VINTAGE

ARARAT

FRANK WESTERMAN

Contents

About the Book

Mount Ararat in Turkey is where, as biblical tradition has it, Noah’s Ark ran aground and God made his covenant with mankind. Now it stands astride the fault-line between religion and science, a geographical, political and cultural crossroads, bound up with the centuries-old history of warfare between different cultures in this region. Frank Westerman takes a pilgrimage from the mountain’s foot to its highest slopes, meeting along the way geologists, priests and an expedition in search of the Ark’s remains, as well as a Russian astronaut who observes that ‘there is something between heaven and earth about which we humans know nothing’.

About the Author

Frank Westerman was born in 1964 and lives in Amsterdam. He is the author of five books. His work has been published in more than ten languages and has won many prizes.

For Vera

FRANK WESTERMAN

Ararat

In Search of the Mythical Mountain

TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH BY
Sam Garrett

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Prologue

THE WATER HAD polished the stones to eggs. Milky quartz was solid white and opaque. Granulite, greenish and spotted. Otherwise you had limestone, which felt almost brittle.

The mountain stream rolled the stones steadily towards the sea and pounded them to gravel – ‘scrubbed gravel’, the kind they dredged up from the lower reaches of the big rivers. Speeds of up to one kilometre per century were quite normal, but during an ice age the transport could grind to a halt.

The stones in the Ill, a wadeable stream in the Austrian Alps, had been on their way for at least a few millennia by the summer of 1976, when several hundred were temporarily waylaid and moved slightly off course. On 23 July of that year, children at play lifted the rocks with their bare hands from the dry section of the riverbed. They lugged them towards the stream, then tossed their cargo into the water, which made an extra *splash!* amid the rapids.

One of those drudges was me. Eleven years old, and probably the youngest. I remember pausing to look at the change each stone made in the current. The dam we were building raised the level of the stream three or four hand’s-breadths, reined it in for a moment, then swung it abruptly to one side, like a judo move. It was a glorious sight. My raw fingertips and the tingling in my forearms added to the sensation that we were helping to alter the natural course

of things. The Ill tugged at our ankles and knees but could not make us lose our footing. Along both shores the wooded hills rose up darkly, but there was nothing grim about the valley floor. The nearby covered bridge on the road to the village of Gargellen, with swallows nesting beneath its eaves, lent a carefree, model-railway feel to it all.

Our game on that cloudless day had grown serious. There were three ‘master-builders’, gangly beanpole boys in their teens, who stood in the water handing out orders. They had their T-shirts tied piratically around their heads. Following instructions from the supreme master-builder, we raised a dam that stretched to the middle of the Ill. There, along the river’s longitudinal axis, lay a bare, elongated island, little more than a pebble beach that split the stream in two at its bow. The Ill complied by flowing alongside in two roiling halves, only to entwine again agitatedly at the stern. As soon as the dam was finished we were going to set up a tent on the island and build a campfire.

Waldcamping Batmund, where we were spending the holidays with our parents, had 42 pitches; the ‘Ill-Insel’ on the other side of the riverine woods was to be number 43.

Somewhere around noon the causeway was finished. All it needed was one boulder to anchor it in place, and to that end the supreme master-builder had dragged a log down from the woods. As the rest of us looked on, he lifted the log on his own and slammed it in place beneath a boulder like a battering ram.

‘Freitag!’

To my amazement and joy he was calling me, and gesturing that I should slide a rock beneath the lever.

Just a little further down, *genau*!

Among the common labourers building the dam there were no Austrians. Only Germans, a pair of Belgian twins, Danes and Dutchmen.

I forced a speckled rock beneath the log and jumped back. I was proud of my nickname, of having been singled

out. My dripping arms poised just inches from my ribcage, I stood and watched; a boy among thousands who had no desire to grow up, who dreamed of being able to remain 11, even 12 at a pinch, for all time, because homework started at 13. Then the playing would end.

