

I

PART 1

TO A FUTURE GENERATION

A BOY'S INHERITANCE IS TO BECOME A MAN

The height of the waves can be very unpredictable, especially on Highdays. But just watching them made something resonate inside me – a freedom, that I knew was trying to fight its way out.

I was only allowed to come walking on the beach with grandfather once it was safe; wisely, since I always ran straight to the tide line. To me it was a magical border in the sand between caution and risk: I would skip from one side to the other, assuredly safe when on the dry ground, then jumping into the clutches of what had so recently been the sea's territory.

I had heard of people who play on the Meridian in this way: now east, now west. But the tide line was more tangible than just markings on a map. And it held the thrill of distant danger as the sand softly gave way where it was still wet from the high tide.

Grandfather would not let me out until he was sure the Highday onslaught had turned back, which sometimes meant I had to stay inside until very late. In community cities and large estates near the sea, a guardian is appointed to sound a klaxon when the tide has turned, and then work can start for the week. Grandfather had no men, however, and had to watch the waves for himself, spending the whole day near the water's edge.

“You must stay in the hut, Hermanus,” he insisted sternly.

The hardest promises of my childhood, but I kept them.

The height of the waves can be overpowering. Quite often there will be reports of men and women being swamped by the Highday tide. And so it is a great sign of recognition in the community to be asked to sound the klaxon for the very first time, since the lives of others are in your hands. It is the guardian himself who is most in danger, but sometimes farm workers labouring in fields nearest the beach are swept away when the klaxon is sounded too early – very rarely can anyone struggle back from this oblivion. When strong men have come back from the sea, they are feted as heroes within their community city, and given nobility status: a defiance of the odds that not even grandfather would choose to risk.

I never asked him for the thing I had always wanted most – I respected the fact that he would not consider me old enough to come with him. But I knew for sure he did want me to follow his footsteps, although it was only on the day of his funeral that he confirmed it to me.

Grandfather wasn't rich and had nothing of value to leave to anyone when he died, but his will specified that I must have the wooden ornament which always had pride of place in his hut. It was the shape of a young man, blowing a fountain of water high into the air, carved very simply. I knew this was his favourite possession, although it was worth no more than anything else he owned. Back inland, there was no klaxon, but I took this as his mantle, conferred upon me.

The first time I went out to help him I was apprehensive about leaving the people I knew: I didn't know there was anything to be excited about. The second time, I couldn't wait.

I was the first child he had ever had as a helper on his land. From my very first day, he made everything a game. I got points for working hard during the day and bonus points for different achievements, especially for throwing a bundle of grain into the basket from a distance. The more points I scored, the more sweets and fruits he gave me.

“It’s worth having someone so young and energetic around! You keep me feeling young myself!” He always said this absent-mindedly, every day as if it was the first time he had said it. “We are a good team, Hermanus. You provide the energy and I’ll provide the encouragement!”

But after the Highday tide, it was a struggle to make me do any work at all. I made straight for Rabbit Rock in the morning – not only was it the biggest boulder on the beach, it was also my first measuring point for a new tide line. About half the tides would leave a mark beyond it and half would not reach.

“Grandfather! Look! The line has come up well beyond Rabbit Rock but Tortoise Shell Pool is still dry!”

Or: “Look! The Singing Weeds have been swamped but the waves didn’t even reach Rabbit Rock!”

Then I went over to Baby Boulder. It wasn’t a very tall rock but I had a secret plan to spend a Highday evening on it when I was older. Even with the highest of tide lines, the top always seemed to stay dry.

What surprises me is that I was always surprised. Every tide line was different – even after I had been visiting grandfather for years. One morning I was amazed to discover that the tide line had reached into all of our fields along the whole waterfront.

“Grandfather, this is the world record highest tide line I’ve ever seen!”

“You should come in the winter, Hermanus. Then you would see some waves to scare you!”

“Is it safe?” I asked him excitedly. “How did they know where to build your hut? Does that ever get wet?”

“No, what do *you* think?! Would I let you sleep there otherwise? But the fields by the beach always get flooded in the winter. If I ever harvest anything from there you can be sure you won’t need to put salt on it when you eat it!”

