THE WHEEL PIN

Creative component of a 2-volume thesis with exegesis

Regenerative Voices: Narrative Strategies and Textual Authority in Three Post-Colonial Novels

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Prologue (Lily)

Water seeps across the floor.
White roses lie scattered, their petals bruised.
The great blue bowl is broken.
I hold the pieces in my hands.

Part One: Kestrel Bay

Coming Home

At the top of the hill, the red car swerved and came to a stop in the long grass at the side of the road. A pair of crested pigeons rattled skyward and a brown horse lifted its head to stare. The driver, a woman with sleek bobbed hair and expensive sunglasses, turned off the engine, lowered the window and took a deep breath.

The air was crisp, scented with salt and eucalyptus. Below, the road descended in a series of loops through a mosaic of vineyards, paddocks and orchards to a glittering expanse of sea. The mixed emotions she felt on seeing the once-familiar outlook had taken her by surprise. From here, Kestrel Bay looked just as she remembered it: the cliffs she and Lily had scrambled down, sliding the last few metres on their backsides; the hard white sand on which they had taken their first steps and later, turned cartwheels; the shifting sea in which they had learned to swim and then to surf. Those waves had raised them high and dumped them, so many times, among the churning grit and stones. She could just make out the ruined jetty and low dunes. And that brownish gleam half-hidden by trees must be the creek where they had dared one another to swing out over the water on a rope and fished with rods made of twigs. But they'd never caught a fish.

In summer, the sea was benign, but in winter it was a snarling beast that hurled itself again and again at the cliff. Kestrel Bay had been a port for decades until it was closed after a tragic shipwreck. A bronze plaque on the clifftop bore the names of the passengers and crew who had lost their lives: *Miranda Kelly, Charles Macintosh, Jonathon Stephens, Sally Elizabeth Sweet.* Lily had traced the letters with a finger, tears oozing from beneath her lashes. *Why are you crying, Lily? They're only names.* Lily had turned and hit her sister in the chest. *No Cat! They were people, people with homes and families, like us.* Cat had grabbed Lily's wrists then, to stop her hitting, and wondered what kind of girl Sally Sweet had been and what she had been wearing when she drowned.

Today, the sea was enigmatic, a silver disc that reflected the sky, revealing nothing. Cat felt the pull of the rolling waves and the tug of the tide, and the previous twenty years floated away from her. Her chest grew tight as the memories crowded in. Just ahead, around the next bend in the road, three gum trees had spread their branches high above a rusty gate fastened with a loop of wire. A rutted track led to the farmhouse standing square and pale in a yard bare but for a pepper tree with thin aromatic leaves and pink berries and a lopsided rotary clothesline pegged with towels

and sheets that hung stiffly in the heat. Hens pecked and nattered among the weeds and two black and white collies lay panting beside the shed where the yellow tractor waited, crusted with last year's mud.

Cat licked her lips, and tasted salt. She tried to swallow, but there was a lump in her throat that would not go away. Never go back: that was her rule. Until now, she had always obeyed it. At eighteen, she had left Kestrel Bay, spurning a student's life in Adelaide, and travelled east to Sydney, a city where nobody knew her, a city she could get lost in. After that, it had been easy to keep on leaving: jobs, towns, people. She had travelled abroad and returned. But she had never been back to Kestrel Bay.

She got out of the car. The sun burned high in a clear sky, but its warmth did not reach her. Grass soaked the hem of her jeans and mud squelched beneath her boots: already there had been rain. The valley fell away below her in a hundred shades of green and gold, and her father's voice came back to her as if she were ten years old. *Might get a spot of rain tonight, if the wind keeps off.*

He stood at the top of the hill beside the tractor, his hands in the pockets of his brown corduroy jacket, and looked out over his land. Beside him, the child was struck with wonder. Overnight, thousands of luminous green shoots had pushed through the hard crust of the earth. The big man shifted his weight and scanned the sky. She imitated him, shading her eyes with her hand. Cirrus clouds streaked the sky in woolly wisps, but on the western horizon dark-bellied nimbus were massing, edged with gold by the setting sun. Her father pressed his lips together, puffing out his cheeks and releasing the air with a soft popping sound. That was a thing he did when he was pleased. The child nestled her hand into his. It felt rough and warm, like the earth. He glanced down and smiled. 'Come on, possum. Better get those chooks in.'

A horn blared and a battered ute roared past, a heavy bass beat thumping in its wake. A youth gestured rudely from the window, shouting into the wind. Unsettled, Cat returned to her car. She glanced at the crumpled pin-striped jacket slung across the seat beside her. It would have to do. She had no time to change.

When Lily had first asked her to come home, she had refused. *Why would I go back now, after all this time?* But Lily had begged. *Please, Cat. For Mum. For Freya.* Perhaps it was the right thing to do, she had thought, to lay the ghosts to rest.

To make peace with her mother. She wouldn't have to stay long—a few days, and she could return to her life in Sydney. But now things were not that simple.

Her boss had refused her leave application. Six years she had worked for that company, longer than any other job. It was part of her campaign to settle down, to do what her father would have wanted. She had been a model employee, working overtime without pay, anticipating the whims of pedantic executives and volunteering for tasks that nobody wanted, like taking minutes and supervising work experience students. When she started, she had hoped that this would be her chance to shine. She had been given the task of writing and designing the company's information brochures, and found she loved the challenge of creating something purposeful, concise. She thought of studying design, or perhaps editing, and making it her career. But two years later, the design work had been outsourced, and her duties reverted to the merely administrative. Although frustrated, she had stayed on, hoping her employers might change their minds. But nothing happened. Tired of the predictable recurrence of tedious responsibilities, she began, half-heartedly, to scan job advertisements. When her application for leave was refused, she'd had enough. She resigned on the spot.

She hadn't told Lily. She had some savings, enough to live on for several months at least, and was determined to be independent. But she was apprehensive about her future. She was almost forty and technologies were changing, her skills fast becoming redundant. *But at least I'm free*, she told herself. There would be no more letters to draft, no more turning on the charm for self-important managers, no more performance appraisals.

She glanced at her watch. She was going to be late. Just what everyone would expect of *Catherine Willoughby*. The starter motor screeched: once, twice, three times. She should have got it fixed before she left. Finally, the engine kicked in and she was on her way.

Around the next bend in the road were no gum trees, no rusty gate, no paddocks, no farmhouse. Where her childhood home had stood, there sprawled a glass-domed shopping mall surrounded by a car park. Beyond them, hundreds of identical houses hunched together, their roofs almost touching. There was barely a tree in sight. 'Freedom Estate', proclaimed a blue and yellow billboard. 'Where lifestyle is everything.' The earth from which her father had made his living for half a century lay buried in concrete. She averted her eyes and drove on.

She turned right onto a road lined with Canary Island pines, planted in memory of local soldiers who had lost their lives in the Great War. The shade beneath these trees was deep and their branches met above the roadway like the vault of a cathedral, or like hands coming together in prayer. Cat was reminded of the finger game she and Lily had played as children, sitting in the sun on the steps of the church hall after Sunday School, waiting for their parents. Your hands made a church; two fingers formed the steeple. You turned your hands around and your fingers were the people. Driving into the encircling darkness of the pines, Cat remembered a story her grandmother had told.

On the edge of a forest in old Europe, in a place too big to be a village and too small to be a town, lives a boy with fiery hair. At the edge of the forest is an ancient pine that the boy loves to climb. High among the branches, he looks through his paper telescope and sees everything: in one direction, the houses and farms and market gardens of his village, and in the other, an infinity of trees and a distant darkness. The bough beneath him creaks and sways, and he imagines himself on a ship, sailing the billowing ocean to lands full of wonder: mountains spewing fire and molten rock, beasts that hop and birds that cannot fly, and murderous savages with patterns of waves carved into their faces. One day, he vows, he will see such marvels for himself.

You never knew, in Freya's stories, which bits were true and which were made up. She wove everything together, bringing near what was far and making the ordinary seem strange. That was how Cat wanted to remember her. She did not want to see her grandmother's coffin lowered into the cold earth, to exchange empty words with strangers, to witness Lily's pain. She wanted to remember Freya as she had been: leaning forward, her eyes alight, her voice rising and falling as her story took shape in the darkness around them.

Lily: Telling the Future

I slammed the door on the wild night outside and stood by the kitchen sink to drink a glass of water. Then I made a pot of tea. It was a ritual that usually calmed me but now every action—warming the pot, turning it three times—triggered a surge of grief. Freya's Tarot cards lay spread on the table in the shape of an unruly cross. The *Fool* lay face up, an ambiguous figure in patchwork robes at the edge of a precipice, a striped creature springing with outstretched claws at its feet. The remaining cards in the spread lay face down; my divination had been interrupted by one of those odd turns I called *the shifting*. I always knew when it was about to happen: there would be a throbbing at my temples, a disturbance of my peripheral vision, and a tingling in my fingers and toes. Sometimes it lasted only seconds, marked by just the slightest shift in ordinary reality—a glimpse of something strange, a disembodied whispering—but sometimes I lost whole chunks of time, and felt as if I were transported to some other time or place, though I remembered little: a face, a swirl of colour, a whiff, a snatch of sound. Often my memory would be completely blank, as if I'd been asleep. Afterwards I would walk, pacing the corridors of the museum where I worked, ambling along the cliff path or descending the wooden steps to the beach below my house. Freya called it a gift, but to me the shifting was more often a nuisance, or even a curse. It was a shadow that hovered over my life, blurring its edges, making it unpredictable.

I had grown accustomed to the shifting, made room for its intrusions. It no longer frightened me. But the prospect of my sister's return filled me with anxiety. When I had phoned to tell her of Freya's death she sounded distant at first, as if she hadn't heard me. I urged her to come home, telling her the family should be together to honour Freya, even if only for a day. I thought it was time for Cat to face up to whatever it was that had kept her away all these years. Though she appeared to have settled down with Rob in Sydney, their life seemed artificial, precarious. I had visited them once. As I stepped through their front door, I must have caught the floor rug with my toe, and Rob, before greeting me, knelt quickly to straighten it. He studied me from head to toe before offering his hand. And their apartment looked something out of a magazine, not a place that real people lived in. If Rob was obsessed with appearances, Cat certainly qualified. Tall and long-limbed, with dark hair, deep blue eyes and a zany energy that people mistook for confidence, Cat was a woman men

noticed, even at almost forty. I didn't trust Rob. But Cat was a grownup. As long as she was happy, that was fine with me.

When I asked her to come home for Freya's funeral, I knew she would say no. When I pleaded, she hesitated. *Maybe*, she said. *I'll see if I can get off work.* I hadn't heard from her since, though this was not unusual. To be honest, there was a part of me that hoped she'd stay away. When she was around, life went awry. Ordinary things abandoned their proper places and whirled about, like leaves and debris stirred up by the hot wind before a bushfire. You never knew where you were with Cat, or what she might do next. She had been that way ever since I could remember: she was a wild card.

If you want to tell the future, you have to know the past. That's what Freya always said. She was my grandmother, my teacher, my closest friend. When I was a child, Freya was a mystery to me. She sang in a foreign language, walked barefoot on the sand by moonlight and floated fragrant flowers in a great blue bowl beside her front door. She was tall, with dark hair swept up in a chignon, and eyes that changed colour like the sea. She wore a narrow silver bangle engraved with symbols and interwoven lines that moved like waves in the sunlight. Sometimes she would slip it from her wrist and hand it to me and I would study the patterns and move my lips as I had seen my sister do when she was reading, hoping this might enable me to decipher its signs. But the language of the bangle, like so many of Freya's secrets, remained obscure.

'What language does God speak?'

Everyone was startled by my question, including me. I was seven years old. I had been thinking about why there were all those different languages, and wondering how one god could possibly understand them all. We were all in the kitchen clearing up after the ritual Sunday roast, except Poppa Ray, who was out on the porch smoking his pipe. Cat started to laugh, but Freya silenced her with a look. She had a power over my unruly sister that no-one else could match, not even my father. He snorted at my question, in contempt or embarrassment. Dad held the view that religious belief was an indulgent and dangerous delusion, and the principal cause of misery and conflict in all of human history. But Mum put down the blue and white plate she was polishing, draped the tea towel over her shoulder, and waited with interest for Freya's response.

‘That’s a good question, Lily,’ my grandmother said, looking at me solemnly. Freya never said a thing just for the sake of it. I felt the weight of having asked a good question, and straightened my shoulders. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cat poke out just the tip of her tongue, so no-one else could see.

‘Tell her not to encourage the child’s nonsense,’ Dad muttered as he left the room. Mum smiled at Freya, who smiled back, as if they shared a secret. But then something distracted them—perhaps the telephone rang. Freya never did answer my question. I realised much later that she rarely gave a direct answer to anything.

Afternoon tea was one of Freya’s rituals. She brewed tea in a delicate Japanese pot, pouring it carefully into her hand-painted cups. She never used a strainer, and sometimes a tea leaf would float to the surface of somebody’s cup. Then Freya would say ‘You’re expecting a visitor.’ There was always cake. It might be a golden butter cake with lemon frosting, a dark loaf studded with dates and walnuts, a sponge light as angels’ wings, filled with cream, or a tray of cupcakes decorated with pastel icing and silver cachous. When tea was over, Freya might upend a cup in its saucer and turn it about three times in a clockwise direction before setting it upright and peering inside to decipher the patterns in the tea leaves. Dad would depart, saying he had work to do. The pictures in the leaves foretold the future, Freya said, though her funny little smile made me wonder whether she believed it, or not.

Sometimes, if we begged her, Freya would trace the web of lines in our palms, Cat’s and mine: the line of fortune, the lifeline, the mystic cross. ‘You will live long, Lily,’ she said. ‘Make your choices wisely. Remember, we make our own happiness.’ If that was true, why did she look so sad? I dared not ask; I was only a child.

‘Will I be a famous artist?’ I asked, but Freya evaded my question. ‘Your art is your journey,’ she said to me. And to Cat: ‘You will travel far. The two of you will meet in a place that neither can reach alone.’ I was mystified. What place could she mean?

Despite my father’s scepticism, I was fascinated by Freya’s rituals. Best of all, I loved it when she brought the blue hatbox down from the top shelf in her wardrobe. It was no ordinary hatbox of cheap cardboard, but a circular travel case of soft leather with a hinged lid, a lock, a silver key and a quilted satin lining the colour of a summer sky. Once upon a time, it had held Freya’s hats, but now it held her memories: letters tied with ribbons, postcards, photographs, concert programmes, a

tortoiseshell comb, a sachet of dried lavender, a little square perfume bottle and her Tarot cards. Sometimes Freya would slip the cards from their black velvet bag and hold them cupped between her palms like a rescued fledgling.

If you want to tell the future, you have to know the past.

Then she would shuffle the cards, letting them slip between her hands until they grew warm and alive. Or she might give the look that said *your turn*, and hand the deck to one of us. Cat was quicker and better than I at shuffling, but Freya made us take equal turns, because practice was important, she said, for hands and minds alike. When you shuffled, everything was in flux, the cards falling, the future forming. The thoughts that flitted through your awareness could influence the outcome of a reading, and the convergence of luck and clear intent could make a wish come true.

Freya would lay the cards out, one by one, in the shape of a cross on the heavy velvet tablecloth. It was a deep green, almost black, like a forest in a fairytale. The cards were smooth as silk and seemed to emit a faint vibration. On one side, they had a sunburst design in vibrant hues of red, gold and yellow. On the other side, each card was different. Some were fascinating: the Fool balancing on a precipice; the High Priestess with her flowing robes and attendant owl that soared among the stars; and the Wheel of Fortune spinning like the ferris wheel at the Royal Show. My favourite was the Moon with her two faces, one bright, one hidden. Some were frightening: the lightning-struck Tower tumbling down; the nonchalant Devil trampling people beneath his hooves; and Death, pale and implacable.

Freya would place the querent, face up.

This is for you.

Sometimes she would place two cards, one after another.