I used my elbow to push a lock of hair out of my eyes. As I stood there waiting for what the rest of life had in store, I suddenly realised that it was Thursday – *Donnerstag*! – but from fear of somehow being mistaken after all, I didn't dare say that out loud. How grand it would be if it could always remain Thursday, this Thursday! If the Earth's axis could only lock with a click – it wasn't impossible, the Lord had done it once before so the people of Israel could win a war. He had caused the sun to pause in its course above the hilltops, just like the rising moon on the other side of the battleground, and of course all those soldiers and their horses must have been knocked to the ground, all of Asia must have been thrown out of bed.

One – two – three … The boulder wouldn't budge at first, but when two other boys came and leaned on the lever it tipped away from the embankment. Like the molar of a prehistoric animal, the chunk of granite popped loose and pounded down the hillside with four, five deep thuds, into the stream.

The sun had already passed its zenith; it must have been around two in the afternoon.

In the year 1976, the control room of the Vorarlberger Illwerke AG was equipped with table-high panels with recessed dials. Some of the controls worked automatically, but important matters, such as the level of the five reservoirs along the upper reaches of the Ill, were still regulated manually.

The interior of the control room was sober, you could say, were it not that one wall was covered by a huge representation in relief of the peaks and valleys of the

Silvrettagruppe. Some would have called it a topographical map, or a scale model – but in fact it was something in between. Five blue, backlit perspex cutouts symbolised the Illwerke's reservoirs, while the turbines of the steam generators were indicated by tiny lamps. The Ill branched and squirmed like a blue vein. Just before Sankt Gallenkirch, at a bend in the valley, was a symbol consisting of two square brackets standing back to back: the bridge on the road to Gargellen. The campsite was not on the map; you could, however, see the Illwerke utility mast that towered over the tents and caravans.

On 23 July 1976, the duty operator was keeping a worried eye on the water balance of the Silvrettasee. The reservoir, which contained 38 million cubic metres of water, was held in check behind a concrete wall 80 metres high and 38 metres thick at its base. With a storage capacity that big, there was no reason why the water balance – supply minus drainage – necessarily had to remain constant.

For weeks, however, steady summer temperatures had been causing far more meltwater than usual to pour into the reservoir, bringing the level very close to the permissible maximum. Unless action were taken, water would start spilling over the top of the dam between eight and nine o'clock that evening. Generally, surplus water was drained during the night, but the operator felt that it would be irresponsible to wait any longer. At 1.30 that afternoon, he threw the handles that opened both floodgates at the foot of the Silvrettasee.

As soon as we had inaugurated the dam, we began gathering armfuls of firewood. I remember picking wild strawberries as well, amid the stand of willow along the bank, and putting them in the front pocket of my shorts. Tottering over the stone causeway, I carried my bundle of wood to the island in the Ill. There I took the jammed

strawberries out of my pocket and arranged them on a polished stone; squatting, I watched as the master-builders laid out a circle of stones for the campfire.

My sister and the other girls from the campsite had gone to the Spar supermarket to buy potatoes, foil, flour, yeast, salt, milk, cola and, if they could, a bottle of Stroh rum to go with it. I thought about how we would bake the potatoes in foil that evening, and loaves of French bread on willow sticks. Our parents, still busy with their holiday reading beside the tent, would soon come down to take a look. I already knew how that would go: my mother was afraid to walk across the loose stones in the dam, but fortunately my father wasn't.

I sat there like that for a while, deep in thought, dabbling my fingertips in the current. It struck me that even though the pebbles looked dull when dry, once in the water they turned orange or green or red, like gems.

With an eye to the growing influx of tourists, Illwerke AG had posted warning signs along the Ill. Written on them in black letters was the word *LEBENSGEFAHR!*, along with an explanatory paragraph. No measly little signs these, but sturdy metal constructions on both sides of the river. One of them was attached to a pylon at the edge of the woods behind Waldcamping Batmund. In practice, everyone seemed to assume – without reading it – that the warning had to do with dangerous electrical currents and the obviously sensible ban on climbing the pylon.

