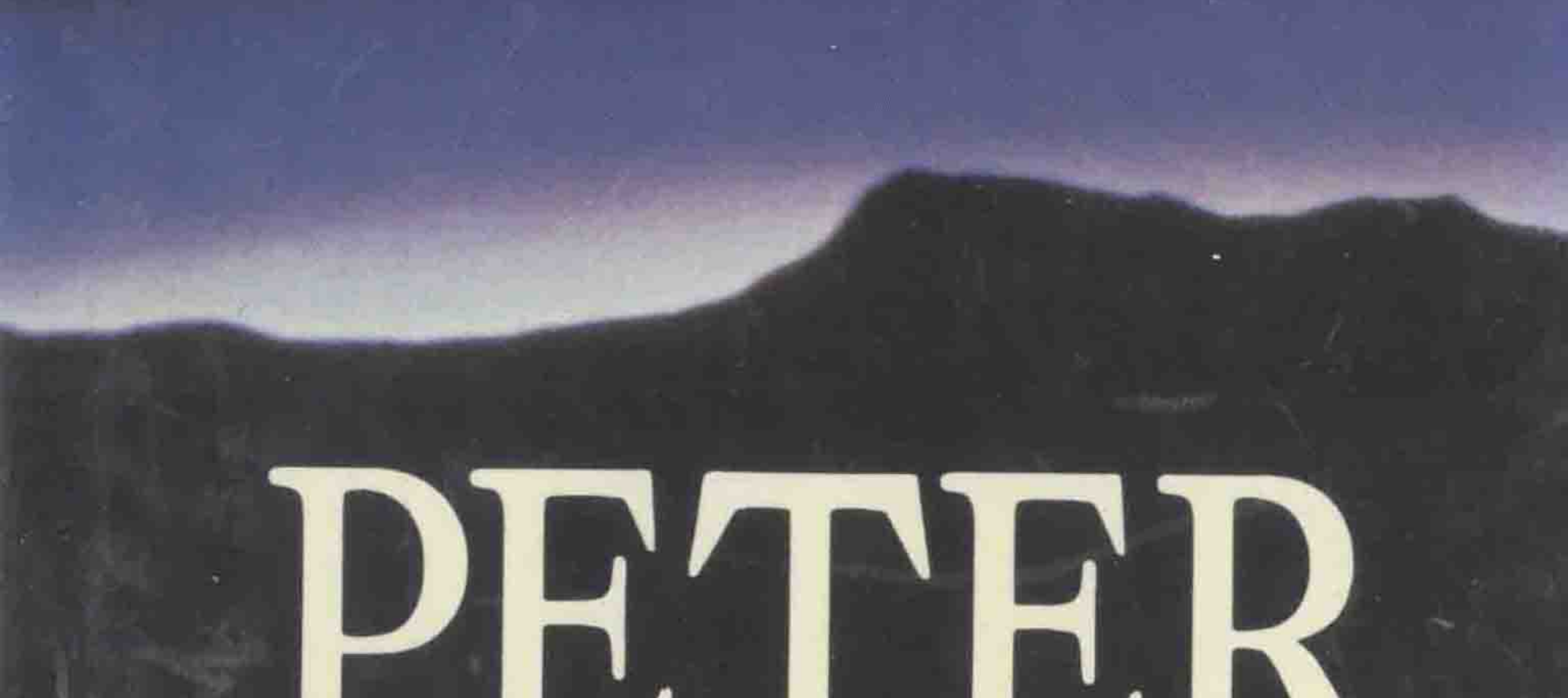
FILES OF A SUMMER



PETER KOCAN

FLIES OF A SUMMER

PETER KOCAN

ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and no reference is intended to any living person.

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Armistice
Freedom to Breathe

No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer.

Edmund Burke

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When I think of the valley I recall the cleanliness of sun and rain and wind, the grass high at the knees of cattle, the hillsides bright with that fresh plant we called yellowbush. Although we were slaves it did not seem so bad. We grew up healthy and we had each other, and as long as we did not irritate them our Margai masters tended to ignore us.

Of course we were very ignorant. We knew our own village and the valleys and hills around it. We knew that the Margai Gur—the king of the Margai—ruled in his mighty hall on the plain two days' journey away. We knew that in the high mountains on the far side of the plain lived the Gorgai, cousins of the Margai and great smelters of metal. But that was all. If you had asked us any more about the world we could not have told you.

We were ignorant partly because there were no grown-ups in our village, except old Agetha. If it hadn't been for her we would not have known what a grown-up person looked like. The Margai were grown-up of course, but that was different. The Margai were not like us. We weren't even sure whether they were human beings—not that we gave it much thought. The Margai were the Margai and far above any ideas we might have about them.