This for the one who leaves, and this for the one who stays.

Next, Freya would lay a card face down.

This covers you.

And another, crosswise.

This is the cross you must bear, the burden you carry through life.

A third, below.

This is beneath you, the foundation of your query.

A fourth, to the left.

This is behind you, what has already passed.

A fifth, above.

This crowns you.

And a sixth, to the right.

This is before you: what is yet to come.

The last four cards were placed to the right in a vertical line moving upward. As she placed the seventh card, Freya rested her palm upon it.

This is your fear. May you face it with courage.

As she laid down the eighth, she said:

This is your family: of blood and of spirit, the dear ones both known and departed.

The ninth card she pressed to her heart before putting it on the table.

This is your heartfelt hope. May your dream be realised, may your wish come true.

Then she laid down the tenth and final card.

This is your destination. May the Goddess protect you, may your journey end safely.

That is how Freya read the cards, on the days when she made it all the way through a reading. But often she would stop halfway, turning up a card that reminded her of a story, or a person. She would hold the card in her hand and begin to speak. It wasn't her words, but the sound of her voice that made me yearn for something, touching a place in me that I hardly knew. Could she see the future? Cat scoffed, but I wanted to believe.

In the middle of a hot afternoon, the summer I turned eight, Freya and I were alone in the house. Cat had gone off somewhere with Poppa Ray and the dogs, and I was bored. Abandoning my drawing, I crept into Freya's room where she rested on her bed with the curtains half-drawn. 'Will you read the cards for me?'

Freya removed the cologne-soaked flannel from her forehead, eased herself up to a sitting position, and considered me for a long moment. Then without a word she stood, slid the hatbox from the top shelf of her wardrobe, took out the little velvet bag, and glided barefoot into the dining room. I followed.

Freya fanned the cards and held them out to me.

'Choose one,' she said.

I hesitated, then touched a card with my finger. She flipped it on to the table, face up. I shut my eyes. Freya took my hand in hers and placed it on the card. I screwed my eyes tighter, and tried to pull away.

'You must face what frightens you, Lily,' Freya said. 'Each time you look away, you lose a bit of your soul. And one day a time will come when you have forgotten what it is you fear, when you tell yourself it is merely something you dislike, or have no time for.' I opened my eyes, and saw Death's impassive face, her sweeping robe, her necklace of tiny skulls.

'Your fear is your teacher,' Freya said. 'Close your eyes now, and tell me what you see.' She held her hand over mine on the card. I closed my eyes. My palm tingled.

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There is a suffocating darkness. Dim shapes loom and fade, bringing whiffs of something familiar, echoes of something forgotten. Masses of tentacles writhe and coil, rows of thin blades slice the air. These alternate in a sickening rhythm, the one unbearably immense, the other excruciatingly thin. I hear a shrill, humming whine, and a million insects dance before me in a shifting helix. Then everything stops. Out of the darkness grows a point of light. Four figures walk toward me, holding hands. The sun is behind them, so I can see only their outlines: a man, a woman with curly hair, a girl, and a boy. The man vanishes. The woman kneels and embraces the children, but they are torn from her arms as if by a silent wind. She cries out and reaches for them, but they are gone. She falls to the ground. Unseen voices join hers in a deep, throbbing chant, a lament that swallows everything. And then I hear Cat's voice, calling me.

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'Lily. Lily.' It was Freya's voice, not Cat's. She rubbed my arms and back, and hugged me close. Dazed, I looked into her anxious eyes. I coughed, clung to her and sobbed. She held me, uttered soothing noises, and stroked my hair. When Cat came home with Poppa Ray, I was sitting at the table drinking sweet tea.

That was the first time it happened, the thing I call the shifting. What I had seen did not make sense. I never told anyone about it, not even Cat, and for a long time I tried to forget it. But I couldn't. Again and again, it floated to the surface of my mind, disturbing all my efforts to organise what I knew. So I left it alone, marking that place in my memory with the label *unresolved*. Over the years other

images came to join it, together with inexplicable shivers of insight, moments of *déjà vu* and odd remarks that people made: anything that did not fit quite properly into a story. I became a collector of insignificant mysteries, the little things that other people discarded. Material things as well: bottle-tops, pencil shavings, the paper outlines that are left when a picture is cut out.

Freya did not ask what I had seen. But from that day on, she let me practise with the cards whenever I chose. She said that once I knew how to read them truly, I would no longer need the cards. They were simply a vehicle, she told me. ‘When you have mastered the art, you may just as well read matchsticks, or the entrails of animals, or listen to the voice of the wind in the trees. And you must recognise the time to let them go.’

Sometimes, in the evenings, Freya would sing. If the moon had a voice, that voice would be hers: sweet, low, and full of mystery. Even in ordinary speech it was musical, with a slight, unusual accent. ‘A fine contralto voice,’ our mother would say, gazing wistfully at her two decidedly unmusical daughters.

Freya knew songs from all over the world. She sang in English, in German, in Italian, and in French. She had a song for everything that happened, good or bad. *Que sera sera*, she sang, when some disappointment made us cry. *Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see.* This was odd, considering her obsession with the cards. When I questioned her, she said it was complicated. Perhaps telling the future was a game she only half-believed in, or a compulsion she could not control. Perhaps she did not really want to see the future. Or perhaps she was consoling herself because, despite all her efforts, what she truly longed for remained elusive.

The Funeral

Beyond the tunnel of pines, a sudden snatch of sun lit the sea, glittering like a promise as Cat followed the coast road south to Kestrel Bay. To her right, a long low cloud, heavy with rain, smudged the horizon with indigo. She smiled wryly as the old kiosk came into view, perched on the cliff above the ruins of the jetty. She remembered how she and Lily, clutching coins to buy ice-cream, had stood shivering in dripping swimsuits beneath the striped awning. The kiosk was a restaurant now, the peeling paint on its walls now chic instead of merely shabby.

A row of fat mansions framed by palm trees, fountains and lawns squatted on the seafront where paddocks had once swept down to the edge of the cliff. Further along, a handful of dilapidated shacks braved the westerly winds on the seafront. Then the road swept around to the point where a cluster of stone cottages was all that remained of the original village of Kestrel Bay.

Cat parked her car, combed her hair and applied a slick of lipstick. She shrugged the pin-striped jacket over the jeans and shirt she'd worn since leaving Sydney days before, and smoothed out the wrinkles. The jacket was tailored, with crisp lapels, and was a little tight across the shoulders. She'd bought it for a job interview six months previously and hadn't worn it since.

The Lord is my shepherd, sang the voices from the church. Cat climbed the steps and slipped through the open door, hoping not to be noticed. The congregation sang in ragged chorus, high voices mingling with low, melodious with harsh. *He ma-akes me down to lie.* As Cat stood looking for a seat, a thin woman in a severe hat—iron grey, narrow-brimmed, trimmed with black net—turned to frown. Cat smiled and nodded. The woman pursed her lips, and turned away. The coffin gleamed darkly on its plinth.

With a creaking of pews, a shuffling of feet, and a riffling of prayer-books, the congregation settled. Murmuring apologies, Cat edged past people's knees to a vacant seat, and was at once overcome by the mingled odours of mildew, disinfectant, and perfume. Nausea rose and she gripped the pew in front as the world began to blacken like scorched paper. She needed fresh air, but couldn't bear the thought of pushing past all the knees again and stumbling to the door with everyone looking at her. She took a gulp of air, willing the sickness to subside.

Her back ached, and she shifted on the hard wooden seat. Church pews were designed for discomfort, she mused: a subtle mortification of the flesh, a reminder of the relentless battle between body and soul.

To everything there is a season, the voices murmured.

Two girls in the row ahead of Cat mouthed insults at one another, grimacing, poking, and pinching until one squawked aloud, immediately silenced by their mother's warning frown.

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak… Cat rose in her seat and peered at the backs of people's heads, looking for Lily and Grace. They'd be up the front. Yes, there was her sister's fair head and her mother's black straw hat with the red poppies, faded now. Grace had worn that hat for decades. When Cat was a teenager, her mother's eccentricities had embarrassed her. They had argued relentlessly, neither conceding defeat. Lily said they were both too stubborn. Cat sat down again, feeling strange, neither adult nor child. She belonged neither here nor there.

A time of peace... The voices carried Cat back to a time when life had been simple. When Grace was simply *Mum*, the person who tucked her into bed at night, stroked her hair, and soothed her nightmares, the person whose presence was a blessing as unquestioned as the warmth of the sun.

The pastor in the pulpit began to speak, clasping his hands beneath his chin, then raising both arms above his head in a dramatic gesture. Cat strained to catch his words. *Beloved sister ... sins forgiven ... eternal peace ...* Rubbing her shoulders and twisting her neck, she caught sight of the stained-glass window above her: Jesus returning to his flock, a stray lamb lying meekly across his shoulders. White light streamed through the broken place where his feet had been. She knew these windows; she had spent hours gazing at them in confirmation classes when she was thirteen.

Each window illustrated a scene from the Bible, but there was a dearth of human figures, the artist having preferred to depict the so-called lower orders. A shoal of fishes fled the net, a lion embraced a distinctly nervous lamb, hordes of animals in holiday mood boarded the Ark, and an iridescent serpent twined about an apprehensive Eve. But Cat's favourite had always been the goats, cavorting at God's left hand, mocking the sheep that gazed with placid currant eyes from his right. The goats lowered their horns, kicked out with their heels, and stared. They had

entertained Cat in the weeks of boredom leading up to the confirmation ceremony, and given her comfort afterwards.

For the confirmation had been a disappointment. Dressed in a new white frock sewn by her mother, she had stood at the altar-rail, waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend. *The body of Christ, which was given for you...* She took the thin wafer on her tongue, and it dissolved to nothing. *The blood of Christ, which was given for you...* The dark wine tasted metallic in her mouth. She held it there, hoping. The minister wiped the rim of the chalice with a white napkin and moved to the next person. Cat swallowed the wine, and waited. The slightest sign would have been enough: a subtle change in the light, a skip in the steady beating of her heart, the merest brush of a feathered wingtip… But there was nothing. She had given up on religion after that. She had not even come home for her father's funeral.

The congregation rose; another hymn was sung. Then the pastor beckoned and Lily stepped on to the lectern. She wore a narrow black skirt, a white shirt, and a cropped charcoal-coloured jacket with wide lapels. Her fair hair was tied back with a velvet bow. Who would guess that this conservative woman was an artist? She peered nervously through round-rimmed spectacles and her voice was tremulous as she began to speak. She spoke of Freya's wisdom, her stories and her sweet crab-apple jelly. She told them Freya had always made the best of every situation.

'She was not a religious woman,' Lily said, glancing at the pastor. 'But she was a woman of faith. She believed in love, in learning, and in following one's heart. She was a student of many cultures, many faiths. She believed in people. She always tried to learn, not what divides people, but what brings us together.'

Lily did not mention Freya's sadness, the haunted expression she sometimes had, as if someone had stolen a piece of her soul. Lily looked on the bright side, following Freya's example, seeking the best in everyone. *Follow your bliss*, she had told Cat when she left Kestrel Bay at eighteen. But Cat knew nothing about bliss; she only knew she had to get away.

Lily invited the congregation to gather in the hall next door for refreshments after the service, and stepped down from the pulpit. There was a murmur of approval.

'A good girl, such a comfort to poor Grace,' whispered the woman in the grey hat, turning to glance pointedly at Cat. Lily might be a better artist, Cat thought, if she concerned herself less with the comfort of others.

‘Let us pray,’ the pastor said. And the church was filled with the hum and sibilance of the Lord’s Prayer, the oddly soothing rise and fall of voices, like the buzzing of bees storing sweetness against an uncertain future.

The pallbearers hoisted the coffin and carried it from the church. The mourners filed out, pulling on coats and putting up umbrellas. The rain drizzled. Lily propelled Grace’s wheelchair along the path at a furious pace, her lips pressed together, her face white. When she saw Cat, she looked surprised and momentarily dismayed. She stopped, stepping out from behind the wheelchair, and eyed the pin-striped jacket with amusement.

‘Not really me, is it?’ Cat said.

‘I wasn’t going to say anything,’ Lily said, making a wry face.

‘I didn’t get the job.’ They both laughed. Lily came forward and hugged her. Cat saw the weariness in her eyes.

‘Who’s this?’ Grace demanded, frowning.

‘It’s Catherine, Mum,’ Lily said. ‘Your eldest daughter.’

Grace drew herself up in the chair and opened her mouth to speak, but Lily grasped the wheelchair and shoved it firmly along the path, turning to beckon Cat.

They gathered at the graveside. Cat gazed at the raw earth, sliced open like a wound. When the coffin was lowered, she could not help thinking of her grandmother’s body inside, folded, still, and empty. No more stories, only silence. The pastor intoned a prayer, and the mourners murmured in response, shifting from foot to foot and rubbing their hands.

Grace gazed open-mouthed at the sky, where a patch of blue burgeoned among fast-moving clouds. Lily stood with downcast eyes, her cheeks wet with tears, a single white rose clasped between her hands. Her hair-ribbon had come undone, and wisps of pale hair blew about her face. Cat put a hand on her sister’s shoulder and Lily, without turning, covered it for a moment with her own. Then she tore the petals from the rose, and let them float on to the coffin, each meeting its reflection on the polished surface. The first clod of earth landed with a thud, and the mourners turned away. Grace’s sister Alice came bustling to collect her, leaving Lily and Cat to walk together to the hall.

‘Freya would have hated this,’ Lily said. ‘All that pious rubbish, implying she was a lost soul.’

‘So that’s what you were mad about,’ Cat said. ‘I couldn’t hear a thing.’

‘Lucky you,’ Lily said. ‘I knew we shouldn’t have let that Kurt do the sermon.’

‘So why did you?’ Cat asked, puzzled.

‘Because he’s Freya’s nephew. Mum wanted to be polite.’

‘Do you really think Freya would have minded?’

Lily gave a little laugh. ‘Who knows? Maybe not.’ She paused. ‘I was with her the night before she died.’

‘Oh, Lil. How… how was she?’ Cat asked because Lily would expect it, not because she wanted to hear.

‘We were just talking. She was exhausted. She wanted...’ Lily faltered, biting her lip. ‘She wanted me to find her stories.’

‘What stories?’

‘Her manuscripts.’

‘She wrote them down?’

‘Yes, don’t you remember? She was always tapping away on that little typewriter.’

‘I thought she was writing letters,’ Cat said. ‘Did you find anything?’

‘Not yet,’ Lily said. ‘But I will.’ She looked at Cat. ‘I’m glad you came home, Cat.’ But there was apprehension in her eyes.

Cat shrugged. ‘Had to do it sometime.’

‘You’ll stay at my place?’

‘Of course,’ Cat said. ‘Thanks.’

‘When are you due back?’

Cat hesitated. Her Sydney life seemed remote, as if, now that she had left, it belonged to someone else. She felt no desire to return, nor to think about what pulled her back. She was not ready to make a decision, nor to confide in Lily. ‘Not sure. I thought I might stay awhile.’

Lily looked surprised. ‘Sure,’ she said. ‘Stay as long as you like.’

In the hall, Alice was setting out plates of sandwiches and home-made cakes on a trestle table. A large electric urn bubbled in the corner. People helped themselves to tea and coffee, talking in low voices. Grace sat in a corner with a crocheted shawl about her shoulders and a rug tucked about her shrunken body. She looked nothing like the mother Cat had known. She had lost a lot of weight; her face was angular, the prominent cheekbones and long nose giving her an imperious air,

like some long-dead Egyptian queen. A mug of tea cooled on the table at her side. Cat walked across and hugged her gingerly. ‘Hello, Grace.’

Grace tilted her head to gaze up at Cat. She narrowed her eyes in puzzlement.

‘It’s Catherine, Mum. Remember?’ Lily prompted.

‘Of course I remember her.’ Grace’s expression was speculative. ‘But why is she here?’ she demanded loudly. ‘What does Catherine want?’

