

Book One: The Honeymoon

Africa is like no other continent on this planet and quite incomparable to the continents of the Americas and the Antarctic; the Indian sub-continent and Australasia. Those continents are unique in their own way. The Antarctic is intensive in her wilderness of ice; the Indian continent in her density of people; the Americas in the play of her human to godly spirits. All have their codes of identity: the condor, flight of dreams; the polar bear, birth of dreams; in India, the voice of dreams; and in the Americas, breath of dreams. None have the intensity of the wild animal presence as does the African continent.

To have a farm in Africa is to be honoured by the gods. The land belongs to the animals; the human people are called there, either by birth or by invitation, to listen and once adopted by an animal to be guided to their 'being-ness'. They determine the vision. We determine the loss.

Helen and Roland arrive in Johannesburg and hire a car for the road trip to Magoebaskloof and Helen's family farm. Helen drives because she assumes Roland has never driven a car before; she has only ever seen him walk and run without the slightest regard for machines.

"Anyway," she adds with a giggle, "we drive on the wrong side of the road. Your job is to admire the countryside."

"It's big; goes on forever."

"And some farms here are the size of Athens," Helen adds.

"Without the traffic. Does it ever rain?" Roland asks.

"It will rain in a few minutes," Helen says pointing up at the dark black clouds. "In Africa the rain comes from one bucket and then the sun shines again. The raindrops are the size of a Retsina glass and the thunder rolls so close your body shakes," and she shivers to show him how close. Roland leans out of the window to feel the stinging drops on his face and hear the crack as the lightning strikes the earth, like spikes from the hooves of an iron horse.

After many, many hours of travelling they crawl onto the winding dirt road up to the farmhouse. Helen stops the car and makes Roland lie flat on the floor, "as a surprise," she explains and orders him to be quiet and not to move until she is inside.

She parks under a tree at the back of the house and goes in alone.

The plan is for Roland to enter unobserved, but this plan goes awry when he sees a strange man crawling out of the bathroom window and goes to help.

"Bugger off," the man says and drops to the ground.

"You're not meant to see me," Roland says.

"So shut up," the man says.

They enter the house together and pretend they haven't yet seen each other. Helen and her mother keep talking and hugging so Roland and the strange man sit on the couch and keep pretending. The mother nearly has a heart attack when she sees Roland and the stranger.

Long into the night they all talk, swapping stories over food and wine, the one story flowing into the other.

At one point the mother asks Roland, "I hear you call my daughter Eleni, is that Greek, because my name is Doreen and you're not to call me Dori." They all laugh and that allows Steve to tell his name story.

"When I was a small boy my mother called me Sev," he tells them, "but my father thought that was too cute and called me Stephen. I was actually christened Stoffel," he says, "Jan Stoffel Rieburg," he thunders, "and I refused to be called Jan, because that is a girl's name so I became Steve."

"And I am Rodino, my real name is Xanos, son of Xanos," and Roland tells them his story, "my papa is dead, my mama I don't know, so another man called me Roland and that is who I am today, Roland Carter."

"Roland is good," and Steve claps him on the back, "forget Rodino," he scoffs, "that's also a girlie name."

At midnight Eleni lays a mattress on the floor and brushes her teeth, waiting for Steve to go. He ambles around the lounge, sipping a nightcap and chatting to Roland.

Doreen appears in her slippers and see-through gown muttering, "well children, lights out. My neighbours will be wondering what's going on over here."

"Your neighbours are miles away Ma," Eleni says.

"They watch me with binoculars," she says.

Steve sits then stands, nervous about his next move. He puts his glass down and stares at his feet. "I suppose," he begins, only to stop.

Doreen kisses Eleni goodnight and says, "Welcome home my child. We're old enough the two of us. I didn't tell you...well it's no secret now," and she takes Steve by the hand and leads him from the lounge, "he's no stranger in this house. He's with me so don't giggle."

The next day Eleni takes Roland on a hike around her family farm. The name of the farm is Pramkop, meaning the flat deck of a pram. Everything in Africa has a meaning, especially in the local Dutch language or any of the black tribal languages, where a name will tell a story and describe the place. Pramkop is the dominant mountain

ridge along the eastern border of the farm, and Eleni explains that her family have always seen it as a cradle with the two lips holding up the sky. The mountains are the feet of a giant creature and these are their paws clutching the land. Between each claw is a deep gully and these gullies are filled with green vegetation and tall trees.

