



# **SOULTRÄUME**

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For my parents,  
in loving memory

## PROLOGUE

SHE SAT ON the carpeted floor and gazed at the patches on the white walls where her paintings once hung. The furniture sold, and her personal belongings stowed away in boxes at a friend's house. Inhaling the emptiness, she listened for the last time to familiar noises: the cries from a six-months old baby in the flat next door, the caretaker's baritone voice in the staircase as he talked to Mrs Koch, an elderly woman who lived one floor above, the noise of the washing machine spinning in the basement and echoing through the whole building, someone beating a carpet hung over a frame in the communal garden. And in the distance the crawling sound of a street sweeper approaching.

She was ready in every sense of the word, prepared to dive into the depths of an unknown future. Prepared to leave the monotony of a routine she didn't wish to be part of. Willing to say goodbye forever.

The phone rang, its electronic sound echoing through the empty flat. She listened and counted each ring, knowing that to answer would mean to hold on and give up before she had even begun.

After the ringing stopped, she stood up, unplugged the phone and, wrapping the cord around it, placed it on the kitchen bench. One last glance, then she locked the door behind her, walked down the stairs and dropped the keys in the empty letterbox with a clank.

A taxi drove up, honked. She got in.

“To the airport?” the driver asked. She nodded, and turning to look back, her only thought was, ‘Adieu, Saumackerstrasse 38.’

## CHAPTER I

THEY WERE HEADING north along the Stuart Highway. The January heat sneaked in through the closed windows of the car and sliced the air-conditioned air into thin strips. A panorama of spinifex bushes, black tree skeletons, rocks, and red earth glided past, revealing a spectrum of desert colours that turned the landscape into a rainbow of sensations. The radio was switched off and they could only hear raw sounds – wailing wind and crackling air. And the monotonous humming of tyres on rough bitumen.

Glad that Doug was driving, Zara focused on the sound of his breathing, in and out. She noticed, through half-closed eyes, the layer of ochre dust that had built up on the bonnet of their black Holden. Ochre dust on their dry skin, too, the further away they travelled from the city.

Lakes of glare strained Doug's vision and his thoughts became one with the endless stretch of road – a bitumen scar through red land. A line of infinity. Towards the centre of the earth and beyond. Until, he thought, they would disappear, magically swallowed up by a black hole the size of infinity. The size of forever. Time, a measurable quantity?

Occasionally, the carcass of a kangaroo on the roadside, torn to pieces and scavenged by wedge-tailed eagles. Not even the sound of an approaching vehicle could deter them. Their claws clasp dead flesh, their fearsome eyes and strong beaks preventing not only

other birds from snatching their prey, but also humans from stopping and taking a photograph of them.

“How are we going for petrol?” Zara asked lazily.

“Still a third full,” Doug replied.

“Hungry?” Zara fumbled through a bag on the back seat, adding the rustling of plastic to the lonely melody of their fourteen-hundred-kilometre drive. “There’s one sandwich left. Ham and cheese.”

“You have it.”

“You should eat something.” Zara passed Doug half the sandwich.

He bit into it listlessly. “Coffee, that’s what I need,” he said, munching on the words.

“How much further to Coober Pedy?” Zara asked, concentrating on her cheese. It had pearls of sweat all over it, like those she could feel between her breasts. “I think we should stop there, fill up the tank and have a coffee break.”

In the distance a road train approached. Doug took his foot off the accelerator, pulled to the edge of the road and slowed down to walking pace. Zara held her breath. A tornado of dust and gravel hit their car.

“Damn! Couple more of those and our car will need recoating!”

Grumbling, Doug sped up to a comfortable 110 kilometres. Why had he agreed to do this trip? Was it only to please Zara? He would have liked to take her to Sydney, to finally introduce her to his parents. But whenever he mentioned his parents, she withdrew. He didn’t understand, they had been together for three years now and their relationship was going smoothly enough. True, they both had their individual lives, his was in Melbourne, hers in Adelaide, but it seemed to suit them both. Zara had mentioned a few times lately that she would like to come to Melbourne so that they could live together. So why not also visit his parents together?

He looked across to Zara, but she had fallen into a slight slumber. He fumbled through the CDs and chose Vivaldi. Soon the music of 'The Four Seasons' invaded their cocoon.

Zara opened her eyes and leant forward. "I think Paul Kelly would fit this climate better."

Doug didn't have the energy to argue and pressed eject. "Where's the CD?"

Zara opened the glove box. "Here." She slid it in.

*Maybe I was dreaming as the light came streaming in, memory and rhyme bringing back the time ... She glanced at Doug. ... everything under the sun... and felt the urge to kiss him, make love to him under a boiling hot sun. ... all day long under the sun ... And she remembered that rainy day, almost three years ago, when she was stuck in the middle of a traffic jam on North Terrace in Adelaide, outside the station.*

It was a day she wished she had taken the train into town, a day she was supposed to have a meeting with the manager of ZURICH, the Swiss insurance company that had hired her from Switzerland for their new branch in Adelaide. Full-time administrative work and the occasional photo shoot when they needed a new brochure. That day, they were going to discuss one for the main branch in Sydney. They were going to fly her there. She couldn't even ring the manager to let him know of her delay because she had resisted getting a mobile. One hour in a traffic jam, only a stone's throw away from her destination, the Rockford Hotel in Hindley Street.

The wipers had been so old and worn that she had only just been able to see the car in front of her, she was angry enough to swear through her windscreen and curse a bumper-sticker the length of her forearm: *Hasten slowly and you will soon arrive. Mila Repa*. Stuck in a sea of metal, there was no escape. Having expelled all the swear words she could think of, she sat back and glanced sideways.

In the red Mazda to her right a young woman was gesticulating, her lips moving fast. She, too, was talking to her windscreen, arms and hands everywhere, a language Zara couldn't decipher. Then the woman fell back into her seat just as Zara had done a minute before. It was like watching herself on television. The woman was also wearing a red jumper. Not often did Zara wear red, but that day she had been in the right mood to wrap herself in a confronting colour.

Red, a colour one gets held up in, she thought, and instinctively turned her head to the left. Two dark brown eyes met hers. A smile followed. The hundreds of raindrops that speckled the car windows added the brush stroke of Van Gogh to his face.

She smiled back at him and rolled her eyes, hinting at the mess in front. He nodded and shrugged his shoulders as if to say that fate wanted it so, all the while looking at her. His features indicated a different origin. Middle Eastern perhaps?

The patter of the rain on the roof of her car lulled her into a dream-like state. Then he turned back to his own world, leaning his head against the seat. He closed his eyes. Zara started fiddling with the radio, looking for some intermezzo, wishing to release her frustration about sitting in a traffic jam. She swore she would buy a mobile as soon as she escaped.

A last time she looked across to his car, but he seemed to have already forgotten she was there. So it took her by surprise when he later opened his window, signalling for her to do the same, and asked her for directions to Melbourne Street. She had to read his lips because she couldn't hear him across the pouring rain. Unable to describe the route to him without drawing a little map, she called back, "Follow me when this is over. I'll take you there." Her meeting would probably almost be over by the time the traffic would begin to roll again, but a short detour to show a foreigner the way, she reasoned, would certainly not mess up her day any further. Quite the opposite, it would bring some meaning back

into it. After all, experience had taught her that fate gave more security and direction to a person's life than the whole world of insurance.

A sudden swing of the car pulled Zara out of her memories. It shook her wide-awake. Her left hand clutched the door handle, for they were moving in zigzags, strips of landscape alternating with bitumen in front of their windscreen, gravel drumming against the underside of the car, tyres squealing until Doug finally regained control, pulled over and brought the car to a halt with a sudden stop. The seat belt kept Zara from flying forward. Doug's outstretched arms stopped him from colliding with the steering wheel. Their foreheads were covered with sweat. Too shocked to move, trying to recollect their senses, they sat for what seemed an eternity.

"What happened?" Zara finally said, her voice sounding as if it had surfaced from a deep shadow inside a body that wasn't hers.

"This creature," Doug replied in a low voice, shaken. "Right in the middle of the road. I don't know. An animal. It crawled and stretched up towards me – only a torso with a face and hollow eyes." He gasped. "More like a human being ..." His hands held on to the steering wheel like teeth sinking into flesh. The skin on his knuckles looked as if it would split any minute, his arms were covered with goose bumps.

Zara had never seen him in such a state before. "I think we should drive back," she said, glancing in the little mirror on the sun visor. A long stretch of road, deserted and empty, only the desert wind whistling around their car. "Let's swap seats. I'll take over for a while." She tried to sound confident as she rubbed Doug's arm to comfort him.

Doug finally let go of the steering wheel. He turned towards her and looked at her with disbelief, fear, sadness; a whole set of emotions flickering across his eyes.

"Too much driving," he finally said, shaking his head. "This is crazy ..."

“I’ll take over,” Zara said again and opened the door.

The heat almost knocked her over. Her knees were trembling. Slowly, she walked to the driver’s side, tempted to touch the hot bonnet with her right hand to assure herself the car would not suddenly disappear. Doug moved across to the passenger’s seat. Zara adjusted the seat and mirrors, and turned to drive back.

No car had passed them all that time.

“About here.” Doug signalled, and Zara stopped.

Everything was quiet, except for their heavy breathing. They could see nothing on the road, no traces of a dead animal or human being, no blood, no torn clothes, no fur, no hair. Nothing. Zara breathed a sigh of relief.

But Doug, not convinced, opened the door and ventured out. Watching him through the windscreen, Zara realised how old he suddenly looked, much older than his thirty-seven years. His hands were shaking and all his strength seemed gone. His smile – that heart-breaking smile Zara had fallen in love with, erased from his face.

Doug squatted in front of the car, disappearing from Zara’s view. The straight road and fierce red land opened up in front of her, stretching into the distance to meet the horizon. Immensity spread endlessly without movement. The scenery seemed to have died.

What was he doing? Zara unclipped her seat belt and grabbed the door handle. Then Doug reappeared. She paused and, with a moan, fell back into her seat.

Doug walked away from the car and, with a hand shielding his face, scanned the landscape. The further he walked, the less Zara felt he belonged to her world anymore – untouchable – as if he had become a character in a movie that she was watching for the first time.

Eventually, as if in a trance, Doug got back into the car. Irritated and confused, Zara stared at the steering wheel. She wanted to comfort him with words, gestures, but an

invisible barrier had risen between them, something that paralysed her. Something that was pulling him away from her, forcing him to hide behind his skin, as behind a mask.

“Nothing,” he said, his voice no more than a whisper. He leant back against the headrest and closed his eyes. The pain of memory snapped at Zara. She could almost touch the raindrops on the car windows between them.

Words, an explanation – she wanted to talk, but couldn’t. She could feel the choking pain that muteness brought with it, and the lack of space inside the car threatened to squash her. The noise of warm air blowing through the fan as she started the engine helped her mind to adjust to the vastness outside. With every kilometre she drove, the silence between them increased, to the point where she was left with a numbness one feels when someone close has died.

*DREAMING IN A STATE OF WONDER beyond the boundaries of pain und den Hürden der Realität. There was this longing for depth. Die Tiefe einer Abstraktion, which would let the unconscious fly over the physical mass called land. Da gab es diese Sehnsucht nach einer Verbindung. A connection between soul and soil, um den Urzustand von Sein zu erreichen. There was this wish to belong.*

*And there was this loss.*



*The soil didn't stick to the soles of her shoes. Mit nackten Füßen tastete sie den Boden ab and with her toes she tasted the earth. But all she could feel were cracks; Spalten, Zwischenräume, which meant darkness and drowning. Then she knelt down and touched the ground with her hands, um sich auf allen vieren dem Boden zu nähern. Ants were speeding over the dust, forming traces of understanding, of knowing. She closed her eyes and slid her fingers over the hot caked ground. Eine zarte Erinnerung, but then memory was gone again. Vielleicht nur der Wunsch einer Erinnerung, because she craved the feeling.*

## CHAPTER II

A COLOSSUS OF A MAN, grinning cheerfully, his face framed by a red beard, greeted Zara from behind the counter: “How are you, love?”

“Hi.” She put her sunglasses down. “Number five, please.”

“And that’s the lot?”

Zara nodded.

“That comes to thirty-one dollars and forty-five cents then. Thanks, love.”

She passed the man her Visa card.

“On credit?” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Yes, thanks.”

His muscular forearms and enormous belly rested on the counter. His skin was almost black from the sun, like leather. He reminded her of a character out of a fairy-tale she could only vaguely remember. A story with red-haired dwarves – sturdy and trustworthy creatures.

“A scorcher today,” he said while processing the card.

“Too hot for me.”

“Where are you off to?” He passed her the receipt. “Your autograph, please.”

Zara scribbled her signature with an uncertain hand.

“Alice Springs.” She passed the receipt back to him.

“Pretty hot up there now. I grew up in Alice. Lots of tourists and blackfellas. I wanted to go to Adelaide when I was a kid, but got stuck here. That was twenty three years ago.” He laughed. “You’re from Adelaide, aren’t you? I can tell. Different mentality. Down to earth, but reserved. No offence, but they don’t trust strangers very much. Don’t like it when you smile at their kids. Tell me if I’m wrong....”

Zara smiled.

“Quite amazing,” he continued, “what you learn about people when you work at a petrol station. Never gets boring. Have been doing this for years now. Wanted to go to university – well – reckon I’ve learnt more by living here. Worth ten of those degrees!” He laughed again and Zara could see the deep wrinkles around his eyes.

“You’re probably right,” she said, turning to leave. She didn’t think it fit to mention that she had only been living in Adelaide for a few years. There was no reason to crush his pride.

“A pleasure, love! I like adding some spice to people’s journeys. Can be quite depressing to see nothing but desert and a straight stretch of road. You should have a wander around here before you keep going, get yourselves some opals, they’re cheaper here than anywhere else.”

Zara smiled politely. “We’ve planned to do that on our way back.”

“Alright, then, have a safe trip. And enjoy good old Alice!”

“Thanks, we will.”

Zara made her way to the door, suddenly panicking. She hoped that Doug was alright. The bright light hit her, for a split second she couldn’t see. Her sunglasses. She turned on her heels to go back in.

The bearded man was already coming towards her, waving at her. “Better take these with you, you’ll need them out there.”

She managed a smile. "I guess I'm getting a bit tired from all the driving."

"Take it easy, love! You've still got a fair way to go." He gave her an encouraging look. "Have a cuppa, there's a few coffee shops in town." He indicated the direction with his head. "See you again on your way down." He turned and hurried back to the counter. "Coming, coming!" he shouted.

Zara stepped back outside into the light, still feeling the cold from the air-conditioning inside on her arms and legs. She suddenly remembered Charlie. Charlie would notice immediately that something had gone wrong. What would they tell her? Should she ring, pretending their car had broken down in the middle of nowhere? Charlie, her best friend, who was always suspicious and who could detect every faint sub-tone in another person's voice.

Zara's head began to spin. Yes, she was exhausted, left with no sense of direction. I - Doug - we have broken down, Charlie, not our car. There was a scream inside her chest, waiting to free itself, but a deep sigh was all that came out.

Doug sat crouched inside the car.

"How about coffee now?" she said, trying to sound cheerful. "There are a few coffee shops around here, the guy told me."

The atmosphere in the canteen-like coffee shop they stopped at was subdued, the light dim, despite the big window. The smell of hot fried oil lingered, mixing with the smell of cheap filter coffee. Two ceiling fans moaned, circulating warm air. The white plastic upholstery had seen better days, starting to tear and split along the seams. Each table was covered with a different patterned plastic tablecloth. The only decorations on the tables were a salt and pepper shaker, a bottle of tomato sauce, and a plastic container filled with sugar.

Doug chose a green-white chequered table by the window. After Zara ordered at the counter, she reluctantly sat down. How could someone become a stranger in the space of a few hours? She tried to interpret Doug's downcast glance, the tension in his body, the silence that had descended on him. She couldn't read him anymore. The look of him depressed her, like the interior of the coffee shop, which only added to her gloom. She looked out the window.

"Doug," she said after a while, trying to engage him in a conversation. But the woman who had served her interrupted.

"Two cappuccinos and scones!" She slid the plates from a tray onto the table, coffee spilling over. "Not many people on the road today. Where are you two heading?"

Zara tried to avoid the woman's gaze.

"Alice Springs," she replied.

"You spending the night or moving through?" She glanced over to Doug, who was staring out the window. Then she looked back at Zara, lifting her eyebrows. But Zara didn't answer. The waitress left them alone.

Lost in the foreignness of the surroundings, they sat like a couple that had had an argument. Doug sipped his coffee, Zara slapped butter and raspberry jam on her scones.

"Doug," she tried again. "Talk to me!" The scones tasted stale, the jam was too sweet. She pushed them aside. "Doug, this is silly! I feel like you're blaming me for what happened out there. Is it because I asked you to come to Alice Springs with me, is that what it is?"

Doug remained silent.

"Please, only one tiny word!" Zara looked around, feeling nauseous, on the verge of fainting. No one else was in the vicinity. The woman had disappeared into the kitchen. "I

know you don't like being pressed, but don't you think this is going a bit far now? You've never treated me like this before, what have I done?"

Finally, Doug looked up. "I've got no explanation myself," he said, "I'm sorry, I don't know what to say to you, not at the moment." He stood up. "I've got to sort this out for myself, somehow."

## CHAPTER III

THE TOILET SMELLED of urine and disinfectant. Doug could feel his stomach twisting, but he needed a few minutes to himself. He checked whether he was alone, then shut himself into a cubicle and sat down on the toilet lid.

The apparition didn't stop haunting him, torturing him in a language he didn't understand. Had he gone completely mad?

He heard the bathroom door creak open, and feet shuffle in. The clearing of a throat followed, then spitting and groaning. Doug felt like a little boy again, hiding in a wardrobe in his parents' bedroom, waiting for his mother to get dressed and leave the room before he could get out of his secret place.

He waited until the man finished. Shuffling feet again, the tap was turned on, off, the door creaked opened, then banged shut.

Doug got out of the cubicle. He splashed cold water over his face and looked at himself in the mirror, startled. Dark pockets under his eyes, greying eyebrows, hanging cheekbones – how come he had never noticed before that he was growing old?

Time had become a matter of uncertainty. No agenda, no schedules anymore, just a vague recollection of existence. What was he doing here? Why had he come to this godforsaken place?

He ran wet fingers through his hair.

Instead of coming here, he should have gone to Sydney, to visit his parents, as he usually did during the summer holidays. "I'm not even talking to Zara anymore," he said to his image in the mirror. "What is happening to me?"

Back in the frail reality of the coffee shop, he noticed Zara and stopped. She wasn't alone. A young man with a beard was sitting at the table, talking to her. He was wearing a T-shirt with an Aboriginal design on it. His hair was plaited, which struck Doug as odd, but interesting at the same time. A large navy-coloured backpack sat on the third chair, opposite Zara, a cup of coffee in front of it – his chair.

He walked back to the table.

"Your coffee's gone cold," Zara said, a worried look on her face. "Everything okay?"

Doug nodded.

"This is Marc," she continued, "he's travelling around Australia." And to Marc. "My partner Doug. We're on our way to Alice Springs."

"Hi. Nice to meet you." Marc removed his backpack from the chair.

Doug mumbled 'hello' and reclaimed lost territory.

At least Marc talked, Zara thought, which was a simple enough reason for her to enjoy his company.

Doug studied Marc's hands, his long fingers and the collection of rings that decorated them. The rings were made of all sorts of different materials, ivory, string, metal. One looked as though made out of human sinews. He shuddered in fascination.

"Marc's from France," Zara said. "He's been travelling around for a couple of months, hitchhiking his way through."

“*Oui*, I am an artist and a healer. I have come here to meet Aboriginal people, to learn from them. You read a lot about Aboriginal spirituality in Europe. But you never meet the people and that’s a shame. *Tu sais*, these people can teach us a lot. I think they are so much ahead of us. *C’est extraordinaire.*”

French, Doug thought. A language so familiar in sound, but no longer in meaning. How long ago when he used to speak it as fluently as a six-year old Lebanese boy would ever speak French! Proud of her Lebanese heritage, his grandmother had taught him both French and Arabic. But English soon became the language that shaped Doug’s universe. By the time he was a teenager, both French and Arabic had lost their importance. They now belonged to the faint memories of childhood.

“The English people here don’t like it when you mention Aboriginal culture,” Marc continued. “*Il y a beaucoup de racisme ici*, like in France, a lot of racism. In France people don’t like *les arabes, par exemple*. The French think that the Arabs are violent, they are afraid of them.” He looked at Doug, but Doug wasn’t listening.

He shifted his gaze back to Zara. “The white races are afraid of the dark races. Everywhere. We cannot understand them, they are different. What we cannot understand, makes us afraid. *C’est la peur qui est la cause du racisme*. Fear, don’t you agree?”

Zara didn’t know what to say. She was in no way capable now of taking the sufferings and responsibilities of the world on her fragile shoulders.

“Yes, perhaps,” she stammered, “I don’t know.” A tourist’s aims and intentions were different to hers. She had gone far beyond the habits and interests of a traveller. She was on the verge of losing the meaning of this new life she had created for herself in Australia – at the side of Doug, who had given her a sense of belonging.

“I think we should head off soon,” she said. “We’ve still got a long way to go.” She looked at Doug, who was again absorbed in his own world.

“*Oui, c’est vrai.* True,” Marc replied, noticing Doug’s silence. “But you must stop in Coober Pedy for longer when you come back. It is a very interesting place, you should go to the underground bookshop and hotel. And they do tours also, so you can go into the opal mines. *Très intéressant, vraiment!*”

“Sounds very interesting,” Zara said, getting impatient.

“It was nice meeting you.” Marc stood up. “I will get another coffee. *Attends!* Wait, before you go, *je te donnerai mon adresse d’email.*” He started searching for paper and pen.

“I think I’ve got a pen in my handbag.” Zara said.

“Aah, *voilà!*” Marc retrieved a pencil from one of the many pockets in his pants. He scribbled his address down on a paper serviette. “It would be nice to hear from you again.” He folded the serviette. “*Voici!*”

“Thanks.” Zara looked at the address. She didn’t ask if he wanted hers. “We’ll write.”

“I check my emails once a week, when I’m in a town with an internet cafe.” He paused. “Okay. *Comment est-ce-qu’ on dit ici?* Happy travelling!” And he looked at Doug.

Doug, aware now that he had been alarmingly quiet for too long, stood up. “Enjoy the rest of your time in Australia,” he said and shook Marc’s hand.

Zara grabbed her handbag. Inside her fist Marc’s email address turned into a scrunched-up record of a passage in the outback she didn’t feel she ever wanted to remember. Outside the coffee shop, she fished her little pocket camera out of her handbag. Without looking back, she held it over her shoulder and released the shutter.

Only much later, when Zara entered the stage of looking back from a secure distance, when she had had the photos developed, only then did she realise the comedy behind it all:

she had taken a picture of Marc through the window of the coffee shop as he himself was taking a picture of them walking off into the heat.

A tourist's souvenir shot of her and Doug, probably ending up somewhere in an album among photos of Aboriginal people, sheep shearers, life savers, fellow travellers, kangaroos, emus, and in the midst of it all, she was certain, a photo of Uluru. Just like the Matterhorn at home – another sacred symbol every tourist wanted to conquer.

Yet such thoughts came later. Out there and then, lost between Adelaide and Alice Springs, on a late January afternoon, taking that picture was a mere jolt to save her from collapsing inside. She didn't know then that the photograph would be the beginning of a portfolio of experiences stitching together the disparate shreds of a longing called identity.

## CHAPTER IV

DOUG REMAINED sheltered in silence; Zara was driving. It was about five in the afternoon. The sun's merciless strength was softening. Charlie expected them late at night, unless they rang. The landscape was haunting, the soil a soft red colour. The rocks along the road shone like rubies in the evening sun.

Zara thought of Marc travelling along the same road, in the opposite direction. What did he think of the landscape, what emotions did it evoke for him? Had he ever superimposed a French landscape on an Australian one, like two negatives, to receive a print that contained both?

She had tried to do it many times in the lab, negatives of landscapes overlapping, producing a final print with more depth and meaning than individual prints. Blending shots simple in composition, without making the technique obvious. Without leaving a seam of no man's land. Without creating borders. It was easy to do in the lab.

In her mind, it usually happened when she was in half-sleep and the old landscape began to appear from deep inside. All of a sudden, there were green hills, and meadows covered with dandelion, buttercups, *marguerites* and long grass that tickled her legs as she ran across the fields. Forests of acorns, birches, beech and pine trees creeping into dark orange soil; the smell of clean fresh air of spring after months of snow mixing with the

smell of dust and eucalyptus. And she would hang on to that imprint in her soul for as long as she could.

When it vanished, when the merged landscape separated again, she would fall into the realm of nostalgia, resisting at the same time a link to her past, to a country she was never fully attached to. And she would ask herself why those moments conjured up images of places and scenes that she never considered worth remembering when she still lived among them?

Memory was always fuzzy, like now. There were no clear borders around the edges of the bubbles that rose, filling her heart until their presence made her nauseous. Searching for a home free from longing, she yearned for answers. And she could no longer find them in art. Resenting the demands of her camera, she felt that the lens that had helped her see was beginning to blind her. She wanted the freedom to remember without recording. She wanted faith.

Doug had fallen into a disturbed sleep, muttering to himself, his body jerking occasionally. It was as if a delirium of fever had snatched him away from her, leaving her with the duty of cooling his forehead with silent understanding.

The sun had set behind a horizon filled with mist and untold stories. Insects began to fly against the windscreen and sounded like blotches of paint dripping on a glass canvas.

Zara turned the headlights on and fixed her eyes on the road, hoping to react in time if a kangaroo jumped out of nowhere. The orange of the sky turned into purple, and she saw faces on some of the rocks. Gradually, darkness, challenged only by the lights of the car, swallowed the long stretch in front.

She felt like an intruder, racing through territory that belonged to the voices of the night. Bushes and rocks flashed by, startling her, as though they were unknown creatures

behind which danger lurked. They seemed ready to demand permission from her, an explanation for her disrespectful entry.

Finally, some streetlights shivered in the distance. Her hands were still shaking. She was hungry, tired. At a roadhouse with a sign ACCOMMODATION stuck to a wooden post, she pulled up. The sound of gravel underneath the tyres brought back a sudden memory, of arriving at her grandmother's house in Austria at night after travelling for twelve hours from Switzerland. A homecoming for her mother. Every one of those trips, a holiday for kids and husband.

The gravel had to give way to bitumen a year or two before her grandmother died. And with the arrival of the bitumen, their annual holidays in Austria had come to an end. In her early twenties, when Zara went back one more time, by then a determined woman, nothing was the same. Yet the memories sprang at her from every wall of the decaying house. In the end, her mother had sold that house, deciding to cut ties and never again return to the place where she was born.

Zara nudged Doug. "We're in Marla."

Doug woke with a start, his eyes wide open, looking at her as if the apparition from earlier had reappeared.

"We're at a roadhouse, in Marla," Zara said again. "I'm exhausted and it's too dangerous to keep driving. I'll see if I can get a room."

"Yeah, sure," Doug mumbled, "I'll come with you." He unfastened his seat belt.

"No, it's okay." She didn't need any pretend gestures of politeness. "You could fill up the car in the meantime, so we don't have to worry about it in the morning. I'll be back in a minute."

Inside the roadhouse, the noise of a packed restaurant awaited her. Music was playing, men and women were drinking and laughing. Several men turned round and stared at her when she entered. But she went straight up to the counter, ignoring their gazes.

The woman behind the counter wasn't much older than Zara, but she had an air of old age about her. So did her husky voice. Her face, a playground of wrinkles, and her shoulder-length wavy hair looked as if it had been dipped in orange paint. The brown lipstick matched her brown sleeveless top, which revealed soft white arms and cleavage; the skin of a twenty year old. Body and face didn't match, and yet they did.

"Hi, how can I help you?"

"Do you have any vacancies for tonight?" Zara's voice quivered from exhaustion.

"I'll check, love." She dialled a number on the wall phone. "Is it a double you're after?"

Zara nodded, noticing the woman's long, brown-painted fingernails. Somehow the woman seemed out of place, as if she had escaped from the red light district of a big European city, maybe to shed her past.

"Okay, I'll send them over," Zara heard her say into the phone.

"The rooms and caravans are all gone," the woman said after hanging up. "But I'll give you our private caravan for five dollars the night. We usually don't rent that one out, but I can see how exhausted you are. I guess I don't want to be responsible for you guys driving on and having an accident. Jack will meet you at the front. He'll look after you, if he's not too spaced out. You can pay tomorrow morning."

Zara hadn't expected generosity, let alone sympathy. Even though she didn't like the thought of spending the night in a small caravan with Doug, she was grateful that someone seemed to care – someone who picked up on human despair without making a fuss about it.

“Thank you very much, that’s very kind of you.”

The woman leant over the counter. “Come over for a bite and a drink later if you feel up to it. Kitchen shuts at 10, but I’ll be around all night. My name’s Rose.”

“I’m Zara.”

“Welcome to the country of endless wanderers!”

Jack was already waiting outside and was chatting to Doug. Used to people who were not talkative after a long drive, he didn’t mind Doug’s silence.

“Hi, I’m Jack,” he said when he saw Zara. “Rose might have told you that the caravan’s nothing flash, but at least you get two beds, which I guess is all you really need at this stage. There’s a toilet and shower block near the cabins. Come and I’ll show you!” He marched off.

“Why don’t you walk with him?” Zara asked Doug, longing for a minute of solitude. “I’ll take the car.”

She watched the two men walk away, one gesticulating and striding with an upright back, the other with hanging shoulders and a bent head, tension in his pace. Two men who could have been friends, on their way to the pub together to have a drink.

Their abode for the night was small, but clean. A smell of dried rose petals hung in the blue curtains and sheets. Rose petals for Rose. And Jack on top of her, making love. Zara could feel their intimacy, almost trod on it when she went inside.

She blushed at the thought of adding her and Doug’s scent to the history of the caravan. How many people had slept or made love in here? How many distressed people had Rose offered the caravan to?

Zara noticed with relief that there were two beds, a double against the back of the caravan, and a single, used as a sitting bench during the day, at the other end.

Doug carried in their two suitcases. "In case we need some fresh clothes."

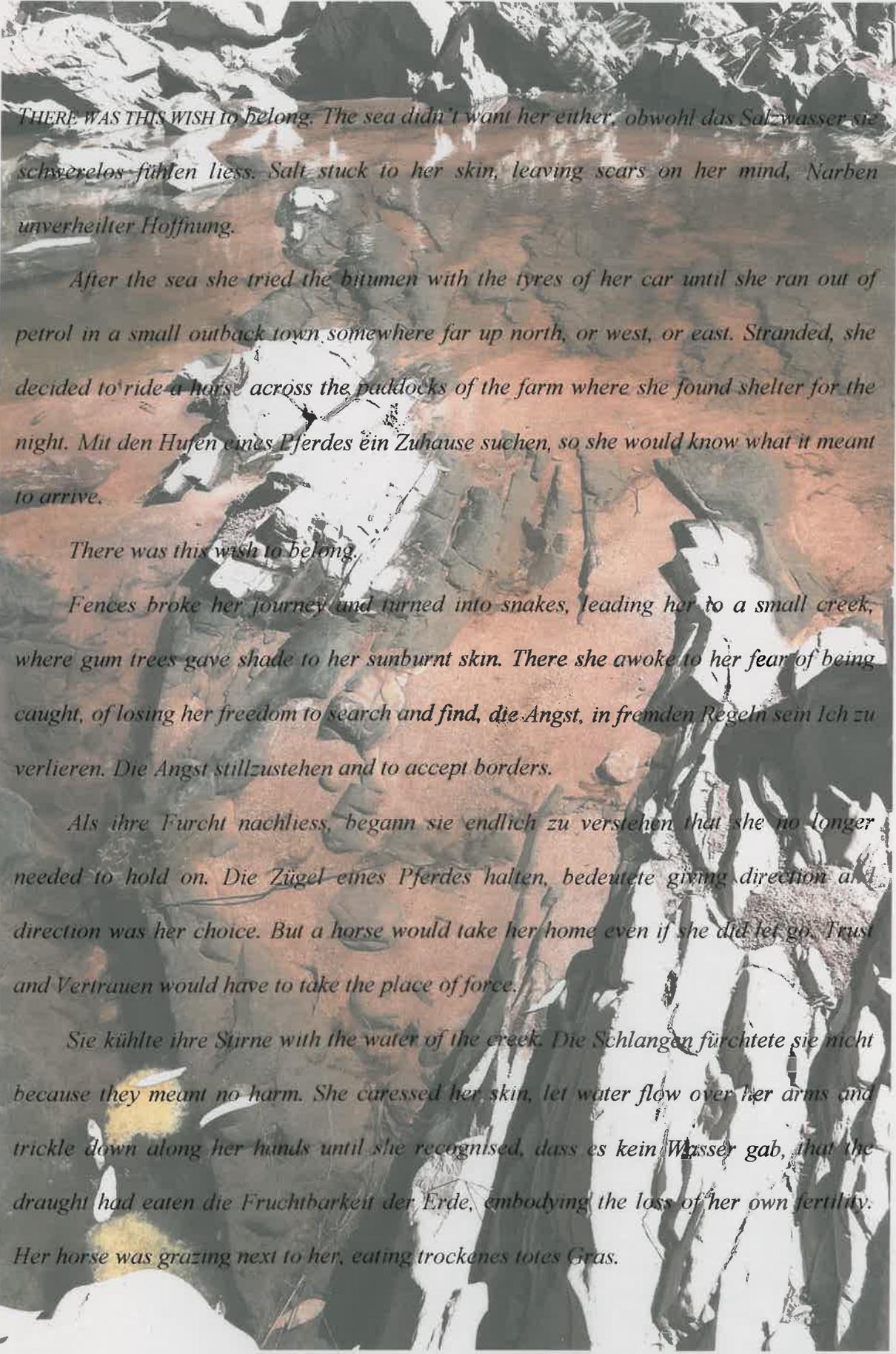
In case we need a new skin, Zara thought.

"I'll have a shower," she said, hoping to wash the bitterness of confusion off her.

She took her toilet bag out of her suitcase and grabbed one of the towels Jack had given them. Blue towels that matched the curtains and bedcovers. Blue – colour of healing. How appropriate, Zara thought.

Doug pulled off his shirt and let himself fall backwards onto the double bed, flopping his hands over his head.

Zara turned away. "I won't be long."



*THERE WAS THIS WISH to belong. The sea didn't want her either, obwohl das Salzwasser sie schwerelos fühlen liess. Salt stuck to her skin, leaving scars on her mind, Narben unverheilte Hoffnung.*

*After the sea she tried the bitumen with the tyres of her car until she ran out of petrol in a small outback town somewhere far up north, or west, or east. Stranded, she decided to ride a horse across the paddocks of the farm where she found shelter for the night. Mit den Hufen eines Pferdes ein Zuhause suchen, so she would know what it meant to arrive.*

*There was this wish to belong.*

*Fences broke her journey and turned into snakes, leading her to a small creek, where gum trees gave shade to her sunburnt skin. There she awoke to her fear of being caught, of losing her freedom to search and find, die Angst, in fremden Regeln sein Ich zu verlieren. Die Angst stillzustehen and to accept borders.*

*Als ihre Furcht nachliess, begann sie endlich zu verstehen that she no longer needed to hold on. Die Zügel eines Pferdes halten, bedeutete giving direction and direction was her choice. But a horse would take her home even if she did let go. Trust and Vertrauen would have to take the place of force.*

*Sie kühlte ihre Stirne with the water of the creek. Die Schlangen fürchtete sie nicht because they meant no harm. She caressed her skin, let water flow over her arms and trickle down along her hands until she recognised, dass es kein Wasser gab, that the draught had eaten die Fruchtbarkeit der Erde, embodying the loss of her own fertility. Her horse was grazing next to her, eating trockenenes totes Gras.*

## CHAPTER V

WHEN ZARA ENTERED the roadhouse, Rose was laughing. It was a joyful laughter like rose buds opening and soaking up the light to shine with dignity.

“Hi, Zara, come and meet some of my friends! They’re travelling up north.” Rose came round the counter. “This is Zara,” she said to a couple standing at the bar. “And these are Sonja and Sven. They’re from Norway, but have been living in Melbourne for several years now.”

“Hi, nice to meet you.” Zara shook their hands. “I’m originally from Europe, too.”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” Sven said. “Which country?”

“Switzerland.”

“That’s one of our favourite places!” he exclaimed.

“You don’t sound like a foreigner, Zara?” Rose said, a look of surprise on her face.

“Well, I’ve been living in Adelaide for nearly five years now.”

“Okay, but some people have lived here for twenty years and they still speak with a heavy accent.”

“What made you come here?” Sven asked.

Zara felt three pairs of eyes demanding an answer. Why hadn’t she just said she was from Adelaide?

“I’m a photographer. I needed space and light – contrast – and Switzerland doesn’t have enough.” She looked at Rose, then at the couple. “I haven’t found out yet what it is that holds people in the place where they were born, what makes them feel connected.”

Sven’s voice reached her as though it had travelled through a thick woollen blanket.

“We left because of the darkness, the midnight sun,” he said. “And because I was tired of my job as a worker on an oil-rig. But one day we’ll go back, Norway’s our home after all.”

Zara’s cheeks were hot, the hub of the pub noise pulsated through her veins. There was a male voice cracking up into laughter, and a thunder of swear words hit her ears. The Australian male’s terminology of affection still astounded her, still sent negative twitches down her back.

“This place, this pub makes me feel connected,” Rose said. Then she quickly changed the subject. “Where’s your friend? Didn’t he want to come over?”

“Doug’s very tired. He did most of the driving today.”

“Fair enough,” she said and motioned her three friends to a table in the corner.

Zara felt like one of three children whose mother made them sit down and eat after a long day playing outside.

“The menu: lemon zucchini soup and the normal stuff, Schnitzel with salad, sandwiches, and potato wedges. I’ll be back in a minute to take your order.” And she whizzed off.

“So, you’re a photographer,” Sven said, turning to Zara again. “I used to photograph a lot myself, years ago, my dream job before I started working on the oil-rigs. But you need to earn a living and photography in Norway doesn’t pay, unless you’ve got your own studio and I wasn’t that good. I still occasionally take photos, and you’re right, the light

here is sensational.” He took a sip of beer. “So, what sort of photography do you do, advertising?”