We were arranging the faded green canvas of an army tent when we heard the roar of an approaching plane. My job was to hold up one of the telescopic metal tent poles. As the noise grew louder we all peered up at the sky above the treetops. Looking up like that, water suddenly came rushing into my shoes before I saw it. My first thought was to keep the firewood from getting wet. Then I saw the

island go under, in one flowing movement. Upstream a foaming barrier of water was racing at us, filling the riverbed from shore to shore. It was not a roller or a steep, curling wall, but a layered, wildly spattering wave. Surf pounding the beach during a north-westerly storm.

Hopping into the shallow water along with the others, my chest sticking out like a runner crossing the finish line, I saw the dam wash away. With a dull bounce, the stones beneath my feet were bowled over the bed of the stream, which turned at once into a river; behind me the sheets of canvas and piles of firewood were being dragged by the current in the direction of the Gargellen bridge.

The others reached the shore, I remember seeing that, but I was seized around the waist and pulled under.

Masis

PILE UP THE syllables of Ararat and you get a mountain:

A
R A
R A T

I love to build words from letters, and stories from words. For the sake of the sound, the cadence, the meaning. And because of the sparks. Strike two sentences together and you get fire. Ararat is Armenian. Ararat is Turkish.

If all is well (and with Ararat all is well), the story rises above the rightness of the individual sentences, its summit like the first dry land after the deluge, a clean slate for a new start – that is how Ararat is anchored in the faith of my childhood.

The first time I saw Mount Ararat with my own eyes, I was not prepared. It was November 1999, in the days when the millennium bug was on everyone's lips. On Times Square, but also – closer to home – on Moscow's Red Square, you could watch the seconds tick by on bright digital screens. The great countdown had begun, the things one did were done a little more hastily, but also more intensely. The remote possibility that a built-in computer blunder could dislocate part or all of earthly civilisation lent the days a

special aura. Who could guarantee that, at 00.00 hours on 1 January 2000, a barrage of Russian nuclear missiles would not rise from their silos along with the fireworks? You could remain stoic in the face of it, you could poke fun at it, you could see it as Armageddon in the offing.

It was during that time that I travelled to Armenia. I was working as a newspaper correspondent in the former Soviet Union, but had never visited the southern boundaries of my patch. An Aeroflot Ilyushin maintained the link between Moscow and Yerevan. For the first few hours the rotund aircraft followed a single meridian, then flew in a gentle curve over the Caucasus and its wars, dormant and active. Not so very far below us lay the sparkling mountain streams of Chechnya, and all one could hope was that we were above anti-aircraft range.

Upon arrival that first time in Yerevan, there was something I overlooked: the tube between the aircraft door and the airport complex sucks the unsuspecting visitor into the heart of a volcano. The architect had designed the terminal in the shape of a flattened cone, with the control tower rising from its crater like a jet of lava. As a passenger you don’t notice that, because you’re looking for your suitcase, shaking off annoying porters and cab-drivers, and all you really want to do at first is to have a pee.

Having collected my bags, I hopped aboard a shuttle bus idling in its own exhaust fumes beneath a concrete viaduct. As we headed into town, I was struck by the realisation that the flat countryside with its distant vines and poplars was shielded by a cordon of rock. The little wooden and stone huts, the irrigation canals and windbreaks – all were standing in the lee of that one barrier. It was not a wall, more a climbing wattle of layers green and grey. Strangest of all was the way the slopes continued up and up, like Jacob’s ladder, filling the entire window of the bus. I had to crane my neck to see whether this pile of boulders and grass ever stopped, and leaning over a little further, I saw

at last a black ribbon of rock capped by a veil of ice. Only above that came the blue of the sky. It was as though Ararat had seen me before I saw her.

