

A Cry on the Wind

The wind that sighed across the stony land of Langvlei was thin and unsympathetic. Like a narrow, sallow, woman with one thing in mind. To reduce Maarman to a shivering boy. Take away his manhood and show that he could not stand the cold without a woman to warm his soul and his bed. And for months now, there had been only one woman in his thoughts.

Maarman straightened up in case she was looking at him again in that strange way of hers. He leaned more nonchalantly on his staff, wishing that there were not so many buttons missing on his overall. Without a layer of denim to break the wind, his cheap jersey let out more body heat than it retained. Mollie and the other sheepdogs were sheltering behind the wall of the kitchen yard, noses on paws, each watching its assigned shepherd for the first sign of movement.

Wreathed in steam, her face was shiny from the heat of the kitchen. Those chipped enamel mugs in her hands would be heavily sugared, the cheap instant coffee added without concern for economy. On the windowsill, there would be sandwich packs to pick up, each identically wrapped in waxed paper and the fillings a mystery until one was in the field and hunger – or boredom, prompted one to investigate.

The Oubaas' kitchen smells were very different from those of the shepherds' quarters. Last night's roast mingled with the toast and bacon aroma of his breakfast. He appeared in the doorway, acknowledging a murmured chorus of greetings, clipboard in hand and his cap shadowing a face that Maarman knew would be clean-shaven and clear-eyed, studying his shepherds for signs.

Like the day, Willem had been so hung-over that even his dog gave him a wide berth, and when Klaas had clearly not slept for more than an hour.

That Willem Kleinbooi had tracked down the owner of a bottle of acrid brandy on the next farm and that Katrina Meintjies had finally succumbed to the blandishments of Klaas Jacobs, had moved the Oubaas not at all and that day's pay was forfeit without comment or complaint. The thought of trudging those bare hills from farm to farm in a hopeless search for work was enough to subdue the most rebellious spirit

Maarman waited for his assignment without moving much more than his eyes. She was stacking plates and wringing cloths in ways that rippled and surged the muscles in those lean forearms and made her breasts move under the maid's overall. He was aware that Jan Jantjies, in his long leather coat, was also watching her and hated him for it. Both for his interest in her and for his fancy leather coat. Everybody knew he had found it along the road to Swellendam, where it had blown off the roof of some careless tourist's car almost in the path of the startled flock that Jantjies and his dog Zeb were driving to grazing on the Krantzkop hill.

Oubaas ticked his clipboard and nodded to Maarman.

He gave him an easy task. Bring in the sheep from the Stone Forest to the home paddock. Watch them until the agent came in his red 4x4 to look at them and then help him to spot check amongst them for general condition and price assessment. Maarman nodded and slouched away without another glance at her, Mollie falling in behind without his bidding. Again, it would not be today that he declared his love.

At the Stone Forest, Mollie bustled about in the cracks and crevices and open spaces, adding sheep to her growing flock as she went, while Maarman leaned on his staff and watched for signs of her flitting black and white form amongst the ericas and deformed shrubs.

Idly, he wondered what this forsaken part of the farm looked like when the sun sank behind the folded purple mountains away to the west. It must surely be a ghostly place with those incredibly weathered fingers of stone reaching forever upwards for the unattainable.

Shreds of trading store tobacco in a hammock of filched toilet paper took up his attention until the cigarette took form and was sealed with one practiced swipe of his tongue. He patted his pockets for matches and struck up while Mollie worked on.

They were leaving the Stone Forest down the clay slope to the home paddock with a sizeable flock, when he heard his name called.

Surprised, he cast about and centered on the sloping path, narrowing his eyes at the sight of her.

Her, in her kitchen smock and apron, scrambling up to the first granite outcrops with a greaseproof paper parcel in one hand. She caught sight of him standing there, and called,

“Maarman! You forgot your lunch. Come and get it!”