“I’m mainly into art photography,” Zara said. “But I’ve done a few weddings and quite a bit of work for an insurance company, to earn some money.”

Sven nodded, but Zara was looking at Sonja, waiting for her to speak.

“Sounds very interesting,” Sonja said at last. “Did you bring any of your photos with you?”

Zara noticed Sonja’s emerald eyes, eyes that were capable of surprise and wonder. Eyes that paid attention, that wanted to be entertained and amused.

“No, sorry,” Zara said, regretting that she hadn’t. “What do you do?”

Sonja linked her arm inside Sven’s. “Oh, nothing very creative. I work for a small car sales company, selling cars to people travelling through the country, tourists mainly. I like it because I meet people that way, but it’s not a job I would want to do all my life, if you know what I mean.” She blushed. “Sales is not really my background, I worked as a librarian in Norway. I love books.”

“Believe it or not, Sonja managed to turn me into a reader,” Sven said and kissed her cheek. “Before I met her, I wouldn’t even consider looking at a book cover, but then all of a sudden there would be all those books lying around at home and Sonja kept telling me all the stories she’d read. One day I picked one up that she’d put right where I’d stumble over it.” He gave Sonja a wink.

“That’s not true, you’re exaggerating now.” Sonja pinched his arm. He laughed.

Zara watched their love play. It reminded her of two birds chirping together in a tree and picking at each other’s beaks. She would have liked to take a photo of Sonja’s fingers pinching Sven’s arm. She thought of herself and Doug. Did they ever give this impression to other people?

“The first book I read,” Sven continued, “was Robinson Crusoe. I’d take that book with me to work, back to the oil rig, and during my lunch break I would read a few paragraphs. It can get damn boring and lonely on those platforms, especially when you’re on a shift when only five or six mates are on board. Everyone just thinks of their families, when they’ll be home again and no one talks much. You feel a bit like that Robinson guy, stranded on an island. Three, sometimes four or five weeks in a row can be hard. But the books. Those books kept me going. That’s also how I practiced my English, through books. Books teach you an awful lot, don’t they?”

He looked straight into Zara’s eyes as if he needed to convert her from one way of understanding the world to another.

“I suppose so,” Zara replied, “but I’m more a visual person. Words, yes, I like how people use words in their day-to-day life. That can trigger ideas for photos with me. But I’m not a great reader of books.”

Rose came back with crackers and dips.

“Here’s some nibbles,” she said and put them down on the table. “What else can I get you, my friends?”

Zara ordered the soup. Sven and Sonja decided to have schnitzels.

The mention of schnitzels brought the smell of childhood back to Zara, her memory of the warmth of an Austrian kitchen, the mess she used to make as a little girl when her aunt let her batter the meat, dipping it into flour, then eggs and finally breadcrumbs. Her fingers always ended up with a thicker batter than the meat. The most exciting part was the sizzling sound, as the schnitzels were deep-fried in oil. And hours after they were eaten, the smell would still linger in the air, intoxicating her for the whole day.

“A drink for you, Zara?” Rose put her hands on Zara’s shoulders. “How about a beer, I think you could do with a drink.”

“Actually, I don’t drink very often. Just water will be fine, thanks.”

“Anything you like!”

Sven and Sonja had both gone quiet, taking in the atmosphere around them as they sipped their beers.

Zara couldn’t quite picture Sonja selling cars. She studied her eyes again, eyes that closed off at times, revealing some depth, yet also carelessness, like now when they were staring into the space of a pub filled with outback blokes in shorts and T-shirts, tourists in shorts and light dresses revealing bare shoulders and legs, some of them sun-tanned and shiny. Zara wondered what Sven’s job was in Australia. He was licking white froth off his lips.

“What do you do for a living, Sven?” she asked.

“Actually, I share a business with a friend. A small café in Melbourne, Brunswick Street. Nothing fancy, open during the day, for breakfast and lunch. We sell Middle Eastern food. Emrie, my business partner, is from Turkey. He cooks all the food himself, I do the administrative side of it all. That’s how we got into this country, Sonja and I. He used to work with me in Norway, then came here to join one of his brothers, that was ten years ago. We’d been in touch all those years, not a great deal of letter writing or anything, just the occasional phone call, and he never forgot my birthday. Always remembered it.”

Sven paused. He smiled and took another sip of beer, then continued.

“So one day he calls me, says Happy Birthday, and asks me if I would like to come and work with him in Australia. ‘I’m planning to open a Turkish café in about a year’s time and I need a partner,’ he said. Sonja and I had already been talking about a major break, about going somewhere else for a few years, so we thought ‘why not’? Ten months later we arrived in Melbourne. Emrie put us up at his place for a couple of months, he was married by then and his wife had just had a little girl. We shared house with them until we

found a unit for ourselves. Emrie did all the paper work, it was amazing. He seemed to know all the right people, too. Three months later we had our residency papers and I was Emrie's business partner."

"They're such a wonderful family," Sonja said, her eyes full of admiration.

Sven shook his head in agreement. "Yes, thanks to them we had an easy start in a new country we hardly knew anything about. I feel sorry for all those who would like to live here and the government makes it so bloody hard for them. How did you get in?"

Zara's body contracted. How could she possibly answer? She was in no way prepared to enter into the complexities of her situation that made her feel like a trapped animal. As long as one didn't have residency, the issue was an intimate one; one she wasn't willing to share with a stranger.

## CHAPTER VI

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE emigrate by choice? What are they searching for? Is emigration a form of political statement? Is an expatriate another term for a silent rebel?

Leaving is the first step of a long process, the process of redefining and readjusting your own self in a new place where you have to learn to walk again; walk on crutches at first, which mark you as an injured member of another society. Whether you left with your pockets full of money or without a cent doesn't matter: the new society will ask the same questions, cast on you the same mistrust reserved for every immigrant.

Arriving is the beginning of longing and losing hope, of waiting on the platform to successful integration. Sometimes you start up a conversation with other people waiting like you, which makes you feel human again. Human enough to allow yourself some value, to acknowledge that you are a person with a history.

Arriving is persisting, and waiting as you run a marathon without knowing if you will ever reach the finish, falling and stumbling, but always getting up from the ground again.

Arriving is moving on while treading on the same spot; is getting back to the humble performances of learning how to fill in a payment slip and the embarrassment when you have to ask at the bank if they could tell you how to do it.

Arriving is learning not to lower your gaze when you are frowned at.

Arriving is spending hours at a supermarket to purchase five items, strolling down each aisle, studying every single product before you know which one to choose.

Arriving is screaming at your neighbour through paper-thin walls at four o'clock in the morning to turn the TV off because you refuse to sleep with earplugs.

Arriving is running up a phone bill of thousands of dollars for the hundreds of international calls you make so as not to lose connection with those you left behind.

Arriving is throwing the same question at your stove over and over again: what on earth am I doing here?

Arriving ends as you surrender, take your runners off, sit down, and, with a rolled up newspaper, crush your big dream like a cockroach,

as the feelings of shame, guilt, frustration, sadness and longing stop tormenting you,

as you begin to enjoy being no more than a number and a foreigner with no plans,

as you rejoice in getting your spring water delivered every fortnight,

as you start feeling good about being different because you take your plastic bags, from the last shopping trip to Coles and ask the check out girl to use them instead of new ones,

as you begin to enjoy hunting for Swiss products, from Lindt Kirsch chocolates to Gruyere cheese,

as you begin to admit that you do miss certain things from the old country because after all, not everything you grew up with was entirely bad.

Arriving ends

as you begin to spoil the friends you have made with authentic Swiss dishes, so they no longer need to go to a Swiss restaurant to find out what is so special about the Swatch people.

Arriving ends

the minute you turn into a cynic, looking at the bright side of life,  
while hanging down with your feet up,  
tied still to that tiny piece of land in the other hemisphere,  
where the sunny side of your house faces south,  
where no cold air sneaks in through the gaps underneath the doors,  
and where double-glazed windows keep the cold out.

Every so often you catch yourself saying, almost with pride: "That silver scooter, did you know it was a Swiss guy's idea? Did you know he's a multi-millionaire now? All he needed was his wife's encouragement for him to sell his creation, a self-made scooter that he used at weekends to get his breakfast croissants from a bakery nearby." And everyone is

impressed, thinking of course that that is how you made your money, too, and that one day you will let them in on *your* brilliant idea, the one you had patented at some stage in your not so distant past.

As a newly born cynic you no longer need to hold on to a legal way of gaining permanent residency, but find the loopholes through which you push an impressive sum of money with a note saying 'to be invested in Australian shares'. You know they will not ask where you got all that money from because a) you are from Switzerland, an island of the rich, paradise on earth where honey flows along the gutters in the streets, and b) they suspected from the outset, the moment you rented that place which was over the top of everything an Australian could ever afford, the moment you bought that near-to-new car, that you made your money through prostitution.

At the end of a long process of leaving, arriving, surrendering, the silent rebel finally turns into a silent rejoicer of humble life, clothed in a cynic's suit; a silent bearer of a vanished dream, who one day might admit that a friend in the old country has been acting all that time as her secret provider of Swiss dental products. Because only *Mentadent C Crystal Gel* toothpaste and *Dentalux Sensitive* toothbrushes give her teeth the orderly, picturesque, neat, and clean look of a Swiss Alpen village, reflected in her Toblerone smile.

## CHAPTER VII

ZARA WAS NOT prepared to talk with a stranger about her road towards residency; a road she had mapped out for herself in the remote corners of her mind. No, she would not allow its chicanes and trimmings to spill over her lips.

She suddenly remembered to ring Charlie.

“I need to make a phone call before it’s too late,” she said, getting up from her chair.

“What time is it?”

“Er, I haven’t got a watch,” Sven replied. “Darling, are you wearing yours?”

“No, but there’s a clock over there.” Sonja pointed to the counter. “Just after 9.30.”

“Thanks, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Zara hurried over to the counter where Rose was arranging plates filled with soup on her arms and hands.

“Is there a public phone here?” Zara asked her.

“Shit!” Rose exclaimed. Soup had spilled over the rim of one of the plates. “How many times do I have to tell them to use bowls rather than soup plates!”

Zara took the plate from her and passed her a paper serviette. Rose wiped her fingers, then took the plate back to the kitchen, swearing, and shouting for another serve in a bowl. Then she came back out. “Sorry, Zara, it’s just crazy around here sometimes. So, what was it you wanted, a phone box?”

Zara nodded.

“There’s one outside the pub, but wait – you can use the phone behind the bar.”

“No, no, the phone box will –”

“Yes, yes.” Rose nudged her, balancing the schnitzels on her arms. “Go on, it’s okay. We’re friends now, the business pays for it.” She winked at her. “Unless you’d like more privacy ...”

Zara lifted her eyes. “No, not really.”

Rose grinned, and Zara slipped behind the counter. Privacy was the last thing she wanted right now.

Charlie’s number rang three times, then the answering machine came on. Zara sighed with relief. But then she could hear Charlie’s voice over the taped message: “*Yep, you got the right number - hello, hang on – I’m not in at the moment so - hello, wait, I need to stop this - leave a message and - hello, who is it?*”

As usual, Charlie’s chirpy voice irritated Zara.

“Charlie, it’s me, Zara,” she tried to chirp back. “I’m ringing from a pub. We’re in Marla. Staying for the night.”

“Hey, Zara! So good to hear your voice! Don’t worry, take it easy! No rush, okay?”

“You know what I’m like ... driving at night!”

“No worries, Darl! I’m glad you stopped. How’s the trip been, alright?”

“Yeah, fine! It’s been really fine, hot though. I’m starting to cool down a bit now. I had a shower and I’m now having dinner.”

“You’re not having dinner there by yourself, are you? Is everything okay?”

“Don’t worry, Charlie, the lady who owns this place is very friendly. She’s looking after me.”

“What did you say?” There was a cracking sound in the line. “What lady?”

“I was saying the lady who owns this place is very nice and she’s looking after me.”

Zara didn’t want to continue with the conversation.

“Why, where’s Doug? Shouldn’t your man be looking after you?”

There it was! Zara could feel the sly suspicious eyes of a fox looking at her from its hiding place. She tensed up.

“Doug was too tired to have dinner,” she replied.” He went straight to bed. He did most of the driving and I don’t mind having a bit of time to myself. Look, I better go now, my soup’s getting cold.”

“Are you sure everything’s alright, Zara?”

The fox had made a jump forward and was in full view, ready to attack.

“Yes, Charlie,” Zara said, “everything’s going well.” She looked over her shoulder, into the pub. “Charlie, I’m very tired, and it’s noisy here and Rose let me use her phone. I really should go now.”

“Rose? Who is Rose?”

Zara rolled her eyes. “Rose is the lady I just told you about.” She sighed into the phone. “The lady who owns this place. I’m fine, okay?”

“Well, okay then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“We’ll probably get in around two. Can’t wait to see you.” Zara could feel her legs weakening.

“Yeah, me, too.” Charlie paused for a minute. “You two didn’t have an argument, did you?”

“Charlie, please! I’d like to go and eat. I’m starving!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll let you go. Just wanted to make sure you’re alright, or I won’t sleep.” She sounded offended now.

“I’m just tired, okay? “

“Okay, Darl, whatever you say, I believe you. Love you and see you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

Zara waited for the click at the other end, then she stood for a while with the receiver at her ear, gathering herself before finally hanging up. She hadn't noticed Rose behind her.

“Everything alright, love?” Rose asked, filling two beer glasses at the tap.

“Yes. Thanks for letting me use the phone.”

“No worries.” Rose glanced sideways.

“My friend loves talking,” Zara said, “and that can be a nightmare sometimes, especially when I'm tired. Aren't you having anything to eat with us?”

“I'll join you guys as soon as that crowd over there is served. I ate earlier, but I need a drink. One of the girls in the kitchen will be happy to do the bar.” She put the beers down on the counter.

The white froth rose over the rim of the glasses and glided down along them. For the first time in her life, Zara felt like a large cold beer. And not a Shandy as she would occasionally have, but a proper beer with a thick layer of froth that would stick to the tip of her nose and to the skin around her lips.

“Can I have one of these?” she asked, pointing to the two beers.

“A pint of draught?”

“Yes, whatever it is.”

Returning to the table, Zara hoped that Sven would not take up their previous conversation. To her relief, he was leaning across and talking to someone at the table next to them. Sonja was flicking through a travel brochure. She looked up. “Did you get hold of your friend?”

“Yes, I did. Thanks.”

“Hope you don’t mind that we’ve finished already.” They had both left half their schnitzels untouched.

“That’s alright,” Zara said, stirring her soup. “You know, this friend of mine, she loves talking. Sometimes she goes on for hours. I had to cut her short.”

Sonja laughed. “Actually, I’m a bit like her, too. Sven only shakes his head now when I’m on the phone with a friend for too long. When we had just moved in together, he would constantly tap me on the shoulder, pointing to his watch. Or he would say, why don’t you just go over and have coffee with her. He can’t understand how someone could chat forever on the phone. You’re probably more like him.”

Zara took a spoonful of soup.

“Well, I don’t mind having long and interesting conversations,” she said, “but not when I’m ringing from someone else’s phone. And I don’t like talking to someone through a machine. I prefer seeing the other person’s face.”

The soup was too bland for her liking, but the steam and flavour of the lemons had a refreshing effect.

“Delicious,” she said, when Rose brought out the beer and sat down.

In some strange way, life *was* delicious at that moment. The combination of lemons, beer, Rose and the two Norwegians was soothing.

As her three new friends began to talk about tax laws in Australia, her mind drifted off along with the hot sticky air in the pub. Lines of conversation glided past her from all directions. If she collected all those lines, she would end up with a poem about life in an outback pub, filled with a diverse range of voices criss-crossing, each drawing a slightly different picture of the place, each contributing to an understanding of what made this place have meaning and roots – each in fact contributing to the concept of home.

*HER WISH TO BELONG, ihr Wunsch to merge with the dry ochre land and zu gebären, was Teil sein wollte. Sie legte sich auf dem harten Boden nieder, looking into the sky. Through the foliage of the gum trees, konnte sie einige blaue Flecken sehen.*

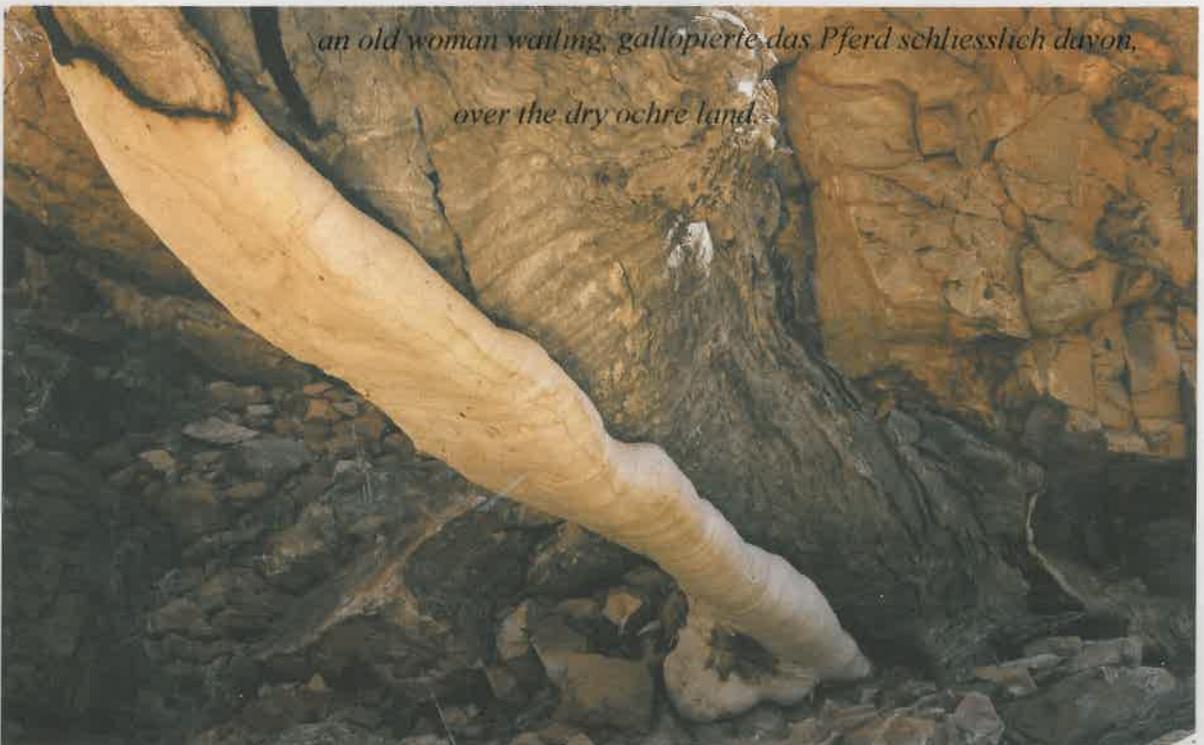
*The snakes began to slither over her soft thighs as if to warn her that she would always only see the same blue spots, und nie den ganzen blauen Himmel, wenn sie verharrte, because to pause was poisonous.*

*Bewegung would keep her moving and movement would keep her heart alive. Und die Seele könnte wiedergeboren werden, if she let her soul kiss the mud that appeared after months of rain.*

*She pulled herself up and stood mit dem Bewusstsein einer Veränderung. She stroked the horse on the brow and whispered to it gently, sounds of comfort, so wie sie mit einem Baby sprechen würde; the baby she was hesitant to let grow inside her.*

*Sie gab dem Pferd einen Klaps auf seine Seite, then pushed, until it moved, irritated at first, looking at her mit traurigen Augen. Wiehernd, reminding her of*

*an old woman wailing, gallopierte das Pferd schliesslich davon, over the dry ochre land.*



## CHAPTER VIII

ZARA WAS SURPRISED to see Doug sitting outside the caravan with Jack, both in shorts and topless. Judging by the number of empty bottles lying around, they'd had a few stubbies of beer already. Zara had never seen Doug drink such quantities before.

She stopped a short distance from them and watched for a while. Jack was mumbling. The string of words coming over his lips weren't coherent enough for Zara to work out what he was saying. Doug looked sombre and gloomy in the light spilling out through the open door of the caravan. He was staring at the ground. Occasionally, Jack's hands would fly up in the air and spill some beer.

Zara didn't know how to interrupt them – this male bonding. And she didn't want to be a spoilsport. Yet, she could hardly keep her eyes open and all she wanted was to go to bed. When she finally went up to them, they didn't seem to notice.

“Warm night tonight, isn't it?” she said in a casual tone, wondering at the same time if Doug had told Jack about the incident on the road. Perhaps under the influence of alcohol he had become talkative.

“Ya know, love,” Jack said, not looking at her, “we live differently out here. Can't compare it to the city, not with the dust we get. I like it here, ya know, me mates, they all live down south or up north, miles away from me. Some are close. It's like a planet on its own out here. I told your man not to worry, there's not enough room to worry. Not out

here. You get up with the sun, after only a few hours sleep.” He spilled some beer again. “This road, it’s not a holiday. It’s a highway. What ya expect? All ya worry about is the fuel ya need to get from A to B. What ya expect?” He now looked at Zara with watery eyes.

Zara shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t know.”

“Not much, I tell ya. Not much, but a great deal at the same time. This road is all we have, it’s our bloodline. Without it we’d be dead. Dead, ya know. Without it, you two wouldn’t be here now. He worries too much. Just follow it, enjoy the ride. That’s all. Tell me a bit of a story when you come back, anything. Don’t take it so seriously.” A splash of beer landed on Zara’s left foot. “Oops! Sorry, love!”

Zara had taken her shoes off, ready to go inside.

“We all better have some sleep now,” she said. “Rose needs your help at the bar, Jack. You better go and check, something not working properly.”

Jack got up from his folding chair. “Old Rosie, still can’t be without her man for more than a couple of hours. Proud woman, but still needs her man like in the old days. Ain’t that love, ya tell me!”

The big smile across his face made Zara feel ashamed about lying to him. He had the nature of a big cuddly teddy bear, even the alcohol couldn’t hide that. Every woman like Rose would invite a man like him into her life. How did Rose survive out here, in such a harsh climate?

She watched Jack shuffle off towards the roadhouse, calling after him, “Good night, Jack!”

Without looking back, he waved his hand. “Get ya man into bed!” he yelled from a distance.

Zara had to smile.

The exhaustion and the second beer she'd had earlier began to work on her mind like codeine. She suddenly felt tipsy. She looked at Doug, who was sitting in a crouched position, and started to giggle. She stood on the stairs of the caravan, with a shoe in each hand and beer on her left foot, giggling into the night.

Her titters disengaged Doug, who looked at her surprised.

"What's so funny?" he mumbled. "Where's Jack?"

Zara replied by falling into a fit of genuine laughter.

"Zara, everything okay?" He dropped the bottle onto the ground, stood up, folded the chairs and leant them against the caravan. "I need to go to the loo, back in a minute." He walked off, with his hands in the pockets of his shorts.

Still chuckling, Zara looked quizzically at his retreating back, wondering why he always needed to run off.

When he came back, Zara was still sitting on the stairs, giggling and humming.

The whole scene was blurred, and Doug felt as if he was watching it all through foggy glass. He closed his eyes, opened them again, but the fog was still there.

"I think we should go to sleep," he said, trying to squeeze through between the caravan wall and Zara's heaving body. "Are you going to sit here all night giggling?"

The light inside blinded him and the whole caravan seemed to spin. A sick feeling rose in his stomach. Zara's giggles became tunes played on a triangle echoing in his head, a sharp, metallic noise. He remembered the Christmas carols they used to sing at home when he was a child, his mother ringing Christmas bells close to his ears; bells that hurt, made him run away and cry.

He got back outside just in time to throw up. It seemed like he was not only vomiting beer onto Australian outback soil, but also releasing the demon in his head, Zara's giggles

and his mother's Christmas bells, as if to say he was no longer willing to carry disturbing sounds and images within him.

Doug's vomiting stopped Zara's laughter immediately. She stood up, slightly alarmed, not knowing what to do. She watched, until Doug stopped retching.

"I'll get you some water," she finally managed to say and rushed over to the car.

Doug drank half the bottle in one go. "You better go to sleep," he said, and burped. Then he walked off again towards the toilet block. This time, he held himself much more upright.

Zara, still delirious, slipped out of her clothes and lay down on the single bed. She pulled the blue sheet over her body and fell asleep before Doug returned.

## CHAPTER IX

A MOTORCYCLE ENGINE started up in the distance. Voices drifted across from the roadhouse, gravel crunching under car tyres and people's feet, while Doug's snoring added rhythm to the sound palette of a busy morning. The light filtering through the blue curtains cast an azure tinge over the inside of the caravan. Zara could feel the heat penetrate her skin. Slowly, she drew back the sheet, remembering the dream she had been woken from:

*Wandering among rocks in a desert, rocks of many colours, the blue ones fascinated her most. She was drawn to them like metal to a magnet, the most beautiful a deep blue marine. Somehow it sucked her in to it, then instantly its colour transformed into a pale icy turquoise, in which crystals floated. Crystals with human shapes and the faces of friends. Friends from the old country, the place that had become a thin fabric of memories. Friends, who were no longer lived realities with living voices, no longer part of her life, just crystallised entities. Sadness overcame her, an urge to go back and breathe again with her past.*

Zara pondered the impossible, to get dressed and drive off without Doug. To leave him with Jack and Rose, maybe pick him up later, on the way back – or not at all. See Charlie, say goodbye, then board a plane back to Switzerland. Simply leave a foolish five-year-old nightmare behind!

As if stirred by Zara's thoughts, Doug woke with a start. "What time is it?" he asked, sounding almost cheerful.

"Twenty past nine. We better get going." Zara climbed out of bed and covered her breasts with her hands. "I told Charlie we'd get in at around two."

Doug caught a glimpse of Zara's nakedness as she pulled a beige top over her head. He never quite understood why she always covered her breasts when she was naked around him. Not after sex, but any other time. 'It's because I'm shy,' she once told him.

It was that kind of shyness that used to arouse him, make him want to gently remove her hands and kiss the soft beauty underneath. It seduced him, and Zara had no idea of the effect it had on him. He had never told her, had never told her that her hands over her breasts, or her hands held over her mouth when she tried to hide a smile, excited him.

But now the look of Zara's body suddenly left him cold and distant. The broken veins along her left thigh irritated him, he found them disturbing, ugly.

Zara slipped into a pair of washed-out denim shorts.

"Do you want to eat something before we leave?" she asked, snapping her suitcase closed. "I'm more or less ready. We also need to take the key back to the pub, and pay." She grabbed her suitcase and the water bottle. "Where are the car keys?"

The drumming in Doug's head had started again. Alarmed, he jumped out of bed. "I don't know. We might have left them in the car," he said, feeling trapped. Suddenly the caravan was like a hot tin box.

The picture of the apparition on the road flashed by. He jerked. Then he heard the clanking of thin metal: Zara had found the keys. He dressed quickly, checked if they had left anything behind, grabbed his bag and locked the door to the boiling caravan behind him.

“I’ll check the car first and then go to the bathroom,” he said and handed the caravan key to Zara, who was already sitting in the driver’s seat. “You take the key back, and I’ll meet you outside the restaurant. I’ll drive.”

Zara noticed sweat forming wet patches on Doug’s white T-shirt. He never used to perspire that much. She could only put it down to the amount of alcohol he had drunk the night before.

“I think it’d be better if I drove first and you had some more rest,” she said, getting out of the car.

“I’ll be fine,” snapped Doug, opening the bonnet of the car. “Just take the key back.”

Zara hesitated, catching a thought before it vanished. Her stomach started to overturn. He wouldn’t dare, would he? She realised how little she really knew him. She had always trusted him, had always simply assumed that he would never do something like – drive off and leave her stranded. And yet, had not the same notion crossed her own mind less than an hour earlier?

She studied him as he bent over the engine and wiped different parts with a piece of cloth, nervously. Was that why he was perspiring so much, planning to drive back without her? Leave her behind?

“Would you like me to order you a coffee,” she asked cautiously.

He didn’t reply. Instead he pulled the oil-stick out of the engine and wiped it, stuck it back in, and pulled it out again, his hands shaking lightly.

Zara’s feeling of alarm slowly began to give way to a feeling of relief. Why not, she thought. The idea of him leaving without her all of a sudden appealed to her. She was tired of tiptoeing around this man who, without warning, had started acting strangely, as if he barely knew her.

“I’ll meet you outside the roadhouse then,” she said. She grabbed her wallet and headed off.

She was contemplating what it would be like to stay with Rose for a while and not to face Charlie straight away. Helping Rose in the restaurant, meeting people from all over the world, enjoying a different life-style for a few days, even if just to find out what it was like to live in the middle of nowhere. And eventually, she would take a bus up to Alice Springs, if there was such a thing as a bus coming through. Or Charlie might want to drive down and pick her up.

She could no longer comprehend why she had bothered asking Doug to do this trip with her. He never seemed to be enthusiastic about it. It was she who had planned everything, trying to persuade him that he needed a break, too. What was she thinking? That he would enjoy it? That staggering around in the outback would be interesting to him? He was even more of a city-dweller than her.

Doug was still bent over the engine, making sure not to miss anything that needed fixing or filling up. There was hardly any water left, the heat killing every trickle of moisture. Red dust everywhere, sneaking in through the tiniest opening. That apparition haunted him, whatever it was – a she or a he? An old face? Maybe a child? What if it came back again? A new air filter would be due after this trip. Those flies! Their mad buzzing only intensified the drumming in his head. They were everywhere. One attacked his nostrils, and trying to swipe it away, he hit his head against the bonnet latch.

“Fuck!” he yelled out, rubbing his scalp and kicking one of the tyres with his foot. He grabbed the half-empty water bottle from the back seat and filled it at a tap close by.

Rose was cleaning tables as Zara entered the roadhouse. She looked up when the door squeaked open.

“Hi there, you’re awfully late,” she said. “I thought you’d left without saying goodbye.”

“And without paying? We wouldn’t do that to you,” Zara replied in a good mood. “I think Doug and I needed a bit of extra sleep.”

Rose straightened her back, rolling her shoulders. “This work’s going to kill me. As much as I love this job, it’s the worst I could’ve chosen as a career change. Being on my legs all day is not what my doctor advised me to do after the accident. But one needs to do something, and Jack managed to charm me into it.” She started moving little pots of plastic flowers back onto the tables.

“What accident?” Zara asked, assisting Rose with the setting up.

“Men! They gallop into your life, feed you with the most romantic promises and carry you away on horseback. Before you know it, you spend your days doing their work.”

Zara would have liked to know what happened, but respecting Rose’s avoidance of the subject, she steered the conversation in a different direction. “Doug might pop in quickly and say hello.”

Rose stopped and looked straight into Zara’s eyes. “Not that it’s any of my business.” She moved the cleaning cloth from one hand to the other. “But I can see a lot of sadness in you, a lot of pain. I’m not sure if your man knows how to read your heart, how to carry your dreams, if you know what I mean.”

Zara wasn’t prepared for this sudden switch to intimacy. She wavered, uncertain how to react, what to say. Rose hadn’t even met Doug, Jack must have told her about him. Confused, she put the key and a five-dollar note down on the table in front of them.

“I don’t need to know people for very long to see inside them,” Rose continued. “You remind me of myself, a few years ago. Too young to let myself go.” She paused. “Alice Springs is a good place for stories. When you get there, do yourself a favour, find

the dry riverbed, and go and lie down in it. Put together the story you wish to live. And –”  
She leant against one of the tables. “Forget about the camera for a while.”

Zara couldn’t cope with Rose’s directness. Two faces suddenly blended in her mind: Charlie’s and Rose’s. “It’s getting late, we have to get moving,” she said as calmly as she could. “Thanks for letting us have the caravan, it was nice meeting you.”

Rose looked at her with a maternal gaze. “Find your story, Zara.” She put her hands on Zara’s shoulders, shaking them warmly. “And don’t worry, I’m not mad. I just want to help, I know when I see a woman struggling with herself.” Then she let go.

“Say goodbye to Jack,” Zara said and tried to smile. She walked to the door, hoping that Doug was waiting for her.

“The riverbed!” Rose called after her. “Don’t forget the riverbed!”

## CHAPTER X

BACK IN THE CAR, with Doug at the wheel, Zara let Rose's words circle around in her mind. Had Rose perhaps only confirmed what she had sensed for a long time? That moving to a new country would never give her the freedom to be herself? But what freedom anyway? The freedom to drift, to run – to escape? To escape from her past, from reality, from responsibility – only to become less free? Hiding behind a camera – was that freedom? Recording scenes, situations, and emotions, without ever turning the lens onto herself? And Doug? What did she really want from him?

*I spy with my little eye something beginning with ... H. Home, horror, hallucination, horizon, Holden.*

How much longer would she be able to run, before she would trip and never get back up on her feet again?

*There was once a black Holden following the horizon, with two passengers stricken by horror on their journey towards Christ. One a believer, the other an atheist. The devil grabbed the believer and threw him into hallucination. The atheist was left with an ugly dream of her partner being snatched away from her, the devil playing a trick on him, creating a monster where there was only black bitumen. And as they kept driving along the road of evil, they could make out a dark line across their path in the distance ...*

Zara reached across and grabbed Doug's arm. "There's something on the road."

“I saw it.”

Doug tried to slow down, drawing closer to the line; it moved. Doug swerved. Then, as if stung by a bee, he suddenly accelerated just as he recognised what it was: a dark brown snake. A thump, then the tyres moved evenly again on the rough surface. Zara looked back, hoping the snake was still alive. All she could make out was a flat dark line fading into the distance.

“I think we killed it,” she said.

Doug had run over it, by accident. And by accident he had aimed at it because he wasn't able to cope with yet another enemy. Shoot before it shoots you. It was a matter of trust, but fear was often stronger. The second time you were prepared, always. Zara couldn't really blame Doug, he was at war with some evil.

“It was a deadly one. It might have killed someone,” he gave as a weak justification.

Not having the strength to say anything in reply, Zara swallowed the tragedy of the snake as another incident that was pulling them apart, aware that some people cover up their fears with irrational and illogical statements when they are at war.

She felt the familiar despair of living on the edge of society. That state after leaving and before arriving. That state of walking for hours with only yourself as company. Of coming back to an empty little flat and listening to your own words bouncing off the walls. Of staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring. Of sleeping without dreams and waking to your own solitude in the morning. Of watching people interact with each other and wondering if you will ever belong. Of looking at the bits and pieces of yourself that need to be rearranged to create something new.

Certain things have to die in order for new things to be born.

Zurich's net of blue trams had to make room for the single Glenelg tram that rattles along its track to Victoria Square in downtown Adelaide. Young Adelaide can't compare with

Zurich's old history, its hundreds of antique furniture shops, its cobblestone lanes winding through the old town, its lake, its Bahnhofstrasse with all the boutiques, frequented mostly by the many tourists, its short cable car taking them up a little hill to the university.

Zurich main station, rebuilt several years before Zara left, shows off as an entrance to a glorious culture with its high glass roof and ever-changing art objects hanging down from it. From Zurich main station one can catch trains to every major city in Europe. Zurich is the home of the Swiss stock market and the National bank. Zurich is surrounded by hills, the home of the upper ten thousands who look down on the city, claiming they created it.

Adelaide has its hills, too. They are the home of the winter people. In the south, there are the beaches for those who can't live without the attraction of the ocean; they're the summer people. In between hills and beaches, lies the city in its all-season slumber. Adelaide has never wanted to be more than it is: a large country town.

Adelaide, Zara was told many times, is the city no person with a right mind would migrate to. Adelaide doesn't create any turbulence in the international picture, it has never managed to become grand, even though in the past it hosted the Formula 1 Grand Prix until a bigger city took it from them. When Sydney hosted the Olympic Games, Adelaide was pushed into the background even more. And if terrorists ever attacked Australia, Adelaide would not be on their map because somewhere along the line someone forgot to pull the city back on the edge of the world. Adelaide is the Festival State. The National Bank and the Stock Market are placed elsewhere in the country.

Adelaide is the city you chose if you want to live quietly for a while, without any of the international dramas disturbing you. A gathering place for those who don't quite know how to catch up with the rest of the world.

Adelaide is a place for dope smokers.

Zurich at some stage ranked highest on the list of European cities dealing with drug addicts. The city cleaned up its international picture several years ago, by 'methodically' scrubbing the Plattspitz, a park situated behind the main station and the Swiss national museum – dealing place for drugs. These days one can walk through the park enjoying the peace and tranquillity of a pettily and picturesquely busy Swiss city without being disturbed by any of 'them'. The scene has moved north.

Then there is the Niederdorf, with a more alternative scene of street cafés, jazz bars and street performers. People go there in the evenings and on weekends to get the hang of what it means to be a citizen in a place swelling with the hypocrisy of a puffed-up arts scene.

Rundle Street in Adelaide with its pubs and cafés, and its extension, Hindley Street, create a similar flavour of alternative-art-exotism, providing the city with a Friday and Saturday night Mecca, adorned by a parade of cars, each showing off the latest fashion of muffler sound systems, driving up and down the street all night, app(e)al(l)ing to the sidewalk cruisers.

Zurich is a place where most of the renowned art galleries of Switzerland are located. Only, art hasn't been made in that city since the times of Dada. People talk a lot in Zurich, about the arts. Artists, more interested in creating than talking, have to go abroad if they want to be successful, and they only come back to die.

Adelaide hosts the Festival, the Fringe, Writers' Week and WOMAD: the big events of art showcasing, when the city comes alive. In between, artists either create silently, or leave the city to create elsewhere, only to come back when talked into participating in one of the big four. Any other time, Adelaide is renowned for its nonchalant 'Sorry-we're-closing-early-today'-attitude, which in short means, 'Sorry, we can't be bothered'.

Zurich is renowned for its businesses being run with the precision of Swiss clocks, meaning that coffee-machines are not switched off and vacuum cleaners not manoeuvred in between and around customers' legs till one minute after closing time. And if customers linger beyond closing-time, they will eventually and politely be taken to the door with 'Wir müssen leider schliessen,' roughly translated as, 'We would like to stay open longer, but the law won't allow us to,' meaning, 'There's a lot of cleaning to be done before we eventually get home, so will you please ...'

Adelaide cares for no one in particular.

Zurich at least pretends to care.

## CHAPTER XI

IT WAS WELL PAST THREE O'CLOCK when they arrived on the periphery of Alice Springs, the road winding along the Todd river, through an opening between two rocky foothills of the MacDonell Ranges – the Gap. They headed for the town centre, past the Alice Springs hospital and several hotels and motels. There was not much traffic on the road, only a few slowly moving cars.