In Yerevan one never escapes Ararat's gaze. That made me restless; what I felt like most was sitting down at a pavement café and staring back. 'Masis' the Armenians called her, or 'The Mother Mountain' – with a perfect volcanic cone on her flank that had once sprung from her womb amid thunderous contractions. I tried to go about my business, but was distracted by the backdrop of that two-headed mountain. Drumming in my head was the sentence my Russian teacher had once made me recite like a mantra, in order to practise the rolling 'r': '*Na gore Ararat rashtot krupny vinograd*' (On Ararat there grows an enormous vineyard). I caught myself taking pleasure in saying aloud the word 'Ararat' (which would not allow itself to be whispered). You could let the two r's roll like an avalanche of stone on a distant slope.

Daily life in the city went on as usual: street merchants displayed their wares – cut flowers, newspapers, puzzle books. Elsewhere, money-changers were busy jotting down the day's new exchange rates and sliding them into their *We Buy/We Sell* panels. But what I noticed most was how the day grew increasingly hazy as it wore on, making the lower slopes of Ararat look as though they had been drenched in lakes of milk. In the afternoon a collar of cloud arose around the level of black rock, but the gleaming whiteness of the summit still thrust its way through. There was nothing pointy about Ararat; the summit was a rounded, rolling icecap.

But even if you stayed inside there was no avoiding Ararat. Her likeness was on banknotes, postage stamps and printed as a hologram on credit cards. Even when I wasn't paying attention, she popped up in all kinds of surprising forms.

It started with the Yerevan Cognac Distillery, a granite fortress built in the Empire style of which Stalin was so fond. Its location atop a rocky outcrop provided a clear view of the alluvial plain and the stately volcano with its two peaks (the one with an icecap, the other bareheaded). ‘Ararat’ was the name of the cognac liqueur produced and bottled here, and the label sported a picture of the view from the distillery itself, rendered in gold paint. On the wall of the cellar where the cognac lay ageing, the writer Gorky had once scratched out a maxim of his own:

COMRADES, RESPECT THE POWER OF ARMENIAN COGNAC! IT IS EASIER TO CLIMB UNTO HEAVEN THAN TO SCRAMBLE UP OUT OF HERE ONCE YOU HAVE IMBIBED TOO MUCH.

The elderly Armenian in the three-piece suit who showed me around was called Eduard. He ran his hand over the oak barrels and talked about the Ararat grape, which grows only at the foot of the mountain.

‘You read the Bible?’ The question sounded more like an instruction, or a recommendation at the very least, and he added confidently: ‘The vines from which our grapes come grow in the vineyard that Noah planted here himself.’

And so it went, again and again. With a photographer I took a taxi to the National Salt Works, a mining operation where even the company buildings at ground level were on the verge of collapse. After the extraction stopped, an asthma clinic had been set up in one of the shafts.

In what was once the miners’ changing room we were outfitted with helmets and hung with lab coats. Anoush, a paediatrician with the looks of a stewardess, ran through the safety instructions. She tossed her torch, thick as a man’s wrist, from one hand to the other, and arched her plucked eyebrows: only when she was satisfied were we allowed to descend into her hospital. We climbed into a lift cage, the grille door closed, and we sank wobblingly into

the earth. Anoush laughed and clicked on her torch. ‘If the electricity fails, we’ll need this.’

Playing with the beam of light, she drew waves on the passing strata. I recognised boulder clay, limestone formations and then, quite suddenly, salt.

At 234 metres beneath the surface the cage stopped. A red neon cross hung above the door, which opened on to a corridor hacked out of solid salt crystal, with walls of the roughest plaster imaginable. Moisture from the lungs and sweat of the miners had melted the walls and ceilings as in a fantasy grotto. Behind plastic curtains hanging from metal rods were children with moist black eyes who could barely breathe in the normal air outside.

We were invited to sit down at tables fitted with things that looked like soup bowls. This was where the young patients received their ‘oxygen cocktail’ three times daily. The masks that hung beside them were each marked with a child’s name. Then, as though we hadn’t fallen deeply enough under Dr Anoush’s spell, she said: ‘The layer of salt in which we find ourselves precipitated immediately after the Deluge, when the waters receded.’

