Little-Lukas backed her up.”

The name hit me in the guts. “I knew Little-Lukas,” I blurted out.

He nodded as if he knew all about it.

“Little-Lukas died,” I announced.

“Indeed, yes.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d heard the news.” I felt quite out of my depth. “I brought his ashes with me.”

He shrugged, his face closed like a mussel.

“Well, that’s that then. I wasn’t sure if he still had relatives around here.”

“I’m his father.”

This was getting a bit too much. I put out a shaky hand, what else could I do? “Mr Lermiet...”

“They call me Lukas Death. We all have private handles here.”

“I guess the old man up there on the mountain, Lukas Lermiet, is also a relation?”

“All of us in Devil’s Valley are related. When we go abroad we’re all Lermiets, but down here it’s just the private handles. And you must be Flip Lochner. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Tampan-Ticks or Whatever

Just like when I faced the old man of the mountain, only more so, I stood gawking like the chicken my mother used to dose with fat-and-pepper pills against tampan-ticks or whatever.

“I hope I’m not putting you out in any way?” I asked. For the time being, I thought, the ashes should remain in my rucksack; they were clearly not welcome here.

He didn’t sound very encouraging: “That is as may be. I suppose if you’ve come all this way you may as well stay.” Adding, as if it were relevant, “It’s a bad year for man and beast, what with this drought and all. Look at this riverbed. Even the wells are drying up. It must be because of Little-Lukas. God has lost patience with us.”

“Isn’t it almost time for the winter rains?”

“Last winter God skipped a season,” he said, making it sound like a death report. “And he’ll keep

on chastising us until he's had enough." He sighed. "We can only hope that he had some hidden purpose sending you here. His ways are higher than ours, you know." Like the old man up there he spoke with an antiquated Dutch accent. I interposed some apposite grunts from time to time, but he paid scant attention to me. Once again I tried to steer the conversation to Little-Lukas, finding it impossibly to understand how the boy's own father could so stubbornly avoid all discussion of his death; but he ignored it as pointedly as before. It was obvious that in some obscure fucking way they'd already learned about the event; and the gloomy man made it clear that as far as he was concerned the matter was closed. So to hell with it. If necessary, I would scatter the whisky-soaked ashes myself when the time came, in some hidden spot when no one was looking. So rest in peace, poor Little Lukas L-Lermiet.

Lukas Death soon ran out of conversation. For a while we simply stood there; it was as if he felt I needed time to adjust, while I decided to keep my questions to myself for the moment. He waited patiently. I suppose a man who makes a living from the death of others has no need to move his arse.

At last he said, almost apologetically, "Well, if you're ready we can go." And I followed him, stepping out to meet my history.

Settlement

As we proceeded further into the valley the settlement unfolded in front of us. Probably thirty or forty houses altogether, arranged in two uneven rows, all of them whitewashed and built to the same basic plan: long and narrow, with a stoep in front, a hump-backed hearth at the rear, and on one side an outside staircase leading up to an attic under a steep thatched roof. Some were more dilapidated than others, as I'd noticed before, but they were all pretty solid, with thick walls built to withstand the ravages of time and perhaps even the odd earthquake. Every backyard had its shed and its haystack and a longdrop, while most sported an old-fashioned stone well. Among the houses were small thickets of trees, presumably brought in as saplings from outside, as none were indigenous: bluegum and willow, even a few oaks. Some distance above the top row of houses was a whole bluegum forest. On the opposite slope stretched a patch of prickly pears, some late fruit still blazing red or yellow among the bluish leaves.

The two rows of houses were interrupted, on the near side, by a large open space surrounded by a low white wall, enclosing the church with its squat tower topped with a wooden scaffolding which presumably housed the bell. At the back stretched the cemetery in which I noticed two old people in black working among the graves.

Against the back of the churchyard wall was a large pile of stones as if at some stage a monument had been planned and then abandoned; unless the stones had simply been cleared from the fields beyond. I tried to ask Lukas Death about it, but he turned a deaf ear.

The plots were large, unmarked by hedges or fences or boundary walls, each running unhindered into the next. There were chickens and geese and muscovy ducks everywhere, even turkeys. In several yards I noticed large trays and scaffoldings on which raisins and peaches and stuff were being dried. Higher up lay the patchwork of fields and gardens I'd noticed before: vines and tobacco and pumpkin and beans, and peach and apple orchards, and a sizeable stretch of citrus, everything visibly afflicted by drought. Most of the plots had pigsties at the back, and small flocks of goats; but I could see no sign of sheep or cattle. One could hear the chattering and screeching of children among the fruit trees or behind haystacks and sheds.

On one roof sat an old woman in a long black dress, her back pressed against the chimney.

Here and there in the fields and orchards bearded men were going about their work, but as we

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