Dust

Margot Luyt

Stof

Toe haar pa hulle gelos het, het hul na haar ouma-hulle toe op die plaas naby Bultlaagte getrek. Op Ligbaai het hulle hoog op teen die berg gebly en kon hulle die pragtige blou see daaronder sien. Op Bultlaagte was die enigste bult dié in die naam – "Dis net een bleddie laagte," het die dogter gedink, "daar's niks om te sien nie, net rooi sand en sand en nog sand!"

When her father left them, they moved to her Grandmother and Oupa who lived on a farm near Bultlaagte. At Ligbaai they lived quite high up on the mountain from where they had a beautiful view of the blue ocean down below. At Bultlaagte there was not a single koppie – the only koppie being the one in the name – 'It's just one bloody stretched-out low-lying nothingness,' the girl thought, 'with nothing to see, only sand and sand and more red sand!'

At Ligbaai her parents were continually fighting. At Bultlaagte her mother and cold-hearted grandmother were continually at loggerheads, flinging accusations and reproaches at each other. Even after Oupa had become seriously ill and her grandparents had to move to town. She and her mother and her two brothers remained on the farm.

Until he stepped into their lives. He and his family.

Shortly after the wedding her mother and her new husband also started fighting. Later they never skipped a day. Not a single day. Sundays were the worst, and the girl was acutely aware of the hostile silence in which they travelled to town and back to attend church. 'Why go to church?' she wondered. The anger within the family was an impenetrable shell eating away at all spirits and emotions. No sermon could ever break through such an encasement.

She was sent to a hostel in town. It certainly wasn't pleasant, but weekends and holidays on the farm were worse. Humiliation, fear, hatred, feelings of guilt and tension made it worse.

Tension specifically was permanently part of life on the farm. Will he be drunk when he gets home? Will they yell at each other? Will he hit her mother? Will he jump into his bakkie and speed off into the thick of night?

The girl couldn't decide which was worse: the confrontations, or the ominous silences. What upset the children most were the times when the mother would lock herself in the sitting-room and listen to the Triumphal Chorus from Aïda. Was she angry with them as well? Was she sad? Were they to blame? At first it was only the tension at Bultlaagte – and, of course, the dust. Red dust covering and penetrating everything inside and outside the house. Later on fear and nausea would set in.

She could neither remember how nor when it started. But she can clearly remember the way Joseph and the other workers, leaning on their spades, would watch how he would drive off to the fields with her sitting next to him in the bakkie. Joseph with his soft, innocent eyes, like her Oupa's. They were the only men with gentle eyes. There was no gentleness in her brothers' eyes, because they were mostly filled with fear or confusion.

Her Oupa's and Joseph's eyes were gentle, but they couldn't help her. Oupa was paralysed and dumb after a stroke. And Joseph. Joseph was beautiful. She knew it was a sin in God's eyes to think the black boys were good-looking, but she couldn't help it: Joseph was very attractive. And there was a soothing strength in his body. If only she could run up to him when she was afraid and sad and bury her face in his chest, he would have held her fast. He would have rocked her gently and whispered into her hair: 'Shh, Missie, it's all right!' But she couldn't and Joseph couldn't, because Joseph was black.

The more her mother suffered, the more she would slog away at the sewing-machine. She made everything on the machine – clothes for the girl who was too big to fit into ready-made clothes, kitchen towels, curtains. Anything. As long as she could shut out all the events on the farm – so that she needn't hear anything or see anything. And know of nothing.

This confused the girl – was her mother really not aware of what was happening on that depressing, cursed farm? Why didn't she stop him? Why didn't she chase him from the farm? Surely she couldn't have approved.

Or did she think that was what the girl secretly desired?

Was that why she liked the boys more? Didn't her mother know how she hated it? How she loathed him? And everything he forced her to do? Was she really unaware of the times the girl had to go and vomit in a vain attempt to get him out of her body and being?

At night she would start trembling when she heard him moving stealthily down the passage. He would wait until her mother was asleep. Was her mother really asleep?

And he was not the only one. When his horrible, foul-smelling brother was visiting, he would also make her do it. Down in the fields, where nobody would hear her crying. She couldn't wash away the terrible stench. And then the deceit. They forced her to betray her mother. No matter how roughly and repeatedly she would wash herself, everything seemed to have clung to her and stuck inside her.

Sometimes when they were driving somewhere, he would stop at the roadside and open his pants while he remained behind the wheel. 'Come, … come help me, play with me' he'd say. Drooling his nauseating spit on the steering-wheel.

Old Doris was the only woman with soft eyes. Why was she called old Doris while the horrible woman from the neighbouring farm was called Aunt Dorothea? Aunt Doris and old Dorothea would have been more apt.

The only people who seemed to have been suspecting something, and who really felt sorry for her, were Joseph and old Doris. Old Doris was different from the other women on the farm. She wouldn't allow the girl to watch when a sheep was being

slaughtered. She believed it was wrong to spill the sheep's blood on the cement slab when they would slit their throats. 'Blood must return to the earth. Otherwise it is murder. The blood must mix with the earth and dust – only then the slaughterer will have forgiveness.'

