

VOLUME ONE

The Slope

Riedmatt, 1961-1963



**The Valley Holds Its
Breath**

A Generational Drama



aban news

Novel · written with Claude Opus

The Valley Holds Its Breath - The Slope

Drama

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Chapter 1 - The Woman Who Married In

The post van left her at the lower bridge because the road up to the Höfli was too steep for it, so Marlene walked the last twenty minutes beside Kaspar, switching the suitcase from her left hand to her right. It was the first day of September, and the valley lay in a light she did not know from home: hard, almost metallic, as though the sun up here had less air to cross. Above them, on the slope, the farm stood like an animal that had lain down against the mountain. Kaspar did not talk. He had talked little during the whole journey, and Marlene had learned not to read this as coldness but as a kind of economy that ran through everything here. Words cost something. Only when the path levelled out and the farmhouse emerged from the fruit trees did he say: "This is it. The Höfli." And then, after three steps: "My mother has already cooked."

The mother stood in the doorway as though she had stood there all afternoon. A small, dry woman with hands that seemed larger than the rest of her. She looked Marlene over, from her shoes upward to her hair, and it was not an unfriendly look but an appraising one, the way you appraise a scythe before taking it into the grass. "So you're the schoolmaster's daughter," she said. It was not a question, and Marlene did not answer it but held out her hand, which hung in the air a moment too long before the old woman took it.

"Come inside. There's a draught."

Inside it smelled of wood, of smoke, and of something sour, preserved. The parlour was low, its beams dark with wax, and on the wall hung a cross and beside it a photograph of a man who resembled

Kaspar and yet was not — the father, she understood, who had lain in the churchyard below for five years. She set her suitcase where Kaspar set it, beside the chest, and realised she did not know whether this was her place now or only the place for this evening.

Anton arrived in time for supper. He had spent the afternoon looking around the village, her brother, and he brought the smell of outdoors with him, of beer and cold smoke, and a laughter that was too large for this room. "A fine spot," he said, dropping onto the bench so that the crockery rattled. "At the Sternem they're already sitting and talking about the dam as if it were their own. I told them I'd get involved the moment they need hands." He looked at Marlene and winked, the way he had as a boy when he had done something and needed her to cover for him.

The mother ladled without looking up. There was rösti and a piece of bacon and afterwards cider from their own cellar, and talk moved over the table, but Marlene noticed already on this first evening what was not talked about. They spoke of the weather and the late harvest, of a cow that was about to calve, of the pastor's wife who was unwell. They did not speak of money, though the Höfli, she could see even then, carried more debt than livestock. And they did not speak of the dam, even though it ran through every sentence like water under floorboards — when Kaspar spoke of the late harvest he was speaking of the dam; when the mother praised the cider, the last this year perhaps from the lower garden, she was speaking of the dam.

"Those people down there," the mother said once, meaning the construction firm, and then stopped and pushed the bread across to Marlene.

Later, when the dishes were cleared and Anton had already slipped out again into the cool night — "just an hour, I know a few

people now" — Kaspar showed her the room under the roof. A narrow bed, a chair, a window facing south, onto the slope and whatever lay below in the dark. He stood in the doorway and did not quite know whether to stay, and Marlene did not know either, and so she said: "Go on then, if you must." And he went, with a nod that was half a promise.

She did not sleep that first night. She lay and listened to the valley, and the valley was not quiet, as she had imagined it would be when she had said yes to this man and this place. There was the livestock in the barn below shifting weight, a dull, patient sound. There was the wind moving through the fruit trees. And there was, far below and yet distinct when the wind dropped, a hammering, a thudding, a striking of iron on stone that did not stop, not even at night — the construction site at the dam working in shifts because time was pressing before the spring water came. Marlene lay and counted the blows until she stopped counting, and thought that this pounding must be the valley's heart, and could not say why the thought gave her no comfort.

Towards morning, dozing rather than sleeping, she heard Anton come home, quietly, with the careful movements of the drunk, and she heard the mother, who was already awake or had never slept, put another log on the fire in the parlour.

The next morning, during the milking, the mother stood beside her and watched her handle it clumsily and did not correct her, but said, as though remarking on the weather: "You need to understand that here you don't marry a man. You marry a farm." She wiped her hands on her apron. "My son is a good man. But the farm is older than he is, and it will still be here after him. Don't forget that, and things will get easier."

