

The Grayton Christmas Supper Contest

Excerpt

Any animal that needed to be slaughtered for the Christmas supper had to be killed the day before Christmas, as no work was permitted on the day. Susanna knew that Gertjie was sharpening her knife, even as she, Susanna, was washing the blood of her processed springbok from her hands. She prepared a marinade of cumin seeds, crushed peppercorns, coarse salt and vinegar, and laid the meat inside to prevent it from rotting. Dirk wouldn't be home for the night. The men were digging the two graves around the clock now, taking shifts with the lanterns. It was as if God had sent her a sign. If there was one thing Susanna knew, it was a sign when she saw one.

With the springbok meat soaking, she pulled her shawl around her shoulders and walked to the farmworkers' houses on the hill.

"Janneman!" she called from afar.

He exited from his hut, his hat in his hand. "What is it, Ouma?"

"I need you to come with me. We're going over the mountain."

"Houwkw, Ouma." He looked at the sky. "The day is gone."

"Bring a lantern, and fetch me the rifle, just in case we come across a lion or hyena."

The white of his eyes were big in the darkening day. "Yes, Ouma."

An hour later Susanna scoffed and swore as her weary legs battled down the steep side of the mountain. God would surely reward her for her good work. She was an obedient disciple. Janneman walked in front with the lantern and the rifle. He said nothing, but glanced at her from time to time over his shoulder, his wrinkled face lined with worry.

When Gertjie's farmhouse came into sight, Susanna took the

rifle and lantern from Janneman and put out the light. She steered them around the back, from where the henhouse and the animal enclosures were visible. She motioned for Janneman to lie behind a rock, while she lowered herself to her stomach and studied the surroundings in the moonlight. God had sent her a full moon. The yard was quiet. Nobody moved around. Gertjie was alone, her menfolk digging in town.

She jabbed Janneman in the ribs with her elbow. “See the pigsty?”

“Yes, Ouma?”

“Go down there, and open the gate.”

Janneman stared at her with owl eyes. “What’s this now, Ouma?”

“Are you deaf, man?” she whispered.

“Houwk, Ouma.”

“Don’t make a sound, or Gertjie may get a fright and shoot you.”

“No, Ouma, this is not a good idea.”

“Do you want a hiding? Go. Quickly. Make sure the pig gets out.” When a trembling Janneman got to his feet and shuffled down the hill, Susanna called softly after him, “The fat one.” Susanna held her breath while Janneman tiptoed across the yard.

Any minute now, the dogs were going to wake, but she was ready. The moment the boerboel lifted his head, she threw her chunk of meat. The big dog turned his yellow head in the direction of the thump, and got to his feet, his nose on the ground. The other mongrels followed. More pieces of meat flew through the air. By now, Janneman had reached his target, and lifted the hatch to swing open the gate. He crouched next to the liberated exit, but the pigs didn’t move.

“Come on, come on,” Susanna mumbled, her eyes trained on the dogs. She projected another morsel through the air, leading them farther away from the house.

Janneman moved inside the pigsty. She could see him through the mesh, coaxing the slaughter pig. But the pig was overweight and lazy, and happy in his confinement where the food was plentiful and good. Janneman pushed, putting his full weight behind the pink bottom. His feet slipped in the mud as he exerted himself, but the pig didn't budge. The meat ration was almost finished, and Susanna had gotten the dogs away as far as her throw could reach. She offered the last sacrifice and watched as it was gobbled up. Janneman was back to back with the pig now, his feet digging into the earth as he huffed and puffed, but all for nothing. The pig gave a distressed squeal, and at that, the dogs twitched their ears and turned their noses to the wind.

“Oi, oi.” Susanna picked up a rock.

The barking erupted. Like a pack of wolves, they stormed the pigsty. Janneman cowered behind the pig, shouting, “Jirre, Ouma!”

Susanna threw the rock, but instead of hitting the boerboel who was leading the pack, it knocked the pig between the eyes. With a grunt and a buck, he shot forward, almost trampling the dogs. A light came on in the kitchen window, but by now, Janneman had clambered over the fence and was running as fast as his legs would carry him into the rocky part of the hill. When the dogs spotted him, they made a beeline, heading hard on his heels. Susanna had a difficult time dividing her attention between Janneman and the pig. The one was heading into the mountain, and the other down the valley, toward the ostrich camps and the elephant path. Seeing that the dogs were catching up with Janneman, Susanna loaded the rifle. If Janneman was caught, Susanna may as well burn ‘guilty’ onto her forehead with a cattle branding iron. She aimed for somewhere between the dogs and Janneman, pinched her eyes shut, and fired.

The shot rang loud through the valley. The dogs braked, yelped, and turned back for the yard.

“You devils!” Gertjie shouted into the night, standing on the stoep with a lantern in one hand and a pellet gun in the other. “I’ll kill you all!”

Another shot echoed in the dark. This time the bullet didn’t come from Susanna’s gun. If there was one thing Susanna knew, it was trouble when she heard it.