Zara pulled out the little map Charlie had drawn for them, guiding Doug into Stott Terrace and then across the river, which in its dryness looked abandoned and forgotten. A tourist in hiking sandals, who carried a huge backpack, stood on the bridge and gazed down into a dry riverbed. Rose's dry riverbed, Zara thought.

"Turn left at the next roundabout," she said. "Then take the first right."

She was suddenly anxious. They were getting close to Charlie's, what would she tell her? Zara hadn't seen Charlie for more than two years, and this visit was meant to be a special one, a joyful one. And now she and Doug would arrive subdued, absent-minded, estranged from each other. She asked Doug to pull over.

"Are we lost?" Doug blinked nervously.

What a question! Zara's head was aching. Yes, lost for answers, can't you see?

"I'll tell Charlie you haven't been feeling well," she said as calmly as she could.

"Charlie's not the sort of person who asks questions."

She didn't think it was necessary to tell Doug that Charlie was exactly the opposite. It might do him good to be faced with an upfront personality like hers. Charlie might get him to talk.

"Perhaps I should go to a hotel," Doug said, "and leave you two alone."

Zara swallowed hard. "What do you mean? I thought we came here together. We may as well head back to Adelaide. And what am I meant to tell Charlie?"

Turning in her seat, she faced Doug, no longer able to control her anger.

"We were supposed to have a good time together up here," she yelled, "a break from work, not from each other! And all you're talking about now is going to a hotel, on your own! I don't even know what the hell's going on!"

Doug unfastened his seat belt and opened the door.

"And running away from conflict again, yes?" Zara grabbed him by the arm, but he snapped out of her grip.

"I don't need this right now!" he replied through clenched teeth, then strode off.

Zara watched him in a trance, too exhausted to call him back, too exhausted even to cry. A hot breeze entered the car through the open door. Motionless, she sat in the passenger seat and stared at the insects smeared all over the windscreen, counting them. Numbers filled her mind, helped her to space out. Somewhere deep down she knew she had to make sure her fuses didn't blow. Somehow they would get through this, they'd had worse arguments before. He wouldn't just run off, he would at least come back for his car.

So absorbed was she in her thoughts that it took her a while to notice the wet tongue licking her hand.

"Jesus!" she yelled out, jumping in her seat.

The Blue Heeler looked glad to finally get some attention. To show his excitement, he put his front paws on Zara's right shoulder and was about to lick her face, when both dog and human heard a voice whistle and call out.

"Sam, 'ey, come 'ere! Stupid dog!"

The dog got down and jumped out of the car, barking. Zara's heart was pounding.

"Shit, shit!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry, missus, you okay?"

Zara was about to jump a second time, but her body didn't have any energy left to perform the act, so all she managed to do was utter a sound of surprise at the dark face staring into the car from the driver's side. She didn't know for a minute what scared her more, the colour of the skin or the dark frizzy hair. She finally regained her senses and, realising the silliness of her fear, she blushed.

"You okay? 'ad an accident?" The man sounded slightly bored now.

"No – er – I'm fine. I'm waiting for my partner." Sam, the dog, tried to get back into the car.

"'ey! Sit down!" The man pulled at the dog's collar. "Good dog that one, don't 'urt'n anyone, just wants attention, ya know." He paused. "From Adelaide, eh?" But he didn't wait for a reply. "I been to Adelaide, too many cars and not enough black fellas. I live in that 'ouse there."

He pointed across the street to a run down weatherboard house with windows that had no curtains or blinds. An old car sat in the front yard, a ripped sofa pushed against it. The letterbox lay on the ground, the door stood open.

A woman came out of the house and shuffled to the only tree in the yard. When she saw the man, she waved and shouted something in a language Zara didn't understand.

"Comin', comin'!" the man shouted back. The dog barked again. "'ey, shut up!"

The woman was wearing a blue dress with a white floral design and her hair was frizzy, like the man's. She wasn't wearing any shoes, and neither was he, as Zara now noticed.

"That my woman", he said. "Her name's Kate. I'm Ben. You?"

"Zara. Nice to meet you."

"Russian?"

Zara had to smile. "It's the name of a city in Croatia, in Eastern Europe. My parents met there and --"

"So you from over there, Europe mob, eh?"

Zara nodded.

"Your man, where 'e gone?" Ben looked up and down the street. "I better go now."

Zara watched him walk over to his house and follow his woman inside. Sam leaped onto the sofa, sniffing. With a bone between his teeth he hopped off again and lay down under the tree, ripping at the bone.

A police car suddenly blocked Zara's view. It stopped a few metres further down the street. A policeman got out and came towards her. The sight of the gun on his hip made her uncomfortable. She could feel the heat eating her up. Like Ben before, the policeman looked into the car.

"Everything okay, M'am?"

Zara sat up straight. "Yes, thank you. I'm just waiting for my partner. He's gone across to a friend's house, should be back any minute."

"Come all the way from Victoria?" He scanned the car.

"No, from Adelaide. But my partner's from Melbourne, it's his car."

The policeman nodded.

"This here is not the safest place on the map," he said. "If you know what I mean?"

Zara could only guess, but wasn't in the mood for any discussion.

"Sure," she said.

"On holiday?"

"Yes, visiting a friend who lives here."

"Better lock the car while you're waiting." He closed the door and Zara nodded through the windscreen. She had no intention of locking the car.

After the police car had driven off, she saw Doug strolling down the street, his face reasonably calm again. She sighed, and looking across to Ben's house, saw Kate standing behind the window, watching.

## CHAPTER XII

CHARLIE'S STREET LED UP A HILL and ended in gravel. Her house was set at a distance from the neighbouring houses further down the street and was open to bushland. They stopped the car in what looked like the driveway, and Zara got out.

The architecture of the house was unusual, something Zara had not seen anywhere in Australia before. The most prominent feature was a vast number of large louvre windows, almost touching the ground – grey metallic adjustable louvres. The rest of the house was built out of dark timber and left unpainted.

Zara was used to timber houses, they were very common in the mountain areas in Switzerland, but they usually were square boxes that had two storeys, tiny windows with brightly painted shutters, peaked and shingled roofs, one or two balconies on the second floor, and geraniums in pots hanging from them. The famous chalets.

Charlie's house, however, was long and rectangular, had a rounded wing-like iron roof overhanging the facades and three long thin iron chimneys, which gave the whole structure an impression of a steamer's upper deck protruding from the ground.

No fences isolated the house from its surroundings, which delighted Zara. On their way in, she had noticed that in this town most houses were unfenced, unlike in the big cities. Although she grew up with people who occasionally enclosed their houses with hedges and picket fences, nothing had stunned her as much as the sight of a land cut up

into neat squares, fenced off against each other, when she arrived in Australia, the country of presumed open space. Each house she had been invited to or had visited was caught either inside weathered corrugated iron sheets, washed out brick walls or the slightly more natural looking brush fences. Zara never managed to fully understand this national phenomenon, which she could only relate to the British need to mark their territory, their my-home-is-my-castle-theory, which must have sprung from a kind of phobia at being lost in the vastness of the Australian landscape.

Charlie's house did justice to Zara's own philosophy, that of humans adapting their buildings to the land that surrounded them, of letting the natural habitat play with the artificial scheme of architecture.

Two eucalyptus trees in the front yard gave some sense of where the block of land started and ended. The rest was bare, red soil, except for two narrow paved paths, one that led to the entrance on the left side of the house, the other ending to the right of the house, in front of a garage, where they had parked their car.

After recovering from the visual surprise, Zara realised that their arrival had gone unnoticed. She had expected Charlie to run out and meet them, but no one appeared.

She walked up to the entrance and looked for a doorbell. Instead of a bell, she found a note crammed in between door and doorframe. *Had to do a few things in town before shops close. Didn't know when you'd come in. Make yourselves comfortable in the garden at the back. Charlie.*

What time was it? Charlie had probably been waiting, sick with worry. But Zara was relieved at the prospect of having some more time before facing her.

She walked back to the car, slowly, no longer able to drag her body along any line of excitement.

“Charlie’s out,” she said into the car, where Doug sat with his head against the headrest. The clock showed 3.55. “She wants us to wait at the back of the house.”

Charlie’s garden was a baffling contrast to the layout of the front yard. An oasis challenging the desert, as if the owner had not been able to cope with the dryness and harshness surrounding her. Large and lush, the garden reminded Zara of a Queensland rainforest. She frowned, but couldn’t help being thrilled with the abundance of green that presented itself to her. She felt tricked, but also seduced. This place threw back at her a perfect reflection of her own state of mind: soil that was cracked on one side and soaked on the other.

Doug put the luggage down on the patio.

“Here’s another note,” he said, cutting short two chirping lorikeets. *Help yourselves to drinks from the fridge.* He looked around and noticed the little bar fridge next to the air-conditioning unit. “Would you like a drink?”

But Zara was already strolling towards a little Japanese water feature. The water, gently trickling from a bamboo flute, relaxed her at once. She sat down on a little wooden bench next to it. Then a hammock, strung up between two palm trees, caught her attention. She couldn’t resist.

As she climbed into the rocking bed, she looked across to Doug, who lingered with two beers in his hands. “There’s also lemonade and orange juice,” she heard him call. She kept looking at him from inside the hammock. He was moving up and down, up and down. Her partner: a strange, comic figure. What was he doing here? She saw him shrug his shoulders, put one beer back into the fridge and sit down on a bench pushed against the back wall.

Charlie's oasis soon enclosed them like a mother who protected her children from a raging storm. Each drifted off into worlds of their own.



*FINALLY ALLEINE, nur sie und herself. Alone surrounded by wind und heisse Luft, die knisterte, when she breathed it in.*

*She looked down her naked body. Die Schlangen hatten Markierungen hinterlassen, teeth marks on the right side of her chest, underneath her breast; Zeichen ungewollter Sturheit. She touched the raised flesh and could feel the hissing, stinging in her ovaries. Sie wollte nicht den Glauben verlieren an die Kraft ihrer eigenen Existenz. To give birth to someone else's dreams would mean to never understand her feet on any ground.*

*Sie beugte sich zum Boden nieder and picked up a handful of grainy grey soil to rub the bites. Das Brennen in den Eierstöcken liess nach and a fresh feeling of knowing welled up inside her, travelling up along the spine until it rested on the bone between her eyes. Die Bilder, die dort entstanden führten sie weg von den gum trees and the creek, to a place filled with rocks. Felsen in einer Wüste, die keine war.*

## CHAPTER XIII

“HEY GUYS, I’M BACK!” Charlie called out from the front yard as soon as she saw their car. She dropped her shopping bags by the front door and hurried to the back of the house. “Hey, hey,” she called again, “no hide-and-seek!”

She saw Doug first, lying on the bench, snoring. Two empty beer bottles on the ground. His black knee-length shorts revealed well-shaped, olive-skinned legs, and his straight dark hair framed a face with strong Mediterranean features. So that was finally him. Not how she had expected to meet Zara’s man, but handsome, very handsome, she had to admit.

It took her a while to spot Zara in the hammock. She walked over to her and was about to call her name when she stopped herself. She tiptoed the last few inches, to steal an unwitnessed look at this perfectly proportioned creature who appeared like an angel fallen through the palm leaves into her garden. Charlie was overwhelmed by her still strong feelings for Zara. Escaping to Alice Springs had done nothing to still her desire for this woman.

Feeling a tingling sensation along her spine, Charlie turned round and her eyes met Doug’s. She felt caught out. Quickly, she walked back to the house, smiling in his direction.

“Hi there,” she greeted him in her chirpy voice. “I had to grin when I came home and saw the two of you asleep. I decided not to wake Zara. You must be Doug, obviously!” She laughed. “I’ve heard so much about you, only good things, mind you!” The still half-asleep man, who had just got himself into a perpendicular position, received a hug that nearly threw him back onto the bench.

“Sorry we came in late,” he said, after freeing himself from Charlie’s embrace. “We slightly miscalculated our time.” He hadn’t expected to be the one doing the introduction.

“Oh, that’s quite okay! It’s me who has to apologise for not being here when you arrived. I must admit I got a bit worried, so I had to distract myself. I needed some more things from the shops anyway, I hope you didn’t mind.” She moved a pot plant on the ground next to the back door and picked up a key from underneath. “I never take my house key with me, in case I lose it.” She looked at the suitcase and the travel bag. “Is that all the luggage you have?”

“Apart from two pairs of shoes in the car, this is it.”

“You two are travelling light! I’ll show you your room. Bring everything in if you like.”

Doug followed Charlie inside. “Nice house you have,” he said, the calming effect of the beer wearing off.

“Thanks, it is quite special. I like it here.” Charlie glanced at Doug, detecting the air of a trapped animal in him. Maybe things weren’t going as well between the two of them as Zara had made out. She blushed.

By the time she had adjusted the shutters in the guest room to let some light in, her face showed her natural skin tone again. Doug put the luggage down on the floor.

“Nice,” he said, inspecting. The walls were blue; a red sofa bed had been folded out with fresh sheets on it. The room had an ensuite bathroom that appealed to him.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll put my shopping away and hopefully Zara will wake up soon so we can have dinner. It’s nearly six, you two must be starving. Did you get lunch on the way?”

“I had a sandwich, but I don’t think Zara had a lot. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind something more substantial in a little while.”

The awkwardness between them grew with every word. Over-politeness and stiff formality lingered in the air, irritating Charlie.

“We’ll have pasta and salad for dinner,” she said, eager to get out of the room. “If you need anything, let me know.”

Before Doug could say anything, Charlie closed the door behind her, and he was alone.

He couldn’t help feeling out of place, wondering again why he had agreed to travel this far. He fought against floating, losing himself in nothingness. Nothingness made people dependent, fearful, and paranoid.

He stretched himself out on the bed and, lying on his back with his hands behind his head, looked at the ceiling. Everything seemed back to front, upside down, strung up at the wrong end. Why would anyone paint a room blue to start with? He had never liked blue, especially the lighter tones. Black was his favourite colour. He would have been excited by white walls and a black sofa, or to add a more eccentric touch, the other way round, black walls and a white sofa.

His walls in Melbourne were all white, white office walls. He virtually lived in his office. The one room studio he rented close to the university was filled up with his bed. That was all his flat had to offer: a place to sleep.

Breathing in deeply, he let the weight of his exhausted body take charge of his mind until he finally drifted off into a restless sleep.

## CHAPTER XIV

IN THE HAMMOCK, ZARA WOKE from the depths of a dream that had swallowed her like the stillness of a vast ocean. Slowly, the ocean-blue changed into green foliage, moving lightly in the evening breeze. With the change of colour came a change of emotions. A heavy force pulled her towards the ground, pressing the sum of her weight against the fine net of the hammock. She kept staring into the green roof above her, unable to lift her body out of the rocking bed. When the sounds of birds finally reached her ears, she turned to her side, and nearly fell out.

Charlie's garden, Charlie's territory, Charlie's presence – it all suddenly closed in on her with the intensity of a nostalgia stuck to images from her homeland. No, she didn't want to be tugged by the sleeves into any past reminiscences, she simply wanted to exist in the only moment worth living: now.

A galah, screeching like a human gone insane, steered its clumsiness towards her and made her tuck her head in. She could feel the bird's wings brush against her hair. The hammock was rocking heavily now, and she felt motion sick. She finally managed to climb out mid-air, cursing the bird's stupidity. When her feet touched the ground, her knees gave way. She had to hold on to one of the trees.

For a moment, she mistook Charlie's voice for another galah's call of attack. But when she heard her name, she looked up. Charlie walked towards her, dressed in a white

sleeveless top and a bright orange wrap-around skirt that reached down to her ankles. Her feet were bare, her long curly red hair like Medusa's snakes on fire.

"Zara, darling, I still can't believe you're real, you're here! No longer just your voice on the phone! You looked gorgeous in your sleep, and so gorgeous now! Come, let me hug you!" She pressed Zara against her, knocking all air out of her.

"Charlie!" Zara tried to catch her breath, disentangling from her friend's firm hug. "Don't suffocate me before I've had a chance to say hi!"

Charlie laughed. "I'm sorry, I forgot how fragile you are." She kissed Zara on the forehead, giving her friend a chance to hug her softly in return.

"Yeah, very fragile. You've always been the stronger one of us."

"On the outside perhaps." Charlie laughed again, embarrassed about her roughness. "Did you have a good nap out here? I didn't want to wake you."

"That drive got to me more than I thought," Zara replied. "I feel better now. Still a bit dizzy, though. Where's Doug?"

"He's inside, waiting for you to wake up. I showed him the room. Nice guy, a bit stiff though, if you don't mind me saying ..." Charlie's eyes turned into burning slits. The fox was back.

Zara had not yet found a strategy to deal with that look – a mix of suspicion, accusation, and worry.

"Now, are you going to show me our room, too?" She took Charlie's hand. "Or, are you trying to tell me that the hammock is going to be my bed for the time I'm here? I must admit, I expect slightly better from someone who's supposed to be my best friend." She looked at Charlie mockingly and by doing so not only slapped the fox across its mouth, but also managed to conceal the comfort that the thought of sleeping out here in the garden

would give her. She would have gladly exchanged Doug for those stupid galahs and have the hammock as her refuge.

“Well, well, what kind of friend do you think I am?” The fox had given in. “But don’t laugh, sometimes a hammock is better than what people offer you as their guest bed. Here you’ve got a choice: hammock, sofa bed, the bath tub, or – my bed.”

Zara didn’t notice Charlie’s blushing. So much caught up in her own worries, of facing Doug in front of Charlie, she felt close to fainting. More than ever she needed her friend’s roughness to shake her back into reality. More than ever she welcomed Charlie’s arm around her waist. It gave her the support of a walking stick.

Suddenly she pulled Charlie closer and started laughing, pinching Charlie’s arm. “Isn’t the world beautiful, and your garden!” Charlie pinched her back, chuckling.

“A kind of paradise, in the desert of a living hell!” Zara suddenly exclaimed. “Out there people whinge and whinge and pull you down, down, down, making you believe there’s nothing good around you!” She staggered along, pulling Charlie in different directions.

“Instead of being grateful to be alive and healthy,” she continued, “instead of appreciating something like this, something beautiful, humans go out fighting wars with everyone and everything! We fight and fight until we drop dead. For what?” Zara stood still, holding on to Charlie, shaking. “Why live? Why, if all we ever do is trying to pick up shattered pieces, if things fall apart constantly without us understanding why – fall apart just like that!”

Zara had raised her voice so much that Charlie was forced to correct her first impression of this being a fit of passion. She had never seen her friend work herself up into such a state. She was stunned and at a loss for words. Had she gone insane?

Suddenly Zara shouted, "Come on, let's dance!" and took Charlie by the hands, whirling her around.

"Zara, stop this, you're making me dizzy!" Charlie didn't know whether she should be scared or angry. "Zara, that's enough!" Anger finally won. "For heaven's sake, you're hurting me!" She grabbed Zara by her shoulders and shook her until Zara broke down. Then she gently pulled her towards her, put her arms around her and patted her back with that awkward affectionate roughness that so much belonged to their friendship. "I'm sorry, you scared me, I had to stop you."

Doug stood at the door, watching. Loud voices had woken him from a dream in which he was fighting a demon that was snatching at his clothes, howling and roaring. It took him a while to realise the voices were real. Alarmed, he ran out of the room to check what was going on and saw the two women huddled together, one crying and the other calming.

They formed a unity, a ring of intimacy, and he stood outside of it. There was no urge in him to break the circle, to get close. Quite the contrary, he felt the excitement and freedom of a voyeur who rejoices in watching an intimate act, without being made to leave, without being noticed.

He watched Charlie stroke Zara's hair, watched her hands rub Zara's back and kiss her cheeks, until Zara slowly gave in to the scent of female seduction. He then turned and walked back inside. The apparition on the road finally had a name: Charlie.

## CHAPTER XV

THE NIGHT WAS CALM, with the heat of the day still lingering over the town. Cicadas neared the end of their concert in Charlie's garden, while mosquitoes were still active, hunting for the sweetest blood they could find. The bush was a black veil. Every night the evening sun brought several kangaroos close to Charlie's house, and occasionally, rustling noises could be heard in the middle of the night. But only those who were not familiar with the grazing sounds of kangaroos would lie stiff with fear in their beds.

Charlie lay awake, gazing at a nearly full moon through the half-shut louvres of her bedroom window. It wasn't eleven yet, but Zara and Doug had wanted to go to sleep early.

She was trying to sort out her state of mind. Something about the two visitors worried her. Zara seemed somehow different to the woman she knew so well. There was an air of gloom, a tiredness of life about her that unsettled Charlie. A deep sadness in Zara's eyes. Those eyes that used to sparkle so bright that Charlie often joked about her friend swallowing the sun. That sparkle was no longer there.

But what unsettled her the most was the fact that Doug didn't seem to understand the complexity of Zara's spirit. The way he had presented himself over dinner – first indifferent, then, when she asked him about his work, suddenly talkative, acquiring a tone of arrogance – had shown her what sort of man he was.

“Why mathematics? What’s so fascinating about numbers?” she had enquired.

He had blinked nervously; the way people who wear contact lenses do.

“I’ve always been interested in the mysteries of numbers. Some people say that to begin with there was the word, but I’ve always believed that our world, the whole universe is built on numbers. Numbers are very powerful, and that makes mathematics a very powerful discipline. How else can I explain it?”

Charlie hadn’t been able to figure out whether he was simply tired of enunciating his passion to a stranger, or if it was all he would ever say to anyone.

“Well, in that case, are you saying that art, society, and nature are all built on numbers?”

“I believe they are, nature at least. Nature provides us with the laws of physics. Nature is mathematics. Art is interesting in the sense that it tries to imitate beauty. But beauty itself is built on numbers and physical laws. What we find beautiful is what comes closest to a quasi-perfect representation of nature. Art tries to copy nature.

“Every time I look at a piece of art, a painting, for instance, I’m interested in the laws hidden behind it. Take the artist rendering three dimensions, the law of perspective – all based on the laws of geometry. Or take abstract art and you’ll find lines, squares, circles, eclipses, et cetera – all geometrical shapes and forms. Take a single line, what is a line? Take a point, what is a point – the shortest line possible!

“This is what fascinates me, what intrigues me about art, the fact that it is based on and makes use of the laws of geometry.”

“What about Zara’s photographs, don’t you think they show something more than just the laws of nature, they show us something about the so called human condition, what is happening inside our minds, what makes us human, the struggles and conflicts, and all that?”

“Photographs are made up of a thousand dots, points, to start with. They throw back at us the laws of infinity, which is more structured than you may think. And so is chaos. I’m interested in chaos, how chaos happens, and how order can be restored.”

“Power, that seems to be the magic word for you then. You want power, the power of a god. You feel like you’re a god bringing order to chaos.”

“God was the greatest mathematician ever, if you like.” He had said it with a solemn tone of admiration, as though he was speaking of a real person that he admired. “God has enormous power, I’m interested in discovering the laws and equations that underlie such power. Take the power of lightning and thunder, for instance – extremely fascinating! The power of wind, the power of physics behind every single natural force.”

“So you’re not in the strict sense of the word a believer?”

“How could I not believe in God?”

“I meant in a spiritual sense. You don’t believe like, for instance, Christians do.”

Here he changed the subject, not because he didn’t know how to reply – she was sure of that – but because he had finished eating.

“This is a nice place for a barbecue, we could buy a few lamb chops and throw them on a barbie tomorrow night. I wouldn’t mind trying kangaroo.”

That was when she had lost her patience, too disturbed by such a man being a guest in her house, a man who substituted feelings for numbers. “And animals,” she said in a raised voice, “how do *they* figure in your great mathematical scheme of the world? Any chance they are governed by some laws, too? Any chance they are considered worthy not to be eaten, or are they simply there for the scientists to experiment with because they are just not clever enough to understand mathematics?”

Zara, who had been quiet all along, suddenly took over.

“Charlie is a vegetarian,” she said to Doug. “She hasn’t eaten meat for – how long?”

“That’s alright by me,” Doug interjected, “I don’t have a problem with vegetarians. Except I believe eating meat coincides with the scheme of things. Again, nature is governed by laws, and one of those laws is that the fittest survive. Animals themselves eat other animals. We’re just a species that happens to be fitter and more advanced than all the others. I don’t have a problem with that.”

She had by then stood up and started piling the plates. She couldn’t be bothered talking to this man any longer. “Equations and the Darwinian law of evolution obviously give you enough answers and pleasures to fill your life,” she finished off with.

“Yes, there’s something erotic about equations, the way you try to work them out. Numbers are beautiful and powerful, puzzling and challenging – like women, I suppose.” And he stood up, himself, casting a glance and a defiant smile at her, while politely assisting her with the dishes.

Doug, Charlie concluded, functioned according to a certain schedule, a net of laws and a certain scheme of success, not once questioning his approach to life. Zara was the opposite, or at least used to be. Dreams kept her alive and aloof, and she was far from running her life along the lines of practicality, far from organising her mind according to the clock. If there was any kind of scheme she followed, it was one of spontaneity and flexibility.

Broken spirit. If ever this meant anything to Charlie, it was now that she grasped the meaning of it in relation to the change she saw. The aggression that had come out of Zara in the afternoon was so unlike anything she had experienced before. Was it madness or simply despair? It scared her to see Zara like that – distant and lost – and it disturbed her deeply to no longer be able to get close to her, enter her mind and vibrate with her.

Zara was like a guitar out of tune, handled by someone who didn’t know how to play the beautiful instrument at his side. Someone not interested in making Zara’s body sing

with the rhythm of her soul. If anything, Doug was merely capable of causing a disharmony between the two parts of her. Charlie couldn't help asking the universe this one question: why, Zara, did you choose to let clumsy fingers take control of you?

The moon remained silent. It didn't have any answers for a woman who was obsessed by the idea that her friend was her creation. A woman who was in love, deeply in love and locked in the past. A woman who would have done anything to chisel her work of art back into shape.

## CHAPTER XVI

THE MORNING BROKE with a thick doona of clouds hanging in the sky and a whisper of eucalyptus leaves on the windows of Charlie's living room. A few crows skidded over the tin roof that crackled and moaned as it expanded with the rising temperature. Rosellas gathered for their morning hymn in the garden.

Down the street, a few houses away, a woman got out of bed and walked into the adjacent room to wake her child, an eight-year old girl called Sandy.

“Time to get up, sweetie.” She gave the girl a kiss on each of her eyes. “Can you hear the little silver bird? It's greeting you again.” She stroked the girl's forehead. “Auntie Charlie again today?”

Sandy sat up in her bed and cuddled up to her mother. “Mmm. You promised me a story.”

“Stories need their time so you remember them later. They're from a long time ago, and another place.”

“When will you take me there?”

“Auntie Joy will take you, soon.”

“I'm going to paint like her when I'm older. She'll teach me all the stories.”

“Hop up now, it's getting late. We'll talk about it later.”

When the phone rang, it took Charlie several moments to break free from her dreams. She reached across and picked up the receiver. "Hello," she said in a sleepy voice.

"Hey, good morning, did I wake you up?"

"Wanda, gee, what time is it?" Charlie prized her eyes open to glance at the clock.

"Usual time. Can I bring Sandy round in ten?" Wanda paused while Charlie yawned.

"I could leave her with my cousin, if I can find him, that fella always goes walkabout. "

"Don't be silly! You know how much I love her company. My friends are here now, Zara and her man, I told you, didn't I? They arrived yesterday and I'm tired from excitement. Do you want me to give her some breakfast?"

"No, don't worry, she's having toast and peanut butter right now. She'll probably hop back into bed with you, so don't get up just for her. Tell me, how are your visitors? Great to have a house full of people, isn't it? I miss my mob sometimes, still strange for me to be on my own."

"Don't whinge, darling, you've got your good old friend here." Charlie yawned again.

"You know you're welcome any time. Stay for dinner tonight, I'm sure Zara and Doug would love to meet you."

"Not tonight, I'm going to see my sister, Joy, you know. But if you like, drop in at work with them and we could have lunch together. I've got a two-hour break today. How's that?"

"I don't know what their plans are. They might just want to rest, they seemed pretty exhausted last night. But I'll see."

"Well, it's a long drive, done it myself a few times. You get used to it after a while. Anyway, I'm not telling you anything new here."

"I think they came all the way from Melbourne. Her man's from over there."

“Even more of a hike then, no wonder they’re done for the day!” Wanda paused.  
“But didn’t you tell me Zara was from Adelaide?”

“Well, yeah, she moved to Adelaide five years ago, and she’s been staying there since. She’s originally from Switzerland, I met her soon after she came out.”

“That’s right. I got this girl working with me at the moment, she’s Swiss, too, I believe. Or Swedish? You know where the nice chocolate comes from. She always brings in those short sticks filled with cherry liquor. I think her mum sends them over, or something.”

“Of course, the Swiss love their chocolate! Zara more so than anyone, chocoholic that she is.”

Wanda laughed. “Well, they might like to meet each other then. I’ll see if Jaqueline will join us for lunch today, if you guys come. She usually eats at the office. I don’t think she knows many people here. She’ll be happy to meet someone from her country. Anyway, I better go. You make sure you don’t talk your guests into the ground.” She almost sang those last few words.

“Her old charming self!” Charlie replied and smiled.

DA WAR EIN EINGANG an entry to a cave, leicht überdeckt von Gebüsch, but she didn't know, ob es ihr erlaubt war hineinzugehen. Sie hörte ein Geräusch, some rustling in the bushes und machte einen Schritt zurück.

The noise became fainter, then it swelled up again. Sie hielt den Atem an. The eyes of a small dingo stared at her and before she could decide, ob sie davonrennen oder stillstehen sollte, the animal winced and walked off in the opposite direction as if to say: 'Die Höhle gehört dir, the place is yours.'

Sie machte einen Schritt towards the cave und drückte die Büsche auseinander with a deep sigh. A deserted resting place revealed itself to her.

Als sich ihre Augen an das gedämpfte Licht gewöhnt hatten, erkannte sie Bilder an den Wänden, stencils of hands, einige ganz verblasst, some in red, others in black, in den Zwischenräumen weisse Linien, crisscrossing as if they wanted to represent the energy of lightning. She was struck by the simple beauty, bezaubert von der Schönheit einer ungezwungenen Ursprünglichkeit, which didn't try to make a statement but simply communicated mit der rohen Existenz des Felsen. Sie erkannte darin die Nabelschnur, the umbilical cord she was longing for so desperately, and she decided to sit down, um den Geschichten zuzuhören, die im Sand unter ihr verborgen waren.



## CHAPTER XVII

CHARLIE'S DISTINCT BUT LOWERED VOICE permeated the vivacious singing of a child. "Sh, Sandy! Zara's still asleep, we need to be quiet."

Zara was trying to make out where she was, lying on her side, one arm dangling over the edge of the bed. The blue walls irritated her, not so much the colour as the shade of them. She had never liked pastels. They were flimsy tones that reminded her of people with a tendency towards hypocrisy. Charlie wasn't one of them, and that's what seemed peculiar to her: pastel blue and astute Charlie didn't match.

The voice of the singing child entered through the open window again, more subtle and soft now, but determined and full of vigour. The tingling sensation in Zara's arm became unbearable. She rolled over and noticed that the other half of the bed was empty. The door to the ensuite stood wide open.

She jumped out of bed, troubled suddenly by the activity in the house, the world spinning around her without her partaking in it. In her nightie, she stepped out onto the corridor, combing her hair with her fingers.

The back door was open and framed a girl rocking in the hammock. For a moment, Zara was taken aback by the sight of the intruder. Who was that dark-skinned little person occupying her refuge, the only spot in Charlie's house that brought her some solace and calm? Zara thought of taking a photo. Scenes that troubled her, she usually managed to

capture best. With the lens she managed to destroy her emotional shortcomings like the rays of the sun destroy an insect caught under a magnifying glass.

“Darling, good morning!”

Zara jerked. She hadn’t heard the footsteps approach from behind.

“Did you have a good sleep?” Charlie kissed Zara on her cheek, and noticed her friend’s questioning look. “Oh, that’s Sandy. You’ll like her, she’s Wanda’s daughter. I’ve told you of Wanda, haven’t I, such a strong woman.”

Zara wasn’t awake enough for a cascade of words, and she struggled to take it all in. “Morning. Where’s Doug?”

Charlie put her arm around Zara’s waist. “He’s gone off into town, to the internet café. He got up when Wanda dropped Sandy off, and Sandy went straight up to him, molesting him with her questions. She thought she was being polite. I told Doug he could use my computer, but he seemed anxious to get out. He said you always liked sleeping in and you and I should have some time together on your first day here. I had to let him go, I suppose.”

Zara sighed. “His work. Always comes first. I sometimes wonder if all mathematicians are like that. He has a research student with whom he gets in touch every day, by email. Doug hasn’t heard from him for more than a week, and I think he’s a bit worried now. They’re working together on some sort of project, I don’t quite understand what it’s all about.”

“Oh?” Charlie said.

Zara yawned. “And what he likes the most is having coffee in the morning on his own, and reading the paper.” She faked another yawn, this time through a forced smile. “He’s a man after all, isn’t he?”

Before the fox could attack, Sandy came running in from the garden, interrupting the two women with her abrupt standstill. She looked at Charlie first, then at Zara before uttering an inquiring 'hello'.

"Sandy, this is Zara, my friend from Adelaide."

"Hi Sandy," Zara said. "It was lovely listening to your singing."

Sandy stretched her little hand out and Zara shook it, smiling, though she felt more like crying. The hammock, her eyes pleaded, I need it back. She felt like a wounded animal whose shelter had been taken away.

Sandy grabbed her hand and wanted to pull her outside. "Try the hammock, Zara, it is beautiful to lie in it and watch the leaves move in the wind. Come with me."

"Sandy, you're such a whirlwind," Charlie interjected. "Give Zara some time to adjust. She might want to have a shower first and change."

"It's okay." Zara said. "I've already tried it out, Sandy. Yesterday, when we arrived, I fell asleep in it. It's very nice."

Zara wanted to pull her hand back, but the girl's grip was firm. Firm and determined for a child her age. Zara hesitated and looked with astonishment at the child, who didn't flinch. Eyes full of curiosity and knowledge, fixed on Zara's.

"How old are you?" Zara asked.

"Eight, but I'll soon be nine. In a month." Sandy pulled Zara towards the hammock.

This girl had a leading spirit, Zara thought. It should have been the other way round, her giving guidance to the girl. Yet, she had always been just that: the onlooker, the follower, the passive 'eye', directed by those who acted in front and around her lens. Even with children.

The hammock was less comforting today. Being watched by Sandy, who sat on the ground and drew patterns into the red soil, Zara felt vulnerable. The holes in the net of the

hammock gave away her fragility, her semi-naked body – holes punched in her heart. No longer did the hammock give her the security of a second skin, inside which she could have hidden.

Charlie watched the two for a while from the back door. Then she turned to go back inside, stretching her arms over her head, uncertain as to where she belonged in that female circle.

“Look, Zara, I’ve drawn a picture of you and me,” Sandy said, interrupting Zara’s retreat into herself. “Come and draw a kangaroo for me.” Her pleading eyes were black.

Again, Zara thought of taking a photo, but decided not to while disengaging herself from the hammock. A camera always distorted reality, mystifying it in some obscure way. She didn’t want to enhance the power she could perceive in the girl, not before she had come to terms with it herself.

“I’m not very good at drawing, not like you,” she said, not being able to work out the abstract pattern on the ground: two circles next to each other and snake lines all around them. Where would the kangaroo fit in? She didn’t know the space it should occupy.

“This is very interesting,” she continued. “Where are you and where am I in the picture?” She noticed the clumsiness of her question, but Sandy didn’t seem to mind. On the contrary, there was pride in her reply.

“The little circle is you,” she said, “and the big one is me and the lines around us are all the stories we have been told and all the things we have seen in our lives so far.”

The lines around Zara’s circle were few compared to those around the girl’s circle. Zara felt inexperienced. The girl was telling her something about her psyche, something that she didn’t want to have pointed out, let alone by a child.

Zara picked a stick off the ground and, between the two circles, started drawing the outline of a kangaroo. Sandy watched patiently, following the movement of Zara’s hand

with her head. When Zara stopped, to finish off with the creature's tail, Sandy uttered a high-pitched sound, similar to a shriek coming from an overly excited two-month old baby. Zara dropped the stick immediately, jumped up.

"What is it?" she asked, looking around nervously.

Sandy remained sitting on the ground.

"That's a funny kangaroo," she said calmly. "A cute kangaroo, and it's bigger than us. But it's wrong, this kangaroo, because you only have to draw the tracks, you know, like this." She wiped out Zara's lines and replaced it with kangaroo footprints. "Come, try, it's easy!"

Zara's cheeks were red, the veins in her throat pulsated, her hands shook. Tears of anger and frustration began to trickle down her face, dropping on the ground and wetting the girl's kangaroo tracks. Sandy was about to grab Zara's hand, but Zara pulled back hard and ran off towards the house.

Charlie, sensing trouble, stepped out onto the verandah as Zara darted past her.

"Zara, darl?" she called out, not knowing whether to follow Zara inside or run across to Sandy, who was still sitting on the ground, humming.

"Sandy!" she finally yelled.

The girl looked up and smiled. "Come and see my picture, auntie Charlie!"

"*You* come here, immediately!"

Sandy stood up, suddenly frightened, and shuffled over to Charlie.

Charlie was shocked at her own voice. She had never spoken to the girl in such a tone before. "Darling, sorry for yelling at you." She knelt down and hugged her. "It's just that I'm worried about Zara. Do you know why she's crying?"

Sandy wiggled herself free.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I showed her my picture and asked her to draw a kangaroo, and she did. Then I showed her how to do a kangaroo our way, the right way, you know. And I think she didn’t like that.”

“I heard you shriek out loud. I know you get excited sometimes but there’s no need to do that. That scares people, we’ve talked about this many times. You remember how you scared me when you first did that to me? It’s no good.”

“I didn’t want to frighten her. But she did the kangaroo wrong way, white way. I thought she is your friend!” Sandy’s eyes were deep black holes, and her little hands had turned into fists.

“Shoosh, shoosh!” Charlie grabbed the girl by her arms and gave her a good shake. “It’s okay, Sandy, no need to get emotional, come on! Zara didn’t know, okay? Zara’s not from here, she lives far away, she doesn’t know the customs up here. You show her, gently, if you like, okay? She’s our friend and she’s not here to –”

“She don’t want to be my friend, she’s sad, very sad. Cryin’ for somethin’ else, that man this mornin’. She don’t belong here, she wants to go home, to other land. I want to make her happy, but she want to be sad.” Feeling the hard grip around her arms, Sandy began to calm down. “This is hurting, auntie Charlie.”