Marlene held the pail steady and looked at the old woman and searched the dry face for malice and found none. What she found was worse: a truth that had held so long it no longer needed an edge. The mother nodded to her, almost kindly, and went to the door, and outside, below in the valley, the hammering had started again, as though it had never stopped.

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Chapter 2 - The Building Site

Anton started on Monday. They took him without much ceremony because they needed hands and because he was strong and quick to learn, and on Friday he brought home the first wages and laid them on the table as if he had found them. It was more than a farmhand in the valley earned in two weeks. The mother looked at the money and looked away, and Kaspar did not count it, but Marlene saw what he counted it in his head. "They pay well," said Anton. "They pay well because no one likes going down there. It's wet and it's narrow, and the mountain pushes back. But money is money."

Marlene went down herself one of those first days, under the pretext of bringing him the lunch he had forgotten. In truth she wanted to see it, this thing no one talked about. The path led past the lower meadows, past the gardens that still yielded now and would stand under water come spring, and then the valley opened and there it was. A wound in the rock, grey and vast, scaffolding, skips, a crane turning, and everywhere men who were small against what they were building. The noise, close up, was no longer a thudding but a grinding, a roar that sat in the chest.

Anton found her at the edge and walked her along a stretch, proud, as if all of it were his. "The water will come up to here, all along the slopes," he said and gestured a line she could not see, and yet it took her breath away because it ran over the gardens, over the old path, over the small chapel by the lower track. "All that goes under. In return the valley gets its money."

It was the site manager who disturbed them. A man from below, from the city, in a clean coat that was out of place up here and knew it and wore it anyway like a reproach. He came over because a woman had no business at the building site, and said so, politely and from above, in a standard German that made the valley people small. "Private visits are not welcome," he said to Anton, not to her, as though she were an object Anton ought to have kept better secured.

Anton laughed. It was the wrong laugh at the wrong moment. "My sister is bringing me bread, Herr Ingenieur. Are you going to forbid her that?"

The site manager looked at him briefly, appraisingly, and left without another word. But Marlene had seen the look, and she recognised such looks from her father's school, from men who had power and did not need to show it because they knew they had it. "Be careful with that one," she said. Anton waved it off. "Him? He spends all day counting and sweats when someone looks over his shoulder."

They ate together at the edge of the pit, and Anton talked, as he always talked, about everything and nothing, and then, half in jest, with a piece of bread in his hand, he said the sentence Marlene would come back to so often that it eventually lost its casualness. "You know what's odd? I sometimes carry the delivery notes from the warehouse to the office. And the figures don't add up front or back. Cement arrives that never arrives. Iron gets paid for that I never see anywhere." He chewed. "Someone here is making twice over. But that's not my business. I dig and I get my wages."

Marlene said nothing to that. She looked down into the pit where the men were working, and up along the slopes where the invisible line ran, to which the water would rise, and she had for the first time

the feeling that would not leave her in this valley: that everything here was connected to everything else, and that the weave was so fine that you could not pull one thread without something, far away, snapping.

Evening caught her on the way home. Light was already burning in the Höfli, and through the window she saw Kaspar and his mother at the table, motionless, in the half-dark, two people saying nothing to each other and yet thinking about the same thing. She stood a moment in the yard before she went in, and above her, in the clear September air, the wind carried up the grinding of the building site, quieter now but steady, and she thought: the money for all this is already spent, in every head up here, long before it is paid out.

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Chapter 3 - Water Rights

The meeting was on a Thursday at the Sternen, in the main room, and half the valley came because it was about money, even though no one called it that. It concerned, said the notice on the church door, rights of way and the settlement of compensation for the properties to be flooded. Marlene was not allowed to vote — no woman was — but she was allowed to stand at the back against the wall, and she stood and watched a valley decide about itself. At the front sat the mayor, a heavy man named Lüthi, and beside him the young municipal clerk and a representative of the construction firm — not the site manager, another one, smoother still. The list was read out: who lost how much land and who received how much in return. Marlene quickly saw that the figures were not distributed equally. The large farms up on the slopes — the Areggers, the Imhofs, the Lüthis themselves — lost little and received much; the small tenants below, who worked the best and most fertile land, precisely the land that was being flooded, lost everything and received, measured against that, an alms. And it was arranged so that the tenants could not vote against it, because the land they worked was not theirs but belonged to the men sitting above.

