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The Curdled Land
A Novel of the 3rd World

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Chapter I

Future generations, mindful of the great events which give us pride in our nation , will refer to it as the day that the Landrover plopped into the swamp. Our country is something of a rarity in the modern world, one of those places where cutting edge technology co-exists with methods unchanged for three millennia.

But the thought was too dreadful; those emaciated coolies stewing in their creaking bullock carts, bare backs covered with bluish welts raised by the blocks of concrete, collapsing like leaky galoushes on the burning asphalt!

After the ... *REVOLUTION* ... came Opium, and a staggering national debt. *Independence* was something more than a word, there was a mysterious quality to it ... like "martyrdom" ; or "blood"; or the plane crash in the jungle. (?)

It had even been rumored that the *gwak'fundi* ' had been buried *alive* ! It was enough to set the gooseflesh crawling up the back of the neck. That was the kind of thing the Revolution was supposed to have ended. And if in fact the UPL had *not* diverted the road, then what the hell were the drivers up to, carousing at 2 o'clock in the morning, drunk as the monarchy in exile?

The pallid evening, vibrant with the heart-beats of frozen doves, snored in the conservatory, after dinner. The massed clouds, expansively clustered , waxed *greasy* . And even as the

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mists seeped across the chubby wildernesses, the marsh gases hovering o'er the eutrophied ponds nurtured epileptic havoc among the denizens of this curdled land.

Rampant panthers on the lawn ogled the verandahs, sucking parsnips juicily, waiting for the elevators to get lost. And there was some excitement, too, down the road. (*One knew right away it was the mercenaries: the loot in their saddle-bags, their morphine squint, foam about the lips.*)

" THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR REMAINS UNDECIDED IN THESE CONTESTED REGIONS, AS INTERMITTENT GUNFIRE CONTINUES TO STRAFE THE OUTLYING VILLAGES. "

Apparently something very strange had been going on at the National Memorial Grounds, some 18 *leks* distance from the Viceroy's complex on Highbottom Road. As the siblings of husbands slaughtered in the August massacres strolled the cypress'd avenues, sobbing alongside the musty sepulchers, cashiered army officers, old and vindictive, monocles affixed to suety eye sockets, swagger sticks at the ready, their beribboned chests all aheave, stooped over their canes and crutches as they measured the distance from the Post Road to yet another part of the bogs.

There was the crack of a pistol at dawn; *the twang of lemon bolted the door*; and a rain of coconuts drummed about the corrugated tin rooves of the laboratories requisitioned by the university for the survey, just before the troubles. Akmed and several of his associates had been rough-handled into the barracks for interrogation by cigarettes and lathees.

But the police bungled the job and were obliged to release them after 48 hours. Thereby they lost the golden opportunity for

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learning that it is he alone, cloaked in obscure memories, his eyes like stolen marbles gleaming wickedly, who holds the key to the resurgent guerrilla activity.

The bloodstains glow, crimson, on the lotus fronds.

Had the police known their business, they could have forced guttural noises out of him, as of those who die evilly. They might in particular have learned about a meeting, shortly before Independence, between himself and the elusive Daphne Kumar (one of those half-breeds of questionable allegiances fated to embroil the destinies of emerging nations) in the newly decorated cocktail lounge of the gymkhana, off-limits all but Europeans since the restoration of prohibition.

Akmed, barely discerning the shell of the nuclear power plant through the veil of illusion and the crippling rain, tried to recollect the details of their conversation. *Politics* , of course. And the world price of copal. And the hemp crop. And tactics. And a hint - (or was it more than a hint?) - of a liaison. And the Landrover. Jungle. Swamp. And whether the *Wara'ku* (the half-barbarous hill tribes who would never accept the new government no matter who was in charge) would remain allies once the C.I.A. dropped them from the payroll. And the illegal traffic in archaeological artifacts.

(Weary of olives.)

Taking the short cut back to base camp through the abandoned quarries Akmed , bored to distraction, gazed through the towers of fetid smoke rising from the burning ghats to examine an arrogantly amaranthine sky. Effortlessly his ears absorbed the static from the walkie-talkies hidden in the brakes of sickly willows suffering by the river banks.

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" *Believe it or not* ", he snickered, "*Those ragged savages consider that water holy!* " It reminded him of certain villages in the mountains, places stinking of cholera, malaria, urine, dung and fermenting koumiss, where scattered bones litter the roads, (*where, to the trephination of racketeers, gutter noises seep from the mortuaries.*) The old ways, he reflected sadly, may not always be better than the new; but they had worked in their own day, whereas most Western technology has a way of breaking down at the worst possible moment .

Akmed estimated that , even given the amount of time it takes to do the simplest things in this benighted land, the Landrover had been raised from the swamp by now and pulled onto dry land . He vividly pictured the activity at the site, the paramedics jamming the corpses into the regulation gunny-sacks, the army inspectors clambering over the rusted jalopy, the junior officers putting the final touches on their reports, the frenzy at the Presidential Palace, hundreds of documents shredded and burned, the native bearers dozing under the tamarinds, drunk on home-brewed toddy, (what they call *jubwu'*) , millions in raw narcotics spread on the jungle floor, the frightened alligators, the monks buttering bagels in the ashram.