Charlie let go immediately. So much anger in that little chest, the hurt of several generations stored inside it. Charlie always felt sorry, and uncomfortable at the same time, when strong emotions like these took hold of Sandy.

“I’ll go and talk to Zara, okay? You go back to your drawing. Promise me not to teach Zara any more, not until she’s happy again.” Charlie held her hand out flat. Sandy laid hers on top.

“I promise,” she said.

“I love you. Don’t ever forget that.” Charlie continued. “And I love Zara, too. She’s my best friend. I don’t want you two to hurt each other.”

Sandy smiled. “You’re very nice, like auntie Joy. Auntie Joy teaches me how to paint.”

“I know, darling, you’re a good painter.” Charlie stroked the girl’s hair. “And now go.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE VIEW ONTO HIS BLACK HOLDEN, dusty after the long drive, gave Doug an anchor for his thoughts. Black – colour of stability, colour also of infinity, of infinite beauty. What had he tried to explain to Charlie the night before? The mystery of a world that he himself would never understand fully? Who was he to explain the exactness and reliability of mathematics now that he was struggling with a nightmare beyond beauty and prediction, yet one so real? Was it the ghost of Gödel that had presented itself to him out there on the road, to challenge his idea of mathematical certainty?

Doug sat in the internet café, looking out onto the street through the large shop window, sipping his strong short black. Every so often he turned a page of the *Alice Springs News*. He usually read *The Age*, but there was none available here at this café. He flicked through the news lazily, Madonna's voice crawling along the ceiling.

A young woman, who stopped outside the window to answer a call on her mobile, caught his attention. She had long blonde hair, which fell over a dark blue jacket that matched the skirt in colour and design. Her high-heel shoes were of the same navy colour as the outfit, which was accentuated by a white and red scarf around her neck. The bright pink handbag she carried over her shoulder didn't fit the rest of the costume, yet it was that bag that made her attractive. Those sorts of oddities in a woman's appearance always caused Doug to stare. He watched her body move, as her hair moved across the back of her

uniform in the shape of a smooth wave. The uniform looked familiar, probably a stewardess from one of the airlines.

As if aware that someone was watching her, the woman turned around, not noticing Doug behind the window. She had a Scandinavian-looking face and very fair, slightly freckled skin. It only occurred to Doug now that this young woman was a rarity up here whereas in Melbourne she would not have stood out. Here the women dressed down as if they didn't take pride in their appearance.

Doug had studied women all his life, was captivated by their beauty, and could never keep his eyes off their differently shaped bodies. He found the beauty of mathematics confirmed in female elegance. In ancient Greece artists tried to cut the perfect male build from marble, not understanding that perfection and symmetry could only be found in the body of the woman.

It was this same quest for perfection and symmetry that underlay Doug's research project. A project that focused on the ugly and apparently random distribution of the prime numbers. The development of modern cryptographic methods had only been possible because mathematicians didn't understand the randomness of the primes. Doug was certain that he could not only prove the Riemann Hypothesis, but also reveal the perfection, the hidden symmetry, by finding a particular infinite matrix, a quantum mechanical object whose spectrum was the zero set of the Zeta function. His belief in this as yet undiscovered algebraic object comforted him.

He looked out the window again, trying to catch another glimpse of the stewardess, but an ugly face, contorted into a scream and with wide-open eyes, stared back at him. Doug jumped from his seat, and trying not to spill any coffee, tipped his chair over. The chair hit the carpeted floor with a heavy thump. The apparition disappeared. Doug's eyes

were fixed on an empty spot. In disbelief and unable to comprehend what had happened, he didn't at first hear the person behind him.

"Is everything okay?" a female voice asked again.

Finally Doug turned round and saw a woman sitting at one of the other computers, giving him an intense look. There was a frown on her brow and a worried look in her eyes. With her fingers still positioned on her keyboard, she looked frozen. Doug just stared at her, incapable of words. Eventually he said dryly, "My coffee, I burnt my tongue."

The woman raised her eyebrows, shaking her head slightly. "Hot coffee? You mean to tell me burning your tongue with hot coffee made you jump and scream?" She sighed. "I'm a nurse, you can trust me."

He picked up the chair. "My tongue's sore, but other than that I'm fine, thanks." A nurse was the last thing he needed. But she kept looking at him. "I'm sorry I disturbed you," he said again, impatiently now, "but I really am alright."

"Okay, okay." She returned to her screen and typed away, sighing every so often.

Doug quickly cleaned up the coffee spills on his arm and hand with a paper serviette and moved to one of the computers further back in the shop. With hands still shaking he logged on to his university account. E-mails and the paper, that's what he had come here for, and coffee. He wished he could leave without giving the nurse the impression he was fleeing.

Sitting with a dry throat, staring into the computer screen, Doug checked his e-mails absentmindedly. It took a fair while for the e-mail from his research student to sink in. He had to read it several times before he finally grasped the full meaning of the message. It was written by his student's mother.

*Dear Professor Samir*

*I am writing to you in the darkest hour of my life to let you know that my beloved son, James, who you supervised so caringly, so respectfully over the past year, passed away yesterday. I am aware that he never told you that he had been very ill for a long time. He forbade me to tell anyone, and I could only accept his wish that I keep his illness a secret.*

*He had hoped he would be able to live long enough to finish his doctoral thesis and the project he was involved in with you. He worked day and night although the doctor was strictly against this abuse of his body. All James would say was: 'who cares, I will soon get enough sleep anyway, so I may as well do what I most enjoy: mathematics.' He would usually sleep for two hours in the afternoon, then go for a short walk before he would sit down again at his computer.*

*James had leukaemia, but chemotherapy remained without success. The cancer had spread too far already.*

*Although my sadness is immense, what makes me sadder than anything is the fact that I have to cause this sadness to you, too, who, as is known to me, spoke so highly of my son. I can only apologise for James' stubbornness and for the fact that he misled you for more than a year.*

*The funeral will take place next Wednesday, at 3 pm. James' wish was to be cremated and his ashes to be thrown into the sea near Sorrento, his favourite place when he was a teenager. He wished that this would be carried out by you, Professor Samir, whom he regarded as his best friend and guide. I know that this is a lot to burden you with, yet at the same time I feel responsible to tell you of his very last wish, as I believe it was his way of expressing his admiration and respect for you.*

*The people at the Mathematics Department gave me your e-mail address and they told me you wouldn't be back until the 20th of this month. By no means do I ask you to come back*

*for the funeral, as I know how important it is for everyone who works as hard as you do to relax and enjoy a holiday away from work. It will cause no further distress for me to keep James' ashes until you return.*

*At the same time, please be assured that I do not wish you to feel forced to grant James' last wish. I do understand that this is very much a matter of the heart where I have no right to interfere or judge.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Mrs Veronica Lanston*

The noises from the street and the humming of computers inside the internet café, the rattling of the coffee machine in the background, the voices of people talking, the smell of toasted sandwiches mixed with that of strong black coffee, the whingeing of a child somewhere in the distance, everything merged into one shapeless white vacuum inside Doug's mind. Words on the screen were performing a silent dance in slow motion. Gradually, the image of James became part of the dance, his face turning into a screaming demon, pleading with outstretched arms, then changing into a pot of figures and formulas from which rose his quirky and lean figure, a metaphor of the perturbed mind of a genius.

After what seemed like hours, the characters on the screen returned to normal and the surroundings impacted with a force that made Doug immediately aware of his slumped posture on the chair and his firm grip around the empty coffee cup. He let go, and over the row of computers looked towards the window where he had sat before. Someone was looking in, grinning under a forehead covered with a red-yellow striped beanie hat. Then the person turned away and was gone before Doug had a chance to read the silent mimicry.

He stood up and manoeuvred his body towards the counter where he ordered another black coffee. The nurse lifted her head and watched him, but the message about James' death had erased her from Doug's memory.

Coffee helped Doug to think clearly again. His heart was pounding, not from the strong black drug, but because a human being can only cope with so much shock. Like on the road two days before, there was again this strange sensation of knowing, of a déjà-vu, something deep inside that he would not allow coming to the surface. He discerned that he had to reply to the message immediately, that he couldn't say 'no' to scattering James' ashes, couldn't pretend nothing had happened.

James' illness explained the few times he showed up in Doug's office. Most of their work had been done via e-mail. James let Doug believe he worked best on his own without too much physical contact. Doug would have granted him anything. Even if James had decided to do his work from overseas, he would have given in.

Because of James' loyal and composed attitude towards the job and his somewhat distant, yet calm respect, Doug had chosen James to work with him on the Riemann Hypothesis Operator Project. If they could get their hands on this hypothetical Hilbert space operator, he believed that he would be able to use it to devise a method for quickly breaking large integers into their prime number factors. A method opening up the distribution of the prime numbers and thus making high level encryption algorithms impossible. Algorithms that in Doug's opinion were the devil's work.

James was the only one who had shared Doug's passion of making discoveries in number theory that would spoil the devil's plan and eliminate secrecy forever – the only one who shared his belief that God's way involved complete openness, considering secret codes and the doings of cryptography evil. Who would be out there to replace him?

Doug had never thought about death in the context of the world he worked in. He felt trapped. Maybe the apparition had been a warning – the devil telling him that it would snatch his best student, not allowing them to make discoveries that would reveal the truth.

Doug shivered. Pearls of perspiration formed on his forehead, and his stomach grumbled. Feelings of nausea and hunger clouded his mind. He needed to get something to eat before he could reply to James' mother.

He would deal with James' death and the apparition the way he approached every mathematical problem, every mathematical mystery: by doing one equation at a time. The universe was built on numbers. Doug was convinced that God would ensure that there was a solution to every important mathematical mystery – he would never let Gödel's incompleteness theorem stand in the way of his goals.

On his way out, he noticed an old man with dark skin and a grey beard staring at him from behind one of the computers. Not lowering his gaze, not even when Doug looked straight back at him and nodded, the man remained motionless, showing no sign of communication other than keeping his serious gaze fixed on Doug. Disregarding the man's stare as another inexplicable incident, Doug opened the door and left.

## CHAPTER XIX

CHARLIE KNOCKED TWICE, then entered the room. Zara lay on her bed, curled up in a foetal position, her brown hair a curtain over her face. Her body was heaving slowly up and down.

Charlie sat on the bed and began to stroke Zara's back, as she had done many times in the past. She thought of something to say, but didn't wish to disturb the serene silence beginning to enfold them. She would have liked to ask questions, those hundreds of questions that she had harboured over the past two years, never revealed in the hurry of STD calls. But even now, although only a few inches apart, she realised how far apart they had grown.

Zara was fragile and vulnerable, a woman with the sensitivity of a butterfly, who, once touched, could no longer fly. And Charlie impudently rubbed the soft powder off her wings, not worried anymore about what came over her friend out there in the garden, or what Sandy did to unsettle her; she only yearned to step in as a saviour with open arms and to stitch the rupture in Zara's heart.

Zara moved slightly and moaned. Charlie bent over her, in anticipation of some words, but none came. Zara had withdrawn.

The clock showed 9.23. Plenty of time left to decide if they wanted to meet Wanda for lunch. Charlie kissed Zara on her bare shoulder and left the room. Upstairs, under the shower, she wept.

They were women, the three of them, Sandy included; they all had their secrets, and their burdens to carry. Every woman had the right to break down without revealing the scars in her soul to anyone. The right to keep silent if she needed to, to fight things out with herself and come back to the world, if possible, restored.

Zara was preparing breakfast, and she was cutting mangoes, melons and paw paw to make a fruit salad, when Charlie came downstairs. Three glasses of orange juice sat on the table.

“I thought it’d be nice to start the day with a healthy meal,” she said, without looking up from the cutting board. “I hope you haven’t had breakfast yet.” She turned around.

Charlie was too stunned to say anything. She looked at Zara, then at the clock. Only half an hour had passed since her attempt to bring her friend back to the world. And here she was, fully herself again.

“What can I say, Zara,” she replied, standing helplessly in the kitchen. “This looks yummy, I’d love to have some.” Zara had her back to her again, chopping even more eagerly. “You shouldn’t be doing this, really,” Charlie added. “You’re my guest and I should be serving *you* breakfast.”

“I might add some strawberries. Have you got any?”

“There should be some in the fridge, but they might have gone off.” Charlie opened the fridge and examined the punnet. “They’re fine, use them all if you like.” She passed them to Zara and watched her cut off the leafy bits and rinse each strawberry individually.

Charlie could never quite comprehend why Zara dissected food like a surgeon. Something the Swiss did, she once said. But Charlie came to interpret it as a characteristic of Zara's personality: Zara was a perfectionist, a silent worrier, only she would never admit it.

"We should have our breakfast outside on the verandah, don't you think?" Zara spooned an equal amount of fruit salad into three bowls.

"That's a great idea. Let me take the orange juices."

"Okay, and I'll follow with the rest."

Charlie pulled out a wooden tray. "Actually, let's put it all on here, that'll be easier."

Together they filled the tray, and Zara carried it outside, while Charlie yelled out to Sandy, who was still busy drawing in the sand.

"Kids are amazing," she then said, "they never get tired. How long has she been playing out here now? She's a good kid, always enjoys playing by herself."

"Yes, that's quite rare," Zara replied, still uncomfortable about what had happened earlier.

Sandy came running up to them.

"Zara's made us a delicious breakfast," Charlie said. "You can eat with us, if you like."

"I'm still drawing. Can I take it with me?" She looked at Zara, then at Charlie.

Charlie nodded.

"I can't see why not," Zara confirmed.

"I like strawberries. Thanks."

Before Zara could say any more, Sandy was walking back to the hammock, spilling juice on the way. Zara couldn't help wondering about the girl's frankness – or was it

cunning? She couldn't work it out. Why did she still find it so difficult to relax around children?

"This is very nice," Charlie said, enjoying every mouthful, "very refreshing in this heat."

"It is, isn't it? I often have fruit salad for breakfast, especially after a bad night's sleep."

"Oh, darl, I didn't know you didn't sleep well, I'm sorry! I guess the bed's a bit small for two people. I've got a spare mattress to put on the floor, Doug might agree to sleep on that."

"No, no, it's okay! I slept fine, really. That's not what I meant."

"But I mean it, honestly. Or you could sleep in the other spare room, the one upstairs that I use as my studio, I mean the one I *used to* use, when I was still painting." Charlie uttered a chilly laugh.

It suddenly occurred to Zara that Charlie hadn't mentioned her painting career for a long time. Since Charlie had taken on teaching drama and art to secondary school children, she had never mentioned her own painting again.

"Actually, what happened to that?" Zara asked. "Didn't you have an exhibition of some of your works soon after you moved here?"

"Well, yes and no. It was a collective exhibition, with five other artists. I had three of mine in it, but they didn't sell. What else do you expect up here? A year later I got another chance, in Sydney, the same three paintings. I flew over for the opening and was infuriated when I saw that they had only exhibited one of them.

"They said they'd never promised to hang all of them. I nearly went in the next day to take the canvas off the wall, if it hadn't been for a fellow painter, who also had only one in there and convinced me that it was pretty good to be in that exhibition.

“Can’t even remember the name of the place, shows how much I cared afterwards. Anyway, the painting didn’t sell and that was the end for me. I just couldn’t face another humiliation. I still do the occasional sketch, purely for pleasure. The art world is pathetic, if you ask me. All anyone cares about is how well you sell. If you don’t sell, you’re out. Talent, ideas, innovation – none of that is important. Anyway, let’s not talk about it anymore.” She flicked her hand in front of her face as if to whisk away a fly.

“I don’t think you should give up, Charlie. The silk-screens you showed me in Adelaide were outstanding. It just takes a while to break through, I know what it’s like. It’s the same in photography – and all the other arts.”

“Don’t! Honestly. I’ve thought it through. I’m happy with my teaching job, believe me. I’m probably a better teacher than artist anyway.” She looked at her watch. “Wanda’s invited us to have lunch with her in town today, at around one, Sandy’s mum. Would you like to meet her?”

Zara was disappointed. Their relationship still seemed to run along the same old pattern: Charlie never listening to her, never caring for her opinion. Charlie, the dominant teacher-figure, and herself in the role of obedient student. Was it lack of energy or lack of confidence that made her always give in to Charlie’s overpowering (s)mothering? Or was it simply her all too Swiss nature – to stand back and recoil when confronted with a forward opinion and an extroverted personality?

“We don’t have to go if you’re too tired,” Charlie said. “I just thought it might be nice for you to get out of the house and meet someone new.”

“What about Doug, is he coming, too?”

“Well, I don’t know. He didn’t say when he’d be back.” Charlie could not hide her annoyance. “I suppose we could wait for him, though he did say you and I should spend this first day on our own. It’s up to you, really. We’d be leaving in about two hours.”

Although Zara would rather not have Doug's company, it didn't feel right going anywhere without him. She was sure that last night Charlie had noticed their estrangement but was still reluctant to talk about it, reluctant to form a bond with Charlie against Doug. In some strange way, she felt responsible for not giving in to something as surreal as an apparition, attributing to it more importance than it deserved.

"He might be back by the time we leave. If not, we'll go on our own," she finally said.

"So, I'll ring Wanda and let her know we're coming?"

"Okay."

Sandy came back from the garden, with her hands sticky and dirty. She put her bowl and the glass, scattered with fingerprints and dust, down on the table. She had rolled the glass over the ground to create a pattern for her drawing.

"Look at your hands, Sandy!" Charlie exclaimed. "Come on, put all the dishes on the tray and let's go inside and wash them. You can help me in the kitchen while Zara relaxes."

Sandy smiled at Zara, who, as a sign of reconciliation, smiled in return. Zara watched the two interact like mother and daughter, watched Charlie's swift movements, Sandy's playful touches, her deliberate bumping against Charlie's arm, and Charlie's soft rejections.

After they disappeared into the house, she looked across to the hammock. What a strange word, hammock, she thought, dissecting it like strawberries. 'Ham' and 'mock'. What did a hammock have to do with mocking ham? She was bewildered at what seemed to her a random combination of words. Why not simply call it a 'hanging mat', a literal translation of the German 'Hängematte'? If called a hanging mat, a hammock would at least structurally come close to a flying carpet, her favourite childhood magic mode of

transport. Whenever she dreamt of leaving her parents, of leaving her home, she imagined taking off on a flying carpet. Charlie's hanging mat so far had come closest to her childhood dream.

Without worrying if Sandy would allow her to re-enter the sacred territory, she walked over to the hammock, and made herself comfortable in the swinging bed. Deep down, she knew she had to let go for the sake of her own freedom, to take off on a flying carpet. Yet, she clung to the old because she feared waking up to the nakedness of her own self, on the verge of free fall.

*DIE ERDE unter ihr war angenehm kühl und rein. Perhaps someone had swept the place to make it comfortable for her, die einzige ZuhörerIn vielleicht for many years. She reached forward and glided her hands over the stencils, ohne sie zu berühren. They had some meaning, she could feel it, eine Bedeutung, die sie nicht fähig war zu erkennen.*

*Vielleicht waren Geschichten sogar wie Hände, with which one could build territory and faith. Maybe those hands recorded the yearning for place, aber auch die Fragwürdigkeit von Besitz, und die Bejahung von Grenzenlosigkeit. She looked at her own hands and wondered about the stories, die darin verborgen waren. Die Linien waren verblasst, faded because time had smoothed them like water a rock.*

*The sun started to set, und ihre Silhouette erschien auf der Höhlenwand, a reflection of her punctured self, ein zweites Ich. Mit dem Lauf der Sonnenstrahlen her shadow became distorted, revealing ein groteskes Spiel der Natur. She closed her eyes im Wissen, dass sie zuerst heimkehren musste, before she would ever arrive where she didn't belong.*



## CHAPTER XX

SANDY LET GO OF CHARLIE'S HAND and ran over to her mother, who was waiting in front of the *Mpartnwe Arts* gallery.

"Hi little one, did you have a good time?" Wanda gave the girl a hug. "I hope she was good," she said to Charlie over her daughter's head, and looking at Zara: "Little ratbag she can be."

Zara blushed and before she had a chance to say anything, Sandy blurted out: "Zara made fruit salad for us and we did some drawing together."

"You did, too," Charlie said quickly, tousling Sandy's hair. "We better get going. When does your painting class start?"

"In five," Wanda replied, "you go in, Sandy, and I'll be back in a couple of hours, okay?"

Wanda gave her daughter a kiss, before Sandy hopped off towards the entrance of the art gallery, waving goodbye to everyone.

Wanda was a big woman. She had the same cheeky expression, the same curly hair and the same dark skin as her daughter. Charlie and Zara looked fragile against her, and very white.

“And you are Zara, I gather,” Wanda finally said. “Welcome to Arrernte land.” She held out her hand, and Zara shook it. “Did Charlie tell you that Alice Springs belongs to the Arrernte people?”

“No, she didn’t. But she’s told me a lot about you over the past two years.”

“Oh, yeah, that doesn’t surprise me!” Wanda laughed heartily. “No one talks like our Charlie, but she always forgets to mention the history of this place. We call Alice Springs Mpartnwe.” She took Zara aside in a mock-manner. “You need a tough skin to be around that woman and not go mad.”

“Isn’t she wonderful!” Charlie teased back. “Such a loyal friend, and silly me thought she’d be happy to talk about the history of this place herself, the place of her people, you know, and –”

“Eh, eh!” Wanda interjected in her hoarse voice. “Here we go, Zara, a thunderstorm of words being hurled at us!” And she grabbed Zara by the arm, pretending to run away with her.

Charlie burst out laughing at the sight of the big strong woman pressing her petite friend against her. And soon Wanda and Zara were laughing, too. For the first time in years Zara felt the freedom of being a child again, the freedom of cheerful play and laughter, unprompted and unpredictable.

Wanda knew how to lure people out of their shells so they would feel surprised about their own lightness, bouncing against the softness of her spirit. She could sense Zara’s fragility and confused state of mind, her yearning for a place in herself to hold on to, to feel safe in. Wanda was Sandy’s mother after all, only much more mature and apt at guiding Zara back onto the hard ground of reality after she had twirled her in the air.

“We better start heading for lunch,” she finally said, after several fits of laughter had escaped her voluptuous body. Her hand was still holding on to Zara’s arm. “A friend’s going to join us. I thought we’d eat at Oscar’s. Shall we go?”

And the three women strode off towards the mall, Wanda in the middle, musing about the quiet friend of Charlie’s to her left. A foreigner. In some way like her own people. Stranded. Only that Zara had no connection to this place, this land. On the other hand, it didn’t matter where she came from, she was a woman and women represented the earth giving life. Their place and home was inside rather than outside themselves, and it seemed that Zara had not yet grasped such truth. All she had to do was take her soul home, guiding it back to itself.

At the restaurant, Wanda’s friend was sitting at one of the tables with a book open in front of her. She had short brown hair and was wearing a brown skirt and a red blouse. When she saw Wanda, her face lit up and she waved.

“Jacqueline!” Wanda called, attracting the attention of other people, who looked her up and down, some with scorn in their eyes. Zara quivered at the bewilderment Wanda’s dark skin created among the customers of the café. Only the waitress nodded to Wanda with a smile, signalling approval.

“No sense of time, us fellas,” Wanda said to Jacqueline, laughing. “Sorry for being late.”

“That’s alright, Wanda. I don’t mind waiting. I always have a book with me.” Jacqueline smiled, and Zara wondered about the woman’s accent.

“Zara – Jacqueline. Jacqueline – Zara,” Wanda introduced the two women.

“Hello, nice to meet you,” Jacqueline said, her wide-open eyes full of curiosity. “I heard that you are from Switzerland, too.”

Zara was too baffled to say anything. Charlie hadn't told her. The last person she wanted to meet was another Swiss. She felt alert, at once caught by a mixture of politeness and unease, an awkward feeling of estranged familiarity that pulled her by the sleeve, forcing her to own up and play the game of the traveller excited at the sight of a fellow countryman.

"Whereabouts in Switzerland?" she asked, embarrassed even about pronouncing the name of her country.

*"Lausanne. Et toi?"*

"Zürich," Zara said, relieved that there was only a tenuous link between them.

*"Ah, oui.* How long have you been here?"

"Nearly five years. And you?"

"Only two months, I will go back in June. I work with Wanda, you know, at the art gallery."

Wanda interrupted: "Go on, don't be polite, speak in your own lingo! We don't mind, do we, Charlie?"

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all," Charlie said, after being unusually quiet. "I actually like listening to Zara speak Swiss. It's kind of cute."

Zara looked at Jacqueline. Jacqueline at her.

"Well, this is difficult," Jacqueline said. "I speak French, but Zara speaks German." Then she turned to Zara. "My German is not very good, I'm sorry."

"Well, neither is my French. I understand quite a bit, but speaking – well, *pas très bien*, not good at all."

Wanda got excited now.

"I didn't know Switzerland had different languages!" she called out. "That's interesting, that's like us in this country! You know, my people speak a different language

to the people in other parts of Australia. We're lucky up here because our languages are still very strong, but others, they only have a few words and phrases left. You wipe out the people, and the language's gone!" She cut through the air with her flat hand. "So, tell me, how many languages all together?"

Zara didn't feel like delving into the history of her homeland, bonding with another Swiss in pride.

"How could I forget!" Charlie exclaimed. "Zara's spoken about it several times! Three, no four different languages, aren't there?"

Jacqueline had finally sorted out a translation. "Four. French, German, Italian and Romantsch. *Cette – pardon –* the Romantsch language is spoken in the mountains, in the east of Switzerland. Not many people speak this language, but I think they are very proud of it and many young people want to learn it again now. They say that this language came from the – *comment est-ce-qu' on dit?*" She looked at Zara. "You know, *la langue des Tziganes*, how do you say?"

"*Tziganes?*" Zara tried to remember. "*Tziganes.*"

"You know, the people who are like nomads, they travel around all the time."

"Of course," Zara finally said. "Gypsies. There's the theory that the Romantsch language was brought to Switzerland by the gypsies who travelled over the Alps from Romania, or Turkey, I can't quite remember now."

"*Mais oui*, Gypsies! I always forget this word," Jacqueline said, sounding frustrated about her lack of fluency in English.

"This is all really fascinating!" Wanda was eager to hear more. "Four different languages, that means four different cultures, how do you all get along then, if you don't speak each other's language? And in such a tiny country – Switzerland is quite small, isn't it? How does it work?"

“Can I get you some drinks?” interrupted the waitress who had come to their table unnoticed. The four women stared at her as if she had asked an impossible question.

Zara was the quickest to answer. “If you could bring us some water, that’d be nice.” She was glad the conversation had taken a turn.

“Water, yes,” Wanda repeated, “thank you.”

And the waitress disappeared again.

“Well, we better decide what we want to eat,” Wanda said, studying the menu, but still marvelling about Switzerland. “It is quite unique to have a small country with such a cultural diversity. An example of a multicultural society that seems to work.”

Jacqueline smiled and nodded, acting the polite Swiss person who excels in agreeing with everyone and everything.

“I think we should have some wine,” Charlie boomed suddenly, waking to her old chatty self again. “We should celebrate the fact that we have two people from Switzerland here with us. Not very common in a small town like Alice. I think, Wanda, you should also show Zara through the gallery sometime this week, while she’s here. That’d be interesting for you, Zara, to watch the women paint. You know, the painting classes Sandy goes to, you might like to sit in one day and take a few photos. Zara’s a photographer. A good one, too.”

Wanda looked up from the menu. “Actually, yes, Charlie told me about your photography. We’re in the process of producing a brochure, a booklet about our gallery and we’ll need a photographer to do a few shots of the women painting, among other photos. Would you be interested? It’s not a huge project, but we’d pay you.” She sensed an air of uneasiness. “No need to decide now. Sometime this week when you feel like it, I’ll show you round, then see how you go.”

Zara couldn't help feeling exposed, like a subject about to be photographed. She didn't mind the work behind the lens, yet the minute someone else put their lens on her, she recoiled like a cat.

"I'll think about it, thanks," she said.

The waitress returned with a jug of water. They ordered pastas and salads and a bottle of red wine that Charlie offered to pay for.

Soon the conversation was back on Switzerland. Zara and Jacqueline were made to stand together, explaining to their small audience the make-up of their homeland. They tried to get the picture of the Röstli-Graben across to them, the ditch between the German and French speaking regions, the ditch between the two different mentalities. Neither Jacqueline nor Zara could remember however why that political and ideological split was named after the main Swiss potato dish, Röstli.

Jacqueline was disconcerted to realise that she knew so little about the origins of the myths and clichés her upbringing had deeply entrenched in her mind. Zara, on the other hand, felt like an acrobat who hadn't done any acrobatics for several years and was all of a sudden asked to perform again. She felt odd and wrong in her skin, trying to appear interested in the place she came from, remembering bits and pieces she had learnt at school about the history of her country. She wondered why she was sitting in a restaurant in Alice Springs talking about Switzerland. Her home country didn't trigger any positive memories. If anything, it made her feel uncomfortable because of the authoritarian hand she saw in her mind. The hand that reprimanded her for trying to run away and hide.

Zara was much more interested in the history of Alice Springs, and after a while she managed to sneak in a question about what Wanda had said earlier, "Mparntwe, your name for Alice Springs, what does it mean?"

“Well, I don’t think there’s an actual translation for it,” Wanda replied. “But the Yeperenye dreaming story has it that Mparntwe, Alice Springs area, was the meeting place of three caterpillars that formed the Mac Donnell Ranges and most of the landscape in and around Alice Springs. Mparntwe became a neutral meeting ground for the Arrernte people, from where they would walk to their particular sacred places, the women in one direction, the men in another. Nice, eh?”

Zara reflected on the image of the caterpillar, its many feet secure on the land, yet walking over it gently. If she herself had a hundred feet, she would perhaps also know where she belonged, where she was meant to leave her traces. Guilt still tied her to Switzerland, guilt about not being a good Swiss citizen because she had betrayed the country by leaving, by wanting something different. She had slapped it across its face, but it had grabbed her by her ankle, and here she was, still not completely free of it.

Determined to find some new roots, to shake free from the old ones, she wanted a long-term relationship with Australia and potential marriage. She would stay on for longer than tomorrow, whereas Jacqueline, proud of her Swiss origin and aware of where her roots were, was in Australia for a short love affair only.

What linked the two was a familiarity with a diplomatic way of not uttering their opinion too forcefully, a reserve when it came to talking openly about their lives, a morale that held work and well-earned money above physical and spiritual health, a familiarity with Mövenpick ice-cream, Röstli, Fondue, the unpleasant slush in the streets in winter, and the precision of Swiss watches – in short, a familiarity with the small, petty and disturbingly picturesque. With red wine, in the middle of the Australian desert, on a 35-degree afternoon, the four women celebrated exactly that: Swiss peculiarities. Because Charlie rejoiced in contrasts and Wanda in universal similarities.

## CHAPTER XXI

DOUG WANDERED AIMLESSLY through the town, his mind still perturbed by the scheme of things that no longer followed the rules he had so carefully laid out for his life. The hunger pangs in his stomach increased with every step, nagging him to find something to eat. He turned unfamiliar corners, found himself in streets without names, walking a pattern of circles that, had one been able to see him from above, would have indicated the path of a tormented creature trying to make sense of the inexplicable, the unfathomable, the untraceable that had taken control of him.

If it hadn't been for the drive up, if he had gone to see his parents in Sydney, if it hadn't been for Zara, he would not now have to face a maelstrom of churning thoughts, wasting his time with the illogical.

In search of a definite solution in the infinity of numbers and considering the absolute accuracy of mathematics, Doug's instincts drew him to the smell of lamb that was roasting on a spit in a kebab seller's shop. Dehydrated from the walk in the midday heat, with all his senses focused on his body's urgent need for food, he nearly fainted as he stepped into the shop.

"Happy day to you, Sir!" The cheerful voice from behind the counter rang like sirens in Doug's ears. "What can I get you today?"

Doug gave a weak smile to the black-bearded, dark-skinned man with the shrill feminine voice. "One serve of kebab, please."

"Skewers on a plate or rolled up?"

"In a roll, thanks – is that roasted capsicum there?"

"Yes, Sir, would you like some capsicum, too?"

"Why not."

"And sauce? Tahini or chilli?"

"Chilli, please – and I'll have a Coke as well."

"Over there, Sir, help yourself," the kebab seller pointed to a fridge. "Is this to take away or have here?"

"Have here." Doug gave the kebab seller a twenty-dollar note.

"Please, sit down, I'll bring the kebab out to you when it's ready," he said, sliding the change back over the counter.

The shop was narrow, and there were six tables along the wall. Doug was grateful for an old plastic chair and a wobbly table opposite the counter to support his weakened body. It was hot inside. With the door wide open, the two ceiling fans running on full speed didn't do much to cool the air down. Doug looked around.

The walls were painted light blue, same as at Charlie's place. People must be obsessed with blues here, Doug thought. An indication perhaps that they missed the coolness of an ocean. Faded posters of landscapes of the Northern Territory decorated the walls. Kata Tjuta, Uluru, Simpsons Gap, West McDonnell Ranges, Alice Springs, he read, and among them an Aboriginal dot painting. In the corner by the door an Arabic water pipe was displayed, and next to it gilt-edged tea glasses on a gold ornamented tray.

"Here you are, Sir," the kebab seller sang through the shop. "Enjoy your meal!" He sailed a plate with a fat kebab onto Doug's table. "On holiday?"

Doug inhaled the smell of food. “Yes, from Melbourne,” he said and bit into the juicy kebab.

“Aah, Melbourne! So you flew here?”

“No,” Doug replied in between bites, “we drove up – my wife and I.”

Doug often caught himself calling Zara his wife, especially with Middle Eastern people. A kind of tribal pride, lingering somewhere in his mind. Or perhaps he lied to cover up his sudden embarrassment about being with a woman without a marriage certificate.

“Uuh, that’s a long drive!” exclaimed the kebab seller. “In this heat!”

Doug nodded, devouring his kebab.

“How long are you going to stay? Driving all the way back again?” Doug held up his left hand and showed his five fingers twice. “Ten? Days, months?”

“Days,” Doug replied, his mouth still filled.

“That is not long!”

Doug nodded again, and as though the kebab seller had suddenly had enough of the notion of driving all the way from Melbourne to Alice Springs, he went back behind the counter, glancing across to Doug several times.

Doug felt he was being observed like some weird curiosity out of a museum. If he hadn’t still been hungry and in need, more than ever, of a full stomach to calm himself down, he would have considered leaving. Instead, he ordered another kebab and a strong black coffee.

The kebab seller’s chatter increased, eager to please a customer willing to spend money in his shop. His lips moved as quickly as his hands. Doug was not in the mood to make conversation, wishing instead for solitude. He reproached himself for not going to one of the fast food chains, where he would have been able to disappear into anonymity.

Suddenly the kebab seller grinned. "I hope you don't mind if I say that for a Lebanese man you are very quiet."

Doug startled. How did the man know? People usually guessed that he was Arabic, but not the exact country. "How did you work that out?" he asked, reluctant to let the kebab seller get away with it.

"Work out what? That you are quiet?"

"No, my background."

"Oh, don't worry, I know my people," replied the kebab seller calmly, "I can tell. Your features, way you behave. I came here a long time ago, but I am still Lebanese."

"I see myself as Australian though, born and bred in this country. But come to think of it, I do prefer Lebanese coffee to regular black coffee."

"My pleasure, my pleasure! I make the best Lebanese coffee in town." The kebab seller laughed and quickly heated water in an ibrik, adding coffee, sugar and a pinch of cardamom with an elaborate and skilled gesture, stirring three times, and bringing the mixture to the boil. As it foamed up, he removed it from the heat.

"So, your parents came here? Or your grandparents?" He now turned to look at Doug.

"My grandparents."

"And how many years ago, fifty, sixty?" He didn't wait for a reply. "And see, you are still Lebanese! It is in your blood, you can't lose it."

He came around the counter with another kebab and a small cup of Lebanese coffee, motioning his customer to sit down again. Carefully, he placed the orders on the table, then, pointing to another chair, he asked, "May I?"

Doug had no choice but to be polite and say yes.

The kebab seller turned the chair sideways, so that it faced the counter. He sat down, resting his right arm on the table and leaning his head against the wall behind him while keeping an eye on business.

“Have you been to Lebanon?” he asked after a while, turning to Doug and lifting his hand off the table as if to emphasise the question.

“In fact, I haven’t,” Doug said, hoping to leave it at that. He had never felt the urge to travel to a country he knew hardly anything about.

“And your parents?” The kebab seller closed his eyes.

“Yes. They’ve been twice.”

“And they didn’t take you?” Again he didn’t wait for a reply. “You were not a child anymore and you didn’t want to go. So, you go now. When we are young, we don’t want to go. But now, how old are you now?” He turned in his chair and looked straight at Doug.

Doug began to fidget in his seat. “Thirty seven, why?” He didn’t enjoy being questioned, about something that was not in the least important to him at the time. He hadn’t come here to talk about Lebanon!

Arabs were not welcome anywhere except in their own countries. He grew up constantly being on guard, constantly losing himself in the crowd so as not to stand out. Even his own people he didn’t always trust, because he was different from most of them: his grandparents had left Lebanon after the First World War, for economic reasons. And they were Maronite Christians, which made them very different from Muslim Lebanese. He, their grandson, grew up with only a little Arabic.

“What time is it?” Doug asked, reaching for a glass of water. He washed down the last bite of food.

“Always early enough to learn something new and see the earth where you came from.” The kebab seller stood up with Doug and held out his hand. “Come back any time you like and we talk.”

Doug shook the man’s hand. “If I manage to find my way here again. How do I get back to the mall?”

The kebab seller laughed, stepping outside with Doug. “Easy, very easy! The mall is just round the corner.” He pointed west. “You go right, then round the corner down the little street and there it is.”

The internet café was empty when he returned. Only the purring computers witnessed the clumsy wording of his e-mail to Mrs Lanston. He was usually quick and straightforward in composing messages, yet this one made him struggle like in his schooldays when he had to write essays in English. None of the standard templates he pulled out of the drawers of his mind provided him with the right set of words. He quite simply had no idea how to approach death on a computer screen.