When it came to the vote, Kaspar raised his hand with the majority. He did it without hesitation and without triumph, with the calm face of a man doing something necessary. Marlene looked at one of the tenants, an old man named Roduner whose garden would sink come spring, and watched him see Kaspar's hand, and watched nothing move in his face, because he had expected nothing different.

That was how things worked here. You voted for your farm, and the farm voted for itself.

Afterwards, over cider, Marlene understood the whole weave. She listened to the men talk — who owed what to whom, whose cattle someone had kept over winter, whose brother was with whose daughter — and she understood that none of those hands were free. Each hung from another. Lüthi owed the bank, the bank knew the firm's representative, Imhof had helped Aregger in a bad year, and Aregger would not contradict Imhof while that debt was unpaid. There was no evil plan behind it. There was something worse: a grown network in which every vote was already given before the question was asked.

Anton, who had come along, could not bear it. He had drunk two ciders and stood up just as the firm's representative was speaking of the "generous solution" that had been offered to the valley, and said, loudly enough for the room to go quiet: "Generous. And the iron that you invoice but don't deliver — is that generous too?"

For a moment no one said anything. The representative smiled, thinly. "The young man," he said, "understands bookkeeping about as well as I understand scything." A few people laughed, relieved, and the conversation moved on and the moment closed over Anton's words like water over a stone. But Marlene, standing at the back, saw that Kaspar did not turn towards his brother-in-law, and she saw that Imhof did turn, slowly, and look at Anton, weighing something with his eyes.

On the walk home, in the dark, the three of them went side by side, Kaspar in the middle. For a while no one said anything. Then, casually, almost warmly, Kaspar said: "You should be working at the site, Anton. Not talking. Talking doesn't help anyone here." It

sounded like the advice of an older brother, which he was not, and Anton took it that way and laughed. "Fair enough. I'll dig."

But Marlene, walking behind them, heard what Kaspar had not said, and it was more than what he had said. Above them the sky was full of stars, cold and uninvolved, and from below, through the night, the thudding came up, steady, patient, and Marlene thought that the dam was growing, blow by blow, and that something else was growing alongside it, slower and in the dark, for which there was not yet a name.

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Chapter 4 - What Anton Knew

He came to her in the barn one evening at the end of October, when she was alone and the lantern was already burning, and he had something inside his jacket that he did not show her at first. He stood there and watched her throw the hay, and finally said: "I need to show you something. But you can't tell anyone. Not even Kasper." It was a piece of paper, copied out by hand in Anton's awkward writing: figures, dates, entries. Cement, iron, timber, amounts beside them, and beside those, in a second column, different amounts. "The left-hand column is what was ordered and paid for," he said quietly. "The right-hand column is what actually came to the site. I've been comparing it for a week, every time I carried the slips." He tapped his finger on the difference. "Enough material for half a house is missing. Paid from the money that was meant for the valley. For the compensation payments. Do you understand? They're taking it from us before we even have it."

Marlene held the paper closer to the lantern. She understood figures — her father had taught her that — and she saw that Anton was right. "What are you going to do with this?"

"Take it to the authorities. To Interlaken, to the district office. They have to investigate. Then the valley gets its rights and the swindlers get what they deserve." He was proud of himself, she could see it, proud and a little excited, like a boy who has caught an adult lying and believes the world is waiting for his report.

She looked at the paper again, and the longer she looked, the more warmth drained from her hands, though the barn was warm. Because

the money was not only flowing out of the valley. Part of it, the figures showed, went through the warehouse, and the warehouse was run by a man from the valley, and that man did not stand alone. Whoever was earning double here was not earning against the valley but with it, with some of the men up on the slopes, with names she saw every Sunday in church two pews ahead. It was not a stranger stealing. It was the valley helping itself to itself, and the trail, she sensed suddenly with a coldness that had nothing to do with the barn, ran closer than Anton knew — almost to the table where she ate.

"Anton." She put her hand on his arm. "Wait. Not this weekend. Let me find something out first."

"What is there to find out? The figures are the figures."