Perhaps this was all nonsense, but the salt bore witness in any event to the fact that the plains at Ararat’s feet had once been a sea, or an inland sea, that had since evaporated like a bowl of water. The only question was: how many millions of years had gone by since this crust was formed?

The Armenians I spoke to weren’t interested in what carbon-14 or potassium-argon dating had to say. For them, only one thing mattered: they were living in the land of Noah, the place where the first rainbow had appeared in the sky. In accordance with the letter of the Bible, they believed in an Ark that had been 300 cubits long, 50 wide and 30 high, a lifeboat caulked with pitch in which man and animal had survived the flooding of the whole Earth. They

could point out the grave where Noah's wife was buried: a slate ruin on a hill. And yonder, close to that triangular spot of shadow on Ararat's northern flank, was where Noah had found the stone that served as the altar on which he sacrificed 'of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl'. Looking up at the omnipresent Masis, the Armenians saw the focal point not only of their own world but of the universe.

And my, were they religious – despite (or perhaps due to) the 'scientific atheism' to which they'd paid lip service during 70 years of Soviet rule.

Long-forgotten illustrations from my children's Bible came back to me there in Armenia, on the eve of the new millennium: I saw bearded Noah kneeling beside his altar to pray; the rainbow, the sign of God's covenant with mankind; I saw the dove with the olive branch in its beak; the animals swarming out of the Ark, two by two, with orders to 'be fruitful and multiply' upon the face of the Earth. That swarming, I knew even as a child, had taken place step by step, and not by joyful leaps and bounds. The giraffes and zebras, stiff from standing still for so long, had edged their way down the mountainside on their fragile legs.

Of course I didn't really believe that the Ark had run aground up there – to me, the story of Noah's Ark was a story, first and foremost – but the fact that you could say 'up yonder' and point to it with your finger did not leave me cold. I had never paused to consider that there were Biblical locations one could actually visit: the myth of the Ark was anchored in the rock-bottom reality of an actual mountain. One with a name, an altitude (5,165 metres) that could be measured precisely, and with coordinates (39° 42' north, 44°17' east) indisputable by human standards.

The beginning (t=0)

IN ONE OF the first photographs of me, I'm wearing a white gown. The gown has a train of artificial white silk that must be at least half a metre longer than my pedalling little legs. 'Baptism, 24 January 1965' the caption says, in my father's finest handwriting.

Again I saw myself, this time with a little polar bear at the zoo in Emmen, aboard a peat ship at Barger-Compascuum, and as a toddler at a sheep-shearing festival in Exloo: '5 June 1967'. My parents had a story to go with each picture, but I had no memories of this black-and-white world.

We were at the house where I grew up, sitting around the living-room table with its moss-green kilim. My mother went to her dresser and brought back a jewellery box. Lying on its velvet cushion was one of my milk teeth. There was also an envelope with my first lock of hair. Angel-white, as she called it.

'Look,' my father said, 'this is you, doing your first circus act.'

I saw myself holding my father's hand, balancing on a pipeline along a ditch. On the next page: picking blackberries, bucket in hand, and in the background the storage tanks of the transfer station for crude oil.

There was nothing I recognised, unless it was the nodding donkey pumps lined up in the wings of my earliest

memories. Of all the oil installations I had grown up among, the nodding donkeys gave off the most penetrating smell.

I asked my parents about ‘the derrick at ’t Haantje’. Didn’t they have a picture of it, not even one – preferably in silhouette against the evening sky, so you could see if it was already a few degrees out of true?

In our family, the phrase ‘the derrick at ’t Haantje’ has a mythical ring. When talk turns to ’t Haantje, my parents and my elder sister effortlessly take the cue from each other’s commentary and nods, while I remain completely in the dark. As soon as they start on about it, I hear in their voices a slight, time-tempered shiver, overshadowed by the bravura of hindsight: that we had been standing right under it, that even then it was already leaning like the Tower of Pisa, that we had escaped disaster by a whisker.