Eleni walks carefully, stopping to rest after only a few hundred meters. She explains it as an inherited weakness of her youth when she chose to study rather than play those silly games with a ball and a stick. She would rather pretend to be ill in bed and read a book than run around a painted field.

The countryside is magnificent and for the first time in his life Roland sees animals in the wild and hears them crashing through the bush, so close his body shakes. High in the sky the eagles circle; the grass grows thick underfoot and plants even push up between the rocks; water runs in every ravine; and insects and butterflies flutter about; the land rich in life and in such contrast to his beloved, though barren, Greece. Eleni explains that in reality South Africa is a dry country and water scarce, so they are blessed to have these streams on the farm.

"They all run down to the Nsikazi river and then into the Komati river," Eleni tells Roland, "and eventually into the Indian Ocean, with lots of sand," she adds, "and these gullies are getting bigger and bigger as the rains erode them away."

"So one day the cradle will go," Roland asks.

"I hope not," she replies, "but we do not control nature; we are only visitors."

They drop down into the gorge, Roland helping Helen, bracing her against the slippery gravel. Roland strips naked and wades into the stream, gasping against the icy water.

"Be careful of crocodiles," Helen teases him.

"Do they eat Greeks?"

"Without chewing," she laughs and wades in.

He kisses her and her nipples stand up like hot raisins, and he carries her to a flat rock and they make love, the plants and animals witnessing their passion. They wash and climb back out of the gorge leaving the wet splash on the rock as their gift to nature.

The sun sets in an orange ball as they arrive back at the farmhouse and the smell of roast chicken entices Roland to open the oven.

"Out of there young man," Doreen snaps, "we Bainrights keep it secret until it's on the table. Now go and wash and join us for drinks on the stoep."

Roland and Eleni bath together, scrubbing each other and feeling gingerly for the soap.

Over their sun downer drink Doreen mentions that, although Helen is of age, she is still the child of the house and only when she is married can she share her bath with a man.

"What about you and Steve," Eleni asks without any attempt at diplomacy.

"We're over sixty," Doreen replies.

Roland blurts out, "I don't think it matters, we made love on a rock and the whole universe said it was fine."

"Oh!" Doreen gasps.

"It's about the feeling not the rules," Roland continues and lifts his glass in a show of appreciation.

Dinner meets all of their expectations and more, the roast chicken the perfect secret. Steve and Roland hit it off and even Doreen, after her third glass of red wine, giggles at the small things missing from the table. Eleni bobs in and out fetching and carrying while at the same time contributing to the rapid-fire conversation. The family cat arrives and sits on top of the sideboard next to Roland and he feeds it scraps from his plate winking at the tight stares from Doreen.

After dinner Roland washes up true to his training, until Doreen tells him to join Steve for a cigar and port. Eleni curls up discreetly in the corner sipping her tea while Roland and Steve puff on their cigars. Roland has never smoked, so he puffs and plays with the ash until it falls, catching it in mid air. He's not a pro on the port either and gulps it as he would Retsina. Eleni hides the bottle to save him from embarrassing himself.

Steve talks of the political situation and the necessity for a government of law and order, explaining that the current situation demands all whites stick together.

"Because the blacks are forming alliances in preparation for an armed struggle, and they'll chuck us out of here," he says. "They will attack us in our homes." He lifts his glass and proposes a toast to security.

And they all agree.

Eleni and Roland slip out into the night. The moon in Africa appears more watery, like frogs' eggs, not crisp as in Greece, like the eye of a fish. The pull is the same, and Eleni leads Roland by the hand to a secluded spot behind the reservoir.

"This is where we'll build our home," she whispers. "We can see the lip of the gully and the tall trees against the mountains, just a little cottage, with a coal stove and a double bed under a mosquito net."

"Done," he says and the site is settled and he kisses her to secure the deal, "and two cots in the corner.

"Done," she says and returns the kiss.

They look up into the egg of the moon seeing themselves upside down.