"Please. Wait one week."

He looked at her, and because he loved her he said: "All right. One week." But she knew her brother. She heard the promise and heard at the same time that he would not keep it, that even as he made it he no longer meant it, because in his head the right thing was always simple.

He put the paper back in his jacket, which he hung on a nail because he wanted to help her with the watering, and so the jacket hung half an hour on the barn wall, in the light of the lantern. And when Marlene looked up later, Kaspar was standing in the barn door, without her having heard him come, and he was not looking at her or at Anton but at the jacket, from whose pocket the corner of the paper jutted. He said nothing. He said the gate needed to be latched better, the wind would otherwise pull at it. And left. But Marlene had seen what he had been looking at, and that night she did not count the blows of the building site but lay awake trying to calculate how many people a single piece of paper could save and ruin at the same time.

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Chapter 5 - The First Snow

Winter came early that year. In the first week of November snow fell far down the slopes, wet, heavy snow that made the scaffolding at the dam dangerous and halted work for a few days. The men loitered about, irritable, because no shift meant no wages, and the money the valley had already spent in its head, before it arrived, now came slower than expected. In the Höfli things grew tight. The mother counted the wood. Kaspar counted in his head. And between everyone lay something Marlene could not name but which had grown denser since Kaspar had stood in the barn door. He looked at Anton differently now. Not with hostility — Kaspar was too contained for hostility — but watchfully, the way you watch a sky that has not yet decided.

On one of those grey afternoons Imhof came. The brother-in-law, the husband of Kaspar's sister, a large, affable man with a handshake like a vice. He and Kaspar sat in the parlour, and Marlene was in the kitchen and could hear their voices, partial, muffled. She heard the word "authority," she heard "the young man," she heard Imhof say: "If this gets down to them, then not only him, then —" and then she came in with the jug to refill the glasses, and the conversation broke off mid-sentence, and both men looked at her with the polite, blank faces of people who have been talking about something that is not continued when a woman comes in.

"Cider?" she said.

"Thank you," said Imhof and smiled, and the smile stayed in the lower part of his face and did not come higher.

That evening Anton announced it at supper, casually, with a full mouth, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world. "Saturday I'm going to Interlaken. Got something to sort out." He did not look at Marlene as he said it, and precisely because he did not look at her she knew what he wanted to sort out. The week was not up. He had not waited. Kaspar put his spoon down slowly and said: "What do you have in Interlaken?" And Anton, lightly, cheerfully, without thinking: "Business." The mother looked from one to the other, and in her dry face something moved that Marlene recognised as fear, an old, practised fear that knew how to hide itself.

That night Marlene got up when everyone was asleep, lit a splint at the stove, and sat at the table and wrote. She wrote to Anton. She wrote that he should wait, just a few more days, that he did not know who he would be dealing with when he followed the trail to the end, that these figures referred to people closer to them than the site manager with his clean coat. She wrote it as plainly as she dared not say it, and at the end she wrote that she loved him and that love sometimes meant carrying a truth for a while instead of letting it drop, because when it fell it would break too many things.

She read the letter twice. Then she folded it and put it in an envelope and wrote his name on it. But she did not put it in the post box down by the bridge, as she had intended. It was too late for the post, and besides, she thought, a letter was the wrong thing; she would give it to him herself in the morning, press it into his hand and look him in the eyes, and then he would wait, because he could not refuse her face to face. She put the envelope under her pillow and snuffed the splint and went back to bed, and outside it was silent, completely silent, because the snow swallowed everything, even the thudding of the building site, which for this one night did not sound.

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Chapter 6 - The Day at the Tunnel

She overslept. It was the snow that made her oversleep, that unaccustomed, absolute silence, and when she woke and reached under her pillow for the envelope and ran downstairs, Anton's place at the table was already empty and cold. "He's gone up to the site," the mother said without looking up. "They're clearing the scaffolding of snow. Need every hand. He said he'll go to Interlaken in the afternoon." Marlene pulled on her boots before she knew she was doing it. She put the envelope in her coat pocket. She said she wanted to bring Anton something, and no one asked what, and she went out into the clear, bitter morning where the snow squeaked under her soles, down the path, past the snow-covered gardens, to where the valley opened and the wound in the rock lay.