‘Even then’ was Sunday 28 November 1965: exactly two weeks after my first birthday. But the only picture from those days is one in which, rising up out of a highchair, I’m trying to sink my fingers into a cake with one candle.

It was Easter 2002 – two and a half years after my visit to Yerevan. I had given up my job as a correspondent, and with it my post in Moscow, which put me further away than ever from Ararat – almost 1,000 kilometres further, as the crow flies.

The web-fine outlines of the two-headed volcano, however, still hung in my thoughts. I had gone back to read the passage about Ararat in the Bible. ‘And the Ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat,’ it said in Genesis 8:4. It sounded to me like a soft landing, back on the ravished Planet Earth. In the previous verses, though, that happy ending had not been entirely guaranteed; if you read carefully, it seemed as though God had for a time forgotten Noah’s rudderless ship. ‘And the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days. And God remembered

Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the Ark.'

Even as a child, the story of Noah and the animals had seized me by the scruff of the neck. It had always produced the same frisson of safe-and-snugness I'd felt when we sang 'He's got the whole wo-orld, in His hands' during the Monday morning assemblies at primary school. All six classes sat together then on the assembly hall's linoleum floor, and that same rolling gospel chorus was trumpeted again and again by six-to-twelve-year-old voices, until the windowsills around us seemed like a ship's railing.

Seeing Ararat had brought back that old lifeboat feeling. And to make matters complete, it was there in Armenia, in 1999, that the desire was born to climb Biblical Ararat and walk its highest ice fields. I had undergone the same thing as the poet Osip Mandelstam, who wrote from Armenia in the 1930s: 'I have developed a sixth sense, an Ararat sense: the feeling of being drawn in by a mountain.'

Back in the Netherlands, however, it didn't happen. My mind was not on distant journeys, let alone on mountain-climbing; not surprising, perhaps, for someone who had just become a father. Our daughter, Vera, had entered the world at three minutes to three on the afternoon of 6 March 2002, without mishap, by Caesarean section.

And what do you do when your first child is born?

You go back to where you come from. If anyone had tried to tell me that beforehand, I would gladly have bet against it ('Just wait, one year from now we'll be living in Istanbul'). But father-hood does unexpected things to you. As you're growing up you extend your operating radius step by step, you swap the garden path for the street, the street for the city, and before you know it you find yourself aboard the Hellas Express to Thessalonica. But once you have reproduced, you begin retracting that world-band aerial segment by segment, and start your sentimental journey home.

We began visiting Drenthe, where I was born, more frequently than ever. The sheets and blankets in my parents' spare room and the conifers in the garden smelled the same as ever. The ageing ladies of the neighbourhood reported striking resemblances: Vera was just as blonde as I'd once been, she had the same inquisitive look, she had my mouth. The resemblance that struck me most, however, was this: I looked like my father when he had helped me tightrope my way along that pipeline, more than 35 years ago. Before long, Vera and I would be doing precisely the same thing, me offering my arm for support in that same way, bent over slightly just like him, and it was that furious turnover rate of the generations that knocked the wind out of me.

Vera was asleep in the carrycot; she fluttered a nostril but didn't wake. Eight weeks old now, and unbaptised.

My parents never said a word about my daughter's condition, but had I asked them point-blank, my mother would have said, from deep down in her heart: 'A pity.' My father would only have nodded; she was his spokesperson in all things precarious.

Among the odds and ends that landed on the table were our Austrian hiking medals, and the stamps from the Alpine lodges to which we had climbed: Lindauer Hütte, Totalp Hütte, Saarbrücker Hütte. The 1970s came back in Kodak-Technicolor tints.

I opened the holiday scrapbook labelled *Vorarlberg, 1976*, and before I even reached the photographs of Waldcamping Batmund I saw myself, aged 11. It was as though I could taste the water of the stream all over again. Clear as a bell, the moment returned at which I had been snatched away by the current. Half under, half above water, I had been dragged beneath the bridge to Gargellen, where the Ill hurled itself between a boulder and a concrete pillar. Just before the mouth of that funnel, the water roiled up, I

was lifted by a rising swell and spat out to one side, into a shallow inlet where I could grab hold of the rocks. The churning water beside me retreated again, plunging into the hole beneath the bridge.