At sunrise Eleni and Roland enter the circle of big yellowwood trees. Eleni had told Roland about a fairy wedding that can only take place in this circle. She gathers flowers and ferns and different coloured leaves and makes a garland for each of them, placing one firmly on Roland's head. She invites Roland into the circle and asks him if he has a present for her. He searches beneath the yellowwood trees and returns holding his present behind his back.

Eleni folds her hand into Roland's whispering for the fairies to bind them together. "Keep your eyes closed," she insists and hums, swaying from side to side.

Roland copies her, but he cannot stop his eyes from popping open.

Eleni looks beautiful, her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, her full lips tasting the sunlight, and Roland leans forward and kisses her. When he closes his eyes again the fairies come. As a puff of wind sweeps through the trees and rattles the branches the fairies appear and dance around the circle.

Roland feels their wings on his face and whispers, "they are here."

Eleni squeezes his hand. "I will not leave you," she says.

"Nor I," he says and squeezes her hand in return.

So they speak their promises to each other and the fairies and to the trees and wild animals

gathered in the circle.

Eleni offers her present to Roland; a bracelet woven from the gut of a wild boar, and slips it over his wrist. And he takes his present; a smoothly polished stone, the colour of the red earth, and places it in the palm of her hand. They kiss and Eleni cries.

"I love you," she says, "you are the most warm, kind, loving human being on this planet."

"Me too," he says.

Doreen sips her morning tea on the stoep and as Eleni and Roland arrive, she tells Helen to make the toast for breakfast, she wants to talk to Roland.

"Sit my boy," she urges him. "We need to chat, there is something important you need to know."

Roland pecks her on each cheek saying, "We had a beautiful ceremony."

"Good, now listen. This farm needs a man."

"Where's Stevie?" Roland asks.

"He cannot do the tough work, he's too old for that, and anyway, he has other problems."

Doreen outlines the plans she has for making Pramkop viable and economically sound. She admits it will not be easy and will take many years, and a lot of money; money which they don't have so the farm cannot pay Roland, but he can live rent free and must find other work in the neighbourhood.

"Helen is young, my boy," Doreen says, "And not so schooled in the wiles of the world as you are. You are much older and I expect you to support and protect her, as Steve said last night. I trust you understand the situation."

"Must I fight?" Roland asks.

"I pray not," Doreen sighs, "but I'll give you six months, my boy," she says, "that is quite sufficient to make a go of it."

"Six," Roland says mulling the figure around to see what it means.

Doreen lights a cigarette. "Yes six, then you either marry Helen or leave her alone."

Roland never tells Eleni about her mother's deadline.

The poor state of the farm cannot be fixed in six months, not alone and not without money. There are no roads, so farm supplies and produce cannot be brought in or out; the water pipes are archaic; storage facilities impractical; and worst of all no established income. The questions regarding his ability to support Helen and fulfil his promise to Doreen dominate his thoughts. Vegetable farming probably the quickest from planting to income; but the farm does not possess a tractor or any of the implements. Orchards and fruit take years before they can be harvested and they also need a tractor.

"Where can I plough?" He asks. "What section of the farm must be left untouched? And who's going to pay for all this stuff?"

Roland has to negotiate every move with Doreen or Steve and they are both forever busy with their private affairs. So Roland finds himself locked in a struggle against time. His high aspirations of living off

the goodwill of the Universe disappear in a whiff of physical achievement. Yet despite his misgivings things get done and things are made to work.

He discovers a power-house in his skinny frame. He builds shacks and workshops and labour housing. He learns to drive a tractor, on loan from the local sawmill, and then a bakkie. He digs, he lays pipes, he plants trees and vegetables, flowers and orchards banking on a suggestion he heard in the pub.

"Throw the raisins at the wall and see which stick," an old man said.

Doreen and Steve negotiate the finances with a local businessman, keeping the final figures of the long-term loan a secret. A secret Roland ignores hoping it will never be his concern to repay.

He builds the new road across the gully to the stream and installs the electric water pump. Alas, the pipes, to the upper reaches of the farm, cut across the ring of yellowwood trees in the sacred glen where Roland and Eleni were married. Progress means; the road takes precedence; the pipes a blessing; and the scars will heal. If the claws of the giant creature have been hurt, the grass will grow and cover the wounds; all will be forgiven.