From a distance she already heard that something was wrong. Not the steady grinding but shouts, isolated, sharp shouts, and the bark of a siren. She walked faster. At the site there was commotion. Men running, one shouting for ropes, one for the doctor. At the lower tunnel, she heard as she passed, water had broken through, a seam the frost had split, and with the water something had come from the slope, rubble, a piece of scaffolding.

She stopped at the upper edge, because the guard post below let no one past, and from there, through the milling about, she saw it. Saw it only for a moment and never quite clearly, for the rest of her life: three figures up on the side scaffolding, where the water was coming out. Anton, she recognised his jacket. Beside him, larger, in a

dark coat, the site manager. And a third, with his back to her, who from up here looked like Kaspar and who might have been Kaspar and might have been Imhof and might have been a stranger. A movement, hurried, a reaching or a pushing, she could not tell the difference, the water between them, the steam in the cold air. And then Anton fell. He did not fall far, but he fell wrong, onto the stone and the iron, and the water went over him.

By the time Marlene reached him below — she did not know afterwards how she had got past the guard post — they had already pulled him out and laid him on a sheet of canvas, and a man was kneeling beside him and straightened up and shook his head, and around her the voices were already saying the word that would henceforth apply. "An accident." "The water, the frost, no one could have —" "An accident, a terrible accident." They were saying it already before the constable arrived, saying it to one another, firmly and quickly, the way you apply a bandage to make a wound stop bleeding.

Marlene knelt beside her brother. His face was calm, wet, strange. In her coat pocket, against her thigh, lay the envelope with his name on it, which she had meant to give him and had not given him, one hour too late, one sleep too late. She felt someone put a hand on her shoulder and knew, without looking up, that it was Kaspar, whose coat was wet to the knees. She did not look up. She closed her hand around the envelope in her pocket, tighter, and left it there, and said nothing, and that was the first.

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Chapter 7 - The Record

The constable came in the afternoon from the district, a tall, tired man who had taken down many accidents and showed it, cursing the winter and the road under his breath. He took statements in the firm's office, a plank shed beside the pit, and Marlene was allowed to be present because she was the sister, and so she watched a morning she had only partly seen become a sentence that would stand forever. It was remarkable how smoothly it went. Everyone said the same thing, and no one needed to coordinate because everyone already knew what would be said. A water intrusion, caused by frost. A man who had worked too close to the edge. A piece of scaffolding that gave way. No one nearby who could have intervened. An accident. The words fitted together like the stones of a wall, each stone held by the next, and the more stones, the more solid the whole.

A young woman was typing. She sat in the corner at a machine, sent by the municipal clerk who could not get away himself, and she typed quickly and precisely without looking up, and only once, when the site manager used the word "regrettably" and paused, did she glance up briefly, and her gaze crossed Marlene's, and in that look was something Marlene held onto: a recognition, a knowledge, that more was being written here than was true. Ruth, Marlene heard her name later. Ruth Berger. She would remember that look for thirty years, forty.

Kaspar gave his statement, terse, in complete, firm sentences. He said he had been above, helping with the clearing. He said the water had come suddenly. He said he had called out to Anton. What he did

not say — and only Marlene, who knew him, heard the gap, heard the silence he placed around this one point — was who else had been on the side scaffolding and how close and in what movement. He did not say "I was with him." He said "I was above." Between those two sentences lay the whole day.

The site manager was forthcoming. He spoke of the diligence of the deceased, of the tragedy, and then, casually, of the "generous settlement" that the company would of course be making available to the family and to the valley, especially now, in these difficult days. No one asked what a generous settlement had to do with an accident.

Last, the constable asked Marlene. Tiredly, almost paternally. Whether she, having been nearby, had seen anything he needed to know. Her coat pocket was empty; she had gone upstairs in the interim and, before the hearing began, pushed the envelope under a loose stone at the barn threshold, without knowing why, only that it must not be on her. She could feel the place in her pocket where it had been, the way you feel a scar. She looked at the constable. She looked at Kaspar, who was not looking at her. She looked at young Ruth, whose fingers hovered above the keys and waited.

"No," said Marlene. "I arrived too late. I saw nothing."

Ruth's fingers fell on the keys. The word was in the record before it had finished sounding.