The girl often used to lie under the peach trees, reading a book. They didn't have much of a library, but her favourite was *The Pilgrim's Progress*, dealing with poor Christian's struggle, which she would read and read and reread.

Sometimes she didn't read – she would just lie there and think. There under the peach trees she could think freely ... and dream freely. She would dream she and Joseph are grown-ups and got married. They live high up on the mountain slope at Ligbaai. Joseph tends to people's gardens, while she cleans their house and makes their children's clothes. Their own garden is like a little paradise – lush and green and home to lots of birds and squirrels. Not meerkats … squirrels. She hated meerkats. They were part of this bleak, barren and dusty land.

Sometimes at night she would dream that she and Joseph and their children lived on the farm in a labourer's hut filled with the smoky smell of a fire they had made with mealie cobs and cow's dung; sometimes it was in a brick house near the sea.

But then there were also the nightmares. In one of those she would dream someone in a bakkie with barking dogs on the back is chasing her like a rabbit through a freshly ploughed field. She can't get away in the loose sand. Or she would dream she puts rat poison in his coffee which her mother then accidentally drinks. Or she would hit him on the head with a heavy club while he sleeps, but then his brother grabs her from behind and forces himself upon her against the wardrobe.

In the morning after such a dream her mother would scold her: 'You screamed again in your sleep last night! Stop eating biltong before you go to bed.' Or: 'You screamed and yelled again last night! We hardly got any sleep.'

On one occasion she sleep-walked to her mother's and his room and only woke up when her mother snapped: 'Martha, wake up. What do you want in our room? Go back to your own bed.'

Although her mother was very strict with her, the girl really loved her and would do anything to try to earn her approval. This unfortunately irritated her mother. Like the time the girl smashed all his liquor bottles against the stone wall.

The girl simply couldn't understand it. She's after all my mother isn't she, she wondered?

During one school holiday, her mother had to be rushed to hospital with a gastric ulcer. With her brothers attending a camp as cadet band members, he and she were the only ones in the house in the evenings. He was even more repulsive than usual, but the girl realised that the more he drank, the more he was inclined to leave her alone and go to bed early.

That evening she didn't mind when he ordered her to fill his glass for the umpteenth time. After a couple of glasses he got up and slurred: 'Switch off the lights and come to my room, I need you to play with me.'

He staggered to her mother's room and she thought: 'Not in there, dear Lord, please, help me!'

Slowly she moved through the house, switching off the lights, except for the one in her bedroom. The bedside lamp was also left on. Then she waited. Everything was dead quiet. She tiptoed to her mother's bedroom and listened at the door – he was fast asleep. 'Thank you, Lord,' she thought.

She went to the dark living-room and sat down on the wooden bench in the glow of the light shining from her bedroom. She sat motionless and expressionless, her chin resting on her chest, hands folded on her protruding tummy and knees wide apart. Her mother would have disapproved: 'Sit properly. A girl must always be feminine, even if she is fat.'

She sat like this for quite a while. Then she got up. She switched on the outside light in the kitchen and went outside. At the cool-room she took the rake Joseph had left there when he finished work that afternoon, walked to the orchard and started raking under the tree where she used to read. She prepared a bed in the earth, just like Joseph before he would plant something. Her earth bed was quite big – almost as big as the bed in her bedroom.

She returned to the house and opened a drawer in the kitchen dresser, the one in which old Doris kept the bigger utensils. She took the butcher's knife, went to the living-room and again sat down on the wooden bench. She sat there for quite a while, chin on her chest and her hands around the hilt of the knife holding it erect on her tummy. She didn't move, she just stared at the blade of the long and shiny knife. She was aware of nothing – just acutely aware of his snoring and the ticking of the grandfather clock.

As the clock struck twelve, she got up and walked to his room. He was lying on his back, snoring, still in his dusty clothes with the sweaty hat askew on his head. His mouth was open. Nausea almost got the better of her, but she continued walking to him. Then she raised the knife slowly and stuck it into his throat, forcefully. For a moment she thought he was looking at her, but she only looked at the knife, and turned and turned it. Blood was spurting. All over her and over him – and over her mother's pillow. He shuddered momentarily.

She remained standing there until he was completely motionless. Then she pulled out the knife. There was so much blood. She had a feeling that old Doris was standing behind her. Not angry or shocked – it was as if she understood.

The girl took the knife in her left hand and with her right hand she scooped out as much blood as she could from the hole in his throat. Then she went out to the orchard, to the patch Joseph had cleared that afternoon. She knelt in the loose earth and pushed her hands into the soil. 'Mix with the earth and the dust,' she said without any emotion. Then she pushed the blade of the knife into the earth a couple of times.

She walked back to the water tank and washed her hands and the blade in the cool rain water. Her mother used to say, 'Use rain water for the cleanest wash.' She turned around and walked back to the bed she had prepared in the orchard earlier that evening. She lay down on her back in the loose earth. And prayed for forgiveness. From her mother and the Good Lord. Then she raised the knife and quickly and forcefully pushed it down into the soft hollow in the pit of her throat.

(translated from Afrikaans)