‘I’m sorry to hear that James passed away’ - he knew that wasn’t enough to hold together the mixture of thoughts that swirled through his mind. He was shocked, confused, and yet disinclined to accept defeat. Both the apparition and James’ death proved to be riddles seemingly unsolvable. Equations gone wrong. Incidents that didn’t happen according to his plans. However, he couldn’t possibly write such a thing to James’ mother. Even silence would be better. Not to reply at all. Silence. But silence would mean to once more give in to the inexplicable. Once more facing something called horror. He replaced ‘sorry’ with ‘shocked’ and added only a few more lines:

*Dear Mrs Lanston,*

*I find it tremendously hard to find the right words, so shocked was I to hear about James' death. He was a brilliant student, my best student, very reliable and suited to this particular project. I can assure you that I will do everything possible to fulfil James' last wish, and it will be an honour for me to scatter his ashes, as a way to say thank you to him for the outstanding work he did.*

*I will get in contact with you as soon as I return to Melbourne.*

*My heartfelt condolences,*

*Douglas Samir*

He read through the message again, pleased with his words. He had deliberately avoided mentioning the funeral. The very thought of it vanished as soon as it formed in his mind. Funerals were a place where he didn't want to be. They seemed contrived, arranged. Like stage plays in which everyone had to perform, even the dead. To save their souls, everyone pretended and cried false tears, well aware that the congregation would shun them if they didn't.

The devil lived in places where the air was pregnant with the silence of death and the noise of the unknown. Only the elimination of secrecy would provide security against the evil that ruled the world. Together with James he had worked towards such an aim. All alone now, he couldn't deny feeling uncomfortable. Wouldn't it be possible that the moment he resumed work on the project, evil might strike?

## CHAPTER XXII

AFTER LUNCH WITH WANDA, Charlie and Zara arrived home to find a message from Doug on the answering machine. *Hi there, I'm still at the internet café. I'll probably be back late afternoon. Don't wait for me if you want to go out and do something. Ciao.*

Charlie scanned Zara's face for a reaction. But Zara, whose heart wasn't in the least stirred by Doug's message, had no intention of breaking the silence she had begun to enjoy. Her thoughts were still with Wanda. She liked Wanda, and she began to like this town. "I'm going to have a shower," she said absent-mindedly, as she walked off to her room.

Charlie followed her. "Zara, I think you owe me an explanation. Something's not right here. Did you two have an argument? Is anything troubling you?"

Zara sighed. "There's nothing. That's just the way Doug is - absent and busy most of the time. He is a loner, Charlie. I've told you many times on the phone. He's different."

Charlie shook her head in disbelief. "Sorry for saying this, but why on earth are you with him then? It just doesn't make any sense. So many times in the past we talked about the type of man you would have a relationship with, someone who's into the arts or into social work or into philosophy, and if I remember clearly, this was exactly *not* your type."

She held up her hands like a shield, noticing Zara's attempt to cut her short.

“I know, I know,” Charlie continued. “None of my business. But you’re my friend and I’m concerned about what I see. Don’t expect me to just hang around, watch all this and not interfere, like last night over dinner. I’m not a fool, I can see that something’s not right.”

Zara sighed again. “If Doug needs to spend some time in the internet café, so what? Yes, it’s not what I had imagined, yes, it might seem rude to you, but in the end it’s me who came to visit you.” She dropped her handbag on the bed. “And I actually thought it would suit you not to have him around all the time anyway, just you and I doing things together.”

“Zara, come on! Don’t play dumb. Why would he come all the way here with you if what he wants is to spend time on his own?”

“Because he needed a holiday and we thought it might be a good idea for both of us to get away from the city, and for me to visit you. He’ll at least get to know a place that’s different from Melbourne. I can’t see anything wrong with that, can you?”

Charlie realised she couldn’t get through to Zara. Once Zara shut off, that was it, Charlie hadn’t forgotten. Whenever Zara felt threatened, she became defensive and wriggled herself out of conflict like a snake. Charlie had no choice but to let go. She knew better now not to keep running against a wall like she used to in the past.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said. “You better have a shower then. I might have one myself. And afterwards have a rest, if you like.”

Charlie uttered those last words more for herself than for Zara. They’d had a nice lunch with Wanda, and she didn’t want to suddenly destroy the afternoon by arguing, not with a friend she hadn’t seen for a long time. She needed to calm herself down. Things had changed, and she had to accept that. Accept that there was a man between them.

Yet, Doug's physical absence irritated Charlie. She found it easier to deal with him when he was around. It gave her an opportunity to observe the two as a couple, to study the chemistry between them, to find out if there was a bond, a bond of love. At least when he was physically present she had a chance to state the obvious to herself, that she would be better suited to care for Zara than him.

Later that evening, Zara and Charlie were preparing dinner when Doug arrived. Zither music was playing in the background. Charlie had already had a few drinks too many. She was chuckling and chattering. Zara, at ease with herself and enjoying Charlie's slide into a world of her own, looked at Doug as if he was a stranger who had let himself in uninvited.

"Sorry for being late."

Zara put the lettuce she had just taken out of the fridge on the table and in a mixture of bemusement and sarcasm said: "Well, not to worry, we got your message. How was your day?"

Before Doug had a chance to answer, Charlie swirled over to him with a bottle of Merlot in her hands.

"Doug, my friend," she sang, "you must be exhausted after a whole day at the computer! Come, have some wine with us!"

She was already pouring a glass for him, and Doug, not sure if she was ridiculing him, was just about to refuse when Zara flicked her eyes at him. He accepted the glass and took a sip.

"Zara, darling, let's make some more salad," Charlie chirped. "There's lots of fetta left and lettuce and olives, and tomatoes, everything. This man must be starving, he'll join us for a Greek dinner, won't he?"

Her cheeks were flushed, enhancing her bright orange hair. She wore a short sarong around her waist, and Doug couldn't help looking at her pale slender legs. When she moved, she did so quickly, swaying her almost non-existent hips and holding her back straight. The tight sleeveless black top she wore accentuated her small and firm breasts. Doug took her eyes off her.

"That'd be good, yes," he said, turning to Zara. "After I've had a quick wash." He looked at her body now. It was of a much rounder build than Charlie's. Her hips and breasts were altogether more feminine, her curves softer. She moved more gracefully than Charlie. But now she looked fallen in and slumped, in comparison to her friend's theatrical pose.

"Make ya'self at home," Charlie chuckled, "and don't ya let two women interfere with your daily routine!"

Doug took another sip, wondering again what he was doing here, why he had agreed to come all the way just to meet a woman like Charlie.

"So, how was your day?" Zara asked again, before Doug could sneak off.

"Mostly okay," he said. "I had to deal with a slight problem, one of the emails I got from uni. Other than that, I had a pretty good day. I wandered around town most of the day – pretty interesting little place. And what did you two do?"

Zara knew that averted gaze too well. Doug had never been good at hiding anything, but she resisted digging any deeper, particularly in front of Charlie.

"Charlie and I went out for lunch with Wanda," she said, trying to sound calm. "A friend of Charlie's. Wanda is Sandy's mum, the little girl. Charlie said you met her in the morning."

"Oh, yes, the little girl. She asked me heaps of questions. A smart child."

“Who’s a smart child?” Charlie exclaimed, popping another olive into her mouth. “Sandy? D’ya mean Sandy, the little girl? You met her, didn’t you?” She glanced at Doug, throwing him a smile. “So, you like children?”

Doug put his glass down on the kitchen table. “If they behave and show some respect.”

“Well, Sandy’s great, she really is. A wonderful thing!” Charlie looked from one to the other, before nudging Zara lightly. “You two should make one like her, eh? Wouldn’t that be nice, I could be her god mum. Hey, I’d like that!” She raised her glass to both of them, her other hand on her hip and her head bent sideways. “I think ya’d make great parents, I really do.”

“I better have a shower now,” Doug said abruptly, turning on his heels and leaving the kitchen without waiting for a further comment from either of the two women.

“Ouch! He didn’t like that. Have I pressed the wrong button?” Charlie whispered. “I’m sorry, darl, I didn’t mean to upset you. I didn’t know it was a touchy issue with him.”

Zara breathed in deeply. “You tend to be quite direct sometimes. Not everyone likes that.” She tried to keep her voice under control. “We’ve never talked about having a child, that’s all.”

She suddenly felt a pang in her heart, which gave her a shiver. Not wanting to go to that place deep inside her where a memory was waiting to surface and spill back, she emptied her glass of wine in one swill and then turned back to the sink.

“Let’s finish making dinner,” she said with a firm tone in her voice.

## CHAPTER XXIII

“I wish I could get *retsina* here,” Charlie lulled, “the dry Greek wine, white wine with mastic in it. Have you ever had it?” Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair tousled. She looked at Doug, no longer with an intense provocative stare.

“No, I haven’t.” Doug was almost cheerful, bestowed with that rare talent of forgetting everything else when eating, content like a cat being fed.

Zara, too tipsy to comprehend the meanings of words, smiled. She struggled with the salad leaves on her plate.

“*Retsina* really is the best way to relax,” Charlie continued, “it sort of –” and she hiccupped. “Excuse me, it sort of puts you to sleep.” She tried to repress a burp.

There was silence again, broken only by the sound of cutlery against china, and by the humming of crickets in Charlie’s garden.

After two plate-fulls of salad Doug leant back. Despite the numbing effect of red wine, the memory of James was nagging at him. He wondered why James had refused chemotherapy. Had he wanted to die? Or had he perhaps tried a formula of his own? What made you refuse treatment that could save your life? Doug could only guess, speculating that James must have refused drugs because he wouldn’t have been able to cope with them interfering with his mind. Maybe his fear that his mind would be affected against his own will was larger than his fear of dying. James had always been obsessed with the ultimate

truth that underlay every equation, the universe of numbers. To numb his senses and the pain would have meant to face a distorted, inauthentic self perhaps. He must have wanted the ultimate truth of life, no distortion, no interference, no padding, no evading – just the simple unavoidable truth the universe of his body produced.

That night it was not Doug, preoccupied all evening with metaphysical thoughts beyond his usual capability, but Zara, more drunk than she had ever been before, who had a strange dream. A Greek dream. She, who had never been to Greece.

Ella pethakimo, ella!

*The room is hot. The bed sheets stick to their skin. The ceiling fan is humming. Sand dust hangs in the air and the shutters tip tap against each other. Driftlight on their bodies. Steaming. She throws herself back. Her flying hair catches the light. Sweat glistens on her cheekbones and drips along her breasts, over her tummy down along her thighs. She moans, then whispers. He can't hear her. She hisses like a snake, her nipples are shining dark. He pulls her towards him and licks the sweat off them.*

*She screams. He grips her hard around her buttocks - yes!*

*Her fingernails cut into his dark skin. Then the sun finds a spot on his chest and marks him with gold. Her lips fall on it. She sucks the light into her lungs. He lets himself flow into the cave - a kingdom inside her.*

Ella pethakimo, ella!

*"I like this language," Zara moans.*

*"It's good to be here with you. This should last forever."*

*"It could." Zara rolls off Doug and onto her back. Her eyes turn with the fan on the ceiling. "It's entirely up to us. Let's just do it. With all the rest."*

*Doug sighs and sits up. He slides his hand over her thigh. Zara stops him.*

*“Why do you always cut out when I start on this? What’s so bad about grabbing the moment?” Her voice is hoarse. Doug notices her disappointment. He still can’t understand why she’s always so sensitive after sex. A sigh’s enough to infuriate her.*

*“Come on, Zara, this is ridiculous. I’m not copping out or avoiding anything here. We’ve talked this over so many times. Enjoy yourself!”*

*“Great twister of other people’s tongues! Did I say I wasn’t enjoying myself? How about relax and dream? Why are you so frightened of dreams?”*

*“Well, it all depends on how you look at it. I’m a practical man, you should know by now. If you’re just trying to catch the stars, you end up losing touch with reality. And where does that take you?”*

*“Into the realm of stories. They are more true than your reality!”*

*“You just can’t accept that different people have different desires, different needs, can you?”*

*“Oh, I see, where does that leave us then? Vowing to a mattress with a linen sheet on it. Cool!”*

*“Christ, can’t you ever stop!” Doug shoots up from the bed and throws a towel around his waist. She stops. He waits a few more minutes before he sits down again on the edge of the bed.*

*Zara begins to read his back like a map of a territory she’s seen only a few parts of so far. A map that carries her signature already. The scratch marks of travelling lust. She blows a kiss to them. Then she realises she can’t stand the distance and moves closer. She plants a wet kiss on the spot that says bite me here and I’m yours, on the northern edge of the map where her lips fall into the territory of neck. Doug doesn’t move. The game has started.*

*The game of getting the fish back onto the hook. The game of seduction that will unravel the twist of boundaries crossed and rekindle the fire of lust.*

*They are now walking through the streets and a little boy comes up to them and motions them to follow.*

*Ella, ella na akkousis papou!*

*They do follow him into a side street, to a white building with blue shutters and a square lush inner courtyard. They enter through the gate. An old man is sitting on a stool and talks in a whispering voice, gesticulating, to the two handfuls of people who sit on the ground around him. The light of a small gas lamp on the table next to him throws deep shadows on his wrinkled face. He wears a white singlet and linen pants that seem so wide that Zara expects them to fall down the moment he stands up. His feet are bare and they are tapping a beat in rhythm with certain words that he pronounces more loudly than the rest.*

*The boy gestures for them to sit down next to him, which is as close to the old man as he can get without disturbing any of the other listeners.*

*Then Charlie all of a sudden sits with Zara – Charlie who pushes Doug aside – and together the two women watch as the others listen. Zara closes her eyes and draws in the smells around her. A mixture of basil, sage, pine gum, sweat, rotten wood, hot stonewalls and roasted lamb.*

*From time to time waves of 'aaaahs' and 'uuuhs' vibrate through the audience, then someone starts talking. Zara opens her eyes. A young man with black hair is addressing the old man. The old man stops and listens carefully, then takes up his chord again, and at the end of what must have been a question, his voice goes up. He stops again, waits for the person who interrupted him to nod, then continues. With his hands he draws a*

*circle in the air, imitates the fluttering of bird wings, and then whistles before clapping his hands and ending the performance with deep laughter bellowing behind his two hands held in front of his face.*

*The masked story, Zara thinks. Her mind takes a snapshot of the man's hands: the left ring finger is missing. The man looks at her through the finger gap. She winces. Then the man shows his face again, stands up, and bows to the audience. Now he grabs his stool and walks away with those wide pants still securely fixed to his waist. Paragalo, kalinichta, he shouts.*

*Zara takes Charlie's hand. "I'm cold, let's go home."*

*The boy turns to them and shakes their hands. "Paragalo, thank you," he says and runs off, in the opposite direction.*

*"Bizarre." Charlie frowns, speaking in Doug's voice. "What was all this about? Did you get it?"*

*"Not sure. Maybe the old man got bored with having the same audience every time. He probably asked the boy to get some people off the streets and promised him some sweets afterwards." Zara knows there is more to it, but she can't grasp the message. "I think," she says, "papou means grandfather. You know, when the boy approached us. Perhaps he is the old man's grandson."*

*"Hmm. I wouldn't have a clue. Makes sense in a way though. Grandfather teaches grandson and first thing he has to do is find an audience. Maybe those other people were strangers like us, only they obviously spoke the language." Charlie puts her arm around Zara.*

*"Strange, isn't it. Like being in Greece," Zara says.*

*"I've never been to Greece, I don't know."*

*"Nor have I." Zara pulls away and wraps her arms around herself. "I'm cold."*

The next morning Zara told Charlie about the dream and asked her about Greece. To her surprise, Charlie had been to some of the Greek islands.

“Crete, Rhodes and Samos,” she said. “Beautiful people, beautiful food and the most awe-inspiring landscapes I’ve ever seen. Have I never told you? I was there, gee, about ten years ago, when I started out on my career as a painter. I got a chance to go with a friend, Laura, who owned a house on Crete. And we travelled to the other two islands while we were there. We stayed for two months.

“Unfortunately, the trip was a waste of time in terms of my career. The whole time I was there I didn’t touch a pencil or a brush. And not a single experience filtered into my paintings later. I’ve forgotten most of it now. It was almost like being in a paradise where nothing mattered anymore.

“Laura was convinced that there were gods on Crete, and their power was too strong for any human to compete with. That’s how she used to explain everything to me. They want you to change your outlook on life, they force you to become one with them first, to become religious, to believe. And once that has happened, a new spirit will be reborn inside you, that’s when you’ll be able to paint here, she would say.

“I don’t know if she was right. I always listened to her with suspicion. It all sounded a bit like an easy way out, to justify not doing anything. Her way of dispersing my frustration. All I know is that once I was back here, I forgot virtually everything. I couldn’t even remember the colour of the mountains Laura’s house looked onto, the names of places, the smell of the air. Nothing. I came back and everything was gone like a dream. Sometimes I wonder if I ever was there.”

Charlie’s eyes had wandered off into the past, and Zara let her go.

“Laura was a lovely lady,” she continued, “a lot older than me, like a mother almost. She eventually went to Crete to live there for good, and we wrote to each other for a while. But then one day instead of getting a reply from her, my letter came back, unopened. I didn’t understand, but concluded that she obviously had moved to a new address. I never heard from her again.

“Sometimes I think I should go back, find the house and see if she’s still there.” Charlie sighed, brushing her hand over her forehead as if to wipe away a bad memory. “Strange how life changes the course of things sometimes. I never got a chance to return her favours.”

Zara didn’t quite know what to say. She put her hand on Charlie’s arm. “I’m sure Laura doesn’t hold a grudge. Maybe she did send you a letter with a change of address and it never arrived.” Zara was still dazed by her dream, too self-absorbed to feel genuine, deep compassion for her friend.

“Maybe you’re right,” Charlie said. “Anyway, I liked Greece very much, and I wouldn’t mind going back there one day. Maybe your dream was a sign that you’re meant to go there. With me. That we should go together.”

“But what about the Greek words? I don’t speak Greek, never even heard Greek being spoken around me. That’s frightening.”

“Well, no, not really. You’ve been to Greek restaurants, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sure, but – ”

“There are always lots of Greek people in Greek restaurants. Maybe your subconscious picked up a few words here and there. Also, I think I might have mentioned a few words last night.

Zara shook her head. “I don’t remember any.”

“Maybe they were just a mix of meaningless words in your dream, not Greek at all.”

Zara was still puzzled, too many riddles. "I don't know, it's all bizarre."

"Maybe some dreams are just meant to be dreams. We could go crazy sitting here and trying to analyse it all."

Charlie's perception of something dark lurking beneath Zara's and Doug's casual way of behaving was as clear to her as the stars in the desert sky at night. Her house, she realised, had turned into the stage of a play, the plot of which she didn't fully understand. She had to admit though that her characters played their roles of deception well.

"So, how are you feeling today anyway?" she said, glancing at Zara.

Zara was holding the fridge door open, staring over the edge out into the backyard, unaware of the reappearance of the fox.

"Quite dizzy actually," she said absent-mindedly. "I might lie down again for another hour." She shut the fridge. "Don't wait for me with breakfast."



*sie verwandelten sich in Betonwände, which began to glow with the ice of careless sobriety, die ihre Haut zu verbrennen drohte. Sie sah sich im Staub der Toten wühlen, welcher aufgewirbelt wurde mit jedem Wort der Befreiung. She saw herself trying to grasp the freedom of a bird migrating south, um den kalten Winter zu überleben.*

*Jahrelang durchforstete sie Wälder; forests in which she invented voices for the characters residing within her. Stimmen, die das Weggehen planten before her hands would freeze.*

*She was the lost daughter returning home to gain certainty über ihre Flucht. Sie wollte nocheinmal die toten Sterne am traurigen Himmel betrachten, to see if the stars were still dead and the sky still sad, wollte wissen, ob ihr Körper noch immer Berührungslosigkeit spüren würde and the lack of enthusiasm on other people's faces.*

*Die alte Heimat, wo die Dunkelheit immer pünktlich kam, while she was running against the clock, die nur Nüchternheit und bewachte Routine versprach. Jede Nacht tastete sie ihre Seele nach neuen Narben ab and treated the scars with her promise, ihre Suche nach einem neuen Sinn nie aufzugeben.*

## CHAPTER XXIV

DOUG SAT AT ONE OF THE COMPUTERS facing the wall to the side of the shop, this time not allowing a window to put him on display. He sipped a double espresso, taking in the disharmonious rhythm of fingers hitting keyboards. After signing into his e-mail account, he noticed with relief that there was no reply from Mrs Lanston.

He turned to his left and looked, past several other computers, through the window. The leaflet-distributor with messages from Jesus was still there, now patiently offering leaflets to every passer-by. Only half an hour before, he had, with a scornful look on his face, stopped Doug. "Mate," he had said, "your life is in need of Jesus. Listen to his messages before it's too late!" When Doug refused, the guy had forced a leaflet into his hand. "Have faith in the Lord!" he had yelled. "He is our saviour!" Doug had been too bewildered to say anything and walked away quickly. The man's stare had followed him until he entered the internet café, where he chucked the piece of paper in the bin, angrily.

What was wrong with people? Why did everyone in this town think they had to save him? The kebab seller, that nurse, Charlie – everyone admonishing him like a child. He was used to being treated with respect.

Doug sighed, thinking suddenly of his parents: Maronite Christians, who went to church regularly. His mother was still trying, every time he visited them, to talk him into fully embracing their religion, with all the Lebanese attire of reverent respect.

“What harm does it do you to go to church, eh?” she would say. “Are you too arrogant to kneel down and pray to God?”

And every time he would try to explain: “I do believe in God, but not in asking God for salvation and forgiveness. Things happen the way they do, whether we go to church or not. And I don’t believe in miracles.” Then, if she continued pestering him, he would finally lash out: “What good did it do to sit and pray for Marie, eh?”

This was usually when she yelled back at him with tears in her eyes. “What right do you have to talk like this to your own mother!” And then his father would intervene before Doug even had a chance to say sorry.

When Marie was dying at the age of ten, he had prayed fervently, prayed for his sister because his parents wanted him to. Although only a twelve-year old boy then, something about praying seemed false to him from the start. He used to see himself and his parents from above, kneeling in front of Marie’s bed, as though he was God watching them. But instead of feeling happy, he had felt embarrassed and ashamed.

At his sister’s funeral he had been shaken by fits of uncontrolled laughter. The whole congregation was shocked. He had decided on that day never again to pray, never to go to church and never again to attend a funeral.

He had continued to have faith, continued to believe in God, yet what distinguished him from other believers, from that day onwards, was that he would no longer waste any time trying to interfere with death or anything else that happened in his life. He came to understand that God *was* indeed all mighty, the greatest mathematician in the world. To interfere with or question God’s would have meant to question his capacities and the truth of his powers. Praying and going to church had become for him nothing more than acts of shrewd bargaining with God.

Since the incident on the road and James' death, however, Doug had started to falter. He began seeing things differently, couldn't help constantly questioning death and God's will. For someone believing in the world as one big mathematical formula and believing in infinity as a valuable result, it was almost heretical all of a sudden to be desperate for answers.

Doug leant forward and typed DEMON into the search engine. If not with God, why not argue with the devil then? Only a few sites came up, about a band called *Demon*. Doug wondered what sort of music they played with a name like that.

Another site listed Christian books that informed readers how to exorcise a demon if they were possessed by one. Doug shook his head at so much superstition. All he wanted was a simple solution, a site that would tell him more about the hidden, logical meaning of an apparition like his, without having to explore the fields of mythology and esotericism.

He keyed in GHOST, but this search revealed a useless never-ending list of sites referring to so-called real-life ghost stories. He was definitely not in the mood for other people's horror stories, having his own to unravel first. His final search word, DEVIL, took him back to the Christian sites listing books on exorcism.

Nothing. No answers.

Doug pondered the possibility of simply forgetting the whole incident, treating it as a mere hallucination triggered by fatigue. Why continue worrying about the uncanny creature, when he should be getting on with his life – when he should be making love to Zara and continue with his project.

Yet now there was a portion of knowledge burnt into his mind: the knowledge that neither of the two, mathematics nor sex, would ever be the same again.

Even with a new student working with him on his project, it would be difficult to continue without James. The project carried just as much James' personality as his own.

James had been the brain behind it, Doug only the catalyst. Mathematics had now attached to it a notion of unpredictability, of inexactness, of potential failure.

The same was true of sex. It was as if he had dried up, as if he couldn't rely on his manhood anymore. The two most infallible pleasures in his life had lost the beauty of prediction. No longer was he able to have confidence in them. He felt clumsy, no longer able to perform as he used to – his trust gone.

Even his office and his tiny flat in Melbourne would never be the same again. And each time he drove now, he was ready for something to jump in front of his windscreen. Ready and scared. Scared that next time he would run over it. Scared that next time it would be a human body.

Exhausted from too much thinking and again driven by his empty stomach, Doug left the internet café. His legs pulled him towards the mall, down the same side street as the day before, round the corner to the left and stopping in front of the kebab seller's shop. This time he read the name painted on the shop window: *Ibrahim's Kebabs*. As he entered, he noticed the CLOSED sign on the door.

The kebab seller looked up from behind the counter. "Ah, my friend! I didn't think you would come back so quickly!" He cleaned his hands on his shirt.

"You're closing early today," Doug said, shaking the kebab seller's hand.

"On Friday always. But if you want to eat, I can make you something."

"If it's not too much trouble – yes, please. Same as yesterday."

"Sit down, sit down!" The kebab seller started unpacking some of the bowls that he had already sealed. "Friday I take food home for my father." His hands moved swiftly. "So, what do you want to know? Tell me!" He didn't look up from preparing the kebab.

"Your name's Ibrahim?" Doug asked.

“Ibrahim? Well, you can call me Ibrahim. But it’s my father’s name. My name is Amin.” His chin jerked upwards. “Did you come back to ask me about my name? Names are not important. You can call me anything you like.” He paused. “And you?”

Doug’s stomach made a loud, grumbling sound. “Me? What do you mean?”

“Your name?”

Doug shifted in his seat. “Sorry, but didn’t you just say names were not important?”

“Yes, yes. But you’ve asked me, so names are important to you. You are my guest, so they are important to me now, too.” He looked up.

“Doug. Douglas Samir.”

“Douglas? That’s not Lebanese!” He shrugged his shoulders. “Never mind, we shouldn’t criticise our parents.” He paused. “So, tell me now!”

“Tell you what?”

“You’ve come to talk, I can feel it in my testicles.” This time he looked straight into Doug’s eyes. “I’m an old harmless man.”

“Well, let me tell you the truth then.” Doug pointed to his stomach. “I came back because I like your kebabs. My stomach brought me back, take it as a compliment.”

“Okay, okay, I see. A lot of pride.” Amin came round the counter with a kebab double the size of the one Doug had the day before. “This will fix you. Never ask a hungry man any questions. Give him plenty of food first, and he will give you honesty as a token of gratitude.”

Amin sat down opposite Doug, just like the day before, but now his body was tense, his posture showed alertness. He was ready to take on a listener’s responsibility, the duty of an elder. His father had taught him that, years ago.

Amin had always respected his father, and through him his mother, who died when he was only ten. After her death, they went back to Lebanon because his father couldn’t

cope with the loss. He had loved her more than any man was ever capable of loving a woman. They didn't return to Australia until Amin was well into his twenties, ready to embark on his own journey to a country of which he had fond childhood memories. His father followed him, not wishing to stay back without his son, afraid perhaps of also losing him.

"It is important to understand who you are," Amin said to Doug, with a tinge of sadness in his voice, "understand where you belong, where you come from. The blood that flows through your veins carries the temperature of your people, no matter where you go, where you live."

Doug had finished his kebab and leant back in his chair, crossing his arms. He didn't know what to reply. What Amin said made sense, yet it didn't touch anything inside him. It was someone else's story. Amin's story, other people's story. He waited for Amin to continue.

"Aah, you're waiting for your coffee." The gravity had gone from Amin's voice. "Maybe I should change my statement: never ask a man to tell you the truth before he has a strong coffee to give him courage." He got up. "Sometimes I get carried away."

While brewing coffee, it occurred to Amin that this younger man had somehow managed to pluck the fatherly nerve inside him. Amin had never married. Marriage for some reason had slipped through his fingers like sand. Maybe it was fear that the same would happen to him as to his father. Or maybe he had never come to terms with his father's broken heart. Though his father had urged him several times to go and get married, there was always sadness attached to what should be a happy occasion in a man's life.

Sighing, he poured coffee into a small cup and carefully – so as not to destroy the head by spilling any – carried it over to Doug.

"Here you are, my son," he said. "Strong Lebanese coffee."

“Thanks.” Doug lowered his gaze, embarrassed to be addressed that way.

Amin sat down again and waited. Waited for Doug to take on the challenge, or run away like the day before.

Doug stayed. “Maybe brother would be more appropriate,” he said. “I don’t believe you’re much older than me.”

“Okay, I see.” He winked. “Now you want to know my age. First my name, now my age. Have a guess then, brother.” He produced a grin.

Doug was amazed at the agility of the man’s brain, at his candour and wit. He had to admit he was enjoying this game despite its serious undertone. Perhaps Amin was right, perhaps it wasn’t just his empty stomach that had brought him back. He breathed in deeply.

“Aah, don’t worry,” Amin laughed, “I’m not offended if you guess wrong!”

Although numbers were one of the prime concerns in Doug’s life, he was hopeless when it came to guessing people’s age. “I don’t know, really,” he said. “43, 45?”

Amin’s grin didn’t disappear.

“Okay, I’m obviously wrong. Tell me then!”

“Oh, I don’t think I should.” Amin rubbed the palms of his hands together. “But we can make a deal: I tell you, if you tell me. We are Arabs after all.” He stretched out his hand, ready for his opponent to shake it and fix the deal.

“What if my story matters more to you than your age to me?” Doug said.

Amin lifted his eyebrows.

“To be honest, I’m not really interested in how old you are,” Doug continued.

A grin lit up Amin’s face again. “Okay. I call you ‘son’ then. That means you are obliged to tell me your sorrows. You have eaten my food and drunk my coffee under my roof. You have been my guest, so I am responsible for you now. Like a father to his son.” He suppressed a smile. “I’m sorry. Not a winning day for you.”

Doug couldn't help feeling trapped. Maybe he should just leave. But Amin was a quick thinker.

"Okay then," he said. "I suggest you come to my house and we talk there. And anyway, it's time to go." He pointed to the door where a group of youngsters had gathered in front of the glass door, looking in and gesticulating at Amin. Amin shook his head at them and crossed his hands in the air, signalling that he was closed. The youngsters turned away and headed back towards the mall.

"It is better if we go," Amin said again. "People want me to open if they see me sitting here. And my father is waiting."

He got up and from the counter grabbed the plastic bag full of food. Doug had no choice but to follow. He put the empty coffee cup on the counter, pulled out his wallet, but before he could get any money out, Amin stopped him.

"What are you doing?" His eyebrows narrowed. "Put that away! First day you were my customer, today you are my guest. Have you forgotten? I said yesterday if you need to talk, come back. We never take money from someone in trouble."

A vague memory entered Doug's mind, about his grandmother saying to him when he was still a little boy that you should never send away people who needed help and were hungry. He remembered strangers occasionally staying at her house for a few hours or sometimes even a few days. It never meant much to him, and he never gave much thought to it later in his life either. Now he had become one of those strangers, a stranger in a foreign land, a stranger who was taken care of by someone like his grandmother. Someone who offered him food and help.

Doug felt uneasy, embarrassed. He was a man with pride after all. A man capable of looking after himself, not relying on anyone, not even on his family. He liked his independence, liked to be in control.

Yet, it was this control that had slipped away from him since the incident on the road. He was no longer capable of functioning the way he did before. He grappled with some non-graspable jelly-like substance that, however hard he tried, he didn't manage to press into a mould.

When Amin locked the door of the shop behind them, the man did much more than just that: he locked the door to one long chapter in Doug's life.

## CHAPTER XXV

ZARA STILL FELT DIZZY, not only from a hangover, but also from a dream that refused to go. Why Greece, she kept asking herself? Why of all places a country she had no connection with whatsoever? Were Doug and she meant to go there together? Would that perhaps be a new beginning for them?

Wanda's embrace suddenly pulled Zara back to reality, the way water does when splashed into your face.

"Good to see you again, Zara!" she said in her passionate husky voice. "I'm glad you've decided to come. You look a bit pale, are you alright?"

"Oh, you should have seen us last night," Charlie answered instead. "We drank a bit too much and are both feeling under the weather."

"I'll be fine," Zara said, aware of her drifting state. She composed herself and began to look around the gallery. "I'm looking forward to this."

She wandered over to a wall with several paintings. Looking at the different patterns and symbols, she let herself be drawn into their abstract worlds, painted largely in oranges and browns, with white lines and dots forming a stark contrast against the darker colours. One painting she found exceptionally beautiful. It was divided into four equal segments, by two yellow lines crossing diagonally. Each segment was covered with what looked like an

abundance of cotton wool blossoms over a carpet of tiny dots in all shades of browns and ochres.

“What are these?” she asked Wanda. “These white cotton balls?”

Wanda had to smile. “They’re the flowers of the Coolibah tree, which is very common in this area. The women paint these flowers a lot. This one’s called the *Coolibah Dreaming*. A very talented young woman from up north painted it. Do you like it?”

“It’s stunning!”

“Where’s Sandy?” Charlie interrupted. “I could take her for a walk.”

“She’s actually in there with the women,” Wanda said over her shoulder. “Do you mind, Zara, if Sandy’s around while you’re doing the photos?”

Zara would have liked to be alone with the women, but decided not to let herself be unsettled by the child again. “As long as Sandy knows that I’m here to take photos and not to play with her.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that! Once she’s absorbed in painting, she forgets the world. She’s got that talent of switching off, sometimes even my sister, who’s supposed to teach her, doesn’t get through to her.”

Zara tilted her head. “So, your sister’s here, too?”

“No, Joy doesn’t come here very often. She lives in Hermannsburg, one of the early missions, you know. The place where Albert Namatjira painted most of his famous watercolours. Have you heard of Namatjira?” Wanda walked over to a shelf that was covered with Aboriginal craftworks.

“I’ve actually read a bit about him,” Zara said, following her. “I like the way he painted the bark of gumtrees in those soft pink tones.”

“See here! These all have his paintings on them.” Wanda showed her a set of four place mats. “First Aboriginal painter who became famous. He started it all. Now we have

so many talented men and women in this country. I mean, look at all the canvases on the walls here, so many stories, so much history.” For a brief moment, her eyes turned inwards. “Anyway, every second Saturday morning I take Sandy to Hermansburg, about 120 kms south-west of here, and she spends the weekend with my sister. Teaches her at her place, that’s better, where the stories are, you know?”

Zara nodded, not quite certain whether she fully understood. She got the impression that Wanda trusted she had a certain knowledge of things. It made Zara feel awkward, as if she was made to belong here despite her foreignness.

“I’ve been looking for a photographer for quite a while,” Wanda continued, “but I never found anyone sensitive enough, and it has to be a woman, too. You can’t just thrust anyone on these artists. They’re very suspicious of people coming in and taking photos of them, of their stories. To them it’s like stealing. I told them you’re coming today, that you’re from Switzerland, and they seem to be fine with that.”

Wanda was certain that given enough time and plenty of nourishment, Zara’s dried-up spirit would come to life again. She was convinced that the women would feel at ease with Zara, as she was in many ways similar to them: talented, shy, easily embarrassed, and someone who would shut off if imposed on.

“Look,” she continued, “take your time. You might want to get to know the women first and come back another time to take the photos.”

When Zara entered the art room, the women didn’t look up. She was struck by the silence. Sandy sat in the far corner, with her back to her. Wanda was right, the child was completely absorbed in her work.

The room was a small industrial hall in need of repair, with ceilings showing the structure of the roof and all the cabling, and large white walls with a collection of over-

sized paintings hanging on them. The women sat on mats strewn around the floor and were bent over their works. Several women were painting one large canvas together, each of them occupied with a different section. Pots of paint were scattered around, and every so often the women swapped pots, sometimes mumbling, sometimes without even looking at each other.

Before Zara had a chance to find a chair to sit down, one of the women working on the large canvas looked up and gestured to her to come closer, sit down on the floor with them. The woman also said a few words, but Zara didn't understand, so she just smiled and did as was indicated. She realised at once that she didn't have the same view of the paintings as when she was standing up, but gathering that the woman's invitation to sit with them was important, she decided not to get up and wander around.

Her camera was in her bag, but she didn't dare take it out. For some reason she felt that that would destroy the peaceful setting. She noticed the women glance at the bag every so often, as if waiting for its contents to spill out.

Sitting cross-legged, she followed the brush strokes of the woman next to her who was working on a pattern of concentric circles. Another woman was painting white dots on what looked to Zara like the image of a brown snake. One woman at a smaller canvas next to Sandy started humming. Then another, fairly old woman with grey hair stood up and left the room. When she came back, she carried a pot of red paint. She knelt down and signalled to the much younger woman who was humming to come over. Without stopping her humming, the woman stood up, picked a pot of brown paint and sat down opposite the old woman. The canvas was still blank, apart from a border of black dots interchanging with red wavy lines. Both women dipped large brushes each into their own pot and started filling the rest of the canvas, with the red woman brushing first, then the brown woman brushing over the red paint, mixing the two colours into a murky earthy colour.

After a while of intense absorption, Zara drifted into a kind of trance. The mumbling and humming voices floated in the background of her consciousness and the colours on the paintings filled her with calm and happiness. She rested quietly in herself, no longer aware of any internal turmoil.

The artists accepted her quietness for a good while, but then became restless, curious about the figure among them doing nothing but staring and dreaming. They decided to take action and urged the woman closest to Zara to wake her from her ecstatic trance.

The woman poked Zara's arm with the back of her brush. It took three pokes before Zara noticed the commotion. She gave the women an alarmed look.

"You paint?" the woman asked, looking at Zara's bag.

Zara cleared her throat. "No, no, I'm here to take photos."

She opened her bag and took out the camera. The women stopped painting and started gesticulating and talking. The woman from before reached across.

"I look," she said, "give me!"

Zara had no choice but to pass her camera over. To Zara's surprise the woman knew how to switch it on and set the aperture on the lens. She aimed at the woman opposite her, who covered her face with her hands, giggling and looking away. She focused and released the shutter. Then she turned to Zara, and before Zara was aware of what was happening, the woman had taken her photo. Pleased with her deed, she handed the camera back to Zara with a huge smile.

"Whadda your name?" she then asked, grabbing the brush.

"Zara," she replied.

"What?" The woman leant across as if to hear better.

"My name's Zara."