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Chapter 8 - The Settlement

The settlement came faster than spring. Before Christmas the money was there, more money than a dead man had any right to be worth, paid out to the next of kin and, in a second instalment, to the valley, to the municipality, for the properties to be flooded, and no one said it aloud, but everyone knew that the second instalment came out more generously since the first had become necessary. The Höfli was debt-free at a stroke. The mother stopped counting the wood. Kaspar paid back the bank and in spring bought the upper pasture they had been missing for years. Anton's estate, a day packet, a few clothes, a watch — went to Marlene. No one spoke about the figures he had shown her in the barn. The paper was gone; she did not know whether it had gone into the grave with him, in his jacket pocket, or whether someone had removed it beforehand, and she did not dare ask. What she knew was that the two columns had vanished, the left and the right, and with them the difference, and from the difference a pasture had been made, and a paid-off loan, and the smile with which the mother poured cider again.

Imhof was suddenly liquid. He bought a tractor, the first in the valley, and drove it through the village on Sunday, and people watched him go by and said that Imhof had made good, and Marlene calculated in her head, the way her father had taught her, calculated the tractor and the pasture and the debt-free parlour against a man who lay at the tunnel, and the result was a number she kept to herself, because there was no one she could have given it to without bringing

everything down, herself included.

The funeral was on a clear, hard winter's day. Half the valley came, because half the valley came when someone died, and the pastor spoke of a diligent, cheerful young man whom the Lord had called to him too soon, of one who in his short time had been a good neighbour to the valley. The valley nodded. It nodded in unison, with the relief of people who have jointly moved a heavy stone to the right place. Imhof carried the coffin. Kaspar carried the coffin. Marlene walked behind and watched the broad backs of the men who were carrying her brother, and thought that it was an image that was right and that lied, both at once, and that from now on she would live inside such images.

At the graveside, when the earth fell, Kaspar placed his hand on her shoulder. It was the same gesture as at the tunnel, the same man, the same hand. And Marlene understood for the first time, fully, what that hand meant. It meant comfort, yes. But it also meant a contract that had never been written and would never be dissolved: that they now belonged to each other, not only as husband and wife, but as two people who knew the same thing and kept silent about the same thing, bound more tightly by what was left unsaid than by any promise before the altar. She let the hand rest on her shoulder. She should have shaken it off, and she knew it, and she did not, and that was the second stone, her own, set against the first.

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Chapter 9 - Winter over the Reservoir

In February they closed the dam. They sealed the last sluices, and the water, which until then had run through the valley as it always had, found no way out and began to rise. It rose slowly, barely perceptibly day by day, and yet Marlene saw it every morning from the attic room: how the valley filled, how the lower gardens first only got wet feet and then vanished, how the old path down which she had walked in autumn to the building site sank piece by piece beneath a grey, smooth surface. The chapel held out longest. The small chapel on the lower track, in which her predecessors had married and baptised and mourned for generations, stood at the end alone in the rising water, an island, then only the roof, then only the narrow ridge turret with its crooked cross, jutting from the lake like a finger. Marlene stood at the shore — the new, strange shore that had not existed a year ago — and watched the water creep up the cross, and could not turn away.

In those weeks she did something she never quite explained to herself. She retrieved the envelope from the barn, from under the loose stone of the threshold, where it had lain through the winter, damp but legible. She could have burned it. That would have been sensible, that was what a shrewd woman would have done if she wanted to go on living. She did not burn it. She wrapped it in waxed cloth and then in a piece of tin that had once been a tobacco tin, and one grey afternoon, before the rising water reached the entrance, she went down, waded the last ankle-deep stretch to the chapel whose porch still lay dry, and pushed the tin behind a loose stone in the

wall, in a spot where the water, she thought, would never quite reach it and never quite wash it away. She did not know for whom she hid it there. Not for herself. Perhaps for no one. Perhaps for someone who did not yet exist.

That winter Kaspar and she found each other, in a way Marlene had not expected and which made her sad precisely because it was real. They lay together in the attic room, and outside the water stood, and Kaspar, the taciturn man, was tender in the dark, careful, almost grateful, and Marlene returned it, and it was not a lie. That was the hardest thing. It was not a lie. They had each other, and they had buried the same thing, and neither could be separated from the other anymore: the unsaid and the closeness grew from the same root, and when she held him she also held the silence, and when she hated the silence the hatred touched him too.