Doreen drops her hoity attitude and waives off the six-month probation admitting the work cannot be done at such short notice. The marriage status irks her, but she holds her tongue, suffering the dark looks of her friends and neighbours. To keep a low profile she stays home to drink tea and smoke cigarettes. She even offers Roland the occasional cigarette, on which he has learnt to suck and suck with some pleasure. Steve makes it his duty to share his opinion on African politics and the coming conflict and each night, after the news broadcast, he invites Roland for a port and cigar.

"This United Nations issue is so hypocritical," Steve begins and Roland knows that when Steve clears his throat and waves his cigar in such a lofty manner a monologue of grand proportions will follow. "We have legalised the apartheid policy," Steve pours forth. "We are white and they are black and we don't want to live their lives and they do not want to live ours. We have to prepare ourselves, my son, and if called to join in the action, we must go," and Steve holds out his hand and invites Roland to slap it a la big-five style, but Roland hangs out the port bottle instead, and Steve takes it and pours himself a double.

Roland's birthday comes and goes and his enthusiasm for the hardships of a farmer, despite the memories of his father's tough and buckled old body, remains as strong as ever. He builds a beautiful house on the edge of the woods for his beloved Eleni. They adopt a cat to prepare them for the ways of a growing family and make a snug box for it beside the stove. Bats move into the house and on warm summer evenings they whoosh in and out sweeping the area clean of flying insects. The windows are extra large and Eleni and Roland lie in bed and look across the rolling grasslands to the lip of the gully and the cradle mountain of Pramkop. Steve's prognosis of another Dark Age seems far-fetched, and although their daily work schedule skewers them out of balance, their lifestyle remains idyllic.

Eleni is twenty eight and nearing the cusp of her baby-bearing days. She arranges the two cots Roland has made in the corner, each with a pretty blanket and pillow, and in a special draw stocks up towels, bottles and clothing. Two weeks before Christmas Steve collapses and their idyllic lifestyle turns upside down. It is only a minor heart attack, but Christmas becomes a sombre affair with Steve festooned in a large easy chair and Doreen puffing from kitchen to lounge; to bedroom and back; and once even to the shed to fetch more wood to service the needs of her poor man.

On one of these sorties Steve winks at Roland and says, "Get me a small whisky, my boy, I need some proper medication," and he swallows it in a gulp. "No army action for me," he says, "you'll have to do it."

"Maybe I'll have an attack too," Roland replies.

"And you come back and tell me all about it,"

Eleni stands by her mother, and they become new bosom pals with Steve in the central role as the star attraction.

"We have a fight on our hands," he says slamming his fist into his hand. "It'll take every man woman and child of us to hold them."

At the mention of the word 'child' Eleni leaves the room and Roland excuses himself, kissing Doreen goodnight and patting Steve on the shoulder saying, "the trouble is Steve, I still don't know who my enemy is."

"This is Africa," Steve thunders. "And anything black is the enemy."

Poor Eleni remains frustratingly barren.

No amount of tests and encouragements from her doctor can persuade Eleni's genes to produce anything but empty scans and bitter tears, and she slides into a deep depression. The two wooden cots remain empty and after more than a year Roland converts them into book holders.

He lies in bed alongside Eleni touching her gently and whispering his plans to start a nursery. Eleni folds the pillow over her face too distraught to even contemplate a future.

Undeterred Roland continues saying, "A nursery of indigenous trees...it could work, and we can twine the forest vines into baskets and fill them with wild flowers," and Roland speaks with great enthusiasm of his plan.

"We're not a family," Eleni says her voice muffled under the pillow.

So Roland tackles the nursery project on his own. At first Doreen tries to stop him by refusing to allocate a piece of land, then refusing him the water unless he pays for it. Roland resolves the problem when he agrees to relinquish all ownership of the project and to work free of charge, as a sort of dowry. The nursery will be another Prampkop farm enterprise paid for by the farm and therefore owned by the farm. Steve agrees to balance the books to avoid any misunderstandings, and once the figures start appearing on his balance sheet he becomes very interested. The development costs are minimal and the price of a finished item big. The raw materials are on site requiring no transport and the overheads are small. The nursery may look primitive, but it works. Steve speaks to Doreen and they agree to release two elderly ladies from the labour pool to work full time on the new project.

One of them, elderly Goga, tells Roland, "you belong in the bush master," and her fire-smoked voice cackles. "You go down there," and she bends her elbow to indicate a place far below the horizon.