“Tsara.” The woman passed her the brush. “Write here!” She pointed to a still unpainted bit of the canvas in front of her.

Zara took the brush, reluctant to write her name on their painting. “But I can’t, this is your painting.”

The woman got impatient and pulled Zara’s hand down to the canvas. Zara wrote her name in capital letters.

“Z-A-R-A,” the woman read out loud. She snatched the brush from Zara’s hand and began to write her own name next to Zara’s.

“Jenny,” Zara said. “That’s a nice name.”

Then Jenny pointed to the woman opposite her and said ‘Nancy’, then to the woman to her left, ‘Peggy’, and so forth with every one in the room. When she got to Sandy, Sandy looked up from her painting. Recognising Zara, her face lit up and she waved hello.

After Jenny finished, Zara greeted the women with an all-embracing hello-nice-to-meet-you across the room. Some of them nodded, then continued with their work. Others didn’t even look up.

“Okay,” Jenny said, motioning Zara to stand up, pointing to the camera. “Photo now!”

Zara did as she was told and stood up. Before taking any photos of the paintings, she focused on Jenny, who was, she could tell, waiting for her turn. She took a shot of her and her big smile, not missing the bit of canvas with their two names, feeling that they had formed a bond, like when two men mixed their blood to seal their brotherhood.

Zara walked around, searching for the right angles and moments to take photos, admiring the patience with which the women set one tiny dot, one short line, one brushstroke next to another, with hands as trained as a calligrapher’s.

In a strange way she felt elated, optimistic for the first time since Doug and she had arrived in Alice Springs. These women were so confident about where they belonged, and each of their paintings expressed that.

Neutral meeting place, Wanda had said, from where the people used to walk off towards their respective sacred places. Maybe a path would lead from here to somewhere she would eventually be able to call home – her own sacred caterpillar place.

## CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE belong to a country? What makes people long for belonging?

Belonging to a nation, to a language, to certain laws means putting your feet down on the ground saying, “I am allowed to stay, I am legal”. But before you belong, the question of your right to stay is like a slap in your face, and your answer is often silence, an expression of bewilderment about who is responsible for your residential fate.

To enter Australia as a temporary resident, there are several options: via a holiday-visa, a business-visa, a work-visa, or a student-visa. A holiday-visa allows you to stay for six months, twelve at the most. A business-visa will be issued for a period of five years if you have starting capital and experience as an owner of a business. A work-visa will be given to you if you find an Australian company willing to employ and sponsor you. An academic degree and a scholarship or financial ability to pay for a university or TAFE course will entitle you to enter on a student-visa, valid for up to four years.

The day you decide to become permanent, your case turns into a case of migration, reducing you to a number, putting you under a microscope, counting your points for age, education, English literacy, and health. Classed as a potential threat to the system, perceived as trying to sneak under the umbrella of the government to keep you alive with Australian citizens’ taxes, you are screened for diseases, criminal offences, strange philosophies and ideologies, linking you with people who you are strongly advised not to

mingle with; asked to take out international health insurance, buy national shares, be the right age, have sufficient professional skills, and if all fails: marry, or at least get yourself into a de-facto relationship with a reputable Australian citizen.

Who controls migrants?

Who determines whether someone's good enough to live in Australia?

The Australian immigration laws were made by people whose ancestors came to this land without any entry permits. They came as convicts, explorers, free settlers who conquered the open space. The then inhabitants of Australian land considered them ghosts. Ghosts who didn't need any entry permits, because ghosts know no boundaries, because ghosts roam freely.

What if, in the early days of settlement, there had been migration laws?

Which of the 250 languages spoken on the continent would the newcomers have been asked to learn? Who would have been fit enough to survive the harshness of the land without killing all resources? Who would have had the necessary skills for weaving baskets, catching fish, dancing, playing the didgeridoo, tracking and hunting animals in the bush? Who for finding seeds and berries, for painting with the full knowledge of different symbols belonging to different communities? Who would have had the skills to teach by means of storytelling?

What if, in contemporary Australia, Aboriginal people controlled migration to Australia?

Which of the newcomers would show interest in Indigenous culture, Indigenous beliefs; would swear not to rape the land, only use what is needed; would learn one of the Indigenous languages so they'd be able to communicate with the people on the land; would take part in Indigenous dances and story telling sessions; would let their children learn by experience, rather than through schools; would agree to look after the land; and would be willing to respect their elders?

Who would an Aboriginal Immigration Department consider worthy living in Australia?

Who would in the end be allowed to stay?

## CHAPTER XXVII

AMIN LIVED ON the western side of town, in a small brick house, nestled in a quiet suburb, not far from the Gap, nature's gate to Alice Springs. Rows of lavender bushes framed a straight paved path leading to the entrance; three olive trees and a lemon tree ripe with fruit decorated the front yard. The ground was covered with bark, mixed in with different sized rocks that gave an impression of the rocky soil so common for the landscape around Alice Springs.

"This saves water," Amin explained. "If you have a lawn and pretty flowers, you have to water them all the time. We have our own water basin in Alice Springs, but it doesn't mean we can waste water. Some people don't understand. But lavender, and olive and citrus trees live well in this climate. Palm trees, too."

Doug noticed the solar panels on the roof of the house, the same he had seen earlier on Charlie's house. They seemed common around here.

"We heat our water with the sun," Amin said, his eyes following Doug's. "All houses in Australia should have solar panels. The best way to save energy. We have so much sun in this country."

Doug nodded, surprised at Amin's care for the environment. Women were in general more concerned about the planet than men. He thought of Zara. There was a time when she wouldn't stop praising her country's well-developed recycling system while criticising the

backwardness of Australians. It would get to the point where Doug was sick of hearing about it and, to shut her up, would throw the question at her why she had decided to come and live in Australia if everything seemed so bad.

But Amin was a man. To hear a man talk like Zara was unusual. Not that Doug didn't care at all, but he had never consciously thought about recycling and had never really become involved. The studio he lived in was in a house of four flats. A cleaning lady took care of his waste.

Amin's house was as spotless inside as on the outside. Doug was asked to take off his shoes at the front door, and they both entered in socks. A speckled green slate floor was the main feature of the hallway. It was brightened up by filtered light streaming in through a skylight in the ceiling.

Doug followed Amin to the back of the house, into a large living area, where red curtains drawn across the windows cast a dim pink glow over the room. The furniture was sparse: a dark green lounge suite, a coffee table, and two sideboards, one with a TV on it. There were only three photographs of landscapes on the walls, and in big letters written underneath each picture was the word LEBANON.

Doug could smell frankincense. It triggered memories of his grandmother's house – a house not unlike this one with light flooding through a range of differently coloured curtains. As a young boy he enjoyed staying there, imagining he was living in a prism.

They entered the kitchen, separated from the adjacent living room by an arch, and Doug noticed an old man sitting at the kitchen table.

“That's my father,” Amin said before Doug could utter a sound. Then he turned to the old man. “I have a friend with me today from Melbourne. Doug is here on holidays.”

Looking past them, the old man nodded approval. “Welcome to my house!” he said.

Doug waited for the old man to recognise him. He was the man from the internet café, the man who had stared without saying a word. But Amin's father kept his eyes fixed on a space behind Doug.

"Nice to meet you," Doug finally said.

"I brought home some food," Amin cheered. "We can all eat together."

"Very good. I am hungry like a lion." The old man laughed, and this time looked straight at Doug. "It is good to eat after fasting, it makes you appreciate food again. And then praying to God is easy. Do you pray?"

Doug shifted from one leg to the other. "Pray?" he repeated, as if he didn't understand the word.

"Begging God, yes. Do you?"

"Very rarely. Why?"

"Good. People who pray every day are lazy. They leave everything up to HIM. They don't understand that praying is there to finalise your account. As if HE'd have time to care about everyone's petty little worries. People think they don't need to take responsibility once they pray every day. Religion's an easy way out for many people."

"Father fasts one day every week," Amin explained, ignoring the old man's views on God. "He believes everybody should do it."

"Yes," the old man said with emphasis while pulling himself up from the chair, tapping along the edge of the table. "Should I come and help you, my son?"

"No, no, sit down, there's not much to do," Amin replied, noticing Doug's questioning look. "Sorry, I forgot to tell you, my father is blind. He lost his eyesight many years ago."

The old man sighed. "I lost my wife and then a few years later I lost my eyes. I didn't want to see the world anymore without her."

“Glaucoma,” Amin added. “Didn’t tell anyone that his eyes were getting worse every day, until he couldn’t hide it any longer. And when he finally saw the doctor, it was too late.”

One answer resolved, but along came another question: why would someone who was blind go to an internet café?

“I’m sorry,” Doug said.

“Sometimes it is good not to see,” the old man continued, “and sometimes it would be good not to hear. The world is full of ugly sights and sounds.” He started walking around the table, towards the living room, with his right hand sliding along the wall. “Come, sit down on the couch! We don’t eat in the kitchen when we have guests.”

“Can I help you?” Doug asked, not sure whether to offer the old man his arm or not.

“I am okay in my own house.” The old man breathed heavily, but walked with grace, slowly, as if to show that his disability hadn’t broken his pride.

Amin, who had unpacked the bags of food, followed them into the living room with a tray of plates stacked with sun-dried tomatoes, roasted capsicum and eggplant, thinly sliced lamb, tabouli, Turkish bread, hummus, and roasted potatoes. Although Doug had just eaten, he was hungry again. Uncomfortable situations always made him burn too much energy.

“There is more of everything,” Amin said, as a mother would to her family.

Doug felt strangely alienated in this small circle consisting only of men. He sat down after the old man, who immediately and skilfully began to dish meat and tabouli onto a plate.

“Please, don’t wait, my son,” he said to Doug.

Once his father and his guest were comfortable helping themselves to food, Amin sat down himself with a plate full of mouth-watering delicacies.

For the first time ever, Doug didn't manage to concentrate on his food and enjoy it without his troubled mind interfering. He wondered how he had found himself into this situation. Was it really just a coincidence that he happened to stumble across the old man in the internet café and then later met his son? A coincidence like James' death and the incident on the road?

He was sitting in a foreign living room, eating food he grew up on, in the company of strangers, surrounded by a strangely familiar atmosphere. There was something of his childhood, his grandmother's house, lurking somewhere in the frankincense-inspired air, haunting him. But nothing surfaced, nothing made itself clear. Except the one thing he had hoped never to see again.

Doug choked and dropped his plate. It shattered into pieces on the floor. Amin paused in the middle of chewing, staring at Doug. The old man, just about to lean back, immediately sat upright, alerted. He tried to make out the source of so much noise by tilting his head in every direction.

"What happened? Amin?"

Amin swallowed the half-chewed bite in his mouth.

"I'm okay," he said quickly. "Doug dropped his plate, something frightened him. I don't know. Doug? Are you alright?"

He looked at the shaking figure flopping back into his seat. Doug's eyes were closed, his face pale. Amin put his plate down, stood up and slapped Doug's cheeks. "My friend, wake up!"

Doug gaped at the wall opposite, but all he could see was the sideboard with the TV and its black screen.

"Doug, are you alright?" Amin knew there was something going on inside that man's chest, but this looked more serious than he had anticipated. He wondered if it had been a good idea to bring him here, to make him talk. He felt uneasy, guilty almost.

“Leave him, Amin, don’t force him to talk.” The old man’s voice sounded calm again. “You better have a look around the room, maybe your friend saw a snake. We’ve had one in here before, you remember? Many people get frightened when they see a snake.”

Amin was confident that no snake would cause such paleness and fright in a man’s face. But for his father’s sake Amin searched the room, looking behind the sideboard, then behind the lounge, behind the curtains, but there was nothing, not even a cockroach. Only Doug, still gaping at the TV.

“It wasn’t a snake,” Doug finally muttered, picking up the food he had dropped and the broken pieces of the plate. “I’m really sorry.”

“No, no, it is alright.” Amin was relieved. “Main thing is you are alright. You frightened us a little. What happened?” He sat down again.

Doug had no choice but to tell them what had troubled him over the past few days, certain that they would think he was overworked and stressed out. Or worse even, that he had gone mad.

Doug didn’t know how to bring across his account. He was well capable of winning the interest of math students so they would be captivated by formulas and numbers, but this was totally different. This experience was as close as he had ever been to the fine line between fact and fiction.

He remembered the few stories his grandmother had told him when he was little. The few stories, he was sure, his grandfather would have also told him, had he still been alive. But his grandfather had died when Doug was only two years old. His other grandparents, the ones on his father’s side, he had never met at all. They were both dead before he was born. And his parents had never been interested in telling their children stories. They were preoccupied with God and with seeing their sons end up with good, respectable careers. His brother was a doctor. Doug himself was expected to become a lawyer. After many

arguments with his parents, they finally let him move to Melbourne and pursue the career he had set his mind on. When he became a lecturer, they started, quietly, to be proud of him.

His grandmother was the only one who had occasionally lifted the lid on the magic of stories. But that was a long time ago, and not long enough to make a lasting impression on a young boy, who was only eight years old when she died.

Amin and his father waited patiently for their guest to begin his story. It was like old times, back in Lebanon, Amin thought, when friends of his father's would get together to drink strong black tea and tell each other stories. It used to be like a ritual. Amin had still been a boy then, but had been allowed to hang around the older men. He never figured out if any of the many stories he had heard were true, or whether the men had simply rejoiced in their art of making them up. Maybe in the end it didn't really matter. Some of the stories didn't make sense until he was old enough to understand the morals behind them. He used to like the comic ones the most, the ones in which people ran into all sorts of troubles, getting away with lies, men caught up in other people's lives, often women's.

"I will make us some coffee and tea," Amin said, no longer able to sit still. "What would you like, my son, tea or coffee?" He looked at Doug.

"Coffee, thank you. Strong, please."

"And strong tea for us," Amin said, disappearing into the kitchen.

The old man remained silent. He was a quiet man, not demanding much of anyone, only talkative before breaking the fast, almost delirious in anticipation of food. Now that he had eaten, he was his calm self again. Sorrow and sadness had made him bitter during the first few years after his wife's death, then tired, and at last humble.

The smell of coffee and strong tea lifted the men's spirits and Doug moved forward to sit on the edge of the armchair. He put his hands on the table.

“It wasn’t a snake,” he began. “It appeared on the TV screen, a figure. Ghastly. I don’t know how to describe it. It all started on our drive up here. I was driving, my – my wife was dozing next to me, when all of a sudden this thing appeared in the middle of the road.”

Doug described the apparition, a bizarre blend of beast and woman, the way it screamed at him with wide-open eyes and its arms in the air as if to stop him driving over it. He told them how they didn’t find any traces and that Zara hadn’t witnessed anything and didn’t believe him. In anger and frustration he had withdrawn. Then there was the second apparition in the internet café, the third one here today.

Amin and his father listened carefully, frowning every so often, nodding.

“Before I saw the apparition again in the internet café,” Doug continued, “I got an email from the mother of my research student, James, saying that he had died of cancer. James and I had been working on a project together for more than two years, but he had never told me he had leukaemia. His last wish was that I spread his ashes, the funeral is next Wednesday.”

Doug talked further about his suspicion that the incident on the road and James’ death might be connected, that the apparition could have been a warning and that he didn’t know if he should drive back to attend the funeral, that he felt very confused and tired.

After finishing his account, he kept his gaze fixed on his still slightly trembling hands, waiting for one of the men to say something – anything.

The old man spoke first: “Sometimes it is better not to see. The world is full of ugly sights, but also full of beauty and full of envy.”

Doug didn’t understand.

Amin took a sip of tea before he explained his father’s words: “In Lebanon we believe in the evil eye. I don’t know if you have heard of it. Some people, we say, have the evil eye. When they cast it on you because they envy you for something, they can destroy

you or the thing they envy. They target children especially. You never go around praising children and babies. You never say anything nice about them for fear you might destroy their health or beauty. Many people don't know they have the evil eye. Maybe someone cast the evil eye on you. Maybe now or even much earlier in your life, when you were a child."

"I'm glad you believe me and don't think I'm mad."

"It doesn't matter whether we believe you or not," Amin said. "Do *you* believe it?"

Doug looked hard at Amin now. "What do you mean? Yes, of course, I've seen it, there's no doubt about that, three times so far, but --"

"You will not see it again," the old man interjected.

Doug waited for Amin to explain again.

"The story has it that this female ghost appears three times only."

"A ghouL," Amin's father said. "She appears when someone has given the evil eye to you. She steals children and eats them. That's the story. You can believe it or not."

"Steals children and eats them? What children?"

Amin noticed Doug's agitation, the sudden anger in his voice. "This is a story people believe in our country, which is also your country, don't forget. We are trying to find an explanation for you, even if it is based on superstition. My father and I don't believe in it, but we know about it. And because you mentioned your student's death and whether it is connected. When you try to follow the story of the ghouL, it could be connected. Someone could have cast the evil eye on you because they want you or your student to fail. That project was important to you and to your student. So the story goes that the ghouL destroyed your child, the project and your student – do you understand? It is a story, like many other stories. People believe in it because they need an explanation when bad things happen, especially to their children."

"And where is God supposed to be in all this?" Doug challenged.

“On the other side,” the old man replied calmly. “Ghoul is like the devil. The story goes that you say the Lord’s prayer three times to chase the ghoul away.”

“Mainly women pray when the evil eye is cast on their children,” Amin added. “Again, that is what the story says. My father and I believe in God, but we are not strict and we are not superstitious. Yes, we know of those stories, because they were told to us back home. We grew up with them. They are interesting to tell, but not to explain everything that happens to us. As my father said before, you can’t make God responsible for everything. But also, you can’t make the devil responsible for everything.”

The old man nodded, his eyes closed.

“All this can also mean that you are meant to understand something,” Amin continued, “that the project blinded you, it was in the way. You were fixated on it, so it had to be removed. It can mean many things.”

Doug remained silent, shaking his head lightly. Nothing made sense anymore. He had hoped for more support, for some confirmation that they believed him. Or that they would laugh at him, convincing him that it was just a hallucination. He would have been able to cope with either of those reactions. But this neutral, unclear, evasive, almost careless response annoyed Doug. It made him feel cut off from the world, caught inside a vacuum without meaning.

“It is never too early, never too late to understand where you come from,” Amin said. “Never too late to see the earth you belong to.”

Doug didn’t want to hear repetitious phrases again, phrases out of context. He was not in the mood for riddles. It felt as if Amin and his father were teasing him: ‘think about this one, boy, then come back and tell us.’

Amin felt sorry for Doug. Here was an intelligent young man who had lost or suppressed the flexibility of spirit and mind that so much belonged to people from their culture. Here this spirit was surfacing, pushing Doug to acknowledge it, but he refused to

go beyond the path he had carefully laid out for himself. A path that didn't allow for anything unexpected to happen. It seemed to Amin that everything in Doug's life was planned and that his career was what mattered the most. At some stage marriage had come in, and a house and children would probably soon follow.

Amin thought of Doug's wife. What sort of person was she? A city dweller like Doug, whose life was as planned as his? What made them travel to Alice Springs?

By the time Doug decided to leave, the light in the living room had taken on a dim purple colour, adding to the setting a mysterious and solemn glow, reflecting the mood Doug's story had created between the three men. It was as if their circle had been extended, now including a fourth, invisible member: the ghoul. And as much as it was Doug's ghost only, it was one both Amin and his father were only too familiar with – the ghost of the land they had left behind.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

A FEW LOST CLOUDS travelled across a clear blue sky. People moved slowly, the heat silencing their activities. It was Saturday. A perfect day for a rest in the shade and a long-drawn-out siesta. But Zara had other plans: unable to erase Rose's words from her mind, she decided to explore the dry riverbed.

"Take this hat," Charlie said and put a straw hat with a wide rim on Zara's head. Corks on strings were dangling in front of Zara's questioning eyes. Charlie laughed. "They'll keep the flies away, trust me, you'll be grateful for them."

Charlie didn't approve of Zara's crazy idea of going for a walk along the Todd River. Alone. She had warned her of gatherings of Aboriginal men in the riverbed, but Zara was persistent.

"Take me to a quiet spot then," she suggested.

Charlie had no choice but to give in.

Despite Rose's well-meant words, Zara packed her camera bag, not keen to leave her camera behind – a crutch that helped her understand a still unfamiliar culture and landscape, and a support she still relied on. She was a photographer after all.

Charlie was waiting in the car, with the engine running and the air-conditioning on full.

"Sunscreen, water, money, got everything?"

“I think so.” Zara pulled the door shut. “Actually, I didn’t bring any water. Do you mind stopping at a petrol station?”

Charlie sighed. “I’ll fill you a bottle. I’ve got plenty empty ones inside. Wait here.”

As Charlie hopped out of the car, Zara had to smile at the striped pattern of the car seat showing on Charlie’s thighs. Charlie was an agile woman, every one of her movements quick and abrupt. Only when she talked to Sandy, did she become soft and did the quiver in her voice disappear.

Zara turned the air-conditioning down, her body still not used to the Australian love of chilled temperatures. Coming from Switzerland, where only large shops had mild air-conditioning, and loving the hot Australian climate, she had difficulty relaxing in restaurants or shops in summer, easily annoyed and irritated by the constant flow of cold air against her bare arms and legs. She remembered how after her fruitless pleading with Qantas staff to turn the air-conditioning down on her flight from Switzerland, she endured the journey, to the amusement of her fellow passengers, with three blankets wrapped around herself, covering her from head to toe.

“Here you are,” Charlie interrupted Zara’s musings. She huffed back into the car and handed Zara a large bottle of water. “I shouldn’t run in this sort of weather, but it helps me keep my weight down.”

Zara laughed. “And you really need to, don’t you?”

“Hey, don’t you make fun of me now! Someone with a figure like yours, of course you don’t need to worry about exercising.”

“Charlie, you are miles slimmer than me. Always have been and always will be. But when it comes to exaggeration, I agree, you’re much larger in that area.”

“If I wasn’t driving this car, I would kick your cute little bum.”

“I’m glad I’m sitting on it. Are you, by the way, intending to flood me with this? You’re not going to drop me off in the middle of the desert, are you?”

“Darling, I can tell you’re a city person and not born in Australia. Your body needs plenty of fluid in this heat. Some people collapse from dehydration. You’ll easily empty the bottle, don’t worry.”

“But it doesn’t fit into my bag,” Zara said, still in a provocative, joking mood, not aware of Charlie’s worries. “I’ve got no intention of carrying the bottle all the way.” She grinned, pinching Charlie’s arm, blissfully unprepared for a tirade of abuse.

“For heaven’s sake, Zara, will you stop complaining, please! We get enough crazy tourists out here walking off into the bush without maps, water, and hats, thinking they’re just going on a short stroll and days later they’re found half-dead by Aboriginal people who happen to know the bush better than any of us. Don’t be so naive, for heaven’s sake!

“Just because Aboriginal people go walkabout without any food and water, doesn’t mean you can, too! They know the land, it’s their home. They know their way around, where waterholes are, and how to eat off the land.

“There’s a lot of racism in this town, but when it comes to surviving in the bush, I can tell you, every white person knows they would never be able to compete with any one of them out there. That’s why we stick to safety procedures and as much as you despise rules made by bloody poms, I won’t let you get away with laughing it all off!”

After she finished, Zara looked across at her, trying to find in her profile an explanation for that sudden eruption. She didn’t know what to say, there really wasn’t anything she *could* have said in reply. So she watched the slow commotions of the town glide past outside instead, letting Charlie’s words sink in.

They drove in silence, out of town, past the Telegraph Station, past a sign, TENNANT CREEK 504 km, DARWIN 1480 km. Zara reflected on the massive size of the country, with the distance between Darwin and Alice Springs alone covering the same distance from Geneva to Copenhagen or Zurich to Belgrade, across several European countries.

Charlie steered the car off the bitumen and they travelled along a rocky dirt road, raising trails of dust, until it turned into a small walking track, where Charlie finally stopped the car. They could see a bend in the riverbed, dry and deserted.

“I’m sorry, Darl,” Charlie said, putting her hand on Zara’s leg. “I don’t know what came over me, I got carried away. I worry too much, and then I say things I don’t mean.”

“It’s alright,” Zara replied, slightly numb from bouncing up and down. “I’m sorry, I rubbed you the wrong way. Of course I’ll take the bottle, I was only joking.” She shoved the bottle in her bag as well as she could, its neck sticking out.

“It is true though what I said.” Charlie still had a worried look on her face. “We do get a lot of tourists who get themselves into all sorts of trouble. I couldn’t bear the thought of you getting lost out here.” She hesitated. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“Yes, I’m positive. I’ll be fine. Just tell me how to get back into town.”

“Follow the riverbed that way.” Charlie pointed to her right. “That’ll take you straight to the Telegraph Station. There’s a kiosk-café there from where you can ring me. It’ll take you a good hour to get there, so don’t walk any further than that.”

“Okay.” Zara opened the door and the heat crept up on her instantly.

“Call me on my mobile, I might be at Wanda’s.”

“I will.” Zara climbed out of the four-wheel drive. “See you later. And thanks for dropping me off.” She put her hat on.

“One more thing, Zara.”

“Yes?”

“Before you sit down on a rock, or a tree trunk, make sure there’s no snake underneath. Use a stick, okay?”

Zara sighed. “Charlie, were you always like this or have I just forgotten? I always thought living in the country made people worry less.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!”

Charlie watched Zara walk down the narrow track before starting the engine. As she steered the car around, she saw Zara bend down and pick up something. Zara looked back and waved a long thick stick. The corks on her hat swung wildly in front of her face. Charlie couldn’t help laughing. She tooted her car horn twice.

“You silly girl,” she said out loud, “don’t you understand I’m responsible for you while you’re a guest at my house? And what would Doug say about you walking off all by yourself?”

Yet Charlie doubted that Doug would care at all. His mind, unlike hers, seemed to repel all worry like oily skin repels water.

## CHAPTER XXIX

AN ABUNDANCE OF red gums rose majestically from the edges of the riverbed, their pink and white bark challenging the stillness around them. The air was flickering with heat, smothering human skin. Stepping down into the riverbed, Zara's feet sank into coarse red sand. Bicycle tracks criss-crossed from one side to the other, revealing the bike riders' delight in playing with the soft terrain.

Zara strolled along, following the deep tracks, but on guard, as if water might come gushing down the river any minute. She found it hard to believe that rivers could completely dry out. She had heard of dried up creeks, filling with water in an instant. She knew of the sea, of high and low tide. She knew of rivers in her home country, swelling to double their size when glaciers in the Alps started melting in spring. But she had never before experienced a river that would stay dry for several months up to the point where people would forget it carried water.

As she imagined the river suddenly monstrous, the surroundings taking on new dimensions, the thought of sitting down made her uncomfortable. But Rose's words kept echoing in her mind: 'Find your story, lie down in the river bed.'

When she came across a shady spot under the canopy of a gum tree, she inspected the area for snakes with her stick. The flies were merciless and they would have driven her crazy if it hadn't been for the corks on her hat – Charlie's hat.

She sat down on a fallen branch and recalled Charlie's words, words that hurt because they had reached deep, words of truth she didn't want to hear. Looking at her bag, she felt sad, confused, and lost. If she had to survive out here, it would be water that would save her, not her camera.

She slipped down from the branch into the sand, her hands in her lap. Rose and Charlie, both had gently given her to understand that even though she had lived here for nearly five years, she still hadn't let go, not given in to the vast, rough beauty of the land. A foreigner hiding in the city, behind a camera, she carried the green impeccable freshness of her home country everywhere. To cool her soul in case it overheated. She had not yet rubbed her body with new soil, not yet erased the smell of the old. Floating between two worlds, she hadn't touched ground, but had given up before she had truly arrived. Like a hammock between two trees, she was dangling between two realities.

She leant back and looked up into the vast blue sky peering through eucalyptus foliage, no longer feeling the flies and ants exploring her body. Warm tears trickled from the corners of her eyes and dried in the heat before they reached her earlobes. She sank further and further into the soft soil.



*DER VERSUCH ZU KREIEREN scheiterte im Verstummen, when eyes full of scorn started to blame her for being different. The clean correctness clashed with ihrer Seele, die nach Freiheit schrie, the freedom of a creature running wild.*

*Sie wollte mehr, als nur an grünen Wiesen vorbeigehen, she wanted more than bathing in sweet fresh mountain water. Sie wollte Kontrast, den Unterschied fühlen zwischen heiss und kalt, wet and dry, süss und bitter. Sie wollte hören how her skin crackled, wie die Luft ihren Atem staubig machte till she was certain all the softness of too much hypocrisy was gone.*

*With night approaching she left the cave im Wissen, dass sie hier nicht bleiben konnte, longing to calm her restless soul. Sie liess sich vom Wind in die Ferne treiben, her heart in tune now with the landscape that no longer threatened and poked her. Die Landschaft, die einfach nur war. Sie, die einfach nur war, gliding in a trance, ohne Furcht, saying goodbye to what was and welcoming the fever that would make her fall.*

## CHAPTER XXX

ZARA JOLTED FROM her dream, and trying to recollect where she was, she stood up quickly. The sun was still high. She looked around, afraid that a snake, or even worse a spider, might have mistaken her for part of the landscape.

She remembered how her brother, when they were children, used to run after her, pretending he had a spider in his hands, wanting to slide it down the back of her jumper. She would scream her lungs out until she was so paralysed by fear that she would simply freeze, standing motionless, and her brother would run off bellowing with laughter. Then she would realise that there was no spider. The whole day she would walk around feeling the sensation of an insect crawling over her body.

A few ants had bitten her around the ankles, and one bite was itching on her arm. Aware of a sudden dizziness, she emptied half the bottle of water and used a tiny amount to remove the dry, gritty remains of tears from her face. She felt better, almost refreshed. Hatless she walked further up the river, with only her camera.

A lizard sped past, alarmed by the vibration of her feet. Zara shrieked. Watching out for anything long and skinny, she glued her eyes to the ground, crept cautiously past rocks scattered with rubbish, while flies vigorously attacked her unprotected face.

The dryness and subtle greens and ochres of the landscape provided a visual challenge for any keen photographer. Zara took a wide angle shot of the river bed, several

close-ups of the white and rose coloured pattern on one of the gum trees, zoomed in on a fallen branch clinging to the edge, then on a group of flies swarming around dry kangaroo droppings in front of her. Finally, she focused on her feet.

She didn't take that last shot.

Instead, she picked up a stick and hurried back to the rocks she had stumbled across before. After probing the rubbish several times, certain that no snake was hiding in it, she fished out a dented Coke can. Not far from her spot in the shade, she positioned the can on the ground and cradled her camera in it, with the lens facing slightly upwards.

After scanning the edges of the river, satisfied that no intruders were spying on her, she slipped out of her sandals and focused on the dark eye of the camera. The sand was burning under her feet. Quickly, she adjusted the self-timer to 15 seconds and pressed the shutter.

She walked away from the camera, then turned, walking back slowly, looking at the lens provocatively. *Click!* She went back and pressed the shutter a second time. This time she posed, her arms over her head, her head tilted back. *Click!*

Back and forth until her movements turned into dance steps, her arms flying in the air, her head looking over her shoulder. *Click!* She glided into a trance, removing herself from the weight of reality, grinning at the camera as if mocking its stare. *Click!* Then her hands loosened her skirt around her waist, unbuttoned her blouse, her hips shook. *Click!* Dancing back and forth to the camera. *Click!* Now taking off the remaining clothes and closing her eyes. *Click!* Dancing naked, with her arms tight around her chest, half-covering her breasts, laughing. *Click!* Her hair dancing with her feet, her back to the lens. *Click!* Dancing out of the shade, back into it, turning and turning around herself. *Click!* Sweat glistening on her body, mixing with her wet scent. *Click!* Flies drinking her fluids, her hands turning into fists, her feet stamping holes into the soft ground. *Click!*

At the final release of the shutter, Zara dropped to the ground, exhausted, and free in her nakedness. A woman emptied out of herself to be reborn, her limbs still twitching in ecstasy, earth sticking to her skin.

When she pulled herself up from the ground and brushed the sand and soil from her skin, her legs felt heavy and numb. She coughed several times before she fully grasped that she was standing naked in the middle of the riverbed. Her mind strangely light, untroubled, she held her hands on her stomach and waited for the heat inside to abate. Then she gathered her scattered clothes and dressed slowly.

After splashing her face with the rest of the water, she grabbed her hat and bag and made her way down the riverbed towards town. Once, twice she looked back and stopped, hesitating. Then, with a firm pace, she continued walking until the witnessing eye of the camera became smaller and smaller. Became part of the riverbed and the rubbish in it, part of the dry deserted landscape. A 35mm dream resting on a compressed Coke can, left behind like the ashes of a fire.

## CHAPTER XXXI

RETURNING EARLY from his daily trip to the internet café, Doug was glad that neither Charlie nor Zara was home. He found instead a note on the kitchen table: *Gone to the river. Back late afternoon. Would like you to join us for dinner at the Bluegrass Restaurant afterwards. Charlie.*

Still irritated by the incident at Amin's house, Doug was not in the mood for Charlie and Zara's company. Exposing himself again to a dinner with an opinionated woman he had never been keen on meeting in the first place, and Zara, whose demanding and accusatory stare he couldn't tolerate.

The night before, he had rung from town, pretending he was finishing some important work that he had to send off to a colleague. He ate alone at McDonald's and afterwards walked through the streets, wanting to go to the local pub for a beer. When he got there, a fight was taking place outside, between two groups of black men. A few white people were watching, quietly. He of a sudden realised that walking these streets at night was no safer than at home in Melbourne. Feeling uncomfortable, he hastily made his way back to where he had parked his car, relieved to find it still there.

When he arrived at Charlie's, he sipped a beer on the verandah. Both women were in bed. After midnight, he walked to the unfenced edge of the garden where the civilisation of

Charlie's house blended with the rough country of the bush. He stood awkwardly, thinking about Amin and Amin's father, the two men's life together, the absence of women in their house, and their talk with him about the female ghost.

Doug's thoughts clashed with the darkness of the bush.

The unknown, lingering in the dark, had always made him uneasy, ever since he could remember, making him embrace the city and its sea of lights. Wherever he went inside the protective bubble of the city, he would steer away from dark and unlit alleys. The more lights around him, the safer he felt. But then things started suddenly to change. The moment the ghoul jumped at him in the brightest hour of the day, his life-long understanding of darkness equalling danger was overturned.

Standing at the edge of the bush in Charlie's garden, he began to understand that to fight the unknown meant to step into it, willingly, bravely, and he could have stepped into the darkness in front of him without fear, without hesitation, without cringing inside. Yet, when Doug heard a crackling noise in the grass, not far from where he was standing, he darted back to the verandah and to the safety of the lights glowing from inside the house.

Overtired now, almost delirious, Doug couldn't help laughing about his cowardly behaviour the previous night. With his third cup of coffee and a sandwich made in haste, Doug slumped down in a chair on the verandah, the heat stifling every motion. He ate slowly, chewing every bite several times.

A crow edged forward, cawing as if to announce to the other birds its cheeky bravery. Doug fed it some bread. The blackness of the bird reminded him that crows were scavengers of dead bodies. The breadcrumbs suddenly appeared like the foreplay to a much larger feast. Doug scared the bird away, disgusted now by its effrontery. He stood up and, like the night before, ventured again towards the boundary of garden and bush.

As the sun burned his skin, he listened to the laughter of a kookaburra, the harsh noises of cicadas, the mild rustling of gum leaves. He squinted into the brightness, too lazy to go back inside to get his sunglasses. About 400 metres in the distance, some rocks, their orange colour faint and pale in the harsh sun, forming a monochromatic blend with the low bushes surrounding them.

Doug thought of James. Words began forming in his head. A whisper at first, then his voice becoming firm, addressing James as if he was standing in front of him in the glaring sun: "I could run to those rocks and back. What do you think?" There was rustling in the bush grass, but this time Doug simply ignored it. "Remember our last few lemmas? We're really on to something, you know? We may not have proved the Riemann Hypothesis yet, but so many things have become clearer. We are almost there. I can feel it. We know the block decomposition of the operator ... all we need now is existence and boundedness."

He looked down at his dark blue canvas shoes, shoes made for wearing on a boat, or in the city, but certainly not in the bush.

"I guess I need boots out here, in case I step on a snake. Ha! No, don't laugh, this is not my territory. Mathematics, yes, but this here? I honestly don't know what I'm doing here? Zara – she wanted to come.

"You promised me another set of formulas. Did you think you'd be able to outrun your own death? Did you believe figures would save you? I'd probably have done the same. Would I have told my supervisor? You've made me doubt."

Sweat started developing under Doug's arms, on his neck and forehead.

"Have you ever been to the bush? You might like it here, I don't know. I find it boring, too dusty. I prefer the water, the ocean. Swimming and diving. What do you actually like doing except mathematics?"

The sun was merciless, but something kept Doug fixed in one spot, unable to move his body while his mind was doing somersaults.

“Tell me, James, was there anything you needed to prove to yourself before you closed your eyes forever?”

Doug looked down to the ground in front of him. Huge ants were marching, leaving traces around his shoes, one exploring the blue canvas. He shook his legs and stepped back. His heart was pounding from the heat.

“I can’t stand my own weakness anymore. Did you feel that way towards the end?”

He took one step forward, focused on the rocks in the distance and ran as if driven by an invisible force.

“Why did you let yourself be beaten!” he yelled into the bush. “Why for God’s sake!”

Doug ran without looking, unaware of the bush grass scratching his legs.

“Why didn’t you agree to have chemotherapy!”

He slapped one of the rocks with his hand, as if it was a team-mate running with him in a relay race, and turned back.

“Why didn’t you talk to me, James!”

The moisture that Doug’s sweaty hand left on the rock dried up instantly.

“I wouldn’t have just let you go like that!”

The imprint of Doug’s hand dried long before he reached Charlie’s garden again, out of breath, eyes wide open. He choked on dry air, bending forward and gasping.

“Why did you abandon our project ....”

Sweat ran down his face, into his eyes. When he turned around, looking towards the rocks, expecting to see a path through the bush where he had run, the landscape was unchanged. The laughter of a kookaburra grew louder, as if mocking him for the fool he was for thinking he would leave an impression.

Then suddenly the laughter stopped, and so did the noise of the cicadas and the whistling of gum leaves. A moment of perfect stillness held the landscape. Doug looked up at the sky, at the horizon and the earth at his feet, searching for an explanation. The stillness was captivating – James' silent applause, or a sign of silent scorn.

Still breathing heavily, Doug stumbled back to the house, exhausted and embarrassed at his foolishness. What had made him do such a crazy thing?