In March, when the snow was going from the slopes, she noticed she was pregnant. She stood at the window and looked out at the lake, now full, a calm, leaden surface beneath which the old valley lay with its gardens and its path and its letter, and she laid her hand on her belly and thought: something new begins here. On this ground. And she knew in that moment, clearly and without hope, that the new would stand on the old whether she wanted it to or not, that the child coming would draw its first breaths above a sunken ground, and that it would never learn that, and yet would always carry it, the way water carries the path it covers.

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Chapter 10 - Who Asks

In April a man came from below whom no one had expected. He was from the construction firm, but not from the site — an auditor, a pale, courteous man with a briefcase, who explained that the dam's accounts would, as with any major project, be subjected to a post-review, a pure formality, and he would be in the valley for a few days and would ask this and that. The valley closed around him, noiselessly and completely, the way flesh closes over a splinter the body will not yield. It happened without an order, without a meeting, without anyone directing it. It simply happened, because everyone knew what was at stake, and because everyone was connected to everyone else. Wherever the auditor asked, he received the same polite, empty answers. Delivery notes? At the warehouse, certainly, but the warehouse had been cleared after the build. The accident victim who had allegedly noticed irregularities? A diligent but young man, God rest him, who had known little about bookkeeping. They were sorry, they would gladly help, they were afraid they could not oblige.

Marlene watched, and she saw something that took from her the last remnant of a hope she had not known she was carrying. She saw that even young Ruth Berger was carrying it now. The auditor wanted the municipal archive, wanted the construction protocol, wanted the delivery lists that should have been filed there. And Ruth, precise, orderly Ruth, searched and searched and could not find one folder. "It must have been mislaid at the handover," she said, with a face that held no lie, only regret, and Marlene, who happened to be

waiting in the anteroom, saw that Ruth knew where the folder was and that she would not find it, never, because she too was now one of them, drawn in by a single missing page that she herself had typed or not typed.

After three days the auditor left, with an empty briefcase and a courteous farewell. That evening the *Sternen* was full. It was not an announced celebration — no one would have dared call it that — but people drank, and people laughed, louder than usual, and Imhof bought a round, and the mayor bought a second, and over everything lay the relief of people who have walked together along a cliff edge and now, in safety, become almost giddy.

Marlene sat with them, because she belonged, and she did not drink. She looked at the red, cheerful faces and understood the last thing that had been missing from her understanding. The lie was no longer Anton's and no longer hers. It was no longer even only the Areggers' or the Imhofs'. It had grown larger than its occasion; it had branched and taken root in every house that had benefited from the settlement, in every hand that had waved things away, in every folder that had not been found. It belonged to all of them now. And something that belongs to everyone, Marlene thought, cannot be taken back by anyone. It is carried because everyone carries it. She stood before the third round of cider came and went out into the cool night, and above the dark lake the stars stood, and she laid both hands on her belly and said quietly, to the child or to herself, she did not know: "Not you. You shall not carry it." And knew in the same breath that it was a promise like Anton's promise in the barn — meant and already broken in the meaning.

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Chapter 11 - The Child

Theo came in October, on a windy evening when the first snow already lay on the high ridges and below the window the last leaves of the fruit trees were turning. It was a hard birth; the midwife from the next valley arrived too late, and it was old mother Aregger who helped, with her large, dry hands, calm and practised, as if she had done it a hundred times, and perhaps she had. When the child finally cried — a fierce, living cry that went through the whole room — Marlene looked into the old face above her and saw something there she had never seen: naked, unguarded relief, almost happiness. "A boy," the mother said. "The Höfli has an heir." And she said it as if thereby a bill had been settled that had been outstanding a long time. They laid him on Marlene's chest and she held him, this small, hot, strange person, and something broke open in her that had nothing to do with duty and nothing to do with the farm — a tenderness that rose into her throat and at the same time frightened her. And in that love, at its centre, like a dark seed in a fruit, sat the thought of Anton, who would never see this child, and the letter in the chapel under water, and the ground on which they all lived. She wept, and everyone took it for a mother's tears, and it was that too, but not only.