There was a hush in the hall, and for a moment, Cat wished she hadn’t come. But it was a good question. What did she want? She stared at her mother.

Lily took command. ‘She came home for Freya’s funeral, Mum. And to see you.’

Remembering the gifts she had brought, Cat rummaged in her bag for the package of chocolates, the little posy of violets. Grace waved the chocolate box aside and thrust her nose among the bruised petals. She inhaled deeply, then wrinkled her nose. ‘They have no perfume.’

‘I’ll put them in water, shall I?’ Lily snatched the flowers and hurried away.

‘Well, Catherine,’ Grace said, leaning back in her chair. ‘It’s been a while since we saw you in Kestrel Bay.’

‘I’m living in Sydney now, Mum.’

‘Did they finish that Opera House yet?’ Grace asked. ‘And how are the cousins?’

‘What cousins?’ Cat asked, puzzled.

‘Shirley, Darryl, and Maureen, Aunty Anna and Uncle Fred. You remember, Catherine, we stayed with them one summer. They took us on a drive to Katoomba and we had lunch at the Hydro Majestic. And then the day before we came home, we took a ferry and a gust of wind got Lizzie’s hat—her favourite one with the blue hydrangeas on it—and it blew into the harbour. Don’t tell me you haven’t been to visit them.’

Cat stood stricken. She had been six years old that summer. Anna and Fred were Grace’s aunt and uncle, long dead. As for the cousins—she had no idea what had become of any of them. ‘Your tea is getting cold,’ she told her mother.

‘It wants a decent china cup, that’s what it wants!’ Grace snapped. ‘I refuse to drink tea out of these dreadful mugs. So you haven’t been to see the cousins. I must say I’m disappointed, Catherine.’

An old, defiant impulse beat feebly in Cat's chest like an injured bird. But she swallowed, and said nothing. Grace pursed her lips and frowned. The bird rose up and struck once with its beak. 'It's my life, Mother.'

'It never hurts to be polite,' Grace retorted. Cat noticed the sparkle in her eyes, the hint of a smile that twitched at the corner of her mouth, and thought: *she's enjoying this. She's baiting me.* 'You're right,' she told her mother. 'Manners are important.'

Disappointment flickered across Grace's face. She opened her mouth to try again, but was distracted by a flock of relatives who fluttered belatedly into the hall and descended on her with small cries of sympathy. Cat watched. Lily returned with the flowers in a jam jar, which she placed carefully on the table near Grace. Their mother seemed no longer powerful, just a frail old woman in a wheelchair, her world shrunk to the offerings of others. Cat felt relief, then pity. But Grace would not want that.

Lily went about the hall offering hugs and handshakes, inquiring after careers, health, and children. Cat stood by the wall trying to work out who was related to whom, and how. A slide show of Freya's life played on a screen, and on the faces and bodies of people as they passed the projector. Silvery figures in late Victorian dress materialised and dissolved. Freya's father Gottlieb stood stiff and bewhiskered flanked by a dozen offspring who seemed to squeeze their careworn mother Katerina to the edge of the frame.

Lily introduced Cat to Alice's daughter-in-law, a plump friendly woman with four school-aged children, but after mutual condolences, Cat found little to say to her. They stood together for a while and commented on the slides: Freya with sleek bobbed hair in a polka-dot frock; Freya alone in her wedding dress, smiling determinedly; Poppa Ray looking handsome in his army uniform; Grace and Alice in pinafores and ankle-socks and then suddenly grown up in dresses with sweetheart necklines. The images switched to colour then: Grace and Frank on their wedding day, Alice and Ted with babies and toddlers; Lily smiling for the camera and Catherine scowling at the gate on their way to Sunday school in hand-knitted jumpers and cream pleated skirts; Freya in her garden, her hair awry, her arms full of roses.

The buzz of voices in the hall diminished as people began to leave. Lily switched off the humming projector, and the hall fell suddenly silent. Cups, plates, crumpled serviettes and half eaten food littered the trestles.

Lily stood in the middle of the hall looking lost. She swallowed as if she might be about to cry, but pulled herself together, became brisk, and began collecting plates. Alice offered to stay and help, but Lily shooed her off to her clamouring grandchildren, telling her she had done more than enough. Grace dozed off in the corner while Lily wiped the tables and Cat collected the last of the mugs.

In the kitchen, Lily said 'Alice's little granddaughter is a sweetie, isn't she?' Without waiting for a reply, she folded her arms and regarded Cat. 'Did you ever want kids?' she asked.

'No,' Cat replied quickly. She wondered why it was so easy to lie. Perhaps because Lily was so curious, so keen to set Cat's world to rights. She should have been a social worker. 'What about you?'

Lily sighed. 'I would have, if things had been different. But art has always been my priority, you know that. And none of the men in my life have been the kind to settle. Working part-time, being a single parent—it's not fair on a child, is it? It's different for you, though. You're in a steady relationship, both working...'

'Yes, but our lives are hectic, and Sydney is expensive,' Cat said. But it was not her who had refused to consider the possibility of having children. It was Rob. Only a few months earlier, her period had been late. She had been nauseous, developed a heightened sensitivity to smells. Her world had quickened, and for a brief, life-splitting interval, she had believed she might be pregnant. It wasn't too late. Plenty of women had babies in their late thirties or early forties. After five years of waiting for Rob to change his mind, what if she had been careless? He had never actually said *no*. He had always said *let's wait*. But Cat couldn't imagine Rob as a father. A child would make messes, grasping at his immaculate clothing with sticky fingers, and interrupting the even tempo of his life with urgent, unpredictable demands. Yet the idea of a baby thrilled her, and she had allowed herself to dream. A pregnancy test had ended the fantasy. They would go on as before, she told herself. She had never wanted children, not really. Nothing had changed.

'Children take over your life,' Cat said. But that was Rob's reason, not hers.

'No,' Lily said. 'They become your life.' Cat had no answer for that.

'Come on,' Lily said. 'Let's get Mum back to the hostel.'

The Letter

Grace's room at the Constant Care Hostel was comfortable but bland, the only trace of her former life as farmer's wife, mother and amateur historian a clutch of silver-framed photographs on the dressing table. Lily helped Grace to the bathroom, and then settled her in a chair by the window overlooking a lawn bordered by paths, trees and flowerbeds.

'My stick,' Grace demanded. Lily found the stick, then left to talk to the duty manager. As the door clicked closed behind her, Grace beckoned to Cat. 'I've got something for you,' she whispered, glancing over her shoulder. Cat bent close. 'It's a secret,' Grace said, putting a finger to her lips.

'What is?'

'Shhh! Quick, look under the bed, before the other one comes back!'

'You mean Lily?'

'She takes things.'

'That can't be true, Mum.'

'It is too!' Grace hissed. 'She took my papers, my family things. Boxes and boxes of them.'

'I'm sure she's put them somewhere safe for you. There's no room here for all those boxes.'

'Never mind about that.' Grace waved her stick authoritatively. 'I hid the important things anyway. Get that case out.' She poked under the bed with the stick.

Cat crouched down and peered into the gloom. 'Is this what you're after?' She hauled a battered brown suitcase from under the bed and undid the rusty clasps. The lid sprang open to reveal bundles of dog-eared manila folders, bulging scrapbooks, and coloured ring binders. Odours of mildew and wood smoke filled the air. Cat sneezed.

'Bless you,' Grace said, and Cat was ten years old, back in the farmhouse kitchen with her mother sitting at the table surrounded by boxes and newspaper clippings.

An entire wall was taken up with filing cabinets and shelves full of folders and cardboard boxes; a computer sat in pride of place at one end of the kitchen table. Grace was the keeper of the family records. It had started as a hobby and grown into an obsession. Grace's evenings and weekends were spent sorting piles of papers,

typing letters to relatives, cataloguing photographs and filling in forms for the family archives. She always said that one day she would publish their stories in a proper book, with hard covers, captioned photographs, and lines of print, fixing the family forever to its place in history. Grace spoke wistfully of 'the book' as if it beckoned her from another dimension, enticing but elusive. Meanwhile, the information multiplied, spilling from shelves and drawers to bench tops and boxes, creeping across the floor, leaning against the walls, and nestling beneath the table where Lily had her hidey-hole. Cat wasn't allowed in there, but who wanted to play with old newspaper cuttings and blurry photographs anyway? Only Lily, catching the castoff scraps, amusing herself with silly games. The kitchen was a great untidy nest and Grace a fussing bird, sorting and sifting, snipping and pasting, weaving together the messy threads of family history. No birth notice or obituary escaped her beady eye. But there were always pieces missing, gaps in the fabric that could not be filled, no matter how she tried.

'It's not in here.' Grace frowned, poking among the papers in the suitcase with her stick and causing the lid to close with a bang, catching Cat across the fingers. Ignoring her exclamation, Grace pointed under the bed again. 'There's another case—a little one.'

Cat knelt and reached again, feeling soft leather beneath her fingers, and a curved rim. It was Freya's hatbox, its blue leather scuffed and faded, its silver clasp a little tarnished.

'Freya said you were to have it,' Grace said.

'Me?' Cat frowned. 'Are you sure? Not Lily?'

Grace shook her head. 'No. You. And she said something else as well...' Grace's mouth twisted in distress as she struggled to recall Freya's words.

'Never mind,' Cat said, putting a hand on her mother's shoulder. 'It'll come to you later.'

Cat sat down with the hatbox in her lap, and slid back the catch, which stuck a little. As she lifted the lid, she smelled a faint, familiar perfume, sweet and melancholy, yet somehow comforting. Freya. She was afraid to touch the things in

the hatbox. Hesitantly, she pushed aside a bundle of letters tied with ribbon, and peered inside. Her fingers sought the little velvet pouch she remembered, the one that had held Freya's Tarot cards. Instead, they found a single fraying envelope bearing a smudged postmark. Cat opened it, easing out two fragile sheets of paper, folded and worn through at the crease. They were covered in closely written copperplate script, elegantly looped, in faded purple ink.

> 14th July, 1934
> My dearest Elfrieda,
>
> I hope this letter reaches you, and does not come as a shock. I had news of you from Fred B. who was here for our local rodeo. He told me about your wedding. Congratulations! I wish you both every happiness.
>
> I roamed the Territory for nearly a decade after I left the Mission, doing anything I could get, mostly droving and seasonal work on cattle stations. But now I have settled down, you'll no doubt be pleased to hear. I enclose a photograph—that's me with my wife Pearl holding baby Jack, and our little girl Maisie in front.

Cat checked the envelope, and rifled cursorily through the papers in the hatbox, but found no photograph. 'Who was Jack?' she asked Grace.

Grace narrowed her eyes as if peering into the past. 'He was the one who disappeared. Freya's brother. Johann, his name was, but he preferred Jack. He was seventeen. No-one ever saw him again.'

'What happened to him?'

'A boy was drowned up that way, crossing a flooded river, and everyone thought it might have been him.'

'But it wasn't.'

'No. We had news of him, much later. He ran away, turned bad.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, my aunts said he went to prison.'

'What for?'

'I don't know. We weren't allowed to talk about it.'

Cat turned back to the letter.

> My partner Roly and I have the lease on a bit of land on a riverbank a few miles inland. There is a salt pan on the property, which the local Aboriginal fellows bag for us. It earns us some cash—£3 per ton, or £6 if we deliver it to town in our ketch—and gets us credit for goods at the store. We get plenty of fish, sometimes even dugong—the flesh makes excellent eating,

and the locals are expert hunters. We grow our own vegetables and fruit—watermelon, citrus, mangoes and paw paws—and keep goats, hens and geese for milk, meat and eggs. We never go hungry, which is just as well, since the supply boat is mighty unreliable in the Wet Season.

We built two houses and a hut for guests, all with proper thatched roofs. I have sunk a couple of wells, and am working on an irrigation system for our gardens and orchard. We look after ourselves pretty well as I can turn my hand to most things. The ink on this letter is made from Condy's crystals, and my pen the quill of a goose. It's a grand life! One is closer to God in the bush than in any church, including the great cathedrals of Europe. And you can tell that to anyone you like (especially Father).

I hope you can forgive me for taking off like that. I'm sorry I left like that. It was a mess, I know, but I had to leave Lake Illusion.

'What's he talking about?' Cat asked.

Grace looked pleased, and shifted in her chair to get more comfortable. 'Lake Illusion was in northern Australia. It's the mission where grandfather Gottlieb worked during the Great War. He was only an assistant missionary there, and preaching to white settlers and serving natives in the store wasn't proper missionary work to him, not after New Zealand. Gottlieb never liked playing second fiddle to anyone, but he didn't have much choice at the time.'

'Where was this place exactly?' Cat interrupted.

Grace waved a hand. 'Oh, somewhere east of Tennant Creek.'

'What happened then, after Jack left?'

'There was a big fuss, of course, and a search party. But Gottlieb got a job back in Adelaide not long after that. He disinherited Jack and forbade any mention of his name.'

'Because of the prison thing?'

'Before that, I think. They'd had a row over something before Jack left. He had always been a tearaway, and Gottlieb was so strict—they never got along.'

Cat read on.

If you want my opinion, we should never have interfered with the Aborigines. They got along fine in the bush for thousands of years. But you'll be glad to hear I keep my head down and my mouth shut these days! Apart from the odd letter to the local newspaper. Parenthood has reformed me. There are no schools out here, so I teach the children at home. Young Maisie is a great reader already at four, I have high hopes for her. I want to give them the education they need to get on in life.

Please write to me care of Cockatoo Station—I have a favour to ask you.

Your loving brother,
Jack

‘What was that about? The favour?’ Cat asked.

Grace shook her head. ‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Oh, come on, Mum, you must remember something!’ Cat insisted.

‘No. Only the fruitcakes.’ Grace gazed into the distance as if hunting down a memory. Cat waited. ‘Freya said Katerina sometimes baked an extra fruit cake at Christmas, wrapped it up, and sent it off. She’d never say who it was for.’

Cat was eager for more, but Grace’s eyes glazed over, and her head lolled to one side. ‘It was all so long ago,’ she said. ‘I’m tired now.’

Cat folded Jack’s letter, replaced it in the envelope, and tucked it inside the hatbox.

Lily returned, carrying a blanket. ‘Sorry I took so long, there was a mix-up with Mum’s medication.’

She stopped, staring at the hatbox. ‘That’s Freya’s.’

‘Yes.’ Cat lowered the lid, and snapped the catch closed. ‘She left it to me, Mum said.’ Disappointment flickered in Lily’s eyes, and she turned away, arranging the blanket at the foot of the bed.

‘We can share,’ Cat offered, making peace.

‘No,’ Lily said, turning to face her. ‘If Freya wanted you to have it, there must be a reason.’

Cat opened her mouth to tell Lily about the letter, and then changed her mind. If there was reason, perhaps she needed to discover it by herself.

‘Yes,’ Lily said, and Cat was glad. Grace closed her eyes and turned her head away as they said goodbye. But as Cat closed the door, Grace called her back.

‘*Find the children*,’ Grace whispered. ‘That’s what she said to tell you.’ And she turned her face to the wall.

Lily: Freya's Cottage

When I visited Freya in hospital, she was weak, drifting in and out of consciousness. She beckoned me, and her eyes cleared for a moment. 'My stories, Lily,' she whispered. 'In the cardboard box, behind... ' Her voice trailed off. She looked frustrated.

'I'll find them,' I promised. 'I'll bring them tomorrow.'

Her eyes softened, and her head fell back against the pillow. I offered her a sip of water, but she refused. 'Take care of them, Lily. Take care of them all.'

I swallowed, and took her cold hands in mine. I might have sat like that for hours, stroking her hands, my throat aching with unshed tears.