I ran on ahead of him to see how far the sea had reached.

“Hermanus!” he shouted after me, “Don’t go too close to Farmer Groort’s land! You’ll set his dogs off!”

But I insisted on following the trail of the world's highest ever tide line, which had lapped up even against the high rocks protecting our neighbour's fields.

"Can you see, grandfather? The line has almost reached them!"

"When the winds are stronger in the winter, at least one wave always reaches Farmer Groort's fields," he told me casually. "But the height of the waves can be very unpredictable."

I started clambering on the rocks but got within barking distance of the fiercely noisy dogs, which sent me running back off the land.

"I told you not to set them off! Quickly! We'll have to back off now... and anyway we've got work to do! Unless—" his voice turning softer — "you want to have a quick look at Baby Boulder today?"

He knew I did, and I got there well before him.

"Look, grandfather! Baby Boulder is wet right up to the top! There is no way of knowing how high the waves are going to go!" I exclaimed. And just for a moment grandfather smiled with a satisfied beam of pride.

But I still hadn't learned my lesson.

The cliff shallowed as the height of the land eased down towards the centre of the bay, and away from the steep rocks of the headland, Thornamar scrambled down to the sand easily.

At last, back on a beach for the first time since my childhood days. Away from the daily orders of the slave masters, and galloping with the taste of independence. No longer cooped up inland — which is a prison that has no windows — and my eyes dancing with the spirit of the waves.

Heading towards the beauty of the opposite headland, being drawn as powerfully as it lured the waves crashing against it.

Watching the mighty crests breaking on its jagged teeth; staring — until startled by the smooth glide of a dying wave about three quarters of the way across the beach. It trickled up, almost cutting across our path.

Fortunately there was no menace in its advance, and its tranquil glistening merely stopped me in my tracks. This was the nearest I had ever been to a wave, and I admired up close as it seemed also to be taking a brave closer look at me before shyly turning away in acceleration.

With a beckoning enchantment it slithered back out to sea, and as I allowed my gaze to linger, I felt the urge to create another encounter. In wild liberation, of the grown-up young man until then kept under control by the legacy of grandfather's restraint, I kicked with an impulse to start my horse along towards the tip of the headland.

My conscience leapt from slumber in protest at such rebellion, but that only made me ride faster. I might never have the opportunity again. So I charged, diagonally to the approach of the waves, still ready to retreat in haste at any moment if necessary – but not another ripple even so much as approached gingerly. If the waves wouldn't come to me, I was going to them, and I would do it so there was enough time to actually gallop around the headland itself.

I rode close enough to the elegant nose of the rocky precipice to admire the jib of its resolute stand against the sea's permanent onslaught, and galloped one step further than the measure of its nobility, in invasion of the ocean's own dominion. The sea was still receding and I was going to make it... hopefully there would be a path back up on the other side—

We rounded the headland and I gasped in wonder at the sheer rocks. Such a glimpse of cliff from this new angle was like seeing my world upside-down. A solid barrier against the sea, although understandably standing unimpressed at my own arrival, simply stretching unceasingly into the distance.

And there was certainly no natural slope to give us a route up to the cliff-top path. But as I started wheeling Thornamar around, the corner of my eye was filled by the approach of a huge wave. Coming out of nowhere. And it wasn't breaking where it should be. I whipped Thornamar round towards the beach we had come from.

The huge wave was following in on the white of a different breaking wave and looked certain to catch it up. If it formed a double crest I had no chance.

We started a frantic gallop back to the shore, while I kept my eyes behind me, on the wave stubbornly refusing to break, seeming to rear itself and stand up to its full intimidating height. We were back round the headland and raced for dry ground by the most direct route.

“COME ON!” I shouted out to the horse, and put my head back down.

But the sound of the wall of water approaching us was deafening.

I afforded another quick glance over my shoulder. The huge wave was just breaking, on the back of the smaller one. It was several times taller than me and forming the white of the moment; Thornamar didn't need any urging.

He was going flat out but the ocean accelerated as the two waves fused into one, and I felt the splash of spray even before I heard the explosion. It was only just behind us and I was helpless as the strength of the current swept me out of my saddle and immersed me in the churning.