Under the shower, he was shaken by uncontrollable laughter, cold water soothing his muscles. Like the laughter of a soldier who had crossed the border into enemy territory and returned unharmed, but bruised forever. The laughter also of sadness and grief that had once before taken hold of him – at his sister's funeral.

## CHAPTER XXXII

THE HEAT WAS still stifling, the town dreary and uninviting. It was Sunday and Charlie suggested a swim in a waterhole about an hour's drive away, a popular spot, where people usually didn't turn up until later in the day. With Doug off to town again, Zara, keen to see more of the surroundings of Alice Springs, agreed without hesitation. The riverbed experience had left her elated – a curious excitement.

When they arrived at the waterhole, well before lunchtime, the place was deserted.

"This is beautiful," Zara whispered, "so peaceful."

"Isn't it? I really love coming here, and I knew you'd like it, too."

"And it's safe to swim? No crocodiles, no currents, no nothing?"

Charlie laughed. "It really is one of the safest places, far safer than the Adelaide beaches. Yes, if you're not a swimmer, you could drown, it's pretty deep in certain areas. But as I said before, children come here, Sandy swims here, and everyone loves it."

"Okay, let's go in then. I'm hot."

Zara hopped out of the car, hot as the air-conditioning was off. The two women grabbed towels, hats, sunscreen, and the water and fruit Charlie had packed.

"Know what?" Charlie called after Zara, who was already standing at the edge of the water.

"What?"

“There’s no one around, we can swim nude!”

“Nude?” Zara turned to face Charlie. “You said this was a popular spot.” She didn’t feel comfortable. The riverbed was different – she had been alone there. Here she was with Charlie.

“We’ll cover ourselves with our sarongs. This is the bush, Zara. People here won’t even blink, let alone raise their eyebrows. It’s different here.”

Zara wasn’t quite convinced and looked around, listening for the noise of a car engine, but there was nothing, just their own breathing and the noises of the bush.

“Okay,” she finally said, as she began taking off her sarong and bathers.

Charlie looked up and down Zara’s body. She had always admired Zara’s olive skin, her fine features, her long legs. And she also liked what she saw now for the first time: beautiful soft round breasts with shiny dark nipples and dark black pubic hair, trimmed neatly, inviting, seductive.

Charlie was an artist after all. She couldn’t help studying nude bodies, couldn’t help in particular caressing with her eyes the body that she had always wanted more than any other. She would have liked to sketch Zara’s perfect lines.

Zara on her part was surprised at Charlie’s whiteness, especially the contrast her ginger pubic hair produced against her white skin. It looked like untrimmed flames that wanted to burn the flesh underneath and everyone who got too close.

“Okay,” Zara said, “you go first.”

Always pleased to be a guide, Charlie stepped into the water. “It really is safe, don’t worry.”

“I do worry, I can’t help it.”

“I know. There’s no rush.”

The water was crystal clear, but very cold. The ground, a mixture of sand and mud, felt slimy under Zara’s feet, reminding her of lakes in the Swiss mountains in spring, after

the ice had melted. She tiptoed behind Charlie, afraid she would tread on something. After Charlie dived in, Zara followed with quick strokes, keeping her head out of the water.

She had never liked diving. She had only once opened her eyes under water. The blurred view frightened her, made her panic, and she decided that she'd rather not see anything than in a half-blind haze.

"Isn't this wonderful!" Charlie called out. "Isn't this the most wonderful experience you've ever had?"

"I'm getting there," Zara called back. She flipped onto her back, stretched out her legs and spread her arms. She floated, eyes closed, the sun burning down on her face and her breasts. It was then that she finally relaxed and gave in to Charlie's assurance that there was nothing in this water that could harm her.

With her ears under the surface, she was surrounded by stillness and peace. This is what it must be like to be in your mother's womb, she thought. Floating without pain, peacefully, trusting that nothing would happen to you. The sensation brought tears to her eyes, tears about something she had harboured within her heart for far too long. Something she was finally prepared to let go.

She realised that if there ever was anyone she could trust, it was Charlie. She realised that it had been her own confusion that caused mistrust towards Charlie, making her suspicious of their friendship. Her own insecurity about who she was, where she belonged. Her own suspicion about everything and everyone around her.

She had come to Australia because she could no longer cope with the mentality of people in her home country – their passivity and inertia. Yet, instead of starting afresh here, she had lost herself, drifting off into inertia herself, mechanically functioning at the side of a man who had given her at least some meaning in a society where she was a number ticked off at the department of immigration.

A man she never really connected with and at whose side she had been floating freely, satisfied, feeling dangerously secure in a cocoon of carelessness, passivity, and detachment. Like a drug, the relationship with Doug had caused her to forget herself and become oblivious to the harsh world around her, the judgmental stare of society, and the ideas of freedom she had once lived for.

The incident on the road had triggered her awakening, causing her to leave her shell and take responsibility for her own life again. The dryness in the riverbed had brought memories back of her former strength and determination to succeed against all odds, of her wish to mix her old self with this new soil and be reborn into it.

Floating in this waterhole, she finally saw through her self-delusion, aware suddenly of her loss of freedom, her false attempt to suppress the hurtful reality of her past in order to recreate a shallow present.

With such sound clarity spreading through every vein in her body, Zara flipped back onto her chest, held her breath and with wide-open eyes dived down into the dark depth till she touched bottom. Coming back up again, she shot through the surface like a dolphin, spraying water out of the edges of her mouth, giggling madly.

“Hey!” Charlie called out, surprised to see Zara so full of zest. “What are you doing! I thought I’d nearly have to rescue you!” She joined in with Zara’s laughter.

“It’s fantastic, I love it! You should’ve brought me here earlier!”

“See, I told you, no dangers in these waters!” Charlie swam towards the shore. “I’ve had enough for now, are you coming out?”

“Yes. I’m hungry, actually.”

“Let’s eat then.”

They climbed out of the water and Zara wrapped her sarong around herself. They picked up their gear and walked over to the shade of a nearby gum tree. Charlie unfolded a picnic rug and spread fruit, almonds and cashew nuts onto a platter. The two women lay

down on their sides and began to pick and nibble on the food. The hot air dried their bodies quickly.

Zara rolled over onto her back. Her sarong slid down, revealing her breasts, but she didn't care. She looked up into the tree and cleared her throat. "I killed my child back in Switzerland," she said in a low voice.

Charlie nearly choked on an almond. She shot up into a sitting position. "You did what, killed your child! You never told me you had a child! What the heck are you talking about, Zara?"

"I really wanted to have the baby at first. But then I realised that the environment was suffocating me, and that I couldn't create. I was two months pregnant. Then I left to start a new life somewhere else."

Charlie swallowed and breathed a sigh of relief. "If you had an abortion, Zara, then you had a reason for it. That's not killing."

"I was afraid of giving birth to a child I might later hate." Zara sat up and faced Charlie. "It was not until much later that I realised I could have given birth in another country, here in Australia for instance. That's what's eaten me up more than anything over the years – that I didn't leave Switzerland with the baby still growing in my womb. Now I feel I haven't got the right to stay anywhere anymore, not there, not here. Once you've killed, you're an outlaw, especially if you did it illegally. Makes me feel even more guilty."

Charlie put her hand on Zara's arm. "Zara, listen. Many women do what you did, and all for different reasons." She hesitated, not sure if this was the right moment. "Zara, I also had an abortion, many years ago, when I was very young. I know what you've gone through, but I had a reason, and so did you. Don't torment yourself."

Zara turned to face Charlie. "You had an abortion, too? But, why?"

Charlie shrugged her shoulders. "It simply wasn't the right time, I was too absorbed in myself. Maybe I was too young. And the guy, well, I never told him. We were together only a few weeks. It would have made things too complicated."

"Don't you feel guilty? Don't you feel you did something wrong?"

"No, quite the contrary," Charlie said calmly, "I did something very right. The only really good thing I've probably done in my life. I didn't kill, I saved a child from a mother who would have been too selfish and too confused to care for it properly."

Zara was stunned. She didn't know what else to say. Was she the only woman to worry so much about aborting a child?

"Who was the father?" Charlie asked softly.

Zara didn't answer straight away, letting Charlie's confession sink in, still in disbelief that her own friend had gone through the same experience, that they shared the same secret. She crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap.

"His name was Manuel," she finally said. "Manuel and I had a relationship for nearly four years, very easy going, no ties attached. I think we loved each other. But he was always on the go, an entrepreneur who'd done everything you could imagine. Studied journalism, wrote articles for a local paper, was a musician for a while, back and forth between Paris and Zurich. Then he taught guitar, opened a bistro, ran it for two years, then dabbled around in the designer scene, and even worked as a filmmaker for a short while. That's what attracted me to him at first, that he never stopped creating himself."

Zara had to smile at the memory of Manuel's optimism.

"He was fun to be with," she continued, "but after a few years I wanted more. I can't say we didn't support each other in our individual freedom, but when I got pregnant, he took it like everything else, as just another challenge to be added to his repertoire of experiences. But the whole thing seemed hypocritical to me and superficial. I didn't want to live in Switzerland and have a child there. I think he was disappointed when I aborted."

Zara paused. "Switzerland was his home, he was happy there. But for me there was something missing – depth, seriousness, truth. I guess I'm not cut out for a careless, fast, get up and go life-style, with a man who reinvents himself every minute, never pauses, never sits still."

Charlie was surprised to hear about a man called Manuel. Zara had never mentioned him. "Does Doug know about all this?" she asked.

"No," Zara said in a low voice. "I've never told him about Manuel, and we've never spoken about children. It has never been a topic between us. I don't think I could have another child anyway. Children frighten me now, the way they provoke me with their stares. It seems they know I've killed one of them, and they reject me for that."

Charlie gave Zara a smack on her thigh. "Don't be silly, Zara! It's not children stirring you, it's your own self that torments you. Your hatred for yourself and your country. You're scared of a new beginning, paranoid almost, and that's why you're hiding behind that lens all the time. It makes you feel safe. It puts a barrier between you and the world, and that's how you cope with your emotions."

"I haven't got it anymore, I left it in the riverbed."

"What?"

"The camera, the lens – it's gone. I got rid of it. You're right, and Rose was right, too. She said the same as you. No, she didn't say it, she hinted at it. So I left my camera in the riverbed. Someone must've collected it by now."

"Couldn't you have given it to someone, Wanda perhaps, not just throw it away?"

Charlie wondered what Zara's next surprise would be.

"No, it was my last act. I had to do it. Break away. And it felt good, very good, even though I feel so naked now."

"Well, you virtually are, have a look at yourself!"

Charlie's laughter relieved a lingering tension in Zara.

“You know, Charlie, Switzerland is like a souvenir. Pretty, but embarrassing. It sits on a shelf, smiling at you, indifferent, not meaning to disturb you, but troubling you anyway. Souvenirs are decorations that lack the spirit of creativity and freedom. They are mass-produced artefacts with no soul. Even a kitchen tool has more soul, because it is useful, it has a purpose. Souvenirs pretend to be works of art, yet they’re dead objects. And that’s frightening, don’t you think?”

Charlie lay back and folded her arms behind her head. “I like your analogy, but I don’t think it matters in the end where you are, what the place you live in is like. Physical place is only of secondary importance. It’s who you are, who you want to be. That’s what matters in the end.

“I feel that we often blame our surroundings for our failures and our unfulfilled dreams. I’m not sure that that’s right. I came to Alice Springs because I had had enough of the city, yes, but not because Adelaide stifled me or I couldn’t cope with it anymore, but because I felt like living somewhere different, exploring new experiences. But I guess that’s where we differ.” She glanced at Zara.

“But look at Aboriginal people,” Zara said. “They seem to feel very connected to their land. And their art, their stories, all reflect their sense of belonging to a particular physical place.” She paused. “Maybe if both my parents were Swiss, I’d feel more connected, but like this I feel I’m stuck somewhere in between.”

“Well, both my parents are Irish, but I don’t feel I belong to Ireland. I don’t think I’d be a different person whether I lived here or over there.”

“Have you been to Ireland?”

“No, but, if I went there, I doubt I’d suddenly feel more Irish than Australian, or anything else.”

“Well, I’m not so sure about that. I don’t think we can deny our backgrounds. As much as I dislike everything about Switzerland, it is still part of me. I often wonder

whether I should've stayed and learnt to live with my heritage rather than run away from responsibility. Whenever I think of refugees and their plight, I feel ashamed. At least my life in Switzerland was never under threat."

Charlie sat up again. "Well, yes and no. If the surroundings and the people cause you to get stuck, then you need to move on. Otherwise you might end up in a mental clinic and that would surely be life-threatening, don't you think?"

She grabbed a piece of apple and chewed on it absentmindedly before she continued. "The only thing is, you have to be confident that you're strong enough to start afresh somewhere else. It's not easy to leave friends and family behind, and also not easy to leave enemies behind. You can get used to things you hate just as much as to things you love. When everything you hate is gone, it can throw you around quite a bit. Maybe that's what happened to you. Maybe you overestimated your strength and then fell into a large hole. But I get the feeling that you're coming out of that hole."

It surprised Zara to hear Charlie draw such a conclusion. "You might be right," she said.

Zara had never thought that talking to a friend would free her. Always believing that she didn't need to talk to anyone about her fears and difficulties, that she was strong enough to cope on her own, she had kept quiet for too long, embarrassed to admit she was staggering and faltering.

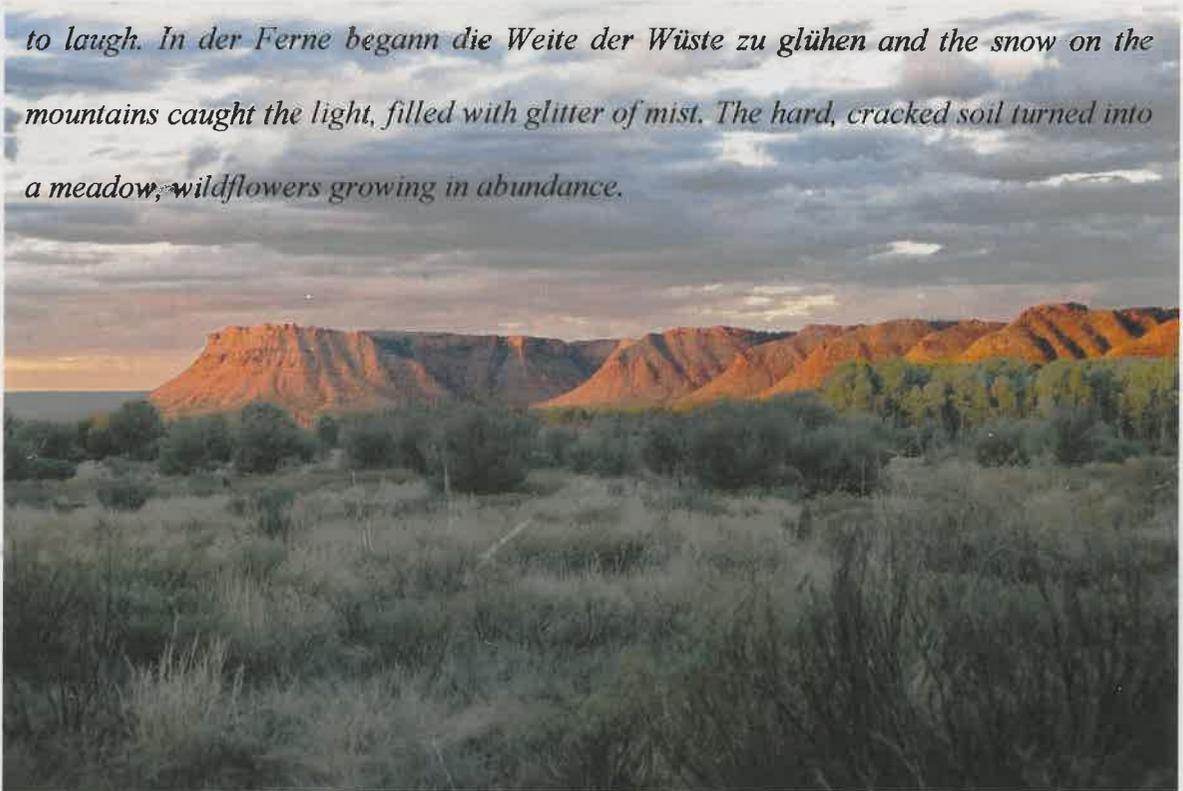
*UND DAS FIEBER KAM. A fever, cleansing her body bis zur Vergessenheit. Schüttelnd lag sie auf der kalten Erde, the moon her only witness.*

*Sie zwang sich, ihre Augen nicht zu schliessen, so she would die with the consciousness of an open soul. Her fingers clutched the damp dusty soil, her knuckles ready to burst, Blut unter ihren Fingernägeln.*

*Und der Wind war still.*

*One last heaving of her chest, one long scream into the moonlit night, um ein letztes Mal die Gewalt des Willens zu spüren, longing for strength to let go. Dann Ruhe, die Frieden brachte, peace easing her face. Der Körper zusammengefallen, eins nun mit der Erde unter ihm, bereits Vergangenheit.*

*Then the wind started to blow again, covering the past with falling gum-leaves, preparing it for a new beginning. Ihre Wiedergeburt begann mit dem Erwachen. Awakening to the faint rays of the sun at dusk when the sky turns from grey to a soft purple, bis eine rosa Farbe die Spatzen zum Pfeifen brachte and the kookaburras began to laugh. In der Ferne begann die Weite der Wüste zu glühen and the snow on the mountains caught the light, filled with glitter of mist. The hard, cracked soil turned into a meadow, wildflowers growing in abundance.*



## CHAPTER XXXIII

DOUG STROLLED through the slumberous Sunday town. It was only eight o'clock, the air still fresh. He had risen with the sun, after an unexpectedly calm and relaxing dinner with Charlie and Zara the night before. Zara had been exaggeratedly cheerful and almost unbearably carefree, telling him about her walk in the dry riverbed, the stillness and solace it had given her.

He agreed with Charlie that it was irresponsible of Zara to walk off on her own, without even a mobile phone. But then again, who was he to say? Zara had always had a streak of careless independence. It had happened before that she would go off on her own to take photographs and not return until hours later. He had never been able to understand what caused her mobile phone phobia. All she would ever say was that she didn't like being on a yoyo string. At some point he had ceased to worry and argue altogether.

Charlie had shown her most pleasant self over dinner, unusually friendly and polite. In the course of their conversation they came to talk about her house and Doug couldn't help saying that it seemed quite big for a one-person household.

"Well, when I had it built I was in a solid relationship, at least that's what I thought. But things didn't work out in the end and I had to grudgingly admit that I was probably better off on my own." She shrugged her shoulders. "It seems to be a constant thing with me that I always choose partners I don't have enough in common with."

Her directness surprised him. He hadn't expected such a candid confession, much rather a slippery explanation.

"Melbourne or Sydney might be better places to find a decent man," he replied, feeling he had to help her in some way. "I'm not sure if Alice Springs has a lot to offer in that respect."

She uttered one of her usual cocky laughs. "Oh, don't underestimate this town, people get desperate up here a lot more quickly than in the city! Anyway, I prefer women. But thanks for your advice."

He didn't know whether that last sentence contained her usual sarcasm, or whether she had really meant what she said.

Doug walked towards the Todd river, amazed at the slow pace of life around him. Melbourne was a city that was always buzzing, even in the early morning hours, even on Sundays. Cities never bored him, whereas here he didn't know what to do with his spare time.

Amin and his father, as Doug had learnt from them, had moved to Alice Springs after coming back from Lebanon and after living in Darwin. They liked the quiet of the desert, which was so different from Sydney, where they had lived before Amin's mother died, and so different from any place in Lebanon. Amin's father wanted to settle somewhere where he wouldn't be reminded of his wife and where he could lead a peaceful life. The desert seemed ideal.

Doug tried to recollect what part of Lebanon his grandparents had come from. Those on his mother's side originated from somewhere along the coast, not far from Beirut, to which his grandmother often referred to as the Paris of the Middle East. He vaguely remembered that his grandparents on his father's side came from the mountains. He only knew that his mother's parents were already married before they came to Australia

whereas both his father's parents had left Lebanon as children, with their families. His parents had both visited Lebanon, but never encouraged their children to travel there. Doug and his brothers had grown up hardly ever speaking or thinking about their heritage. It was usually their features that had given them away – straight black hair, dark bushy eyebrows, olive skin, and dark brown eyes.

Doug walked across a footbridge, then back again, surprised that the centre of the town virtually stopped where the bridge started. The pub where he wanted to get a beer the other night looked deserted now, apart from a black man standing by the door, restless, as if waiting for someone. Doug nodded a good morning in passing.

“Hey mate,” the man called after him, “can you help me out with a cigarette?”

Doug turned round. “Sorry, I don't smoke.” He wanted to continue walking, but the man had already caught up with him.

“Can you give me a dollar?” he said.

Doug was worried that the fellow would turn unfriendly if he didn't give in. He put his hands in his pockets, searching for coins, unwilling to pull out his wallet.

“You're not from here, eh?” the man asked, nervously playing with his fingers.

“No.”

“Adelaide?”

“Melbourne.”

“I been to Melbourne once, with my sister. Not a lot a black fellas there, and cold down there. Different, very different.” He sniffed.

Doug held his hand out. “Here.”

“Thanks mate,” the man said, snatching the coins. He looked around apprehensively.

“Thanks, eh!”

“It's okay,” Doug replied, about to move on, when the man stopped him again.

“Like it here?”

A friend had once told Doug that repeating the other person's words always worked when in a delicate situation. It showed agreement, compliance, but at the same time it was a move to keep the other in check. "Not a lot of white fellas here," he said. "And it's very hot. Different, very different."

The man laughed, shaking his head nervously. "Different, eh? Want to meet my cousin? He lived in Melbourne, many years. He down there, with the rest of the mob." He pointed to the shore of the river.

Doug could see a group of men sitting in the shade, gesticulating to each other. "Sorry, I can't. Friends have invited me to lunch, and I'm running late already."

"Tomorrow," the man said impatiently, "we here every day."

It was Doug now, who was looking around nervously.

"I'm going back to Melbourne tomorrow," he said.

"Going back, eh?" The man seemed surprised. He thought for a while, then continued: "Got another dollar, mate?" He looked straight into Doug's eyes, but Doug held his gaze.

"I gave you all I got," he said firmly.

"Okay," the man said. "Flying back?"

"Driving."

"Long drive, that!"

"Yeah."

"Have a good trip back, eh?"

"Thanks."

Doug set off quickly before the man had another chance to hold him up.

When Doug got back to his car, he still had half an hour to kill before the internet café opened. Conscious that he needed some more thinking time, he decided to go for a drive around the outskirts of town.

Mrs Lanston's sorrow would be there again between her lines, sent to her son's mentor, a man who had taken the place of a father in her son's life. Her words would again contain her gratefulness for the guidance he had given to James. A gratefulness that embarrassed Doug because it created an intimacy he had never wished for. He had never seen himself as anything but James's supervisor and had never perceived James as anything but his best student.

In the safety of his car, Doug drove around town, finally steering his vehicle towards Anzac Hill, mildly interested in exploring the landmark. There was no one visiting yet, not a single tourist. He parked his car and took the few steps from the car park to the main viewing area where the white Anzac war memorial towered into the sky. The Australian and Northern Territory flags were hoisted, but there was no breeze bringing them to life.

He sauntered towards an information plaque and read about the Aboriginal and European history of the hill: *The Arrernte Aboriginal people know this hill as Untyeye-artwilye, a name derived from the words untyeye meaning corkwood, and artwilye meaning story. The hill is the site of the Corkwood Dreaming; a part of the explanation for the creation of the landscape. The story tells of a woman who lived alone on the hill. She was arragutye alknarintye; that is, she avoided the company of men. ...For the first 60 years of European settlement it was called simply 'The Hill'. Later it was known as Stott Hill and View Hill. It was named Anzac Hill in 1934 in memory of the soldiers of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) killed in World War I.*

Even though not familiar with any of the Dreaming stories, Doug was fascinated by the story of the Corkwood Dreaming. He would have liked to know more about it, about why the woman avoided the company of men. He tried to pronounce the Aboriginal word,

but his tongue twisted around the unusual syllables. View Hill, Anzac Hill, how much easier to pronounce the English names, yet how boring and bland they sounded in comparison to the Aboriginal word. He wondered what the Arabs would have called this hill had they ever had reason to give it a name. He could only vaguely remember the Arabic word for hill: *tall*, a word his grandmother had used often when telling him about Hunters Hill. *Tall* Hunters, she'd say – the oldest suburb in Sydney, which she had visited on many occasions as a young woman, delighted by the spectacular views over Sydney Harbour.

Doug walked up to the railing that surrounded the viewing area. He looked south. His eyes glided across the town centre towards the McDonnell Ranges, with the prominent Heavytree Gap dividing them into a Western and Eastern extension. He noticed how stunningly green the town was, despite the heat and dryness around it. An oasis in the middle of the red desert after heavy rainfall in the previous year.

What made people come and live here? Who would find this place attractive? Every one of the five days Doug had been here, he had begun in his usual positive mood, and every day he went to bed frustrated and depressed, struggling to hold on to the pattern of life he had created for himself in the city. A pattern of a tight, familiar circle within which he moved comfortably, of people he associated with without really engaging with them, people who gave him the nod of society he needed as a constant reminder that where he had placed himself was an okay place to be. A nod, though, that still allowed him to walk freely and didn't pry into his private life, into how he achieved what he achieved. A nod that didn't pay much attention to his cultural background either.

Doug realised that out here life had different parameters and a different meaning altogether. Only two social colours seemed to exist: black and white. If he were to live here, he wouldn't know within which circle to move. Which one, he wondered, did Amin and his father belong to, black or white?

Talking to a black man had made him act defensively, why? Why did he not go with him to meet his cousin, talk a while and listen? Why had he lied to him?

Doug no longer knew where he belonged. Like being put on a pedestal for people to see, he no longer managed to blend in. Yesterday, when he sprinted across the bush like a maniac, pushed to where he never thought of going, the ring of safety and comfort he had surrounded himself with had torn. He realised he had come to a point in his life where something in his psyche had started to take over, demanding to be fully explored, to have its say.

Amin and the old man. James' death. The apparition on the road. They had pushed him over the edge so that now he was in free fall, out of control, not knowing where he would land, and how long it would take to get there. All the formulas that had made up his life, didn't seem right anymore, numbers were tumbling, and the infinity beyond mere sight was attacking him from all sides like a storm of locusts thundering down on a landscape, stripping it to nothing.

As he looked at the town beneath him, something stronger than all numbers together suddenly emerged. No longer content with just being a spectator of an alien landscape, Doug was aware of a longing for some deeper connection; a connection reaching further than the city. A connection to a world beyond the one that had so far presented itself to him as reality. The world of his ancestors. Lebanon. The land of his people. A land he had never seen, never reflected upon. A land so different from the one he grew up in.

For the first time since he could remember he felt a sense of curiosity to find out and see what he had ignored and what had been hidden from him for so long. But what did it mean to embrace such a complex heritage? What would it be like to speak that language and start where he broke off as a child? How would the world treat him if he suddenly acknowledged openly that he was Arabic?

Maybe he could begin where someone else's heart was no longer beating. Maybe he could leave for Melbourne tomorrow, to attend James' funeral. Maybe he could begin, for the first time in his life, a project that didn't involve numbers: his journey home.

It was half past ten when Doug entered the internet café. He sat down at one of the computers and opened his email account. Mrs Lanston's reply was there, her message short.

*Dear Professor Samir*

*Thank you for your warm and immediate reply. I can understand that you may not be able to come to the funeral. Your agreement to scatter James' ashes has however lessened my sorrow and brought much peace to my heart. I shall be looking forward to meeting you in person when you are back.*

*My deepest gratitude,*

*Mrs Veronica Lanston*

Doug's reply was equally brief.

*Dear Mrs Lanston*

*Thank you in return for your reply. As my plans have changed and I am due to return to Melbourne earlier than expected, I will be able to be at James' funeral, Wednesday, 3 pm. I look forward to meeting you.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Douglas Samir*

He clicked the SEND button without hesitating and leant back, at peace with himself. If he left early the next morning, he would be able to make it with two overnight stops. And this time he would invite the ghoul to join him on his ride across the desert and back to the city, should it reappear.

He tried to bring the image of the ghoul back into his mind's eye, yet instead of an ugly and frightening visage, he saw a relaxed, calm and gentle face with hundreds of laughing wrinkles. A face that was familiar. A face with eyes that sparkled like a girl's.

This time the apparition didn't startle him. Instead Doug's lips stretched to a smile reflected in the screen of the computer, and he nodded as if he had known for a long time that she had been there, hiding behind the ghoul's face, waiting to be acknowledged and recognised: his grandmother as he had seen her last before she died.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Ya habibi. All those stories, I will try to remember them again."

The old man at the computer by the door had his eyes closed, waiting for a friend to come back and read the news from Lebanon off the net to him. Doug stood, feeling a mixture of grief and lightness looking at Amin's father. He was uncertain if he should say something, should make himself known to him, let him know that he finally understood what they were trying to tell him and that he would be leaving the next day.

The old man opened his eyes and looked straight at Doug as if he had sensed that someone was staring at him. He turned his head towards the door, then back to where Doug stood.

"Yusef, is that you?" he said, leaning forward.

Doug hesitated, urged forward, but then turned away, and quietly slipped out the door into the street.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

“HOW ABOUT A Middle Eastern platter for lunch?” Charlie asked. They were driving back into town after other people with squealing children in tow had arrived at the waterhole. “I know this really good kebab place and the owner’s lovely. I reckon he makes the best tabouli and has the best roasted vegetables. And his kebabs are delicious, too – the vegetarian version at least.”

Charlie was in high spirits, glad Zara had opened up to her. Zara was humming, enjoying the undulating landscape they were driving through – the West McDonnell Ranges with its different tones of red and brown and a surface that looked as if it had been combed with a rake. She felt that a heavy weight on her heart had finally dissolved and disappeared. Thinking of her decision not to have children no longer left her with a feeling of guilt.

Charlie nudged her. “Hey, where are you?”

Zara looked across, a sparkle showing in her eyes. “Sorry, I just feel very relaxed and light. What did you say?”

“I asked if you’d like a Middle Eastern platter for lunch. Late lunch I suppose – it’ll be two o’clock by the time we get back into town.”

“Sounds good. Take me anywhere you like.”

“Okay, let’s go home and get changed, and then see Amin. You’ll like him. He loves chatting.”

Zara lifted her eyebrows. “Amin?”

“The owner of the kebab place I’m going to take you to. He’s Arabic and loves talking, like all Arabs.” She paused. “Well, maybe not Doug.”

“Don’t you worry, Doug can talk if he’s in the right mood,” Zara said.

“Mind you, Amin’s not overpowering either. He’s a bit like Wanda. I’ve actually often thought the two would make a nice couple.”

Zara laughed. “You’re such a match-maker!”

“No, no, no, it’s not what you think!” Charlie countered. “I haven’t done anything to bring the two together. Honestly. That’s purely me thinking about it sometimes. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone’s future, not anymore. Not after I once got two other friends of mine together and it all ended in a disaster.”

“So, what happened?” Zara pulled her legs up and put her arms around them.

“Well, both were artists. It didn’t work at all. They fought all the time and ended up seeing a counsellor, each on their own. I don’t actually know if they ever got over the emotional damage. I felt so guilty; I couldn’t look them in the eyes. We’re no longer friends now, that all happened a long time ago. But I’ve certainly learnt a lesson.”

Zara couldn’t help feeling amused. That was just like Charlie, overbearingly keen on interfering in other people’s lives, always wanting to fix everyone, and ending up creating all sorts of trouble.

“I like Wanda very much,” Zara said. “She’s very easy-going.”

“Mmm,” Charlie replied, not really listening. She suddenly slowed the car.

“What’s wrong?” Zara looked in the sun visor, expecting to see the police signalling them to stop. But no car was in sight.

Charlie pulled over. “See, there.” She pointed to their left. “Approaching fast.”

Zara made out a swirl of dust, but before she could say anything, sand and gravel hit their windscreen and their car was rocking like a boat caught in a storm. The trees on the other side of the road bent vigorously to one side, looking as if they would be ripped out of the soil. Rubbish from the edge of the road flew through the air and a KFC container was hurled against their bonnet.

Then all of a sudden the scenery was calm again.

“What the heck was that?” Zara’s mouth was dry, her left hand clutched the doorhandle as it had done only a few days before when Doug saw that apparition.

Charlie navigated the car back onto the road.

“A willi-willi,” she explained. “They’re very common around here.”

“A what?”

“It’s an Aboriginal term for whirlwind. Aboriginal people, at least in this area, believe that a willi-willi is an evil spirit roaming the land. They say you should always let them go past, never drive through one. People have been killed, their car overturned. It’s difficult to keep your car under control when one hits you.”

“But I didn’t even see it coming! We would’ve been a real mess if I had been driving!”

“No, you can’t not see them when you drive, but you can ignore them, thinking they’re just a bit of dust coming across. That’s what people don’t understand, they’re miniature tornadoes.”

Zara puffed air through her lips. “Incredible!” She was stunned. Was that perhaps what Doug had seen, a willi-willi, not a ghost at all?

“You okay?” Charlie asked. “It didn’t frighten you, did it?”

Zara blinked nervously behind her sunglasses. “No, it’s just – I didn’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Don’t worry, they’re quite a bit of a spectacle, but nothing can happen if you respect them.” Charlie turned on the radio.

Zara didn’t know what to think. Could it really have been just a whirlwind, a willi-willi that had come between her and Doug? Had a whirlwind been enough to throw them off balance?

Perhaps the truth was that their lovemaking was the only thread that had ever held them together. And it was the lovemaking that Zara would miss the most if they broke up, even though Doug’s touch had faded already. They had not made love and had hardly spoken since the incident on the road, but still lay next to each other every night in Charlie’s blue room, drifting past each other during sleep like distant friends.

An image of her parents crossed Zara’s mind. She had long lost touch with them, except for the occasional postcard. Hippies when they were young, they had decided to grow up in their late twenties. Her father turned to money and investments and became a stockbroker; her mother took on a job as legal secretary. They bought their own little house, and then the children came, first her brother, then herself, three years apart. Whereas her brother thrived in their parents’ post-baby, conservative world, Zara withdrew more and more into herself, rebelling against their ideals as soon as she started to think for herself.

Her parents embraced everything she hated. They thought migrants were far too well off in Switzerland, and too many were still streaming into the country, taking the good Swiss people’s jobs away, turning the streets into unsafe havens of crime. They had voted against the European Union, wanting to keep their roads free from the large trucks that would pass through Switzerland if it became a member. They were against shops introducing late opening hours, and her mother was proud to hang red geraniums in pots on her balcony to underline her Swissness. She had adopted citizenship when she married Zara’s father. They owned a chalet in the mountains, where they used to take their children

skiing every winter. On Sundays, they used to stroll along Lake Zurich and would claim that despite all the travelling they had done, they were always glad to return to their own country. Because there was no better place to live than in Switzerland.

Zara had never stopped rebelling, constantly challenging her parents, who to her mind had grown to be hypocritical. She had begged them to open their eyes, to be young and questioning again. Yet all they used to say was that in the end it was childish behaviour to want to change the world, that there was nothing to complain about, and that rules were made to keep peace and one could not wish for a better life than the one they had.

When Zara had left them at sixteen and moved in with a friend, they were concerned, but still hopeful that one day she would come to her senses. When she had wanted to do arts, they had sighed and shaken their heads. When she had finally finished her photography diploma, they asked her if she would now be ready to start a serious career, become a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, or something similar. They had given up on her when she told them she would leave to go and live in Australia. That was after her secret abortion and after her falling-out with her brother, who had done what every son should do: step into his father's shoes.

Zara had simply failed to understand her family, and vice versa. Not even her mother, who had left her own country when she was only eighteen, was able to connect with her. Zara couldn't help wondering if she and Doug would have ended up like her parents, had it not been for a whirlwind. She shivered at the thought that a willi-willi might be enough to shake her parents out of their stupor.

"How are your parents?" Zara asked, interrupting Charlie's singing along with the music.

"Still happy in Queensland?"

“My parents? Yes, I think they’re enjoying it a lot more than Adelaide. At least they never complain. I suppose they’re fine. Why ask?”

“No particular reason, I was just curious. Do you still see them?”

“Well, once a year at least. They came to Alice Springs last year and I did a bit of the tourist thing with them, but I told you about that, didn’t I? I think they really liked it. I might fly over later this year for a week or so.” She looked across to Zara. “And you? Still keeping a distance?”

Zara nodded. “Nothing’s really changed. I only hear from them at Christmas and on birthdays – the usual card. I’ve been thinking, maybe I should ask them to come over and visit me?”

“Well, well, that’d be quite a progress. Why not? I’d love to meet them and find out if they’re really as bad as you say.” Charlie twisted her face into a grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll behave.”

“I’m sure you will.” Zara grinned back, then became serious again. “I don’t know what is right anymore. Why bother about our parents if they never make an effort to understand us?”

“Just take them as they are. Don’t expect anything, don’t feel guilty about your own life, and don’t try to change them. I think that works best. It’s easier for me, I reckon, because I’m an only child. Parents tend to be a bit more caring and more reluctant to lose contact with you than when there are other siblings around who they can focus on.”

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you: what happened to Sandy’s father? Is he around?”

“Oh, that’s a long story. Wanda grew up around Darwin and lived up there until about seven years ago. She met Brendon, Sandy’s father, up there. They’d been together for two years, I think, when Brendon’s brother died under weird circumstances. Something to do with a killing. I don’t actually know the full story. Brendon turned to heavy drinking

after that and ended up losing his job. Then Wanda got pregnant, and they struggled for money, and he started hitting her. She stuck it out until Sandy was one year old, then she left him and came to Alice Springs.

“Her mum’s side are from down here, and her sister Joy, the painter, moved to Hermannsburg nearly twenty years ago. But other than that, Wanda hasn’t got lots of family left here, most of her mob’s up North. Joy took her in for the first two years, before she found a job here and a place to live.

“I think on one or two occasions while visiting her mob in Darwin, Wanda met up with Brendon so he could see his daughter. He seemed to regret it all, but hasn’t ever made an effort to get himself together. I think he’s living with another woman now. It’s a very touchy issue with Wanda. She’s been very strong to come out of it all, and I don’t think it’s easy for her. She really misses her people, but for Sandy’s sake she thought it’d be better to move away from Brendon.”