Kaspar came to the bedside, shy, as he always was before large things. He looked at his son for a long time. Then he said something he had never said before and would never say again, quietly, almost only to himself, in a voice in which something tore: "I would have liked it different —" And stopped. He did not say what he would

have wanted different. He did not say it because the whole valley lay in that unfinished sentence, the tunnel and the water and the man on the canvas, and because a man like Kaspar would rather break off a sentence than think it to its end. But Marlene had heard him, the broken sentence, and she knew it was the closest thing to a confession she would ever have from him, and that it would have to be enough, because nothing more was coming.

In the nights when she nursed the child and the valley was quiet, she made her decision. She would never tell Theo. Not when he was small, not when he was grown, never. She would hold the silence like a shield over him, give him a valley that was simple, a farm that was simple, a father that was simple, and she would cover the fissures that ran under everything with her own body, for life. She called it protection. She believed it, too. Only much later, as an old woman, would she sense that a silence laid over a child is not a shield but a weight it carries without ever knowing what it carries.

One morning when the child was a few weeks old, she happened to look in the tarnished mirror above the chest that had already been the mother's. She saw her face, still young but changed, with a set about her mouth that she did not recognise, a firm, closed set that she knew from old mother Aregger and from the old women of the valley who sat at their windows and said nothing more. And Marlene recognised for the first time with full clarity the woman she would become: the silent woman at the window who knows everything and says nothing. She was twenty-three. She laid the mirror face down on the chest and picked up her son and stepped to the window, out over the lake that lay calm and gleaming, and held the child in such a way that he could not see the water.

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Chapter 12 - Spring Flood

In the first spring after the child the snowmelt came quickly and forcefully. A warm föhn lay over the mountains for days, and the water came from all the slopes at once, and the lake — the young, untested lake — rose higher than the engineers had calculated. For a time it looked as though it might go over the wall. Men stood at the dam all night with lanterns, Kaspar among them, and down in the district they were already talking of evacuation. Then they opened the sluices fully, and the water shot white and thundering into the valley below, and the level held, barely, and in the morning everyone said the wall had proved itself. But Marlene heard Kaspar say quietly to Imhof in the evening that the inspectors had noted a suspected crack in the lower third, nothing serious, they said, it would be monitored. Nothing serious. She had heard that before, about something else. When the level was at its height and the water reached far beyond the old banks, a cold fear gripped Marlene that had nothing to do with the wall. She thought of the chapel. At this height the water must be going into the porch, up to the wall behind which the tin lay. She went down, having left the child with the mother, and stood at the churning, brown bank, and nothing of the chapel was to be seen, not even the ridge turret; the whole lower lake was a single churned surface. Somewhere down there, she thought, my letter is perhaps loosening from the stone right now and drifting away, and no one will ever read it, and perhaps that is good. Perhaps the water is relieving me of it.

But then, in the following days, the level fell again, the meltwater ran off, the lake settled, and on a clear May day when she went down again, the ridge turret jutted from the smooth water as before, the crooked cross, unchanged. The chapel stood. The tin, she sensed, lay where she had put it. The water had not taken it.

She stood at the bank for a long time, deliberating. She could have waded out and retrieved the tin, now, at low water. She could have finally burned the letter, removed the last thing that remained of the truth, and been free, as free as one could be in this valley. She considered it seriously. And then she left it. She left the letter where it was, behind the loose stone, in the waxed cloth, in the tin, beneath the water that watched over it. Not from weakness — she knew that precisely. From something that was almost hope: that one distant day there would be someone who asked, who would truly ask, and that then there should be something able to answer, when all the mouths that were now keeping silent had long fallen quiet. She could not say it. But she could let it lie, for whoever would come.

"Marlene!" It was Kaspar, up on the slope, calling to her. The child was crying; she should come up. His voice carried far across the still water. She looked once more out at the lake, at the cross jutting from it, at the ground that held everything — the gardens, the path, her brother in memory, the letter in the wall. Then she turned and walked up the slope, to her husband and her son, and did not turn back.

Behind her the valley lay in the May rain that was beginning now, quiet, steady. The wall held. The lake lay grey and patient. And deep beneath its surface, in the dark, a letter waited for a time that had not yet been born.

Über dieses Buch

The Valley Holds Its Breath - The Slope

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