The call next morning did not surprise me, but it seemed unreal. I put down the phone. 'She's dead. Freya's gone.' I said the words aloud, not believing them, needing to hear them. A ragged sound tore my throat. It did not seem to come from me. I dressed, left the house, unlocked my car. I had a promise to keep. If I could find the stories, some part of my mind insisted, time might rewind, take another path. I would take them to her. She would sit up, smile. It was a nonsense. The rational part of me knew this quite well. But still I had to do find them. I drove to the cottage. I flung open cupboards, scrabbled through drawers, plundered boxes. But all I found was a near-blank page in the typewriter. It was headed *Lost Children*. I collapsed on Freya's bed clutching it, pounded the quilt with my fist. My tears made dark splotches on the soft blue cotton, the faded patchwork squares. When I sat up and caught sight of myself in the mirror, I looked wild and dishevelled, like a madwoman.

*****

I floated through a silver landscape like moving through a moonlit dream, or an old photograph. Even my own pink flesh had turned a pearlescent grey. The swell of the sea was illuminated intermittently by sweeping beams from the lighthouse on the shore. Further inland, cart-tracks and foot-paths wound among fields of flax, odd hillocks, and dense, low scrub.

A straggle of whitewashed wooden houses lined the road that stretched south along the coast, and a little apart from them, set in landscaped grounds with hedges and fruit trees, was a bigger house with a verandah, and small chapel to one side. The buildings shone in their nest of foliage. At the rear of the house were stables, sheds,

and a vegetable garden. I peered in at the windows, but the curtains were drawn, the house closed. Inside, the children stirred and murmured in their sleep. Their dreams rose like smoke from the house, but I was unable to decipher them.

The land was colourless, the sky a milky dawn. Soon I would wake into another world. There was no nourishment for me in this one; I was just a witness, wandering alone and unheeded in the country of the past. I was a ghost, a ghost of the future, a troubling premonition, a shiver along the spine, an apprehension of a time yet to be realised. No-one could touch me.

The sun rose, and my body grew transparent. The children tumbled from the house, sent out by their mother to play on the common until breakfast was ready. The redheaded boy searched in the hedge for duck eggs and the two little girls tossed a ball back and forth. An older girl with braided hair rolled her hoop along a path that meandered through the grass. I floated above her, unseen, watching. I saw a soul open like a flower to the sun, responsive, tender, knowing neither disappointment nor cruelty.

'Hello,' I whispered.

The girl propelled her hoop forward. It travelled true, then wobbled, veered and fell in the grass. She picked it up with her left hand, tossed it in the air and caught it deftly.

'Hello?' I repeat, longingly.

The girl stopped and sniffed the air as if sensing my presence. I concentrated, summoning her attention. She shook her head as if to dislodge something, flung the hoop away and began to gather wildflowers, white, blue and yellow.

I had to let her know I was there, looking out for her. I longed to tell her that she had a future, that she would grow up in another country, would have a life of her own. I wanted to tell her not to forget this, the precious childhood played out in a magical land on the dark, boulder-strewn shores of a wild sea beyond the mountain. *Someday it will seem a fairytale*, I wanted to say, *but it is the beginning. This country of the imagination will stay with you, though you can never go back. Do not forget.* But even if I could have told her, the child would not hear.

She frowned and looked around uneasily.

'Don't be afraid,' I whispered.

Their mother called the children to the house. The girl with braided hair put the posy carefully into the pocket of her pinafore, picked up her hoop and called to the younger ones.

"Come, Johann! Greta! Anna!"

They ran to join her. The red-haired boy put his arm around her shoulders, and she twined hers about his waist. The smaller girls grabbed a free hand each and together the four children skipped toward the house, laughing.

I watched them go. In the centre of my chest was a curious feeling. A hollowness, and a warmth. Something lost, and something found.

*****

I woke early, before dawn. I gazed into the darkness, waiting for the familiar shapes of morning to emerge. Small birds twittered from the fruit trees outside my window, and magpies warbled from the eucalypts beyond. A turtle dove lamented *the poor fool*, *the poor fool*. I languished in a haze of warmth and tattered dreams, until it hit me. Freya was dead. That happened over and over, forgetting and remembering, as if some part of me wanted to push away the truth. I had slept the night through without stirring, but my head ached as if I had cried all night. Life had to go on, but it felt wrong. Empty, and wrong.

In the shower, the rushing water pummelled my muscles and muffled my thoughts, but it did not wash away my desolation. I dressed, my mind crowded with questions to which there were no answers. Where were Freya's stories? Why had she left the hatbox to Cat? Why had she not told me? At least I had the Tarot cards. Freya had given them to me months before. I took the little velvet bag from my bedside drawer and held it in my palm for a moment before putting it in my pocket.

In the front room, Cat was asleep on the sofa, one arm flung above her head, one foot trailing on the floor.

A gale was blowing, and I struggled to close the door behind me. I had bought the old beach shack perched high above the gulf a couple of years after I started working at the museum. Seafront land had increased rapidly in value in recent years. I could have sold my old shack and built a better place inland, away from the wind. But I loved being by the sea, smelling it when I woke in the morning, hearing it in my dreams. Freya's cottage was close by, and I had visited her often, especially

after Poppa Ray died. I would usually take her some little gift: a flower, a pot of soup, a little drawing. But now her house was empty.

I crossed the road to the narrow path that meandered along the sea front, determined not to dwell on things over which I had no control. Clumps of grass and grey saltbush lined the edge of the cliff before it dropped steeply to the beach below. The wind shoved me sideways, whipping my hair across my face. A kestrel hung motionless above me and then, with a flash of white belly and tawny wings, plunged out of sight. I faced the wind, feeling its strength beat against me. Today, Cat and I planned to spend the day at the cottage, sorting through Freya's things, cleaning and packing. Today, I would find the stories. I walked, letting the wind blow my mind clear. As I turned for home, a white feather lay on the path at my feet. I bent and picked it up. At home, I let myself in, wondering whether to wake Cat or let her sleep.

But as I opened the front door, I smelled bacon frying, and heard it sizzling and popping in the pan. I shrugged off my coat and hung it in the hall, putting the things from my pockets—keys, the bag of Tarot cards, the feather—on the table by the phone.

It was warm in the kitchen.

''One egg or two?' Cat asked, pushing tomatoes and bacon to the side of the pan. 'You must be freezing.'

'Oh-ho,' I said, rubbing my hands. 'The bracing o-zone.' Cat stared at me blankly. 'It was a saying of Poppa Ray's,' I said. 'One egg will do.' I hesitated. 'Have you looked in the hatbox yet?'

'Not properly,' she said in a low voice. She turned to face me. 'Did Freya ever tell you about her brother?'

'Which one?'

'Jack.'

'You mean Johann? Yes, he was the one she talked about most. I think he was her favourite. She used to tell me stories about when they were children in New Zealand. Why? What did you find?'

I imagined photographs, blurry black and white shots of Elfrieda and Johann playing with Māori children, or sitting astride their horse on the way to school.

'I'll show you,' Cat said, setting breakfast before me. But she never did.

After breakfast, we filled the car with boxes and drove the short distance to Freya's cottage. Cat pushed open the gate and strode up the path, and I followed with all the cleaning gear. We went around through the overgrown backyard, and in the back door to Freya's kitchen. It was painted cream and green, with old patterned lino on the floor. Everything was just as it had been: the cool-safe, the bread-bin, the marble pastry slab, and the two enormous tins, one painted pink and one green. When Poppa Ray was alive, Freya would bake, every couple of months, a batch of his favourite biscuits, spiced with ginger and cinnamon, knobbly with nuts and raisins. She left them on racks in the kitchen to cool, and then stored them in the tins between layers of waxed paper. 'I should have made her tell me the recipe, I should have written it down,' I said, staring at the pink and green tins, my eyes blurry with unshed tears.

Cat gazed at me, uncomprehending.

'For Poppa Ray's biscuits.' But Cat didn't remember.

She marched through the dining room and into the hallway, her footsteps ringing on the wooden boards. I followed, wondering how to make her stop.

'Remember the summer we stayed here?' I asked her.

Cat kept walking, fast. She didn't look at me. 'How could I forget?' Her voice was cold, edged with sarcasm. 'It was the worst year of my life.'

'There were good times, too,' I said. My voice sounded plaintive.

'Name one, Lily!' Cat swung around to face me, her eyes fierce. 'Dad was in and out of hospital for years. He was never right after the accident. We had to sell the farm. And then Mum went crazy.' Her jaw was clenched; she was trembling.

'She's not crazy, Cat. Dementia is an illness.' I tried to be calm. 'And we came through it. We stuck together.'

'We were just kids!' Cat said. 'What choice did we have?'

She fled down the hall, flung open the door, and gazed out into the front garden, her shoulders heaving.

*****

Dad's accident happened at the beginning of the Christmas holidays when I was eight and Cat was ten. Dad left the tractor running while he went to open a gate, and it rolled on top of him, crushing his foot. Cat was with him when it happened. She came running into the house, screaming. Mum called the emergency number, and we

raced out to the paddock where Dad lay trapped. Waiting for the ambulance took forever; then he was rushed to hospital in Adelaide.

When we were allowed to visit him, Dad lay with his leg up over the bed, his face pale. It was like he was a different person, not the father who *never sat still long enough to scratch himself*. He gave us a twisted sort of smile and cracked a feeble joke. 'Bet you didn't know your old Dad was the sort of bloke who was silly enough to get run over by his own tractor, did you, girls?' Mum pushed us forward. I kissed Dad on the cheek and took his big, callused hand in mine. He gave my hand a squeeze and said 'You're a good girl, Lily.' Cat hung back, staring at the linoleum and scuffing it with her shoe as if she wanted to rub out the pattern.

As Mum drove us back to Kestrel Bay, I slumped in the seat, my brain as bleached as the paddocks of stubble we passed. The seat was slippery beneath my bare legs, and a hot wind blew through the open window.

'You girls must be on your best behaviour for Freya and Poppa Ray,' Mum said. Her voice was tired.

'Yes, Mum.' I leaned forward and kissed the back of her neck. She smelled like ripe apricots.

Cat flicked me a look of scorn, and went back to staring out of the window. She had been surly since we left the hospital. She wouldn't even play 'I spy', the game we always played on car trips. In fact, she had hardly spoken since the accident. When anyone tried to comfort her, she just snapped at them.

When we turned off the main road, I stuck my head out the window and breathed in the scent of pine trees and the salty sea air. There wasn't much to see at Kestrel Bay, just empty paddocks, old stone houses, a cluster of holiday shacks, and a little kiosk that sold ice-creams, bait, and fishing tackle. Oh, and the church.

Freya was in the front garden as we pulled up. She waved her secateurs, and put down the bucket of roses she was carrying. Trixie, our black and white fox terrier, barked and ran in circles, wagging her too-long tail.

The gate squeaked as Cat raced through. I ran after her. 'Wait!' Behind us, Mum lifted our suitcase from the car. I bent to pat Trixie, and she stood on her hind legs to lick my nose, then lay down on the cool concrete of the verandah, panting and grinning like a pirate. Freya opened her arms wide, and I ran to her, breathing in her scent of rosewater and vanilla. 'I love you, Freya.'

'I love you too, darling.'

Freya opened her arms to hug Cat, too, but my sister ducked away. Mum put down the suitcase and laughed at Freya. ‘Are you gardening, Mama, or baking?’

Freya wore a faded floral pinafore and cotton gardening gloves, and a light dusting of flour powdered her hair and one cheek. Freya chuckled. ‘A little of each. You know I can never stick to one thing at a time.’ Her tone softened. ‘But how is Frank?’

‘He’s comfortable,’ Mum said, but her voice made it sound like a sad thing. ‘They’re going to operate tomorrow.’

‘Again?’

‘Yes. The surgeon says there are a lot of bones in the foot. It’s tricky.’

Freya put an arm around her shoulders. ‘Poor darling. You stay with him. The girls will be fine here.’

‘Of course they will.’ Mum straightened. ‘But please don’t wear yourself out.’

‘They will be no trouble, at all, will you, Mädchen?’

I shook my head. Cat rolled her eyes, and I gave her a little kick on the leg, just a nudge with my toe, and jumped out of the way before she could kick me back.

‘Catherine, help your mother with that suitcase, please,’ Freya said, in her I-know-what-you’re-doing-and I’m-ignoring-it voice.

Cat scowled, but picked up the suitcase and heaved it on to the verandah.

‘What’s the matter, Cat?’ I said.

‘Nothing.’

‘Why are you grumpy?’

‘Leave me alone, blabbermouth!’ She pinched me hard on the arm.

‘That will do, girls!’ Mum scolded.

‘Have you eaten?’ Freya asked her.

‘Yes, we stopped on the way for fish and chips. But I’m dying for a cuppa.’

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ Freya said.

I looked sideways at Cat: this was our cue. She tried to stay aloof, but I gave her a teasing smile, and started humming. Cat frowned, trying to resist, but she couldn’t, and we both burst into song.

Polly put the kettle on, Polly put the kettle on, Polly put the kettle on; we’ll all have tea. Sukie take it off again, Sukie take it off again, Sukie take it off again; we’ll all run away.

We raced around the side of the house, screaming with laughter, our feet crunching on the gravel driveway, past the crab apple tree, the lavender hedge, the potted geraniums. That was how it started—the summer everything changed.

*****

'I don't blame you for leaving, Cat,' I said, coming up behind her. 'But you could have come home for a visit.' All I could think of was Mum's face at Dad's funeral, the ghastly vacant smile, her eyes gazing past us, looking for something they would never see again. Cat stood silent in the doorway. The wind picked up, hissing among the leaves.

'There's something missing,' she said, without turning around.

'What?'

'Here,' she said, indicating the space beside the door where, for decades, the great blue bowl had stood.

'Oh, her flower bowl,' I said. 'It broke.'

Cat turned around then, and looked at me. Her eyes were soft. 'I'm sorry,' she said gently. 'Come on, let's clean this place up.'

All morning we moved side by side through the cottage, dusting, sweeping, and mopping. We cleared shelves and cupboards, and scrubbed them inside and out. We emptied containers and cleaned the inside of the refrigerator with a vanilla-scented cloth, just as Freya would have done. We washed and dried her china, glass, and cutlery, and packed it all away.

Down the narrow passage we went, past the bedrooms, past the hallstand hung with coats and hats, past the brass doorstop in the shape of a Sphinx, to the front room. Arranged on the mantel above the fireplace were Freya's favourite pieces: the green glass candlesticks, the hand-painted jardinière, the family photographs.

I stroked the fat brass Buddha on top of the piano, sat on the stool, and ran my hands across the keys. *Do re mi, plunk*: that key had been wonky for ages. When we were children, Freya had sung and played for us, ballads and lullabies, old-fashioned songs about love and rosebuds. Foolish things.

*****

The piano stool is a bench with a lift-up lid, stuffed full of paper songbooks with pictures on the front. Inside, the notes perch like black birds on a wire fence, and the words of the songs stretch out alongside. I sit on the stool with a songbook

propped in front of me, my hands poised above the big creamy keys and the little black ones. I want to make a song for my father: a song to make him better, a song to bring him home. My fingers dance across the keys, but the notes come out all wrong. I start to cry. ‘If you want to make beautiful music, my darling, you must practise, practise, for years,’ Freya says. But it’s too long to wait.

Across the hall from the front room was the spare bedroom that Cat and I had shared, sleeping side by side in twin beds.

*****

‘Wake up!’

It is not the moon, but torchlight sliding bright across my eyelids.

‘Come on, Lily!’ Cat closes the bedroom door with a quiet click. She rolls up a blanket and pushes it against the bottom of the door so the light won’t escape into the hall and wake our grandparents. Then she turns on the light and opens the wardrobe where Freya’s best clothes are kept.

‘What are you doing, Cat?’

‘Just looking.’

The wardrobe smells of cedar and naphthalene. I gaze wide-eyed at the dove-grey travelling suit, the polka-dot sundress, the satin negligee, the taffeta evening gown, the beaded bolero, the cashmere shawl, and the blue velvet cloak. On the top shelf is a row of hats—wool, straw, and linen; trimmed with ribbons, feathers, flowers, fruit. Lined up two by two below are high-heeled shoes with pointed toes, sandals with narrow golden straps, boots with fur tops, and dancing slippers of supple leather. Cat reaches for them. ‘Cat, you can’t.’