“It’s always the children who suffer the most, isn’t it?” Zara said. “I feel sorry for Sandy.”

“I guess so, but then again, Sandy’s having a much calmer life growing up here, even though there’s a lot of trouble around here, too. But if Wanda manages to keep her away from it all, Sandy will grow up okay.” Charlie paused. “I think Wanda thought of aborting, too, but I’m happy she didn’t. Imagine, she’d probably still be with Brendon, wasting her life.” She sighed. “Just shows you that we all have different reasons for why we decide to have or not to have a child.”

## CHAPTER XXXV

THE AIR-CONDITIONING AT *IBRAHIM'S KEBABS* was working furiously, roaring and rattling like an old man cursing the heat. Amin looked up when Charlie and Zara entered and greeted them with a big smile. He was serving a young couple, tourists with small backpacks on their shoulders, their skin glistening with sweat and slightly too red for their own good. Their English was rough, their Austrian accent strong.

While preparing their kebabs, Amin tried to engage the couple in a conversation, encouraging them to look after their skin. They looked at each other puzzled, not understanding what the man said.

“Please?” the guy asked. “How much?”

“No, I mean your skin.” Amin pointed to his arms and face, then to theirs. “You need to put on sunscreen.”

They were completely thrown. “Ich verstehe nicht, was er will,” the guy said to the girl and turned round, “I don’t understand,” and then, as if a sign with the words ‘I speak German’ was dangling from Zara’s neck, everyone looked at Zara, waiting for her to lift the awkwardness of linguistic failure.

“Er hat gesagt, Ihr sollt vorsichtig sein mit der Sonne und genügend Sonnencreme einschmieren,” she said in a tone of indifference.

“Ach so,” the Austrian said, relieved. “Ja, wir haben uns einen Sonnenbrand geholt. Wir waren den ganzen Tag draussen und haben die Creme im Hotel vergessen.” He turned back to Amin, nodding, “yes, not good, we know.”

“They forgot their sunscreen at the hotel,” Zara translated for Amin.

“Oh, I have some here, wait!” And he dashed off into the back room.

The two frowned, turning to Zara again.

“Er geht seine Sonnencreme holen,” Zara said.

“Nein, braucht er doch nicht!” When Amin came back, the Austrian shook his head vigorously and said, “No, no, thank you! We go back to the hotel now.”

“Doesn’t matter, you should still put some on, it’s important. Here.” Amin held the tube out to them.

“Ihr sollt Euch trotzdem einschmieren,” translated Zara.

“Nein, wirklich nicht!” They both shook their heads. “Sagen sie ihm, dass es nicht nötig ist.”

“They don’t want any,” Zara told Amin, shrugging her shoulders.

“Okay, no worries.” Amin put the sunscreen down on the counter. “Would you like any drinks with your kebabs?”

“Drinks? No, we have water. Thank you.”

“That’s nine dollars then.” Amin held up nine fingers.

“Yes, yes, I understand.” The Austrian put ten dollars on the counter. “It’s okay.”

They grabbed their kebabs, said goodbye to everyone, and ‘Danke’ to Zara. Then they were out the door before Amin had a chance to give them back their change.

“Don’t worry,” Zara said, “they’ve given you a tip.”

“Oh, that’s nice, thank you, very nice!”

Amin put the one dollar coin back into the till and like a news reader switching from a serious to a more light-hearted topic, his face lit up, and his voice changed to a higher pitch.

“Now, my ladies, Charlie my angel!” He came round the counter and gave her a big hug. “You haven’t shown yourself here for so long, what happened! And this must be a friend of yours from Germany! I know German when I hear it, but I can’t speak it. You sound so Australian!” He grabbed Zara’s right hand with both his and shook it wildly. “Welcome to my shop!”

Zara smiled, not knowing what to say, surprised at the description Charlie had given her earlier of Amin.

“Amin,” Charlie said, calm in comparison. “Zara’s from Switzerland, but she lives in Adelaide now. She’s come to visit me, we’ve been friends for a few years. I met Zara in Adelaide when she had just come over from Europe.”

Amin finally let go of Zara’s hand.

“Aah, I see!” he said. “So you must like Australia, to come here from so far away. And you don’t mind the heat?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I have known Charlie three years. But she doesn’t come to my shop very often anymore.” He pretended to sulk.

“Nothing to do with your food. I told Zara you serve the most delicious Middle Eastern food in town, didn’t I?”

“That’s true,” Zara replied, smiling, “Charlie did say that, and I can’t wait to taste some.”

“Okay, okay. I’m the only one who serves Middle Eastern food in this town, so that’s not a very good compliment, is it?” He raised his eyebrows and grinned, his head tilted to the side.

“You know why, Amin,” Charlie said, her voice firm now.

“Sorry, my angel, I’m sorry, I know.” He looked like a little boy who had been told off. Zara gave Charlie a puzzled look.

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” Charlie said to Zara. “But let’s order first, shall we?”

“Yes, my ladies,” Amin replied quickly, happy to be of help again. Back behind the counter he appeared a lot taller and Zara wondered if the floor was raised or whether everyone seemed bigger behind a counter.

“We’ll have your platter, with everything except the meat.” Charlie paused. “No, hang on. Zara, would you like some lamb?”

“No, I’m quite happy with vegetables.”

“Okay, the vegetarian version then. Make it a big one, double the normal size.”

“Anything for you, my angel! And to drink?”

“I’ll have an orange juice.”

Zara ordered the same.

“Take a seat, my ladies, and rest. I’ll bring everything out to you.”

Although Zara was curious to hear Charlie’s story, she would have liked to sit for a while first and watch Amin prepare their food. Despite his chatter, there was something about him that she liked. She could tell that there was a quiet side to him. One that he would probably only show to close friends, or during a serious conversation. Charlie was right: he was a male version of Wanda.

Charlie was getting impatient, fidgeting on her seat until she gained Zara’s undivided attention.

“About ten months ago,” she started, “after I’d been having my lunch here regularly, every Friday, there was this fellow one day, a guy from Sydney, who was in Alice Springs on business. He came into the shop, ordered a kebab and sat down at the table next to me. There aren’t a lot of tables in here as you can see, so I didn’t find that unusual. But then I

noticed he was staring at me and when I looked back at him, he just kept staring. Anyway, I still didn't think too much of it. I finished my coffee, paid and, unfortunately, I said to Amin that I'd be back the next Friday.

"The Friday after, I came back, ordered the usual, sat down and in came the guy again. Still I didn't think too much of it, it was lunchtime and people who work usually keep to a certain hour when they have their lunch. But then he asked me if I'd mind if he sat at my table, even though there were two other tables left. I felt a bit strange, but thought to myself, don't be silly. But then he started talking to me, asking me personal questions, where I lived, what my job was, etc. I only gave him vague answers and I definitely didn't give him any clues about where I lived.

"Anyway, when I left I just winked at Amin, then said loudly that I didn't know when I'd be back. The week after I decided to come on a Wednesday, plus come in an hour earlier. But bingo, there he was again! As soon as I had ordered my food, in he walked. He sat down at another table this time, but again stared at me constantly. Amin by then had noticed what was going on, but couldn't really do much. Later that day, while I was doing my shopping, I bumped into the guy in the supermarket. I pretended I didn't know who he was and left as quickly as I could. Then when I drove off, I saw him standing at the supermarket entrance, watching me. I took several detours before I finally drove home."

Amin came over with their orange juices.

"Better not talk about him," he said, a worried look on his face, "he hasn't been back for a long time." He put the two glasses down on the table. "I miss your company."

"I'll try to come again more often, I promise."

"No promise! Any time come here if you feel like a good meal and a friendly chat."

"You've got such a big heart, Amin. Thank you."

He didn't reply, but started humming and disappeared behind the counter.

“Anyway,” Charlie continued, “to cut a long story short, that guy kept stalking me for another three months, always popping up right where I was, but luckily always only in town. I don’t think he had a car. I ended up hardly going into town anymore. I talked to Amin about it on the phone, to make sure he would not give the guy any details about me. Amin told me that he had started to turn up every day, occasionally asking about me. Amin pretended he didn’t really know me, but tried to find out more about him. But all he learnt was that he was in Alice Springs on business for three months, sent by his firm in Sydney. Amin never found out what company the guy actually worked for.”

Charlie breathed in deeply.

“Gee, talking about it makes me shiver again! It was like having a ghost on my heels.” She shuddered. So did Zara. “Anyway, let’s forget about it. I really was paranoid for a while, even long after the guy had left town. I hope I’ll never bump into him again.”

But just as Charlie finished talking, someone else they didn’t expect to see entered the shop.

“Doug,” Zara said, surprised.

“What?”

“Doug’s here.”

Charlie turned round.

“Hello, my son,” Amin said to Doug, who looked absentminded and quite exhausted. “How are you?”

“Hi Amin,” Doug said, “I’m fine, thanks, I’ve just come to – ” He suddenly noticed Charlie and Zara in the corner, their eyes on him. “Oh, hi!” he said, blinking nervously and shifting from one foot to the other. “What a surprise!”

Amin looked across to Charlie, all of a sudden worried that Doug might be yet another man who was harassing her.

“Excuse me,” he said to Doug in a slightly harsher tone than usual, “you know each other?”

Doug cleared his throat. “As a matter of fact, yes, we do.”

Zara decided to take over. “Doug’s my partner, we drove up together and are staying with Charlie.”

Now Amin’s eyes were wide open, staring at Zara, trying to make sense of all this. So this was Doug’s wife! She was so different to how he had pictured her. Charlie’s friend, Doug’s wife!

“So how come *you two* know each other?” Charlie asked Amin before he managed to speak again.

“Doug has come here several times to eat and we started talking,” Amin replied with pride in his voice, “and I have taken him to my house. He has met my father. He told us what happened to him and his wife on their drive up, and also told us about his student.”

Doug made a step towards the door, but then decided otherwise, looking around the room as if searching for a place to hide. “Great,” he mumbled, tapping his fingers on the counter. Zara gasped.

Charlie looked at Zara out of the corner of her eye, repeating mechanically: “He told us what happened to him and his wife on their drive up?”

Amin sensed tension. “Have I said something I shouldn’t have?”

“Well, I wonder, is there something you two haven’t told me?” Charlie looked from Zara to Doug.

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” Zara replied. “I think there is something Doug needs to tell all of us.”

“We better sit down,” Amin said quickly. It was up to him now to rescue the situation. “We sit down and we talk ... no ... we eat first,” and he picked up the platter he had just finished, swirled round the counter, and served the women.

“And I’ll bring some bread, and cutlery, and all you have to do is enjoy the best food in town.” He wanted to laugh, but his already high pitched voice hit a note too high for him to cope with, so that what came out sounded more like a magpie being strangled. “Always better to talk with a full stomach,” and he whizzed back, grabbed the rest and put the plates down so quickly that they rotated on the table for a few seconds before they came to rest. Then he turned to Doug.

“Come, my friend, you sit down, too, I’ll make you a kebab like last time, sit down, we can push two tables together and I will sit with you all, okay?” He tried to keep Doug in check with smiles while Doug helped him move the table.

Charlie and Zara ate quietly, feeling uncomfortable with each other. Charlie was no longer sure whether she was intruding, and Zara felt that she should have told Charlie about the incident on the road. Doug was still marvelling about Amin and Charlie’s friendship.

Amin had never prepared a kebab so quickly. He constantly glanced at the door, hoping no one would come in and they could get this awkwardness out of the way. When Doug pulled out his wallet to pay, Amin shook his head and spoke louder than necessary, as if addressing an audience in a theatre.

“You are all invited today!” Amin wasn’t the sort of man who would try to get out of a situation he felt responsible for. “Here we are!”

He put the kebab on a plate and quickly organised some vegetables and tabouli for himself. Then the two men sat down.

“What a coincidence,” said Amin who couldn’t stand the silence, “that we all meet here!” He coughed briefly. Charlie suddenly felt sorry for Amin’s desperate attempts.

“Yeah, the world’s a lot smaller than we think,” she said, smiling at Amin. “But then again, not necessarily a coincidence, just shows that here is where people meet who enjoy good food.”

“It is all very delicious,” Zara added. “Do you prepare and cook everything yourself, or do you have someone to help you?”

“All myself. But I like doing it, it’s my job, I don’t mind. It’s not hard, I always cook for up to three days, and I run out of different things at different times, so I don’t have the full load every day, you know.”

Zara nodded.

The more their stomachs filled, the more they calmed down. Amin got up once or twice to serve other customers, then quickly joined the group again. By the time they had finished eating and were ready for coffee, they all felt reasonably at ease, soothed by Amin’s capacity to make people feel at home.

“You better tell them now,” Amin said when he finally thought the right moment had come.

Doug glanced at Zara, who remained impassive. Amin looked at Doug, waiting for him to start, and Charlie leant back, eager to finally hear Doug’s ‘secret story’.

So Doug began, more capable now of telling his story than the first time. Zara listened as if she hadn’t been with him out there on the road. The event seemed so distant now, almost no longer real. But when Doug mentioned James’ death, Zara was shocked. She had met James once or twice. He had been a very polite young man. She wasn’t at all prepared for this. Why hadn’t Doug told her? Had they drifted so far apart that he couldn’t even trust her with news that was clearly so important and personal to him?

“That’s a lot to deal with in such a short time,” Charlie finally muttered, struggling to take it all in. “I’m really sorry.”

Doug announced that he had decided to attend James’ funeral and to fulfil James’ last wish. Zara couldn’t help feeling alarmed at the prospect of Doug leaving the next day. Would she go with him?

“I’ve actually come here today to say goodbye,” Doug said to Amin. “And to thank you for the delicious kebabs. And for your time.”

He would have liked to say much more, that he had solved the riddle of the apparition and was confident that the evil eye didn’t have anything to do with it. Yet, he could say none of this. He didn’t want Charlie and Zara to listen.

“Please, any time come and visit me when you come to Alice Springs again,” Amin replied simply, even though he couldn’t help feeling sad. Amin could tell that Doug had found an explanation for the ghost, a meaning. He knew because Doug would not otherwise have come back to say goodbye. He also knew that Doug’s journey back to the mystery of his ancestry wouldn’t be easy – he had only just begun.

“Everyone has their own ghosts to deal with,” Amin said in the end, smiling at Zara, certain that she had her own story to tell, too.

Then they all sat together a little longer, chatting about other things, about the importance of tourism to Alice Springs, the many attractions this place offered for people who had never been to Australia before.

At some point during the conversation, Zara remembered Marc, the Frenchman and healer they had met at the coffee shop in Coober Pedy, wondering whether he was waiting to hear from her, what he thought of Adelaide and whether he was the sort of person who would ever get angry about anything. She also recalled the man with the red beard from the petrol station in Coober Pedy, and thought she should at some stage look up his parents’ shop in town. She was feeling more and more certain that she wanted to stay with Charlie for a little longer, long enough to sort out the possibility of her heading back to Switzerland, even if only for a visit. Or maybe she would go along with Charlie’s idea of accompanying her to Greece.

When Amin's guests left his shop that Sunday, they felt calm and content with the outcome of things.

"Just one more thing," Doug said to Amin, when he gave him a last handshake, after Charlie and Zara had already walked out into the street. "I've finally figured out your age."

Amin laughed. "Go ahead then!"

"You're 40."

"And how did you work that out?"

"Birthday card up there," Doug said in a boasting tone, pointing at a shelf behind the counter. "So, not quite old enough to be my father." He grinned.

"Well done, well done, my son," exclaimed Amin, patting his friend on his back. He then waved goodbye to them, still chuckling about Doug guessing wrong again, about him not noticing the yellow edges around the card. But, Amin thought to himself, what does age mean in the end anyway?

## CHAPTER XXXVI

ZARA STOOD UP from the table. "It's been such a long day," she said. "And I have a pounding headache. I think I need to go to bed. Do you mind?" She rubbed Doug's shoulders, slowly.

"Are you sure you don't want to drive back with me?" Doug asked, tension still lingering in his body, despite Zara's soft hands.

"Positive." Her fingers paused. "Even though I don't like the idea of you doing all the driving on your own."

"Don't worry about that, that's the least of my concerns. As long as you are happy and do what you need to do."

"This place seems to help me sort myself out. I've even been thinking of returning to Switzerland for a while."

"Sure." Doug stood up. "I want you to be certain, that's all." He gave her a kiss on the cheek, then scanned her face for any signs of irresolution.

Zara pressed his hand, giving him an encouraging smile. "Tell Charlie I'm sorry for sneaking off. I'll see both of you in the morning."

"Would you like me to get you anything, a glass of water perhaps?"

Zara shook her head. "I'm fine, thanks."

The glow of the sun was still visible on the horizon. Doug made himself another cup of coffee and went back out onto the verandah. He couldn't wait to leave town. He needed the commotion of the city to think clearly, to organise and plan what he would do next. Letting go of old patterns, he knew, was easier said than done.

He let his eyes wander over the lush garden, over the ferns, the willow trees, their branches intertwined with the leaves of palm trees, over lily bushes, ponds, and birds hovering in and around the plants. A backyard microcosm swathed in twilight, a world with lungs, breathing its own life. There was an irresistible, enticing aspect to the darkening lushness.

He was about to stand up and stroll through the garden, when Charlie came out onto the verandah.

“Oh,” she said, surprised to see Doug on his own. “Where’s Zara?”

“In bed with a headache. She didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Poor thing, must have had too much sun today.” Charlie sat down opposite Doug. “And a few too many emotions to deal with in one day. I actually wanted to give you two enough time to talk, so I deliberately didn’t rush through my work. How did you go?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. All I know is that Zara’s going to stay with you for a while. I think we both need time to sort things out. She seems to be more clear about it than me.”

Charlie crossed one leg over the other. “Zara can stay with me as long as she likes, of course. Will you be alright on your own?”

“I’ll cope. I’m used to driving long distances – I’ve driven from Melbourne to Adelaide, and back, several times.”

Charlie shifted forward on her chair. “I meant emotionally, will you cope without Zara?”

Doug sat up straight and stretched his back. He took a sip of his coffee.

“This thing with Zara’s headache,” he said, “she often uses excuses when she’s upset and wants to be alone. She hides behind a backache, or a migraine, or some other physical pain.” He leant forward and rested his elbows on his knees, looking hard at Charlie. “I need you to look after her. You have to promise me that.”

The kitchen light shining through the French windows onto the verandah created deep shadows on Doug’s angular face, increasing his strong features. Charlie suddenly felt irritated. Doug’s gaze was relentless. It caused the same discomfort in her as Sandy’s deep black stare, but Doug’s was charged with demand, asking her to yield. She held her breath, then, breathing out sharply, forced her eyes away from his and stood up.

“I’ll be back,” she said, “I need to finish off marking some project work.”

Doug heard her hurry inside and up the stairs. He tried to adjust his eyes again to the darkness in the centre of the garden, a darkness that was still pushing and pulling him. Teasing him. He stood up and walked into the garden, following the little path to the Japanese water feature. He stood for a while and listened to the noises of the night.

Somehow he didn’t feel right about leaving without Zara. Yet, he had no choice. She didn’t want to leave early and he couldn’t stay any longer. After all those years, he suddenly felt he was running out of time, that he had to make up for what he had so far neglected – to reconcile with the dead that were very much a part of him. Where he would start, and how he would go about it all, he did not know though.

The light from the window upstairs suddenly caught his attention. He turned around and looked up. Charlie stood by the window and was watching him. In her orange sarong, matching her copper hair, she appeared like a marble statue caught in a flame against the backdrop of the night.

Doug waited for her to open the window, or to signal to him, but she didn’t move. He went inside. At the bottom of the stairs he hesitated. Then, disregarding his resistance, he

went upstairs. The door to Charlie's bedroom stood ajar and light spilled out onto the landing. He knocked lightly.

"Come in," he heard Charlie say.

She turned around as Doug entered.

"I thought you were finishing off some work," he said.

Charlie gazed at him curiously. "How come when you speak you often sound as if you are commanding people, giving them orders?"

Doug put his hands in his pockets. "I'm not aware of it, why?"

Charlie bit her lips. "I know you have gone through a lot and I don't want to sound cold. But you and I haven't really hit it off from the start. I suppose I'm a bit surprised you should ask me to look after Zara."

Doug looked straight into her eyes. "When two people love the same person, there's always going to be friction, don't you agree?"

Charlie took a deep breath, but didn't reply. She leant against the window.

"I've asked you to look after Zara because you love her," Doug continued. "I didn't think you'd see it as a demand or an order. I thought you would naturally be inclined to do it anyway."

"Well, why ask then?" This time Charlie looked straight back at Doug.

"Don't you think it is time to stop quarrelling?" Doug held her gaze.

"Okay, what do you suggest?" She paused. "That we have sex?"

Doug's eyes widened. This woman was even more forward than he had so far had the pleasure of being a witness to. He wondered how much further she would go. It wouldn't surprise him if she suddenly attacked him physically.

"Well, I hadn't thought of that," he said. "But if that's how you solve problems – do I have a choice?"

Charlie cocked her head. "I believe it is much rather *your* way of solving problems. I for myself prefer to talk."

"We could be in for a long haul then. Do you mind if I sit down?" Doug looked around for a chair, but there was none.

"You'll have to sit on the end of the bed," Charlie said, pointing.

Doug remained standing. "I actually came upstairs to say thank you for letting me stay at your house. I have obviously been a difficult guest. But let me assure you, it wasn't my idea to stay here. I wanted to go to a hotel, but Zara didn't like that idea."

Charlie crossed her arms. "Go on," she said.

"I'm not in the mood to talk about why you and I don't get along."

"So, what then? Back to sex? Don't forget, I prefer women." There was suddenly a smile playing around her lips.

Doug waited until it was gone. "Under different circumstances, sex might have indeed been a good way to clear the tension and conflict between us."

"Under different circumstances we would never have met in the first place."

"Which would have been much better for both of us, don't you think?" Doug walked towards the door.

"I suppose mathematicians and vegetarians just don't mix very well."

"And same is true, of course, for heterosexuals and homosexuals."

Charlie couldn't help shaking her head. This man never seemed short of an answer. When it came to sarcastic mockery, she realised they were both equals. "Good night," she said. "And don't worry, Zara will be in good hands with me."

Doug stepped out onto the landing. "See you in the morning," he said and pulled the door closed.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

LOW CLOUDS AND a listless sky cast a subdued grey over the landscape and gave hope for a sprinkle of warm drops later in the day when children would run out of their houses and squeal with joy. And adults would relax, inhaling the smell of wet soil in anticipation of those months that would bring more rain.

Doug had packed his few belongings and was stowing them away in the car, ready to drive back along the long, lonesome road south. Zara and Charlie watched him, waiting to say goodbye. Both women felt solemn about the man's departure, slightly uncertain still about what it all meant. They gave him a small lunch packet and asked him to call at least once while he was on the road.

When he drove off and his black Holden turned the corner so that only a swirl of dust was left behind, Zara couldn't hold back tears. These were tears of relief, but also of consolation – perhaps one day they would be able to continue their relationship.

Charlie put her arms around Zara, nearly crying herself. She felt confused and couldn't help thinking that she had somehow been the real cause of Zara's distress and Doug's departure, the real cause of their separation.

"I'm so sorry, Zara!" she said, patting Zara's back helplessly.

"I always felt carefree when I was with Doug," Zara whispered, her face hidden in Charlie's hair. "He somehow knew how to make me happy. I'll miss that very much."

“If only I had the ability to undo things,” Charlie said.

“Don’t you be sorry. Sometimes things happen for a reason, to shake us up, to give us a kick to move on in life.” Zara freed herself from Charlie’s embrace. “It’s about time I should look ahead. Why don’t we invite Wanda over for afternoon tea?” She tried to smile, ushering Charlie back into the house. “I need to get a grip on myself, I’m in my mid-thirties for heaven’s sake!”

As if agreeing, the clouds released a sudden downpour of rain, with thunder and lightening performing a short, but intense display in the sky, cleansing the air from tension and despair, from dust and pollution, and recharging Zara’s soul with the power to heal.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

A BARELY DISCERNIBLE breeze dispersed the gentle, warm and bold fragrance that two potted lavender bushes on Charlie's back verandah exuded. Zara deeply inhaled the scent, mixing it with the tangy flavour of lemon on her tongue.

"The women liked your photos," Wanda said across the table. "They would like you to visit them again. I think they want to take some more photos with you. As I said last time, we need a photographer and we'd be happy to give you a twelve-month contract. Pay won't be fantastic, but enough to get through up here. What do you think?"

Zara scraped the last few crumbs of lemon tart into a corner of her plate. "Jenny, one of the women, is a great photographer herself. She took some of the photos you saw." She sighed. "It all sounds wonderful, and you're both so kind. It's just that I made –"

"My home is your home," Charlie interjected. "You know that, Zara, in case you're worried about where you're going to live."

"I'll need time to think about it."

How would she explain to Wanda that she no longer possessed a camera? There was also the insurance company in Adelaide she was still hooked up with – what would happen to her residency status if she quit? And would she want to commit to staying in Alice Springs for a whole year? She wanted to be absolutely sure she would make a decision out of her own free will, without being pushed in a direction she would later regret. She

wanted control over her movements and actions again. And most of all, she wanted to feel that she belonged.

She looked across to Sandy, who was playing with her napkin. "Sandy, would you like me to tell you a story?"

Sandy looked up, surprised.

"What story?" she asked, almost timidly.

"Darling, what a question!" Wanda cheered. "You love stories, so come on, off you go!"

"Let's go over to the hammock," Zara said. "That's both our favourite place, isn't it?"

Charlie looked at the two, worried that they might upset each other again.

Sandy hopped off her seat and followed Zara to the hammock.

"No mischief, the two of you!" Charlie called after them. And to Wanda she said: "Zara has to sort out a few things first. She's only just split up with her partner, and she's not quite certain yet where to go from here. And the whole thing with visa and stuff, it's quite a mess from what I understand."

"Well, the visa side of it, we'll be able to work that out. But her heart has to be in it first, you know."

Zara was making herself comfortable in the rocking bed as Sandy climbed on top of her.

"Oh, okay!"

"We just have to pull in our tummies and we can lie next to each other," the girl said.

Zara didn't object and, moving onto her side, tried not to fall out, while Sandy squeezed her little body in next to her. They faced each other and could feel each other's breath on their skin. Sandy made the hammock rock dangerously.

“Careful!” Zara said, holding on to the side and waiting for the girl to stop wiggling. “Now, listen, I’m going to tell you a story from where I was born, a country on the other side of the world, Switzerland. Have you ever heard of such a place?”

Sandy shook her head in excitement.

“Switzerland is a tiny little country in the centre of Europe, long long way away from here. There are lots of mountains and in winter it gets very cold, and it snows until the landscape is all white. The story I’m going to tell you is about a special flower that grows there, in the mountains, a wild flower, bright yellow colour. It is called Arnika –”

“That sounds like a name for a girl,” Sandy interrupted. “I like it.”

“Yes, and the story I’m going to tell you is about how Arnika received its name. And it involves dwarves. Dwarves are small people who make good things happen –”

“We have giant creatures that created the landscape a long time ago. You can still see them today, they’re everywhere. Yeperenye, Utnerrengatye, and Ntyarlke.”

“That’s right. Caterpillars, your mum told me about them, they formed the landscape around Alice Springs, didn’t they?”

“Yes, they’re all caterpillars.”

“I like caterpillars very much, and I like dwarves, too. Know what dwarves are called in my language? Zwärge. So this is a Zwärgegschicht. Are you ready?”

Sandy closed her eyes and Zara began.

*Once upon a time there were two dwarves, Raruck and Silverbeard. Silverbeard had healing powers, but Raruck didn’t know, not until one day he found out first-hand. Raruck was climbing over rocks to look at Edelweiss flowers, which are a beautiful deep blue and are only found high in the mountains. Every so often he loosened the soil around those flowers that had started to wilt. He didn’t notice that a goat had slipped on one of the rocks higher up, causing it to roll down. The rock hit Raruck’s leg and pulled him down*

*into the valley. Luckily, dwarves are not as heavy as human beings and they fall more lightly. But the rock still left a big bruise on Raruck's leg, which hurt him quite a bit. Raruck wanted to cry, but then decided not to and limped off.*

*Just then Silverbeard came along and saw Raruck limp awkwardly.*

Zara looked at Sandy. "And because dwarves in my country don't speak English, but a form of German, this is what Silverbeard would have said: '*Hey Raruck, was machsch denn du für Faxe? Gfallt's dir, so dur d'Wält z'humple?*'"

Sandy started giggling. "Sounds like you're singing. What does it mean?"

"See if you can work it out from Raruck's answer," Zara said mysteriously, and then continued:

*'No,' Raruck said, 'I don't at all like limping through the world, but I have to. Lueg! Look!' Raruck pointed to his swollen leg.*

*Silverbeard understood now that Raruck was in real pain. 'Leg dich ane. Lie down,' he ordered.*

Sandy giggled again.

*Raruck lay down on the ground. Silverbeard held his hands towards the sun until they were very warm. Then he rubbed them against each other, whispering secretly: 'A-iri Ni-ka, A-iri Ni-ka.' Then he rubbed Raruck's injured leg with his hands, all the while humming: 'A-iri Ni-ka!'*

*Raruck could feel his pain disappear. After a short rest, Silverbeard asked if Raruck was feeling any better and if A-iri Ni-ka had helped relive the pain.*

*'Jo. Yes,' said Raruck, 'es macht gar nümme weh. It's no longer hurting, dear Silverbeard. How come you have magic powers? Is there still some A-iri Ni-ka left in your hands? Es schmöckt so guet. It smells so nice.'*

*And Silverbeard said: 'My healing powers don't happen just like that. I have to call them. A little bit of sun and starshine, das isch's Gheimnis. There's still a lot in my hands now.'*

*Raruck asked if Silverbeard could transfer some of his power into the yellow flowers around them, so that they would all smell nice. Silverbeard smiled and placed both his hands on one of the yellow flowers nearby, with Raruck whispering: 'A-iri Ni-ka, A-iri Ni-ka.'*

*When Silverbeard removed his hands, Raruck noticed that the flower had gone brown inside. He lent over the flower and could smell the beautiful spicy scent of A-iri Ni-ka. He asked Silverbeard if this wonderful scent was going to stay inside the flower or if it was going to be carried away by the wind. Silverbeard told him that it would stay, because he had placed the scent deep into the flower. And all the flower's sisters would take on her scent. He then asked Raruck to go around and whisper A-iri Ni-ka into every one of the yellow flowers so that they would take on the scent even more quickly.*

*Raruck wanted to know if it was possible again to remove the A-iri Ni-ka scent from the flowers, just in case he ever had a swollen leg again. Silverbeard nodded and said: 'Was drin isch, cha me au wider useneh. What is inside, can be taken out again. Perhaps even di superschlaue Mönsche, smart human beings will one day find out.'*

*After these words, Silverbeard left. Raruck stood there for a while, looking at the yellow flowers and at his leg. He was able again to jump up and down. He hopped off towards a field of yellow flowers and knelt down beside each of them, whispering 'A-iri Ni-ka, A-iri Ni-ka ...' It was as if the magic smell was distributed over the whole field. Raruck could smell the beautiful spicy scent everywhere.*

*After whispering the magic word to the yellow flowers for hours, he sat down on a rock to rest. Soon after he heard footsteps, which belonged to a human being. Raruck looked up and saw a shepherd coming along. He was limping just as Raruck had done before. Raruck watched the man, who sat down next to a pine tree where a patch of yellow flowers was growing. The shepherd took off one of his shoes, moaning. Raruck could see clearly that the man's foot was swollen. The man rubbed his foot several times before he lay down and fell asleep. Raruck thought that A-iri Ni-ka could help the man and he picked one of the yellow flowers. He then held it under the shepherd's nose while saying in a low voice: 'A-iri Ni-ka cha dir hilfe. Rub your foot with it and A-iri Ni-ka will help you.'*

*Raruck then laid the flower into the man's hands and sat down on a rock nearby. When the shepherd woke up, he was surprised to see the yellow flower in his hands. He tried to remember: wasn't he just dreaming of that flower? What was its name again? He tried to say it, but didn't quite get it right: 'Ar-ni-ka,' he mumbled and carefully rubbed his foot with the flower.*

*The next day the shepherd's pain was gone completely. A miracle! And a magic flower! Everywhere the shepherd went afterwards, he told people about his dream and about the healing flower Arnika. But the dwarves still to this day call the yellow flower A-iri Ni-ka.*

“Did you like it?” Zara asked after a long silence.

“Yes, it's a very nice story,” Sandy said. “You know, we have healing plants, too. I want to draw one for you.” Trying to get out of the hammock, she shook it dangerously again. “We won't fall out. I'll help you.”

As soon as they had both disembarked, Sandy ran off towards the house and came back with paper and colour pencils. She sat down on the ground, asking Zara to do the same, and drew a rough outline of a stem and purple flower bud of an apple bush.

“This called pintye-pintye. You can mix the leaves with fat and rub it into your chest, for coughs and colds. Like, you know, that Vicks’ stuff that you can buy in the supermarket. It’s strong. Auntie Joy uses it a lot.”

“Very interesting, I would like to try that.”

Sandy asked Zara to draw an Arnika flower next to her picture. This time Zara felt at ease. She sketched the yellow petals of an Arnika flower bending towards Sandy’s apple bush, so that it looked like the two images were communicating with each other.

“How do you spell Arnika?” the girl asked. Zara spelt it for her and Sandy wrote the word in an arch above the drawings.

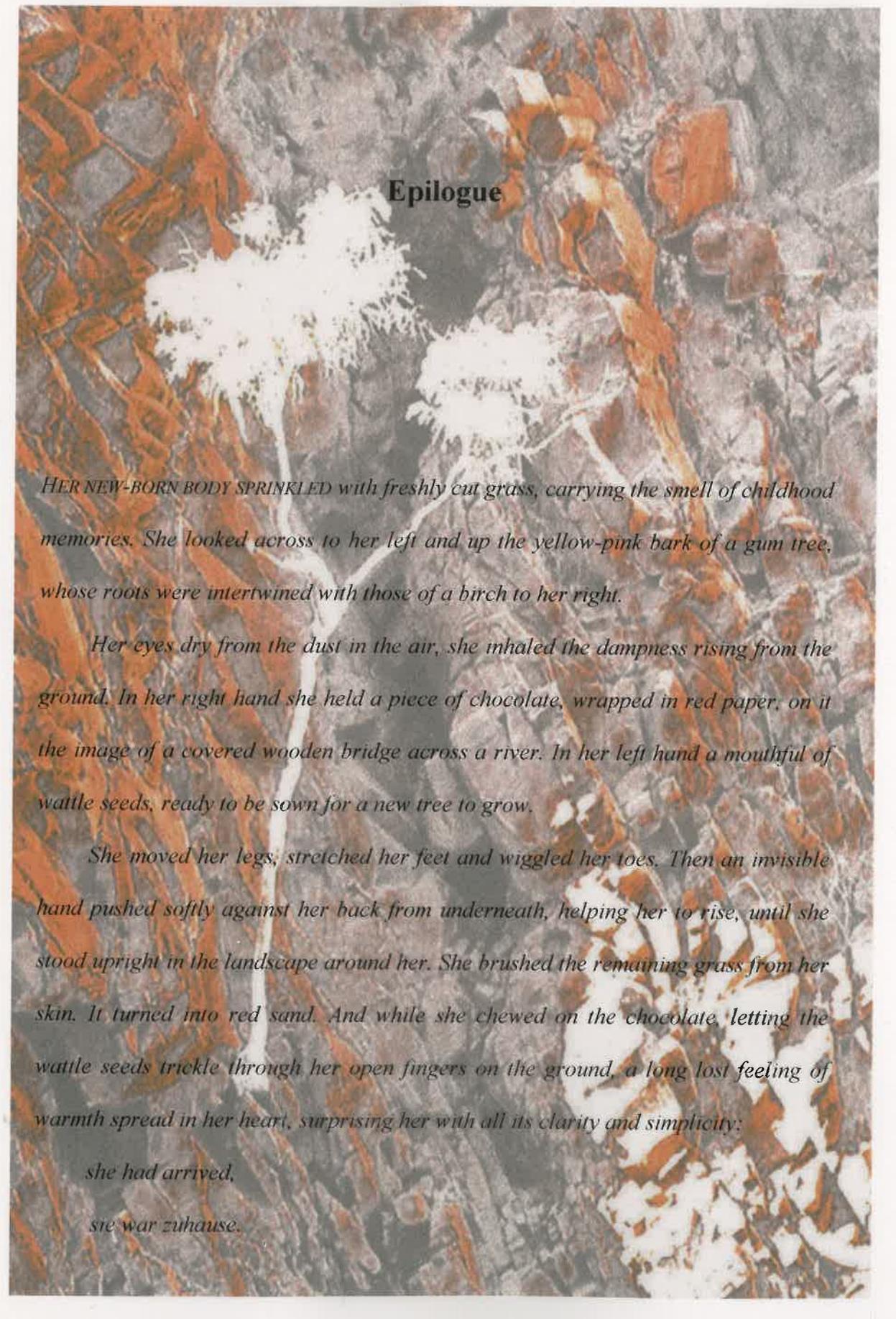
“And what was the name again of your plant?”

“Pintye-pintye. But I don’t know how you spell that.”

“Never mind, I’ll write it the way it sounds.” And, in an arch curving upwards so that the names almost formed a circle around the picture, Zara wrote PINTJE PINTJE.

Sandy smiled. “I like our painting. I want to show it to Charlie and mum.”

Zara stood up and held out her hand. “Okay, let’s go then.”



## Epilogue

*HER NEW-BORN BODY SPRINKLED with freshly cut grass, carrying the smell of childhood memories. She looked across to her left and up the yellow-pink bark of a gum tree, whose roots were intertwined with those of a birch to her right.*

*Her eyes dry from the dust in the air, she inhaled the dampness rising from the ground. In her right hand she held a piece of chocolate, wrapped in red paper, on it the image of a covered wooden bridge across a river. In her left hand a mouthful of wattle seeds, ready to be sown for a new tree to grow.*

*She moved her legs, stretched her feet and wiggled her toes. Then an invisible hand pushed softly against her back from underneath, helping her to rise, until she stood upright in the landscape around her. She brushed the remaining grass from her skin. It turned into red sand. And while she chewed on the chocolate, letting the wattle seeds trickle through her open fingers on the ground, a long lost feeling of warmth spread in her heart, surprising her with all its clarity and simplicity:*

*she had arrived,*

*sie war zuhause.*