Another memory arose immediately, tangled up with that one: after that summer I had begun to pray differently, more intensely, with my hands clasped so tightly that my knuckles turned white. Before then I had prayed out of habit, before and after meals. My sister and I would rattle off a bit of jabberwocky, 'Bessy's foot twitches extended ewes', rather than 'Bless this food to its intended use.' But being dragged away by the Ill had caused me to clutch at prayer. I would thank God the Father for having heard my cry above the roaring waters. He had seized me by a wrist and an ankle and tossed me from that flood. That's the way it had happened.

I was amazed to see myself again as that boy in pyjamas who addressed himself to Our-Father-who-art-in-Heaven. Was that really me? It had been more than 20 years, I realised, since I had prayed; I couldn't do it any more. There had been no radical break, no real renunciation in fact. I had come to see religion, in whatever form, as a kind of theatre, a round-the-clock performance written and directed by earthlings.

To my surprise, my parents knew nothing about my narrow escape from drowning.

'What I *do* remember,' my mother said after a while, 'is that one day the stream turned into a river.'

'Into a seething rusty-brown torrent,' my father added.

Apparently I had kept my most terrifying experience from my parents, and shared it only with God.

My mother, frightened by what she had never known, began fretting in hindsight; my father made the mental leap to 't Haantje. 'All four of us were almost killed that time.'

It struck me that, for my parents, ’t Haantje must have felt like the same kind of close call as my experience in the Ill. The story told within the family said that the earth at that particular spot ‘had been turned inside out, like at Sodom and Gomorrah’. Our family, like Lot’s, had escaped by a hair’s breadth. But to me, ’t Haantje remained a blank spot on the map, and that began troubling me.

I asked my parents to tell me exactly what had happened on 28 November 1965. And I didn’t want to hear the myth any more, only the facts.

They gave the following account:

My father, who worked in the drafting office at the Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij (Dutch Petroleum Company), had read in the NAM news bulletin that colleagues were drilling for gas beside the Oranjekanaal. ‘Hey, kids, that’s close to Emmen,’ he’d said. ‘Let’s go and have a look.’

My mother and sister were not particularly enthusiastic. Compared with a nodding donkey, which at least takes elegant bows for the viewer, a drilling derrick is a static and boring thing. A pylon without arms or cables.

‘A replica of the Eiffel Tower, that’s more like it!’ My father, with his penchant for hyperbole, had won the case, and so, carrycot and all, I was loaded into the back seat of our first car, a Renault Dauphine. We drove out of Emmen in the direction of Sleen, then followed the Oranjekanaal to the former peat-cutting settlement of ’t Haantje. In a pasture at the bottom of a dead-end road stood the derrick. The oilfield itself, a tarmac space the size of two football pitches, was surrounded by a concrete gutter and a fence topped with coils of barbed wire. On the closed barrier hung a sign posted by the Dutch Mining Authority: NO SMOKING.

My sister, almost six at the time, was the first to notice the strange registration plates on the parked cars.

‘They’re from France,’ my father told her. ‘What did I tell you? The builders of the Eiffel Tower are at work here.’

The drilling camp looked more like a gypsy settlement than anything else, in terms of both location (remote, a good 100 metres in this case from the last farm in ’t Haantje) and accoutrements (messy, with scrap metal stacked up between the egg-shaped caravans). There were a few cement silos from the firm Halliburton, a rack of steel pipes, a pair of smoking diesel generators and three workmen’s huts which my father, in his oilfield English, called ‘doghouses’.

The gypsies were sun-baked Frenchmen, members of a travelling *equipe* from Forex, a drilling company based in the town of Pau at the foot of the Pyrenees.