Well! He must not forget to congratulate the boys when he got to camp! Odd, wasn't it, to be using that expression, "boys", employed by the imperialist overlords to express their contempt of us! Akmed saw them more like young mountain lions, galloping across the mezzanines of the doomed bourgeoisie, *as the many guns flared the one-armed salute !*

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Sipping their fragrant wines in the wakes of bellowing frogs, sick with dysentery and *déjà-vu* on their yachts moored in the Marina, the power-mad oligarchs thoughtlessly cluck and gaggle . Every day, caches of contraband electronics, Walkmans, transistor radios, beepers, VCR's, cell phones , pirated CD' s and tapes are being smuggled on muleback through the mountain passes to the north. Fleshless spiders in the leprosarium, chandeliers waltzing, display the ineffable mudra. It was not the first time that Akmed had observed that, although foreboding and evil premonition stalk the summits of on all the surrounding hillsides, yet the neighboring woodlands ooze their miraculous resins.

The funeral march had been scheduled to begin at 6; yet it had to be delayed so that the mourners could watch the clearing away of the crumbling cenotaph plinths covering the peristyle of the mausoleum. Cackling crows, yearning for extinction, spit on the monuments, mock the bronze bulls.

Even the flunkies typing away like devils in the district bungalows had thought that the funeral would be over before dinner. And it would have, had not the *huk'alutz* (described in the encyclopedias of the imperialists as a " *mix of high priest and shamanistic fraud of that rag-bag of superstition, animism and devil worship they call a religion in those backward regions* ") shrewdly exploited his graveside oration to remind everyone that the authorities, fearful of stirring up latent resentments in the scheduled castes, had yet to determine the identity of the deceased.

Renegade soldiers, deserters for the most part, are already bivouacked in the Devonian scarps around the capital, Kalashnikovs and AK47's fixed on tripods set in ledges and crags.

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Patience is running out, the raw recruits sick with fear. Having nothing better to do, their commanding officers are killing time by smashing eggs in the toilet bowls.

Finally the march was ready to begin. The sinewy arms of eternal banyans swaddled the sad road to the cemetery along which, to the sighing of impenetrable odes the tense processional, grief inebriated, shuffled past gutted lorries, mounds of rotting papayas and, everywhere concealed in the jacarandas, vendors of papadams and ghee.

The drums were silent tonight when Marilyn leaped out the window.

Burning incense and the cloying aroma of pungent spices mingle with the vinegary whine of the local bagpipe, the pastoral *kouf'toos*.

In the month of the boea the hill tribes work in the poppy fields from dawn until well after nightfall. Purple curtains of dense mist on the horizon hold back the approaching rains, which always descend a few hours before sunset. Crickets hiding in the cactuses mutter their malicious lies.

The helicopters arrive at the noon hour, the tonnage is assayed, the harvest loaded on board to be hoisted hundreds of miles away to government laboratories concealed in the jungles.

The Landrover's mission had been routine, a corrupt official at the wheel, another one counting the receipts on the back seat. The monkeys and parakeets had seen it all, of that one could be sure: the diversion of the road; the placing of the mines; the guerrillas camouflaged and well hidden under the spreading palms.

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Yet the *Wara'ku* farmers never knew who was sending the helicopters : The French? The Americans? The Israelis? The Chinese? Even Brazil was claiming a piece of the action! One has to understand that these are proud peoples, remnants of ancient kingdoms pushed into the mountains half a millennium ago by the superior might of the invading *Chuptans* . They entertain high hopes that the money pouring in from the Coalition and corrupting their traditional way of life will restore their past greatness.

But it had been in the very depths of the night, a full moon on a cloudless sky, the canopy giddy with chatter, the drivers drinking like swine to drown their mounting terror. Exquisitely nubile bullets crept into flesh, ugly cries, (as from ghosts decapitated by trams) rent the steamy air

And the glorious deed was accomplished. The puppet government was doomed, and the nation saved! History will not now accord it the courtesy of a misplaced comma in a wordy and largely unintelligible legal document

Somehow Akmed worked up the nerve to descend into the ghastly blackness of the crypt and heave open the coffin lid. Standing knee deep in smashed coconuts, he sneezed and, with wide-armed gestures, warded off the noisome stench of mildew, dressings, cotton gauze and many even more dreadful things. Shadows fluttering like huge butterfly wings floated over the dome of his razed cranium. For a brief instant the sputtering light from his cigarette lighter illuminated the rigid carcass. Then he saw the scrofulous ecchymose on the bridge of its nose. Rooted to the spot and speechless, as if a fish-hook were lodged in his

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throat, unwilling or unable to believe the truth , Akmed
shuddered :

Surely ... It Could Not Be She !!

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