Maarman’s heart was pounding, but he stayed where he was and called back

“I’m up here - to your left – leave it there. I’m busy.” While he would have dearly preferred to say, “I’m up here – to your left – bring it to me – I love you.”

There was momentary confusion when her animated presence spooked the sheep until she stood still and Mollie regained control. Then, like lumpy porridge, the flock flowed past her to the gate of the home paddock. There was no such way past her for Maarman. They met face to face on the narrow path, she with the sandwich pack extended and he with his staff held defensively across his chest. Like a spear. She spoke first.

“Here, take it. Otherwise, it’s a waste of good food. A man should have something.”

“Thank you, it’s good of you to bring it. I forgot ☹☹”

“I know. I saw it there at the window and I thought, “That must be Maarman’s – he must have forgotten it” – so I brought it. With something extra. Your overall is open. You will catch cold. It’s cold up here.”

As she reached up to tug the collar of his overall, she touched his chest and Maarman was lost. Lost in the sweet, stolen soap scent of her and the firm warmth of her body under the cheap fabric of her maid's smock.

Afterwards, neither of them could have told how it was that they came to the little space between the rocks where the sweet grass had been short-cropped by sheep and the shy dassies that kept watch over this mystic place so far above the farmhouse and outbuildings.

Twice, during their love-making, Mollie appeared at their secret place, anxious and whining for support, before streaking back to her work, made impossible by the closed gate of the home paddock. Maarman hardly registered her presence. She, on her afternoon break, did not see the dog at all.

So it was that twenty five of the boldest sheep slipped away from Mollie and into the irrigated lucerne field so close to the home paddock, where only her will held the bulk of the flock, waiting for Maarman to open the gate.

Lucerne, that in its green and un-dried form, contains enough prussic acid to bloat and kill sheep and cattle, attracted to the dark lushness.

The lovers left their hiding place in time for her to prepare afternoon tea and start peeling vegetables for the evening meal and for Maarman to meet the agent.

Mollie's sheep had endured the poking and prying of the agent and were picking at the stubble of the home paddock when Oubaas came down to where Maarman was wrapping the length of worn chain around the gatepost.

"The agent says that the count was about thirty short – he can't give me a price."

Maarman sighed, looked at his boots, picked at a rough spot on his staff, and said nothing. Mollie moved closer to press her head against his knee and he fondled her ears.

Oubaas tilted his cap back and looked around.

There were crows sitting on the fence posts of the lucerne field. They cawed and flew away a short distance when he walked up to where the lucerne field met the home paddock and stood there for a long time looking at the pale and swollen shapes lying scattered here and there in the gathering dusk. Some were still convulsing, helpless in their death agonies.

Oubaas passed Maarman without a word on his way back up to the house and then stopped to turn and say, quite quietly "Tie up my dog and pack your things. Collect your pay in the morning."

Maarman nodded once, and went to feed Mollie and tie her up in the wire run with the other dogs for the night before going to his own quarters for the last time.

Before mid morning, Maarman was six miles along the gravel road to Swellendam and moving fast, his blankets under one arm and a bundle of possessions slung across his back. He had considered stopping for a cigarette, but decided to conserve his tobacco and, instead, sat on a rock to stare back along the way he had come.

There had been heavy dew in the night and the short-cropped grass of the fields still sparkled in the new sun. He could see the last of Langvlei where it joined and became the farm Vergenoeg along a low ridge.

Over that ridge, she had cooked breakfast for the Oubaas. Later, with the scraps put aside for Mollie, she stood staring at the empty dog run where it had taken Mollie since before sun-up to chew through her tether rope.

With a last look, Maarman sighed and stood up to go.

At the furthest limits of his auditory range, he heard a strangely familiar sound and paused to look back. A fast moving black and white speck crossed the distant landscape, reached the road he had tramped, and was out of sight for the moment. Far in its flying wake, another, more upright speck toiled along, burdened by a bundle of some sort. Faintly, on the still, cold air, he could hear a string of invective.

Maarman sat down again to wait for them, a suffocating tightness in his throat.