Roland discards her opinion with disdain as it speaks of separation.

Arriving home after a long afternoon in the nursery, he races into the bedroom stripping off his shirt and throwing himself across the bed. The cat runs for its life. Eleni bounces up and down and her book slips to the floor. She picks it up and opens it at random, her eyes darting across the lines.

"Are you coming to the party tomorrow night?" He asks, reading over her shoulder.

"Maybe," she says snapping the book closed.

Well, she doesn't so Roland goes alone.

The whole village turns out; Peter and Sue Lubber, Helen's best friends, command the biggest table and the biggest attention, mainly because of Peter's loud mouth and business connections. Everyone knows everyone and everyone is there; Piet van Vuuren once had to box the ears of Grey Viljoen when he caught him red-handed in the storeroom with Sonya, his wife. Poor Sonya, she's so pretty and so pert, and Grey so handsome and so wealthy, but a good whack over the ear flattened his attention over something he should never have touched.

As Piet admitted a few days later in the pub, "what's one night? Hell! She deserves it."

It is the self-same brute of a Piet who corners Roland just after midnight and demands to know when he will be joining their local commando. Grey Viljoen leans over Roland to lend his beery breath to the weight of their concern.

"You must shoot the bastards."

"Better be prepared than surprised," Sonya says and Roland's neck prickles.

"We're going for a training camp next week," Grey adds. "Two nights on my farm."

"So what," Roland shrugs them off.

"It's a game farm," Sonya adds, "You'll like it."

"Bring your own beers," and Grey laughs, "I'll supply the lions."

Early the next morning Doreen confronts Roland the moment he arrives on the stoep for breakfast, her message a sharp spike to his pride, reasserting herself at the top of the order.

"This name thing with Helen must stop," she says, "I christened her Helen, not Eleni. Her name is Helen, you got that."

Roland slurps his coffee taking only the top, just like he used to in Greece. "Helen," he says rolling the name around his tongue. "I like. Okay. Helen."

As soon as her name changes back to Helen, Eleni falls ill. Perhaps that is what Doreen wanted, another patient since Steve is on the mend.

Goga leaves the nursery to hover around the house saying, "Helen is called by her ancestors. She has healing in her hands, the ancestors say she must use this gift." And Goga brings gifts of snuff, a painted mirror and a bird's egg, in one of the nursery baskets, to ward off the evil spirits.

Helen plucks up the strength to lift her hand in a weak signal of thanks and then sleeps again. She is continually exhausted. She cannot eat. She cannot even sit up. Roland calls it the poet's disease, remembering Emily Browning, and he holds thumbs that this sudden and mysterious intervention will bring her back to loving him.

While Helen lies semi-conscious Doreen moves in to the bedroom, to be at her side day and night, and Roland goes to Grey's farm for a weeks army training.

Roland remembers nothing of the training. The beers never seemed to end, and they stood around a fire laughing over silly jokes; while the supposed enemy commandeered the bush. He does remember Timbanyani to be as wild and exciting as promised, and sleeping under the stars feeling scared, especially when a big fluffy rat suddenly switched on its bright red lights and screamed at him. He held his breath until

it switched them off, but never slept.

The seeds of war ripen. South African military forces snipe in and out of Angola; the townships swelter in the heat of unrest; and farmers are identified as soft targets to be killed and driven off the land. Roland feels threatened. With Steve and Helen sick, and Doreen tied to their beds, he is the only protector on the farm. He rings Piet and speaks to him of commando duty. The next day he sits in front of the commanding officer volunteering for service.

There is no parade, no induction, and no ceremony.