The only car with Dutch plates, a black Volkswagen Beetle, belonged to Jan Servaas, one of my father’s colleagues who had been assigned to the crew as ‘mudboy’. My sister wanted to know what a mudboy was – did he really work with mud, the way my father claimed?

She never got to ask him, because no one came to the gate that afternoon. We could only watch the helmeted workmen from a distance. They wore round-tipped boots and filthy plastic aprons over their clothes, and one was standing on a platform three-quarters of the way up the tower.

‘That one up there is called the “derrickman”,’ my father pointed out, holding me in his arm. ‘His job is to thread one drill pipe on top of the other.’

Doghouse, mudboy, derrickman – those were the first English words to make it into our family circle.

What happened after we left, however, my parents knew only secondhand. My father, as it turned out, had kept a few memorable clippings in a file with the title ‘Finance & Planning’. One of them was from the front page of the daily newspaper *Noord-Ooster*, dated 2 December 1965:

DERRICK ’T HAANTJE COMPLETELY DESTROYED

> Large part of drilling installation disappeared into the ground. It was as though an invisible hand tore open the earth. The derrick buckled and collapsed with a loud noise. Machines and drilling equipment sank deeper and deeper into the crater caused by the explosion. It was a scene from judgement day, worse than a bombardment.

If I really wanted to know the ins and outs, my father suggested, why not talk to Jan Servaas, the mudboy at ’t Haantje? In the last few years before they retired, he and my father had worked together in the planning department.

‘Jan’s a staunch, strait-laced character,’ he warned me. ‘Fairly eccentric. When things got too noisy for him he used to crawl under his desk and work there.’

Jan Servaas’ number was there in the directory. I phoned, and immediately recognised the way he talked: this was NAM-speak. The Dutch spoken by the mudboy from ’t Haantje bore no trace of a regional accent, and was punctuated every few sentences by an English term such as ‘toolpusher’ or ‘well engineer’.

I asked whether, as an eyewitness and a man of practical experience, he could tell me what had gone wrong back in 1965 during the exploratory drilling known by the name of ‘Sleen II’.

‘Aha, ’t Haantje,’ he said. ‘That was a huge act of grace.’

A huge act of grace! The phrase sounded so archaic, like the seventeenth-century translation of the Bible from which my grandfather used to read aloud. I wondered whether this Jan Servaas might see God’s hand at work in the disaster – and did my best to arrange a meeting.

The idea of a clean slate was what attracted me to ’t Haantje. With his universal flood, God had been out to

eradicate His creation and start all over again. That, on a small scale – you could almost call it ‘laboratory scale’ – was precisely what had happened here too. The deep geological substrata had been rolled and mixed together into a porridge that defied all attempts at dating. At the very spot where the NAM engineers had performed their engineering work, 2 December 1965 was t=0.

It reminded me of my maternal grandfather and his unshakeable faith in the Word. Year after year he would go to the Monday morning cattle market in Rotterdam, buy a cow and a pig and walk them back to his yard, where he killed them with a single shot from his butcher’s pistol. Not long before he died, his old school honoured him with a great deal of pomp and circumstance as its oldest living alumnus (he was well into his nineties by that time). The press was there, the mayor, the headmaster. The conversation turned to the subject of age, and the headmaster found that a fitting moment to show my grandfather a fossil from the Cretaceous period. ‘This is a petrified ammonite. It lived on the earth one hundred million years ago.’

My grandfather rested his meaty hands on the head of his cane. ‘A hundred million years? That’s ridiculous. The earth is six thousand years old. Add up the genealogies from Adam on and work it out for yourself.’

Fine. That was my grandfather, vintage 1903.

Then you had his daughter, my mother, born in 1934. Once, when I had completed a school essay on the subject of ‘aggression among humans and animals’ and was proudly showing her the results, she had stiffened in horror. ‘Although man is descended from the apes …’ She couldn’t make it past the very first sentence.

And what about me, born in 1964; where did I stand? I didn’t want to burden my daughter with my own inability to believe. But exactly what I *did* want to pass on to her, I wasn’t quite sure yet.