But she is pouting into the mirror, twirling in rose-coloured silk. I finger a feather boa, and twine it about my neck. We prance and preen, pretending to be film stars. Cat is Liz Taylor, and I am Greta Garbo. We flounce across the mattresses and fall giggling upon the pillows.

*****

I stood staring into the wardrobe.

‘We don’t have to do it now, Lily,’ Cat said, touching my arm.

But how would I have the courage to do this on my own? Together, we took the clothes from their hangers, caressing the fabrics, breathing in the memories, and folded them away in boxes.

In Freya's room, I pushed back the curtains, and light spread across the white walls, the diamond-patterned quilt, the bench with its paisley curtain, and the oval mirror with its warped reflections.

*****

It's a fine summer morning, and I am eight years old, sitting on Freya's bed. I watch her dark river of hair rippling in the sunlight as the brush lifts it up, and catch sight of a coppery gleam. 'I see red in your hair, Freya.'

'Never mind that, Lily,' she says. 'Every day you must brush your hair, a hundred strokes.' She braids her hair deftly, coiling it like a snake around her head and pinning it into place. By mid-morning, little wisps and tendrils will escape to curl and dance about her face and neck. I can't understand why she braids her beautiful hair so tightly. 'Your hair is so long. If I was you, I'd wear it loose.'

'If I were you,' Freya corrects. She smiles and tosses her head. 'When I was a girl, it was longer than this.'

'How long?'

'Long enough to sit on! The boys at school used to pull my braids.'

'Did you cry?'

'Never! Magda and Johann looked out for me. We walked a mile to school each day, but if Father didn't need the buggy, we were allowed to ride our horse. He was brown with three white socks and a white star on his forehead. We wanted to call him Lucky, but Father wouldn't let us. He said there was no such thing as luck, only hard work and God's grace.'

'So what did you call him?'

Freya laughs. 'Christmas! Father couldn't object to that, although he grumbled that it might be blasphemy.'

'But what did you do with Christmas while you were in school?' I ask.

'We took off his harness and sack, and set him loose in the paddock next to the schoolyard. When we came out, he always came to the gate to meet us. He knew he would get his dinner when he got home. And maybe some oats or molasses. Johann saved apples, and scrounged carrots from the kitchen. But one day when we were riding home, some boys threw stones at Christmas, and he bolted. Greta fell off, but Jack and I hung tight to his neck and galloped all the way home! Father wouldn't listen when I tried to tell him about the boys throwing stones. He beat us with the

cane, and made Johann sleep the night in the stable as an extra punishment, because he was supposed to look after Christmas.' Freya smiles, remembering.

'But you see, that was no punishment to Johann. He was happy in the stable, snuggled up in the straw with Christmas and the dogs. After that, he misbehaved deliberately—until Mama realised what he was up to and put a stop to it.' Freya sighed. 'I wish he and Father had been able to get along.'

Freya takes up the brush once more and bids me stand in front of her. I close my eyes, feeling the gentle pull on my scalp, the rhythmic sweep, stroke after stroke. I feel happy inside, like a cat purring.

I open my eyes and see us in the oval mirror, the girl in yellow pyjamas and the woman in the blue kimono. I love the mirror with the carved frame that smells like my pencil box. The reflections in the glass are fluid and mysterious, as if they might change at any moment into something different. Freya says this is because the glass is old, and beginning to melt. I go toward the mirror, and the room behind me warps and shifts. Freya, sitting on the bed, curves sideways, and my face with its lopsided eyes, freckled nose and sticking-out straw hair looks almost beautiful. I screw up my eyes, willing the glass to melt, wishing I could be in the village between the mountain and the sea with the child called Elfrieda who was my grandmother in the long-ago world.

****

'Do you mind if I have the mirror?' I asked Cat.

She shrugged. 'Take what you want, Lily. You don't have to ask me. I'm just a visitor.' She laughed.

'No, you're not. Freya left the house to both of us.'

'Really?' Cat sprang out into the passageway, turned, and leaned back into the room. 'What will we do with it?'

'We don't have to decide right now. Let's think about it,' I said. 'Is there something special you'd like, to remember her by?'

She shook her head. 'I've got the hatbox.' She looked at me as if she sensed the pain I felt. 'It's just old letters and stuff,' she said. 'I don't know why she wanted me to have it.'

'Neither do I,' I said rather sharply. Cat raised an eyebrow. I fought an urge to apologise. Cat didn't deserve the hatbox. It didn't mean anything to her. But if

Freya had meant her to have it, there must be a reason. ‘What did Mum say, when she gave it to you?’

‘Oh, something about children. She was rambling, you know how she does...’

‘*Lost Children,’* I murmured.

‘What?’

‘I found those words on a page in Freya’s typewriter, the day she died. I think It was the title of a story.’

Cat frowned, but said nothing.

We sorted Freya’s belongings: a pile to keep, a pile to give away, and a pile whose fate was undecided. At midday, Cat took the car keys and went to buy lunch.

Right at the back of the shelf with the paisley curtain in Freya’s room was a pile of folded linen: old tablecloths, embroidered napkins, and lace-edged doilies. Behind this, I found a cardboard box. I got it down, placed it on the floor, and knelt to open it, my heart beating fast. The box contained manuscripts, some handwritten, some typed, some fuzzy blue carbon copies. Beneath them were lists and letters, quotations scribbled on scraps of paper, recipes torn from magazines, and, right at the bottom, an old photograph album. I put on my spectacles and browsed through the stories, expecting a collection of myths and magical tales. But what I found was quite different. The stories had one-word titles, subheadings with years and geographical locations, and character names that I recognised—Gottlieb, Elfrieda, Johann, Magda, Anna: the names of Freya’s family. She had been christened Elfrieda, but after she married would only answer to Freya.

I tried to sort the stories, to put them in some kind of order. I wanted to present Freya’s achievement in the best possible light. I knew Cat had loved Freya too, but thought her a little weird. The task was daunting. There were several drafts of each story but they were undated, making it impossible to determine which versions were more recent. Some pages had been fastened together with pins that had rusted, leaving the manuscripts marked with a gritty residue. Some pages floated loose; they had no numbers. Some stories were unfinished, and some had extensive deletions and scribbled revisions in Freya’s crabbed and awkward hand. Freya was left-handed, but had been forced from an early age to use her right. The left was the hand of darkness, the Devil’s creature, according to her father. Each time she reached out with her left hand, her knuckles were struck with a steel ruler. I flinched when Freya told me this, hearing the crack of metal on bone, feeling the pain in my own

nerves—for I, too, am left-handed. Born into more enlightened times, I was allowed to use my natural hand to hold a cup, a spoon, a pen. But Freya had to curb her instinct, which must have caused her to mistrust herself in other contexts, too. How might things have been different, had she been allowed to follow her natural bent?

I sifted slowly through the manuscripts, piecing the stories together, reading them, losing myself in Freya's dappled world of hope and regret, enchantment and disturbance.

Part Two: Pieces of the Past

The Typewriter

Kestrel Bay, Australia, 1967

Freya sat on a straight-backed wooden chair at her dining table and prepared to write. She removed the cover from the typewriter and laid it on the velvet tablecloth. The cloth was normally removed at mealtimes and the table laid with placemats, unless there were guests, when it would be laid instead with linen, silver and fine china. But there were seldom guests, though Grace might drop in for a cup of tea or Catherine and Lily might race in breathless after school to raid the biscuit tins. Ray preferred to take his dinner on a tray in front of the television set, a habit Freya frowned upon. Mealtimes were meant to be sociable, even if that meant no more than passing the salt, mulling over the day's events or discussing the clues in the weekend crossword puzzle. Between them, with the help of Pears' *Cyclopaedia* and *Larousse*, Freya and Ray could usually finish the puzzle by bedtime on Sunday.

When Ray had retired, they had moved to Kestrel Bay, half a mile from Frank and Grace on the farm. The little stone cottage overlooked the sea, the ruined jetty and a curving sweep of white sand beneath high, crumbling cliffs. The bay had once been a port shipping slate, wheat and wool to Adelaide's Outer Harbour. Now it was a forgotten backwater, known only to fishermen, farmers and the owners of holiday shacks who came every summer to lie on the crusted sand and swim in the limpid waters.

In fine weather, Freya opened the windows wide each morning to let a fresh breeze blow through the house. Each morning after he had showered and shaved, Ray stood by the window, took in the sweep of the sea, inhaled mightily and recited: 'Oh-ho, the bracing o-zone!' He spent his days in the vegetable garden hoeing, weeding and fertilising his radishes, broad beans and tomatoes, or in the shed tinkering with his beloved car, taking the engine apart and putting it back together. His daughters joked that it was the best-preserved car in Australia because it so rarely took to the road. He walked every morning to the corner shop for milk and a newspaper, taking the yellow spaniel on her leash. Freya cleaned, cooked the meals and baked batches of the hard, spicy biscuits Ray loved. He disdained the shop-bought biscuits that collapsed in a soggy mess, ruining the tea.

Ray and Freya slept in separate rooms. Freya had abandoned the room they shared and moved to Grace's old room, white and blue and airy, with reflections of the sea dancing on its walls. Ray thought it was because his snoring kept her awake,

or because she hated the smell of tobacco. But the real reason was that, after forty three years of marriage, Freya wanted a place of her own.

With care, she lined up the edges of her pages—a sheet of blue-black carbon, face down, sandwiched between two sheets of white typing paper—and fed them through the roller of her typewriter. She had first seen the little blue Olivetti in the window of Wigg & Sons, next door to the milliner in Grenfell Street where she had worked part-time, on and off, for thirty years. Her father had not wanted her to work when they moved to Adelaide from Lake Illusion after the war. But she was determined, and had helped support the family, and saved for years, putting a little aside each week from what she earned sewing hats and typing correspondence. When she married Ray in 1924, he told her proudly that no wife of his need go out to work. But she thought of her mother, worn to death at fifty after raising fifteen children, and of her dull sisters in their narrow homes, and she stood firm. She would keep the job. Eventually Ray gave in, though he grumbled from time to time. And one day she had brought home the typewriter.

She had justified its purchase on practical grounds, and indeed, her handwriting was abominable, crabbed and spiky. The physical act of writing was painful to her, though she had felt the compulsion to do so for as long as she could remember. Maybe it was a habit she had got from her father, always scribbling in his little leather notebook. It helped her to put her thoughts in order, to understand the gifts life bestowed. For everything was a gift, of that she was certain, though sometimes its purpose was obscure. Even not knowing was a gift; it made a person open, curious. Freya called herself agnostic, said she was keeping her options open, although according to her father and her brother Kurt she was already damned. She didn't care. Now with the typewriter, her hands were as free as her mind.

In the beginning, she had written letters to far-flung family members, to government departments, and to editors of newspapers. To poets and to politicians too, begging for help, and for justice. In those days she had been fierce and full of courage, determined to right a wrong and to fulfil her promise, and the little typewriter had been her obedient accomplice. But then there had been Ray's illness, and after that, Frank's accident and the grandchildren to care for. For years there had been no time for writing letters, and now the time for letters had passed. The lost ones would be settled now, she consoled herself, and getting on with their lives, perhaps with families and children of their own. They would not welcome her

intrusion. Instead, though it had proved more difficult than she imagined, she had summoned the courage to put her stories on paper.

She longed to send them out into the world, to see them thrive, offer nourishment, or grow into something wonderful. They might do some good, go some way toward making up for her failures. Obsessively, she drafted and redrafted the stories. Uncertain but determined, she sent copies to friends and acquaintances, to magazines and literary journals, to academics, to anyone who might spare her a breath of encouragement. Until now, she had encountered only politeness.

She sat before the little typewriter, stretched the small of her back, and squared her shoulders. At the bottom of her mind, below the babble of everyday thoughts, the new story hummed softly. Not yet cast in words, it was simply a rhythm, a cadenced shape, a song without rhyme or reason. Now that she had glimpsed it—just a flash, like the dappled hide of an eel catching the sunlight that slants through shallow water—she was greedy to catch it. But the story was elusive, and glided away to feed on the darkness below the surface.

Her childhood, the early years before the family moved to Australia, was always, in some sense, with her. That time had been peaceful, joyous even. It was like diving beneath the sea and finding another world, a place she loved although she knew she could not live there. The memories came again and again, ungraspable, slipping away and blurring into a jumble of colours and voices: a song (a certain translucent blue), a cluster of whispering greens, a silvery scribble of laughter, the deep reddish rumble of her father's voice, the gentle golden melody of her mother's. She followed these pathways, which might tail off into nothing, or reward her with unexpected bounty. She had learned to trust the erratic process of her memory, setting down events as they occurred to her, rather than trying to shape them as logic might insist. She waited for the story to reveal itself.

On an island far away stands a mountain, its crater capped with snow, its flanks clad in spoked ferns, tangled trees, and coloured lichens. Water pours down its sides in falls, streams, and rivers that run north, south, and west to the sea. The coast is lined with sands of antique silver and smooth black stones that rattle and hiss as they are shaken again and again by the tides. At the westernmost point, atop a great boulder, a lighthouse beams against a glowering sky.

Between the lighthouse and the mountain is a village, nothing more than a scrap of common land and a straggle of wooden buildings along a graded road: post

office, dairy, flax mill, smithy, schoolhouse, and a handful of houses: white squares with triangular roofs, like something a child might draw. The grass is bright and the flat meadows are interrupted here and there by strange, round little hills, said to have been formed by volcanic eruptions. On the road leading west from the village to the lighthouse stands a mission house and a chapel, built by a man who travelled across the world to bring God's word to the natives of this land. He had been born in another village, another country, another time—

Freya's fingers flew, and all at once the keys jammed in the machine. She disentangled them, and sat back in her chair. Now her thoughts were stuck too. She did not know how to write about her father. All she remembered was his voice, rich with passion, resonating like a fine old instrument when he sang or preached. It was a voice full of fire and light, a voice that could conjure images of apocalypse or of illumination. His voice could be gentle or thunderous. It could make one yearn or tremble. But even more fraught were his silences. When he was deep in thought, his wife and children had walked on tiptoes, spoken in murmurs. The study door was never to be knocked upon, the dark abstracted figure pacing the garden never to be approached. For his work was not like the work of other men. It was God's work: a vocation, a sacred mission.

Disobedience

A Story by Freya Forsythe

Saxony, 1864

Kleinwelterode was an unremarkable place of awkward proportions, a little too big to be a village, and a little too small to be a town. It had begun as a marketplace at a crossroad where the trading routes from four great cities met in the shadow of an ancient forest. Traders had pitched their tents and set up stalls along the roadside to sell provisions to passing merchants. Then some enterprising soul began a vegetable plot and built a hut, and soon others decided to stay. An inn was built to provide food and lodging for travellers. Houses sprang up, market stalls were transformed into shops and alehouses, and grassy meadows turned into farms and gardens. The trade increased, and Kleinwelterode grew prosperous. War came, and its fortunes declined. The cycle repeated itself again and again over the centuries. Through it all, generation after generation of Kleinwelterodians tilled the fields, growing cabbages and potatoes, melons and pumpkins.

The forest, of birch, spruce and pine, of tangled undergrowth and mossy glades, brooded over Kleinwelterode, haunting its dreams. The people told stories around their hearths at night-time of a mighty tree with branches that reached as high as heaven itself, and roots that reached down to the beginning of time. They warned of the unspeakable creatures that lurked in the forest, and forbade their children from venturing among the trees. Nobody thought to question the old stories until a child was born who questioned everything.

He came into the world on a bitter winter's night, with a wild wind from the west whipping the branches and shrieking through the cracks of the old stone house. The midwife smiled grimly at the newborn as he waved his bloodied fists and yelled. Annaliese lay exhausted, her damp hair tangled on the pillow. Both mother and child had survived—a blessing. And the child was strong—another blessing. But this was just the first of many battles. The midwife touched her palm to the wooden bedstead and made a swift sign of protection over the child's head. Then she swaddled it against the evil draughts that swirled about the room, and called for the child's father who paced the hallway, sucking on his pipe.