Ours was a breeding village. When each group of girls and boys reached the breeding age they were put together to mate. Then, when the babies had been born and weaned and given to Agetha to raise, the mothers and fathers were sent down to the plain where the Margai Gur would decide what

to do with them. The most likely thing was that he'd give them to the Gorgai. The Gorgai needed lots of slaves.

You were only ever sent to the plain once, after the breeding, and you were never heard from again. Of the life of the plain we knew only what Agetha could remember, for she had been born there and had come to the village as a small girl, in one of the batches of children sent up to restock the numbers.

Agetha said the plain was so big you could hardly see to the edges of it, and that it held more cattle and crops and huts and people than you could imagine. She said life was much more exciting there than in our village. But it was scarier too, because there were hundreds and hundreds of Margai growling about.

We seldom had more than fifteen or twenty Margai. They lived in their hall on the high mound at the top end of the village near the cattle-yards. Now and then a few of them would return to the plain for a while to suck up to the Margai Gur or to visit the Margai females, or sometimes a few new ones would come, but mostly they did not change. This meant that we got to know their habits and tempers and which ones to be especially careful of. Not that Margai differed much from each other. It was best to be careful of them all.

The shadow of the hall fell on us every day. The Margai said they were protecting us from booguls, the ghosts of savage giants who'd lived in those parts long ago and who'd been destroyed by the early Margai in a terrible war. If it were not for the Margai these booguls would return and rip our bellies open. The Margai told us we should be grateful for their protection, and so we were.

All except Rowan. Once, when our group was about eight years old, Rowan shook his small fist at the darkness falling on the hillside and cried: "I wish a boogul would come! I'd teach him a lesson!" Then Jamie shrieked that he saw one approaching. We all felt a dreadful clutch at our bellies and ran inside. Only Rowan stood his ground. White in the face

and trembly-voiced, he challenged the boogul to advance and be taught its lesson.

"Are you sure you saw it?" he demanded of Jamie afterwards. Anyone else would have taken credit for scaring the boogul off, but Rowan worried that it hadn't been a true test.

Life was very simple. You were born; you were raised by Agetha; you did your work; you made a baby; you were sent away. Because of this pattern we were cut off from our mothers and fathers and all those who'd gone before, and we had only a vague notion of the future. We were sealed in our own brief time and small experience.

As far as we knew this had always been the pattern, and we had no reason to think it would ever change. No-one set out deliberately to change it, at least not at first . . .

THE SHADOW OF THE HALL

I am about fourteen. It is a warm afternoon and I am climbing the steep woody hillside above the main valley. I am on berry-picking and have my berry bag over my shoulder.

I pause and look down at the village. I see the river winding in its fringe of willows, and the tiny figures of girls and boys hoeing vegetables on the flat, and the cornfield gleaming in the sun. Across the main valley is the gap in the opposite hillside where it opens into the lushness of the cow valley. All familiar, yet with a touch of strangeness already creeping in. Before long there will be the journey to the plain, the end of all known things. If you look from this height clear along the main valley you can just see a far corner of the plain, and beyond that the tops of the Gorgai mountains white in the sky. We know that the white on the mountain tops is called snow and that it must be cold. Often in the evenings a chilly wind blows from there. Agetha has made a song. The song tells how you could listen forever for the voices of those who have gone to the mountains, but all you'd hear is the wind's voice cold with snow. The songs Agetha makes to soothe or amuse the littlies are often cheerful. The ones she makes for herself are sad.

I go further up the slope to where the trees thicken and the yellowbush sprouts in clumps. There is a smell of something dead. It could be a pig or a goat. The smell has spread in the still air and it is hard to tell where the centre of it is. I leave my berry bag on the ground under a tree and walk slowly through the bushes. I have no reason to trace the

smell, except that I do not think it is a pig or a goat. I think it is more likely Bobby, a boy from our hut who's been missing.

He lies on his back behind some yellowbush. His arms are flung out and his head is split almost in two. A Margai axe did it. I squat nearby and gaze at him. I do not go too close because of the smell and the big black flies. The little hillside animals have gnawed the flesh, and the eye-sockets are empty, but the wild dogs have not found him yet. When they do he will disappear quickly. Bobby was always afraid of wild dogs. He was a timid boy and I can't imagine what he might've done to irritate a Margai into axing him. He had probably just been unlucky. The slightest thing can provoke a Margai if he's already in a bad mood. It's your own fault if you don't take care.

And yet there is something in the way Bobby's arms are flung out, as though he is appealing to the treetops and the sky to witness his trouble.

And the stink. Kiri wouldn't want him now.