One signature; that is all it takes to create Lance Corporal Roland Carter of the 31st Infantry Battalion, Far Northern Region, Charlie Company. His natural ability to perform under stressful conditions coupled with his acceptance of discipline earmark him for active service. His commanding officer fast-tracks him into hard-core training and posts him off to a training camp in Potgietersrus; and from there to Oudshoorn and then Messina. Roland feels honoured to be serving his people. He has long yearned to belong to a tribe, one he can call his own. Since these are Helen's people they are his. By choosing Helen he chose her tribe and even without a clear-cut enemy, he acknowledges that his enemy will be brought to him, just as he draws his aim so an enemy will appear in his sights. The weapon issued to him feels good. He leans against it and it holds him steady. He cups it to his cheek and touches the trigger, waiting to strike. It becomes his friend listening in on his private conversations and dispersing his doubts. Like all good soldiers he and his weapon become inseparable and like all good soldiers they assume the mantle of invincibility. They are destined never to die; there is only one side and they are it. Roland dons the paraphernalia of a combat trooper; the helmet, the weapon, the jacket, the pockets and straps and ammo clips and face paint. He looks the part, number 1335881KH from boots to goggles, exactly the same as the other seven grunts in his stick. Only his thoughts are different, and his thoughts he shares with no one.

He sits astride the manhole cover on the roof of an armoured vehicle on patrol in the black townships. Yesterday was quiet. Today is not. There are stone-throwing youths barricading the streets; tyres burn; every black voice screaming abuse at him.

"Out! Death to the whites! Freedom! Amandla! Equality!" They scream.

Steve had forecast the rise of Black Nationalism, along with military conscription for every white son and daughter. Had he forgotten that whatever equation of moral duty applied to the one side also applied to the other? Had he blinded his forecast in the damning fear of the massive imbalance in his equation, that four million just cannot outfight forty million, and that four million just cannot deny the forty million their collective vision? Nothing in any equation from any angle can outweigh the moral vulgarity of suppressing a people craving their independence and freedom. No suppression in the history of mankind has ever succeeded and this one will be no exception. No commanding officer can hoodwink Roland into believing that the white tribe will succeed. The black students rising in open defiance of authority are the same students Roland had encountered in France. They breathe from the same barrel of intensity. Theirs is the rightful rebellion, their rhetoric the energy of fire. They boil and the heat doubles. The more he sees the screaming youth, the more he knows; these are not my enemies. Even if attacked he could never fire upon them.

As Roland drives through the smoke he feels their hate. He knows he is not the hero of his dreams,

just as he was not the hero of that French drive with Ricardo Elvalez, the Algerian patriot. He is a symbol of repression; every stone is meant for him.

At 06h00 he hands in his weapon and all SANDF material issued to him. He refutes all future tours of service and any other commitments he made.

"I am a volunteer, not a conscript," he says and walks away a free man.

Roland arrives home and bursts inside crashing through the door. He sees his beloved Eleni sipping a bowl of soup beside the stove, and picks her up swinging her around.

"I love you, I love you," he cries, his joy spilling over to see her smiling again.

"Careful," she says, her voice hoarse and unfamiliar. "You're hurting me."

He puts her down and stares at her, seeing her dishevelled hair and her sunken cheeks, and wondering why she appears to be aging while still so young.

"You're up," he says and runs his fingers through her hair.

"Only just," she replies.

"You used to be so blonde."

"I haven't been in the sun the whole summer."

"There's still time."

"No, I've got other things to do," she says and tells him how Elsa had come to see her and spoken of herbal remedies and alternative ways of healing. "In fact she said she would try to come tonight on her way home. If I'm asleep please wake me," and Helen flops back into bed.

That evening Roland notices a light approaching the house. He stands in the shadows of the stoep waiting.

A soft voice calls out, "hello, is that you Roland. This is Elsa, remember me, Elsa Viljoen. Grey hooked this funny torch to my keys so that I could see in the dark. Sneaky ja, he's so smart," she says and climbs the steps. "Hello," she says again and hugs Roland. "I came to see Helen; did she tell you?"

A bat flies into the house and back out again. Quick as a wink Elsa shines her torch into the sky. She calls the bats birds of the night, not omens of fear.

"They are prehistoric birds, the same as owls," she says and shines the torch into Roland's face. "You're not in the army anymore are you?" Without waiting for a reply she tells Roland that Grey too has quit all that nonsense. "He's not well," she says. "He's got this chest problem. Ag man such a shame, but he still pots it up with Piet whenever he can, the rat. I love him you know," she says kissing Roland on the cheek, "he's the only man I've really loved and we'll just die together," and she breaks off to fix Roland in a withering stare, like a spider to a fly. "Ag! Helen such a shame," and her eyes crinkle up in sadness. "I'll just chat to her for awhile." She spins on her heels and disappears into the bedroom.

End of sample read