Friedrich shook his head when she held the bundle out to him, but peered curiously into the folds of swaddling. 'It's a boy,' the midwife said. 'A healthy boy.'

But when Friedrich Weis saw his son for the first time, he was struck with a sense of foreboding. ‘Grüss Gott!’ he muttered.

His wife raised herself on one elbow. ‘My love?’

Friedrich held his lantern high, pushed back the cloth from the infant’s forehead, and gaped as if he saw a pair of budding horns. ‘Red,’ he said. ‘Its hair is red.’ The baby howled.

Those fiery locks were a mystery. For generations, the offspring of these families had been fair and placid. As the midwife handed the squalling infant to its mother, Friedrich grumbled about evil omens, changelings and Devil-spawn.

‘Nonsense,’ Annaliese said, putting the baby to her breast. Friedrich looked at her in surprise. ‘His hair will fade,’ she said soothingly, pushing a blameless blonde lock from her own perspiring brow.

But Friedrich was unconvinced. He had the uneasy feeling that his well-ordered life was about to change. ‘The child must be christened,’ he said. ‘I shall name him for his forefathers: Heinrich, Eckhart, Wilhelm.’

‘Yes, my dear, of course. But grant me a small favour, if you will,’ Annaliese said. Friedrich frowned. ‘Just a mother’s whim.’ She smiled prettily. ‘I’d like him to have another name—a special name.’

And the child was known as Gottlieb. He was different from the other children. Though quick and curious and eager to please, he would fly into a passion over the smallest thing. Perhaps it was his string of humble forebears that kept Heinrich Eckhart Wilhelm Gottlieb Weis on the path of righteousness, or perhaps it was the prayer folded into his name, but nothing could quell his fire. When something displeased him, he roared. When something attracted his interest, you never heard the end of it. While his elder sister Gretchen and his younger brother Franz spooned up their porridge in sweet-natured silence, Gottlieb talked with his mouth full or hurled his bowl to the floor. Later, when his obedient siblings marched through the cobbled streets each morning to work in the cabbage gardens at the edge of town, Gottlieb ran off to play at the edge of the forest where a great pine tree stood.

Gottlieb loved to climb this tree. From high in its branches, he could see everything. In one direction was the village, laid out in miniature, and in the other direction, a sea of trees: trunks and branches, twigs and leaves, all interwoven like the stitches in the tapestries sold by the travelling merchants, growing smaller and

smaller until they melted into darkness. The tree creaked and swayed beneath him but, cradled in its branches, he felt safe and full of hope. From his pocket he would draw the telescope he had made from a piece of rolled-up paper and a blob of red sealing-wax, and imagine himself in a great ship, sailing away from the village, across a billowing ocean. Squinting through his telescope, he saw things that nobody in Kleinwelterode had ever seen: great birds, and monsters of the deep, and the green line of a distant shore.

Gottlieb's errant ways drove his father to shouting and stamping about the house, finally sinking into a chair to shake his head in despair. But his mother would lay a hand on Gottlieb's shoulder, caress his flushed cheek with cool fingers, and call him *Lobo*, beloved. Her touch always quieted him—for a while. But Gottlieb was as full of questions as a Swiss cheese was full of holes, and they were questions that nobody could answer.

What lies at the heart of the forest?

How do the stars know their place in the sky?

Where do stories come from?

Annaliese sought advice from Pastor Nessel, the most learned man in the village. He said that Gottlieb's incessant questioning was a sign of intelligence. Annaliese looked askance at this, but the pastor told her not to worry. 'It is a good thing, to be clever,' he said. 'The boy will make his mark in the world. He must be encouraged. He must learn.'

And so Gottlieb, at six, began to visit the pastor twice a week for instruction in the teachings of the Bible. He listened with awe to tales of the miracles wrought by Jesus: the walking on water, the multiplication of loaves and fishes, the casting out of demons. He learned of a man named Martin Luther, who devoted his life to God after being saved from a thunderstorm. Luther had warned of the demons that haunted the forests and dark pooly places of the earth, and Gottlieb nodded solemnly. His mother had told him about the *Wassermann*, the green-haired creature that lurked beneath the surface of rivers and ponds, waiting to snatch unwary children in its claws and drag them into the water. Luther had seen such things with his own eyes. Once, in a fit of rage at being interrupted in his writing, Luther had even hurled his inkpot at the Devil himself. Gottlieb pictured the dark liquid dripping from the bright curls about Lucifer's horns, hearing the curses, the echoing clatter of cloven hoofs as the Evil One fled the castle.

Gottlieb shivered with excitement at such tales, and dreamed of another life, far from the cold houses and dreary cabbage gardens of Kleinwelterode. He could not imagine just how it might unfold, but he knew that something mighty beckoned. It called to him from the pastor's stories, from the shining words of the hymns they sang in church and from a future that hovered, formless, just beyond his reach.

When Gottlieb was seven years old, Annaliese walked him for the first time to the schoolhouse, a stone room that smelled of chalk and damp. Hopping from foot to foot to keep warm, he held his mother's hand as she talked with a tall man dressed in dusty black. Spit glistened in the turned-down corners of the man's mouth, and a narrow bamboo cane in his right hand swished gently through the air at his side. *Swish-swish.*

Gottlieb stared at the rows of children sitting silently with folded arms, staring back at him from their wooden desks. Though he knew some of them, nobody smiled at him or called a greeting. He stood still and clung to his mother's hand, looking down at his feet, his new boots with leather laces. 'You must stay here, Lobo, and learn your lessons,' Annaliese said, disentangling his fingers. 'Be a good boy now.' She gave him a little push, and the children sniggered.

He was glad when the day was over, but learned to his dismay that he had to go to school again the next day, and the next, every day except Sunday. There would be no time for playing at the edge of the forest, for climbing trees or for wandering through the fields, making up songs. Worst of all, he very soon learned the purpose of the schoolmaster's bamboo cane. But Gottlieb's natural thirst for learning made him settle to his studies, and he made good progress. But he was not allowed to shirk his chores at home; there was work to be done, his father said, and Gottlieb was made to fetch and carry, to serve customers in the store and to work in the cabbage fields after school and on Sundays, as well.

One afternoon his mother sent him to carry two lidded pails containing hot food and coffee to his father and the men at their work in the fields, to sustain them until they finished work at sundown. As he departed, his mother ran after him and handed him a cloth-wrapped bundle. 'Take this package with you, Lobo my love, and bury it beneath a tree. Do not stop or unwrap it, and do not show it to anyone. Just dig a hole, put it in, and cover it well. Then go straight on to the cabbage field.'

'What is it, Mama?' he asked, taking the narrow package in his hands and examining it curiously.

‘Never mind what it is!’ she said sharply. When she saw his hurt expression, she added gently: ‘It is a thing from another time that must be laid to rest.’

‘How did you come by it, Mama?’

‘It was my mother’s, and her mother’s before her.’

His grandmother had died before he was born, but he knew that, like him, she had loved to sing. And he knew, too, that she was the source of the stories Annaliese told him about the beings that dwelled in earth, wood, and water, and of the healing properties of plants.

‘Pastor Nessel says it is a pagan thing and will bring evil upon us if we keep it in the house,’ Annaliese explained. ‘So ask no more questions, but do as I say.’

‘Yes, Mama.’

Gottlieb set out with high spirits and good intentions, but the pails were heavy and the cabbage field a good half hour from the village, and by the time he reached the edge of the forest he was tired, and stopped to rest beside his favourite tree. Setting the pails carefully on the ground, he sat and gazed into the forest. The package in his pocket dug into his side, and he took it out, turning it over in his hands. It was long and narrow and hard as stone. A dangerous thing, his mother had hinted, and yet it had belonged to his grandmother, who was good. How could it be both bad and good? He frowned, and lifted the edge of the cloth, unwinding it just a little. No harm could come from looking; a peek, and then he would bury it as Mama asked. He unwound the cloth a little further and saw a glimmer…

The cloth fell to the ground, and he held a great pin in his hand. One end was sharp, and the other shaped like the wheel of a cart, with four spokes joining an inner ring to an outer rim. *Rad-nadel*, he named it. *Wheel-pin*. Its surface was dull, corroded here and there to a greenish hue, except for a part that shone reddish-gold, like fire. Its contours seemed familiar, its weight somehow important. He must bury it. But where?

He glimpsed a flash of colour, a sudden flare in the shadows of the forest. He blinked and it was gone—the glimmer of an insect’s wing, perhaps, or a mote of dust caught for a moment in his lashes. But there it was again—a flicker of reddish light, deep among the trees. He stood and followed it.

His footsteps made no sound on the damp leaves and soft pine needles. The branches of the trees soon met above his head. The air grew dark. The flickering coloured light had vanished, and he heard the steady drip of water and the

melancholy cry of an unseen bird. Deep in the forest, he came to a magical place: a grassy clearing where specks of pollen danced in shafts of golden light from far above. This was the perfect place to bury his treasure.

He ran forward and cried out as his foot sank in cold, wet sludge. Ripples shivered through the skin of waterweed and lichens, and he saw that he had stumbled into a hidden pool. He struggled to pull his foot free, releasing clouds of mud into the water.

The skin on his shoulders and the back of his neck prickled. Staring at the glistening surface, he thought of the *Wasserman*, and cold fear trickled through him. There was a great sucking noise, and his foot came free, but his boot disappeared in the mud. He fled back through the forest, arms outstretched to ward off twigs and branches. His feet were heavy as stones; his breath made a rasping noise and his chest was pounding. He stumbled thankfully into the sunshine at the edge of the forest, scratched and bruised and out of breath. It felt as if centuries had passed, but there was the old pine tree, and the two pails standing beside the path where he had left them. He rested awhile, then picked up the pails and trudged toward the cabbage field.

He reached the perimeter fence, glad to see the men in their blue overalls hoeing and weeding the rows of cabbages as they did every day, and his father, working on the far side of the field. As he headed toward the gate, a smooth stone rolled beneath his shoe, and he slipped and fell headlong in the road. He lay listening to the thudding of his heart and the clattering of the pails as they rolled away. The smell of coffee rose around him as it soaked into the earth. He heard the distant roaring of his father. The men leaned on their hoes and stared.

He did not cry out that night when his father beat him. And when his mother crept upstairs to comfort him, he pretended to be asleep. He longed for her embrace, but did not deserve it. When the house was quiet, he felt beneath his mattress where he had hidden the wheel-headed pin, held it in his hand, and traced its contours with his fingers. He should have left it in the forest.

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When he completed primary school, Gottlieb begged to be allowed to enrol as a day pupil at the *Gymnasium*, but his father would not hear of it. He was the eldest son, and must do his duty, managing the market garden. Gottlieb had no choice but to

obey. However, determined to continue his studies, he persuaded his teachers to give him private lessons and studied late into the night.

At twelve, Gottlieb was tormented by passions inexplicable to his mild-mannered mother and his pragmatic father. Friedrich found his insolence intolerable, and Annaliese despaired of making peace between them. When Gottlieb insisted on attending church twice on Sundays, Friedrich was furious. ‘What is the matter with him?’ he said to his wife. ‘Does he not understand that work comes first? Sunday afternoon is time enough for church. If he wants to pray and read fine words from books he can do it in the evening, when the day’s work is done.’

‘He wants to be confirmed,’ said Annaliese. ‘And Pastor Nessel says he must attend both Sunday services.’

‘That boy is looking for trouble,’ his father grumbled. ‘And what’s more, he will find it. His head is too full of ideas and his tongue is too ready to speak them.’ But Friedrich was loath to go against the wishes of Pastor Nessel, and Gottlieb got his confirmation.

As he delved into the scriptures, Gottlieb began to question the practices of his church. Like all State churches, it followed the rules proclaimed by Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1830, which had diluted the original teachings, banning some rituals outright. The giving and receiving of the host was proclaimed symbolic rather than actual, and the naming of bread and wine as the blessed body and blood of Christ was forbidden. To Gottlieb’s thinking, a symbolic host was powerless to confer grace and the service that contained it was meaningless. At thirteen, convinced that the communion ritual as it was practised dishonoured both Luther and Christ, Gottlieb refused to attend the family church at all.

His father, bewildered and outraged, stood, pushed back his chair and thumped his fist on the kitchen table. ‘For years you insist on going to church at all hours, and now you will not go at all!’

Gottlieb ran his hand across the scarred pine of the tabletop, searching for a way to explain. ‘It is a matter of principle, father. The communion service is not performed the way it should be.’

‘And who are you to say how the pastor should do his job?’

‘It’s not me, father. It’s in the scriptures, in Luther’s teachings. Even Pastor Nessel agrees—’

Friedrich thumped the table again. ‘I’ll hear no more of this. We are a God-fearing family. We have made sacrifices so that you could be confirmed. You will attend Church with the family on Sunday afternoons and there’s an end to it.’

But there was no end to it. Gottlieb learned of an Evangelical Church on the far side of town that practised the old communion rites, and three times a week he toiled on foot through stony streets and muddy pathways to worship at his new church. At last he had found fellowship with people who thought as he did, in a place where the rituals were not hollow, but full of meaning. When Friedrich threatened disinheritance, Gottlieb, for the first time, did not answer back; he simply ignored his father.

Some months later, a visiting preacher came to the new church, a missionary just returned from British colonies in the south. He told of wonders: gigantic birds that did not fly but crawled upon the earth, fierce tattooed warriors with protruding tongues and mountains that spewed fire. Gottlieb listened to these tales with longing. The missionary spoke of savage tribes who had never glimpsed the possibility of salvation. There is much work to be done, the missionary said. Who among you will heed the call? Gottlieb saw himself advancing through a dark jungle toward a crowd of fierce warriors.

Their teeth and eyes gleam and their faces are golden-bronze, etched with intricate spirals of dark blue. The spears they hold are aimed at Gottlieb’s heart. He advances, holding in his hand a brightness—a chalice, or a torch?—that illuminates the jungle with a light so intense that the savages are overawed, throwing down their spears and falling to their knees. They shield their eyes from the brightness and beg for mercy. And he lays a hand on the shoulder of the chief and says, ‘Rise, my friend, do not be afraid, for the Lord is thy Saviour.’ And the ears and eyes of the savages are opened.

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Soon after the missionary’s visit Annaliese took to her bed. She ate little and grew thin and weak, losing strength for all but the simplest of household chores. She sent Gretchen to market on Saturdays in her stead while Gottlieb stayed at home to cook the meals and serve the townspeople who lined up outside the front door from morning till night to buy bread, vegetables, plants and seed.

Although Gottlieb prayed for the restoration his mother’s health, she continued to ail. He resolved, like Isaiah, to make a sacrifice, to give up something

he truly loved so that his mother might be healed. First, he thought to give up cabbage, but his father growled at the waste. He could give up sweets, but that was not a true sacrifice for he rarely got them. He gave away his collection of glass marbles to an incredulous schoolboy. But marbles were for children, and his mother only grew weaker.

So he borrowed his father's tinderbox and burned his old telescope in a secret ceremony beside the old pine tree. *O Lord, take this offering...* He felt a pang as the tiny flame took hold, and then a fierce joy in the pit of his belly as he watched his toy consumed: the exquisite pain of relinquishment. He knew then that the power of the Lord was with him and would grow stronger with every sacrifice he made. Satisfied, he blew away the ashes and the charred scraps of paper. The sealing wax melted to a red blob, and he rolled it into a ball and put it in his pocket. But still his mother ailed.

There was one thing left to give up. 'Dear God,' Gottlieb prayed. 'If you make Mama well, I will bury the Radnadel in the forest.' Even as he spoke the words, he shivered.

The next day Annaliese smiled, called his name, and sat up. In the ensuing weeks, he spent hours by her bedside, reading aloud from the Bible. Slowly her health improved until one morning she put on her robe and came down to the kitchen. A pot of soup simmered on the stove. Gottlieb tended to the ovens and served the customers who came to the front door to fill their baskets with cabbages, potatoes and warm loaves of dark bread. 'Go back to bed, Mama, or you will catch a chill,' he said.