Boys and girls are starting to fall in love, with thoughts of the breeding time, and Kiri is Bobby's girl. I mean *was*. She is slender and gentle and her skin is a sweet brown from the sun. Just a few days ago I'd noticed her particularly. We were hoeing alongside each other and Kiri bent to pluck a weed and her tunic came up at the back and showed how beautiful her legs were. I envied Bobby. Gazing at him now, at the thing a Margai has made of him, I understand the cruelty of it.

My berry bag is not where I left it. I search all around the tree, then around other trees, then return to the first tree. There is a hard knot of worry in my stomach. I try to think who or what might have taken it. Anything could be prowling this hillside. A boogul? But booguls were said to avoid the full light of day. The Margai who axed Bobby, back again and in the same bad mood? But no Margai would want to touch a berry bag. Margai hated touching slave things. I peer about at the undergrowth for a sign of movement or

maybe even a face watching me. There is nothing.

Too late I glimpse a shape leaping from the branches above. The breath flies out of me as I hit the ground. My throat is being gripped. I flail my arms and kick with my feet. I cannot squirm free. My sight dims. A black haze dims the sun through the treetops. I stop struggling.

"You'd be dead now!" says Rowan as he lets go my throat. I gasp air. "I had your berry bag up the tree," Rowan says. "You only had to look up."

I lie still and watch the haze go off the sun. I sit up. My neck and chest hurt, but I am all right. Then the fright bursts out and I scream abuse at him.

"What's the matter?" Rowan asks, startled.

"You hurt me!"

Dismay shows on his face, then a pout. "I didn't do anything to you," he says. "You did it to yourself by being easy prey."

Of course he is right. He played more than fair, taking the berry bag to alert me. It isn't his fault if I'm a fool.

Rowan is brushing dirt and leaves from his body. You'd think him vain if you saw how he runs his hand across his thigh or delicately picks a twig from his hair. Yet Rowan isn't vain, at least not in the ordinary way. Not like Lon, say. Rowan knows he is the best of us—the strongest and fastest and bravest—but if anything it seems to confuse him. It is as though, not having anyone to measure himself against, he is unsure what the measure ought to be. I often think Rowan would be happier if he was second best. Then he'd know what the standard was.

"Bobby's over there," I say, pointing. "He got axed."

"Yeah," Rowan replies.

"Maybe we should throw some dirt on him."

"What for?"

"The wild dogs..."

"Let the dogs have him," Rowan says. "He can't feel anything. Anyway, I'll bet he'd rather be eaten up quick than go on rotting. I would. Wouldn't you?"

"I'd rather not be dead in the first place!" I say. "That

Margai shouldn't have done it."

"Bobby must've annoyed him."

"But is that a good enough reason?"

Rowan shrugs. He can't see the point. I barely see it myself. The Margai are strong and can do as they like. That's the way of it. Rowan walks away among the trees. He's on berry-picking too.

Just before sunset I meet Rowan again on another part of the hillside and we sit on a rocky outcrop and look down into the valley. I would like to talk some more about Bobby, but Rowan's not in the mood. He stares down at the tiny figures on the river flat, trying to pick out Rada. Rada stirs a moody sulk in him nowadays. It's as though he can't decide whether he loves or loathes her. I love her. I've loved her ever since we were littlies. But Rowan will breed with her. Everyone takes that for granted. The best boy and the best girl are meant for each other.

The last of the sun disappears beyond the low hills at the top end of the valley and it is suddenly very cold. The slope behind us feels hulking and sinister. I get prickles on the back of my neck. Already it is dark enough for booguls. If I was alone I would hurry away now, but Rowan stays sitting and I sit with him and we watch boys and girls straggling into the village from the river flat and the cornfield and from other places. The first of the cattle appear through the gap from the cow valley and amble toward the yards near the Margai hall. The Margai like the feel of their cattle near them when they feast and brawl through the night. We see boys coming behind, driving the cattle on. The village is beginning to be lit by the glow of the night fires that wink small as candles through the gloom and distance to where we sit. The cookshed is open. The stew will be steaming now.

Rowan slides off the rock and savagely kicks a clump of yellowbush. "I'm going on cattle-minding tomorrow!" he growls. "Berry-picking is stupid!"

He starts down the hillside and I follow a little way behind. It isn't berry-picking that has made him angry. I suppose it must be Rada.

That night the wild dogs cry on the hillside and I lie under my blanket in the hut and listen. I look across at Rowan. He is sitting in his corner in a shaft of moonlight through a crack in the timbers of the roof. He is playing the game called Knuckles where you put three pebbles on the back of your hand and then flick them into the air and try to catch all three. Rowan mostly catches all three. He takes no notice of the noise the wild dogs make.