'No, I shall sit here a little while,' she said. 'Your company will do me good.' He made her comfortable in her favourite chair, wrapped a shawl about her shoulders, and handed her a mug of steaming soup.

'Thank you, Lobo.' Her smile was brilliant. 'You are my lucky star.'

His heart leaped with joy. But then he thought of the Radnadel. Sometimes at night he would hold it, stroke its shining surface, trace its rayed design with his fingers and imagine the stories it could tell. He polished it until it shone red-gold all over. He did not want to venture alone into the forest and he did not want to put the Radnadel into the dark earth. He did not want to give it up, for it had belonged to his mother, and her mother before her, and was as much a part of him as his dreams.

Life returned to normal and Gottlieb, though reluctant to leave his mother, went back to work with his father in the vegetable gardens. But one day a

neighbour's child ran breathless from the town to summon Friedrich home and Gottlieb, hearing the urgency in the child's voice, knew something was wrong. While his father scratched his head and questioned the child, Gottlieb ran for home. Out of breath, he burst through the door of the silent house and rushed upstairs. Annaliese lay motionless in her bed, her face pale, her eyes closed. The neighbour woman stood with bowed head and clasped hands. The white curtain rippled in the open window.

Gottlieb cried out and threw himself upon her body, wetting her still-warm face with his tears. 'She is sleeping. Isn't she? Tell me she is sleeping!' he screamed at the neighbour woman. But she shook her head in sorrow and held out her arms to comfort him. He ran from the room, pushing past his father who had appeared at that moment in the doorway, his face crooked with grief.

He ran wildly, a painful tightness in his chest and throat, until he came to the edge of the forest, where he flung himself at the foot of the old pine tree. He had broken his word, and his mother had been taken from him.

At her funeral, Pastor Nessel spoke of Annaliese's goodness and said she was in God's embrace. He spoke of Heaven, of an end to pain and of eternal peace. Gottlieb struggled to understand. With his Bible classes, his endless questions, his secretly sketched diagrams of spiritual hierarchies and the oppositions of Heaven and Hell, he had thought himself clever. But now he was confounded by a simple question. *Where is Mama?* There were many answers, but the only one that mattered was not an answer at all, but an emptiness. A hole had been torn in the world. *She is not here.* The pastor said her soul was with God. Did God need her more than he did? When at last he was able to think again, he arrived every time at the same conclusion: her death was his punishment. He was to blame, and he must make amends.

His father grew dour, and sat for hours each day outside the house, smoking his pipe. Gottlieb and Gretchen brought him food and tried to comfort him, but he growled and waved them away. After a while they left him alone.

Eventually Friedrich returned to work and, before a year was out, he had roused himself sufficiently to take another wife. Eva was small, brown-haired, and plump. She cooked and cleaned and went to market and did her best to mother her husband's children, but soon bore children of her own and had little time for the older ones. They worked in the gardens, helped in the kitchen and took care of themselves. The family carried on, as families do, but never again did Friedrich Weis

sit with his family around the fire in the evenings, telling stories and singing the old songs.

Gottlieb missed the singing. But he worked and studied in silence, determined to earn his freedom. He thought sometimes of the red shape that had lured him into the forest, of the clearing and the pool, and of the wheel pin hidden in his room. He knew he was a sinner with no prospect of redemption except through God's grace. He must make himself a new life that belonged only to God, and hope that one day a light would shine again in his heart.

The Lesson

A Story by Freya Forsythe

Taranaki, New Zealand, 1906

Elfrieda opened her eyes in the darkness. She heard the even breathing of her sisters, and the soft chirrup of a small bird outside the window. She sat up, felt for her clothes, dressed quickly, and crept outside to her favourite place in the garden, a boulder near the front gate. When the land was cleared, nobody had been able to move the great stone, and so it had remained, incongruous beside the flowerbeds. She scrambled to the top and sat cross-legged as the grey dawn began to brighten. She stared hard at the massed leaves and blooms of the *pohutukawa*, black against the silver of the sky, waiting for the moment when colour seeped in to them. But, as always, the moment eluded her: suddenly, as if night had never been, the tree held up green leaves and crimson blossoms against a soft blue sky. In the scrub beyond the garden she heard the stirrings and rustlings of small creatures. Close by, a single bird began to sing: five bars repeated, a trilling melody. She searched but could not find the bird. The song shifted suddenly to a different sequence of notes, followed by a curious rattling sound. Then the five bar melody resumed. Elfrieda was entranced by the odd little song, and kept listening for it as, one by one, other bush birds joined the chorus. She could make out the soft call of the wood pigeon, the chirrup of the fantail—the pretty little bird the called *piwakawaka* —and the cry of the elusive native cuckoo. But she could not picture the bird that sang the peculiar tune that she loved best.

She looked to the east, toward the mountain. Most days, even in summer, the peak was wreathed in clouds or utterly obscured by fog. But today it was clear, an irregular triangle with a slight bump on its southern slope, haloed in rosy light. She held her breath, and watched, trying not to blink. Against the deepening blue of the sky, transparent colours played across the snow-topped peak—pink, gold, orange, fiery red, and pure white. The peak trembled as her eyes oozed tears.

‘Elf!’ It was Johann. ‘I’ve been looking everywhere for you.’ He stopped and gazed at her. ‘Are you all right?’ She nodded, rubbing her damp cheeks, and smiled at him. ‘Come on, then!’ he said, holding out his hand to help her down from the rock. ‘Father is waiting.’ Gottlieb gave a lesson in the chapel for his family every Saturday, testing each new sermon before the public service on Sunday.

Elfrieda sat, unwilling to move, her gaze lingering on the mountain. It would be cold and gloomy in the chapel; the smell of vinegar would sting her nostrils and the stone floor would be hard beneath her knees. Her father's voice was deep and musical, but often when he preached it contained a note that rang false, jarring against the fine words and ruining their harmony like a sticky piano key. On such a fine morning, she would have preferred to hear the lesson in the garden. Why should God's word be heard in one place rather than another? Out of doors, she could feel her part in all creation. To breathe the air of a new morning, to hear the song of the birds, and to see the sun rise beyond the mountain—surely these were acts of worship too? *God made the world, and saw that it was good*. But to Father, worldly beauty was a dangerous distraction.

'Come on, Elf.' Johann's voice was gentle, urgent. 'It's not worth a caning, is it?' She lifted her shoulders, straightened her back, and took her brother's hand. Together they went down the path to the little chapel, where they took their places beside their siblings, their boots clattering. Mama smiled fondly at them while Father watched from the pulpit, frowning slightly, his hand resting on his Bible. He cleared his throat, waiting until they were sitting quietly, he began.

He read from the Book of Genesis. He talked about obedience. Adam and Eve had disobeyed God's instruction and eaten fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. And because of this disobedience, God had driven Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, cursing the ground on which they walked, and saying *In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.*

Elfrieda could not contain herself. 'But Father, what about forgiveness? When we are naughty, it's true that you punish us. But if we are sorry, you forgive us. Why would God not forgive his children? Why would He banish them and not give them a second chance?' She frowned, striving to understand. 'He must be wicked.'

Her Father descended from the pulpit. He stood above her, glowering. 'How dare you speak of God that way!' The blow knocked her sideways. She put a hand to her stinging cheek. He made to seize her by the shoulders, but Johann was between them, threatening the big man with his fists. Father flung him aside. Elfrieda stood tall and shouted into his angry face. 'He is not a good God, I hate him!'

Father took a step backward. His eyes blazed, but his mouth was grim. 'Blasphemous child. Get out of my sight.'

But Elfrieda stood her ground. She was not afraid of him, she realised. She saw his mottled purple face, the crimson veins in his eye, the spittle that glistened among the coppery bristles of his beard. She saw the white, freckled fists clenched in rage, the fleshy mouth that opened and closed silently like that of a trout. She saw how the man's anger possessed him.

Mama laid a hand on Father's shoulder. 'I could kill the child!' he growled, but allowed her to lead him toward the door.

Mama's voice was calm. 'That would be most un-Christian, my dear.' Her eyes sought Elfrieda's as they passed, and her look said, *why must you provoke him?* But Elfrieda was not sorry.

Another Country

The family left New Zealand when Elfrieda was eight years old, and it became a place she only dreamed about, a dreamlike shape suffused with rosy mist. The circumstances of their departure were fraught with drama and last-minute changes of plan; telegrams went back and forth, and more than once Gottlieb had stormed through the house, striking walls and furniture with his riding crop.

When he had first arrived in the colony, he had worked as assistant to the missionary at Maxwelltown, Superintendent Schmidt, an overbearing man who edited Gottlieb's sermons with a red pencil and found reason to thwart his every initiative. Schmidt was also disliked by the church committee, since he had antagonised every member in some way or another. As time went on, the Superintendent grew increasingly dictatorial and irrational, forbidding Gottlieb from visiting the homes of local settlers and from consulting with the church committee. The final outrage was his summary suspension of the English and elementary school lessons that Gottlieb conducted in the neighbouring villages. To add to Gottlieb's difficulties, Church affairs were complicated by disputes between rival factions over issues of doctrine, the duplication of mission-stations in some regions, and inadequate communication with ruling bodies in Australia and Europe. On investigation, Gottlieb learned that Schmidt had originally emigrated to New Zealand under the auspices of another organisation, but had, it was rumoured, been dismissed as a result of a dispute over ownership of the mission land.

Gottlieb composed a letter of complaint to the mission authorities in Australia, detailing how his duties had been impeded and listed the grievances of committee members and parishioners. He sketched an impression of a community bewildered by erratic leadership, bedevilled by suspicion, and obstructed in its progress by the intransigence of one man, concluding with a request for an urgent investigation into the conduct of Superintendent Schmidt.

Within weeks, a pastor was sent from Melbourne to conduct private interviews with anyone willing to speak. Schmidt refused to be questioned on the grounds that no legal charges had been brought and that the accusations against him were unfounded and unjust hearsay. As a result of this investigation, the mission society informed Schmidt that he could no longer be regarded as their missionary, whereupon he threatened legal action, vowing to continue his work at Maxwelltown independently. The mission society had then sponsored Gottlieb in establishing a

new mission near the western coast, close to Parihaka, a centre of resistance. Needless to say, ill feeling between the two missionaries continued, though they rarely saw one another.

After ten years of peace and relative prosperity, when Gottlieb had almost forgotten the battle with his former superintendent, Schmidt took his revenge. Rallying supporters, he hounded mission leaders in Australia and Germany with petitions, protests and threats of legal action until they sent him a written apology. Gottlieb received a letter directing him to do the same, which naturally he ignored.

Meanwhile, things went from bad to worse in Taranaki. Te Whiti, the visionary leader whose speeches had brought Māoris from across the country, grew ill. Without his leadership, people drifted away from the district, and the pews in Gottlieb's chapel grew bare as entire families of formerly faithful parishioners departed. Then, over the course of several months, a series of petty thefts occurred at the mission-house: a carved bone ornament, a pair of sleeve-links, a trinket-box. Most distressing of all, the chapel was vandalised: a window smashed, red paint smeared on the door. None of this could be directly linked to Schmidt, but Gottlieb was certain he was behind it.

The mission society, for reasons of its own, decided to close its operations in New Zealand, and Gottlieb began negotiations to return to America, where he had studied. Unfortunately, no position could be found for him. Letters, then telegrams, flew back and forth with increasing urgency.

An assistant's job came up in outback Australia, and in desperation Gottlieb agreed to take it. From a lush land of fast-flowing rivers and plentiful rainfall, he brought his family to a desert. From being the master of his mission, he became a lowly helper, handing out tracts and serving behind the counter in the mission store. But it was a job. He worked hard, determined to support his family, prove his worth, and better himself. Although he spent a dozen years at Lake Illusion, Gottlieb never settled. His children, however, loved the bush, and were forever running in with some new plant or creature they had discovered or some new bit of knowledge they had gleaned. Gottlieb grew weary and his health suffered. His wife Katerina bore eight more babies during this time, his eldest daughter Magdalena married and went away, his son Johann found work at a nearby cattle station, and Elfrieda assisted in the mission children's home.

Punishment

A Story by Freya Forsythe

Lake Illusion, Northern Australia, 1917

‘Please, Miss, will you take us for a walk?’

Elfrieda yawned, and smiled at the eager boy plucking her sleeve. Charlie was the liveliest of the boys in her care, eleven years old and full of restless curiosity. When lessons were over for the day, the children loved to ramble through the scrub and around the shores of the salt lake that gave the mission its name. She stood up and stretched, recalling the raised voices that had kept her awake the night before, and hoping the row would not last too long this time. She tried her best to mend the rift between her father and brother, but it was a daunting task. ‘Very well, Charlie,’ she said to the boy. ‘Run and get the others.’

As they set off, the children darted here and there, pointing out plants that were used as food or medicine, or squatting momentarily to decipher the tracks left by some creature in the dust. They were born to this life, Elfrieda reflected; where she saw only wilderness, they knew a Garden of Eden. Yet they were as curious as she about life and customs in other lands and never tired of hearing her stories.

‘Tell us about the Shans, Miss.’

‘The Shans live in a country called Burma. They say the earth was formed by millions of ants who carried it grain by grain from the depths.’

‘Tell us about the , Miss.’

‘The of New Zealand say their land is a great fish hauled from the bottom of the ocean by the ancestor-hero Maui.’

‘Now, Miss, tell us about the Egyptians!’

‘To the ancient Egyptians, the world was a giant bowl surrounded by high mountains. Every day Ra, the sun-god, sailed across the sky in a boat like the ones that can still be seen on the Nile. The stars hang on invisible strings from the body of Nut, the sky goddess. And every month, the moon is eaten by a sow, one bite each night until it’s gone. Then the moon is reborn and the cycle starts again.’

‘That’s just like some of our stories!’ Charlie said.

Elfrieda told the children that, all over the world, people have stories about how the earth and the first people were made, and about why the sun, moon, and stars move as they do. She collected these stories because, like Charlie, she had always been full of questions. The answers she got from her father had never been

enough. Now, she tried to encourage the children's curiosity. It was all she could do for them, though little enough, she knew. They had been corralled here far from home and family in accordance with some idea that they must be 'civilised.'

Lately, Elfrieda had seen Charlie mooning about the playground alone, gazing out across the saltpans or into the scrub. Though she could only guess at his longings, she imagined him grown tall and strong, stalking through desert and scrub for days on end and returning triumphantly to camp with meat for his family. What promise did life hold for him now?

As they reached the playground and the boys dispersed, a child ran up to Elfrieda with a message: she must report to Matron's office immediately.

The big woman looked up, frowning, from her paperwork as Elfrieda entered. 'I hear you have been teaching the children heathen mythology.'

'I tell them stories. From other lands. I think—'

'You are not employed to think, my girl, nor to alter the curriculum. In future, if you must tell stories, let them be from the Bible.' Elfrieda protested, and Matron cut her short. 'A missionary's daughter—you ought to know better!'

Elfrieda bowed her head. 'I'm sorry, Matron.' Though she had no intention of stopping her storytelling, she said no more for her father's sake.

She turned to go, but Matron had not finished. 'There's been a complaint against one of your boys.' Her voice was disdainful. 'Charlie was seen near the pastoral offices which, as you know, are strictly out-of-bounds. And now a valuable artefact from your father's collection is missing.'

Elfrieda knew at once that it was her father's favourite piece, the Radnadel, a bronze wheel-headed pin. He was proud of his collection of antiquities, and always showed it off to visitors. When the family first arrived at Lake Illusion, he had even shown some of the elders of the local Aboriginal clan, but they had made a fuss and spoken excitedly of spirits, and Gottlieb had been reprimanded by his superior. Now the collection was kept in a locked cabinet, the key to which lay in the drawer of Gottlieb's desk. Matron confirmed her suspicion, saying that the key had been taken, though nothing else had been disturbed. This was clearly not the work of a child, and Elfrieda said as much. But Matron, uninterested in her theories, closed her eyes and put her hand to her forehead. 'I have a migraine,' she announced. 'You will handle this nauseous affair.'