I am lying on the river bank, naked in the cool mud and reeds at the water's edge. A breeze moves the willows ever so slightly and the rustle of them mingles with murmurs of talk from girls hoeing on the flat nearby. I am keeping an eye out for the workmaster. He has sent Rowan and Lon and Kat and me to fish in the river with the big net and Rada has slipped away from her hoeing to join the fun. If the workmaster comes I'm to warn her.

The floats of the net bob on the water downstream. I turn my head and see Rada curve up and break the surface. Her long hair shines wet in the sun. She flips smoothly over on her back and slides under again with barely a splash. Rowan appears and does the same. Then Lon. Kat tries to follow but he is too fat and he flounders and splutters and has to paddle to the bank and cough among the reeds. When he recovers he comes along the bank and asks if I want him to take a turn as lookout. I tell him no. It is too nice just lying in the mud with the sighing willows overhead.

Kat creeps up the bank behind some long grass and calls softly to Mina who is hoeing a short way off. He wants to give her a beautiful little round stone he found on the riverbed. Kat and Mina being in love is a bit of a joke to the rest of us. Kat is so fat and Mina quite dainty, but they themselves see nothing funny.

"Keep your head down," Mina calls back softly. "Squint's looking this way."

Squint is a Margai and is hanging about at the far edge of the flat toward the cornfield. Low-ranking Margai are sometimes sent from the hall to check on us. They resent it and that makes them irritable. Margai hate having to take notice of slaves. We are a nuisance. We distract them from the only thing they really care about—their endless jock-eying for rank and status in the hall. From where I lie at the water's edge I hear a repeated knocking sound. Squint must be tapping the side of his axe against a rock. That's a sign of irritation in a Margai. The knocking fades.

"He's going," Mina calls.

"Here, Mina, catch!" says Kat. He throws the stone over.

"It's lovely!" Mina calls back after a moment.

"Not as lovely as you!" Kat tells her.

Other girls giggle.

Three pale shimmers approach the bank underwater. Rada pulls herself up into the reeds and lies on her back beside me. Then Lon. Then Rowan. I turn to look at Rada side-on. Her eyes are closed, her mouth open a little to regain her breath. Her chest rises and falls. Rada's nipples are large and brown and I would like to lean and kiss them. I could do. Rada wouldn't mind. But now, with the breeding time near, there is an awkwardness about a lot of things that weren't awkward a year or two ago.

While I am thinking this, Lon, who's on the other side of Rada, leans on his elbow and plants a kiss on each nipple. Rada's eyelids flutter. It must feel nice. Lon kisses her nipples again and nuzzles his face against them. Rada gives a tiny groan and pushes his head away.

Rowan is pretending not to notice. He stares up into the willows as though something fascinating is there.

"I'm going back in," Rada says.

"Race you to the net!" says Lon, jumping up.

"Give me a start then." Rada slithers into the water and

swims away, laughing. Lon goes after her. Rowan keeps staring into the willow branches.

After a while Kat calls from the top of the bank that the workmaster is headed our way from the village. I whistle to Rada and she swims to the bank and puts her tunic on and creeps back to her hoeing on the flat. The rest of us pretend to be busy with the net.

We catch almost nothing that day, but the workmaster doesn't care. Fish is slaves' food. The Margai eat only the flesh of their cattle. All the workmaster wants is for us to be at our work and obedient and not irritate him. I suppose it isn't much to ask in return for holding the booguls off us.

Kat and I are sitting comfortably against a grassy knoll in the cow valley with part of the herd grazing around us. We're joined by a squib called Chooky. Squibs are boys and girls of the in-between ages, ones too big to be looked after by Agetha but still nowhere near their breeding time. When you stop being a squib yourself you begin to look down on all squibs as cheeky pests and you either ignore them or boss them around. Mostly you ignore them. But I like Chooky. He's about eleven and has carroty red hair and is quite smart and sensible. "Chooky" is some baby name that has stuck to him.

Kat is talking but I'm not listening. I am thinking about an old grey cow cropping the grass next to me. Her nose is nudging my knee and I smell her cowy, summery breath. She is not one of the good breeders and I'm wondering if the Margai will kill her soon. I picture her, skull smashed by the axe, skinned, and spitted over the big fire outside the Margai hall. It is hard to imagine the big body without the life in it. Where does the life go? Maybe it goes into the air to whirl and float forever. That might explain the wind. Wind could be made of the disembodied lives of all creatures. And that might account for the different moods and tempers of wind: ghosts of hawks and eagles make high sharp winds; ghosts of cattle make slow breezes, and so on.