‘I will ask Charlie about it tomorrow,’ Elfrieda said. ‘It’s nearly time for supper, and if this is just a prank, the Radnadel may be returned before morning...’

‘You will do as I say and you will do it now!’ Matron snapped.

Elfrieda found Charlie in the playground. He stared at the ground. ‘I never took nothing,’ he growled.

‘I believe you, Charlie,’ she replied. ‘But, tell me, do you know who might be responsible?’

‘No.’ The boy was sullen.

Elfrieda returned to Matron’s office to declare Charlie’s innocence. She asked whether a proper search been made for the artefact, whether there were any other suspects. Perhaps Gottlieb had taken the Radnadel out of the cabinet himself and forgotten to replace it? Matron could barely contain her exasperation. ‘We will waste no more time on this,’ she said. ‘You will cane the boy.’

Reluctantly, Elfrieda summoned Charlie to the schoolroom. ‘I have been ordered to punish you.’ She took the slender bamboo switch from its place in the corner. She recalled being beaten with a cane just like this one. It was not the physical pain she remembered, but the shaming. Charlie stood motionless at the window, staring out into the playground, a small muscle twitching in his jaw. Without a word, he bent forward, presenting his thin, cotton-clad rear. Elfrieda held her breath and made a quick downward slash, wincing as the cane made contact with the boy’s flesh. She stopped, lowering the cane. This was wrong.

Charlie stood up, frowning. He stepped toward her, palm raised, eyes blazing. She took a backward step and he halted, his expression softening. Reaching out to her, he whispered, ‘I won't hurt you.’

‘I’m not afraid of you!’ She said it without thinking, and in that moment, knew she had lost him. He turned away from her, his face a mask.

There was a brief knock, and Anna burst in. ‘Elfrieda! Johann is gone! His horse is missing.’

Charlie fled through the open door.

The West Wind

‘That’s it?’ Cat said, peering over Lily’s shoulder as she finished reading and attempting to grab the manuscript. ‘Are you sure there’s no more?’

‘Don’t Cat, you’ll tear it! Lily smoothed the pages and searched in the box beside her. ‘There might be another page somewhere,’ she said doubtfully. ‘Freya wasn’t terribly organised.’ She took a sip of water and a bite of sandwich.

‘Nor a terribly good writer,’ Cat observed, stretching out on Freya’s bed and dangling one foot over the edge. She had returned to the cottage to find Lily sitting cross-legged on the floor in a sea of papers. They had taken turns to read the stories aloud while they ate their lunch.

‘Since when are you a literary critic?’ Lily retorted. ‘She might have been, if she’d had more support. At least she kept writing—all this history would have been lost, otherwise.’ She stacked the papers together and replaced them in the box.

‘It’s fiction, Lily!’ Cat objected. ‘We don’t know which parts are true and which Freya made up.’

‘It’s her life, Cat. Of course it’s true.’ Lily took off her spectacles, closed the box and stood up. ‘Help me carry these things to the car.’

Cat leaped up and grabbed a box of linen. ‘Haven’t you heard of artistic licence?’ She followed Lily down the hall. Outside, the sun was shining. ‘That Bronze Age thing has to be fantasy.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Lily insisted. She put the box down while she got out her keys. ‘Freya told us about it when we were kids.’

Cat leaned on the car and closed her eyes, soaking up the warmth. The shape of an old story glimmered faintly in the darkness. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said, trying to remember. ‘A little girl loses her way in the forest and finds a thing made of metal. It’s long and thin, dark green, corroded. It looks like a big pin, or perhaps a key. The girl picks it up and takes it home. She hides it from her parents, polishes it until it gleams. But there’s a spell on it, a curse—anyone who keeps this thing is doomed to die a horrible death, or wander the earth, forever homeless.’ She opened her eyes. ‘That was just one of Freya’s spooky tales.’

‘No, Cat.’ Lily looked exasperated. ‘Wrong story. The Radnadel was real. Gottlieb was obsessed with it. Freya told us how she peeked through the half-open door of his study one day and saw him sitting in his big carved chair. The sun was coming in, that slanting afternoon light that turns everything to gold—the inkpot, the

fountain pen, the half-written sermon on his desk. Gottlieb was humming to himself, polishing something with the penwiper Freya had made him for his birthday. It was a big bronze pin with an ornamental head. That was the Radnadel.'

Cat looked at her sceptically. Lily was practical about most things, but when it came to Freya, loyalty overruled her common sense. 'You can't trust Freya's stories. You know that.'

'I'd sooner trust her stories than most people's truths.'

'Sorry, Lily. I don't remember that one.' Cat got into the car and shut the door.

The phone was ringing when they got back, and Lily ran down the hall to answer it. She handed it to Cat. 'It's Rob.' Lily went into the kitchen, glancing back as Cat spoke into the phone.

'Hello?' Standing in the narrow hallway, Cat thought of how she had left the apartment: the discarded clothes and damp towels in a jumbled heap on the bedroom floor, the dirty dishes in the sink, the yellow note stuck to the bench top near the electric kettle. She had been in a hurry. But she had left the mess on purpose.

'What are you up to, Cat?' Rob said calmly, as if speaking to a child. 'Your phone's been off for days.'

'I forgot my charger,' she lied. 'Didn't you get my note?'

'Yes, but it didn't tell me much. Like where you went, or why.'

'My grandmother died,' she said. 'Lily wanted me home for the funeral.'

'Oh.' There was a pause. 'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'There was no time.' The truth was, she had just wanted to be gone.

'When are you coming home?'

'I'm not sure.' She didn't want to go back. She wanted to make her decisions on her own from now on. But she couldn't tell him that, or he'd talk her into coming back. Like last time.

'Can't you give me some idea?' he said.

She sighed, tired of doing everything to a schedule, of keeping everything in its proper place to keep Rob sweet. In the beginning, he had brought a sense of stability to her chaotic life. He was hardworking and reliable; she felt safe with him. But now she longed to wake up to a day that was unplanned, to be guided by serendipity, as she had in her travelling days. She remembered, not so long ago, searching his face, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man with whom she'd fallen in

love all those years ago. But that Rob was gone. The man with his tongue in her mouth was a stranger. The blind insistence of the body that pushed against hers made her sick. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away. She could not explain what was wrong.

He was angry, of course. She soothed him with words. He thought he still loved her, but she knew it was over. If she went back now she would be trapped. 'I might not come back.'

'Catherine, you're being silly—'

He was the only one besides her mother who ever called her Catherine. 'I'm sorry, Rob. It's over.' She put the phone down quickly, and rubbed her cold fingers, forbidding herself regret or guilt. Noticing a small black bag on the hall table, she closed her hand around its familiar contours. The feel of the velvet against her palm, the slight shifting of the cards inside, took her back to a time when all things were possible, and the world was a mystery. Without thinking, she slipped the bag into her pocket.

'Is everything all right?' Lily came from the kitchen with two mugs of tea.

'Yeah. I just broke up with Rob.'

Lily put the mugs down abruptly, slopping tea. 'You what?'

'We broke up.'

'Why? You two have everything.'

'Yes,' Cat said. 'But none of it is mine.'

Lily stared at her. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't want to talk about it, Lily. He's no good for me, that's all.'

Lily blocked Cat's path to the door. 'He's not… violent, is he?'

Cat gave a short laugh. 'No, nothing like that.' She could not explain the particular pain he made her feel.

'Oh, Cat.' Lily's voice was soft with concern. 'I thought you were happy.'

'We were. Something changed,' Cat said, shrugging off Lily's emotion, wishing she would let the matter drop. 'Perhaps I just grew out of needing him.'

Lily twirled the end of her hair around one finger. 'You know, I never did think he was right for you.'

Cat gazed at her, astounded. 'Bloody hell. Now you tell me.'

I never said anything because I didn't want to upset you.'

‘Never mind.’ Angrily, Cat ducked beneath Lily’s arm and marched to the door. ‘I wouldn’t have listened anyway.’

*****

Cat trudged along the cliff path, head to the wind, trying to see a way forward. Cold gusts dug icy fingers into her ears and rattled in her skull, making it impossible to think. Every year in the third week of May, the wind blew in from the west to Kestrel Bay. That was when winter really started, her Dad had said. Every night for weeks the wind would shriek and howl, flinging sand up from the beach that worked its way into every crack and crevice of the old farmhouse. Lying awake at night, listening to the groan of timber, the screech of iron, and the rattle of glass, Cat would wish and wish for rain. Because when the rain came, the wind died down.

In a good year, the rain came early, washing everything clean. It fell straight to the earth in silver sheets, soaking the ground and swelling the shoots of barley, wheat and rye. There would be fodder for the cows, plenty of milk, and money in the bank, at least for a little while, at least enough to get the family through another year, to buy new school shoes. Cat had loved snuggling up in bed listening to the rain drumming on the corrugated iron roof and the water singing through the gutters, down the pipes, and into the tanks. *Wish-wish, wish-wish, wish-wish*. She would think of the birds shivering in the treetops and the small creatures huddled in their burrows and feel lucky to be living in a house, with a roof over her head and four walls to keep the weather out. When the rain stopped, there was a pure shining stillness in the air. That was in a good year.

In a bad year, the wind blew unrelenting for months, bearing swollen rainclouds high above the farm, past the parched paddocks, to the hills behind. Cat had left Kestrel Bay because of the wind. That, and the narrow-minded futility of country life. When Grace tried to pass on the latest gossip, Cat would put her hands over her ears. *Who cares?* She had fled Kestrel Bay to find a proper life.

Before Cat went to school, she knew everything. At five, her mind had been uncluttered. She knew how to tell the time with a dandelion clock, to count the petals of a daisy to determine the course of love, and to dream right down to the roots of the blue-gum tree by the back fence. She knew the insides of caterpillars, the language of birds, and the intricacies of the patterns the sun made behind her eyelids.

Then her days of freedom were over. No more running wild on the farm, fishing for tadpoles in the creek, or building forts in the woodpile. No more roaming the countryside and coming home exhausted. She had to go to school.

'Why?' she asked.

'So you can learn things,' her mother said.

'What things?'

'Things you don't know.'

'But I know everything!'

Everyone had laughed. The story was repeated, the laughter echoing down the years.

At school, she had scorned the predictable plots of Dick and Dora in the elementary reader and turned instead to the library, where she discovered 'The Swiss Family Robinson', 'Treasure Island' and 'Gulliver's Travels'. She believed in adventure, but couldn't quite get the hang of the hero thing. Why did boys get all the glory? The only woman in the Swiss family was the mother, and all she did was stay at home, cooking, cleaning, and mending like any mother, even if 'home' was a magical grotto or a gigantic hollow tree. Cat had higher hopes of the shipwrecked sailor, a girl who had survived on her own on a tiny rock for three whole years. But after she was rescued the only fate awaiting her seemed to be marriage. Cat decided she would never marry.

Like her great grandfather Gottlieb, Cat had big dreams. Her school friends had talked about changing the world, living a different kind of life. But, one by one, they had acquired careers and partners, mortgages and children, and used words like 'maturity' and 'responsibility'. The dreams faded, but Cat stayed single and determined, if not to change the world, at least to see it. She never stopped long enough to build a career or to make friends. Four years after she went overseas, in the third week of May, her father died. She told Lily she couldn't get a flight from Barcelona in time for his funeral. Later, Lily told her of the gales that howled around the house for three days and nights, uprooting trees and ripping the roof from the shed. On the morning of the funeral, the wind had dropped.

Cat kept on travelling. She lived in London, Amsterdam and Berlin. She waited on tables, wheeled babies in parks, cleaned cars and handed out leaflets on street corners. She tried marijuana, cocaine and one-night stands with strangers, but nothing made her feel alive. Wherever she went, she found the world was the same:

every city, town and village thrived on gossip and petty politics. In her twenties she thrived on the wandering life, but as thirty loomed on her horizon, the casual work that kept her going became tedious and exhausting. In Sydney she met Rob, and decided to settle down. She let him organise her life; he was good at organising. But, like the castles her father had constructed from playing cards to amuse her when she was a child, the new life she built with Rob was flimsy. She watched herself lay each piece with care. The furnishings she chose for their apartment, the simple, expensive clothing, the well-connected couples they entertained, all were elements in an edifice without foundation. She felt like a fraud. She had hoped that perhaps, with patience, she might learn to believe in this life. But deep down she might have known it was a mug's game; her father's dreams, too, had turned to dust.

She paced the cliff path, back and forth. A low boom of thunder sounded, and lightning forked across the sky. She watched, spellbound, until she began to shiver. Then she climbed into her car and sat, shielded from the freezing blast of the wind. Her breath came in painful gulps, but she couldn't cry. She could never cry. Breaking up with Rob had been the end of her dream of a normal life, the life her father would have wanted her to have. What would she do now? She had always believed that she was heading somewhere, that there was something just around the corner that would make it all worthwhile. Perhaps that was an illusion.

Feeling something digging into her hip, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the little velvet bag. She turned on the dim overhead light, loosened the drawstring, and Freya's Tarot cards slid neatly into her palm. They were worn and dog-eared, their colours faded, but the sight of them took her back to a time when the world had been both mysterious and bright. Automatically, she began to shuffle. The cards slipped obediently between her hands. *Wish-wish*, they whispered, *wish-wish*. Time and mind and coloured cards flew together and apart, together and apart. A card flipped sideways, landing at her feet. She glanced at it and replaced it in the deck. She didn't believe in telling the future. It was just a game, like life. There were those who played it safe, like Freya and Lily, and those who took a chance, like Jack. She shuffled, and the cards fell beneath her hands like silk, like rain.

Lily: Making Tracks

I woke suddenly, my heart thudding fast. Burrowing into my quilt, I tried to get back to sleep, but the wind was whistling in the windows and growling under the eaves. I could hear the rustling of leaves and the creaking of branches and, more distantly, the roar and crash of the sea. There was another sound that I could not place: a repeated high-pitched screech, as if something was rubbing against the iron of the roof. I lay there trying to work out what it could be, and was soon wide awake. It was a work day, and I was in the habit of getting up early to paint in my studio before breakfast.

I stood shivering in the screened-off porch, staring blankly at a new canvas. Making the first brush stroke was always daunting. It thrilled and appalled me. *This could be it,* whispered a voice in my mind. *This could be your great work.* I advanced, full of hope, to the primed white surface, a thin layer taut with possibilities. But as I raised my brush, another voice whispered: *Don't muck it up.* I knew these voices. If I stopped to listen, they would argue until the ghosts of my father's Friesians came lumbering down the hill, and I would lose any hope of achieving something today. I refused to listen. I didn't trust words. Fat with potential, glistening with seductive colour, they held as much promise as paint in a tube. But they were deceptive: I'd sooner trust something I could touch: an old piece of bone or a stone worn smooth by the sea. My sister had a way with words; she could talk you into anything, but it would often end in tears, as our mother used to warn us. Cat never stopped long enough to listen. I slid a CD into the tuner, swept the squabbling voices away on waves of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, and covered the canvas with a transparent yellow, clear as sunshine. Then I added scarlet, vermilion—a film of blood.

I worked with reds until my eyes cried out for green: the lush, edible foliage of Blackman's tropical rainforests, or the brooding darkness of Rousseau's fantastic jungles. I stood back and looked at what I had done and saw that it was angry and childish. So I turned the canvas to the wall, and pulled out an earlier unfinished painting, a semi-abstract landscape, seen from above. Some passages were familiar, but the whole was strange, like a map of someone else's country. In the bottom half of the picture, a river meanders toward the coast through fields and orchards, past a settlement of stone dwellings with thatched roofs. Tiny figures gather outside the houses, faces upturned as if awaiting something from the sky. Eucalyptus trees sway, remnants of forest in a country shaved and tamed, its spirits departed, or wailing

unheard over scattered bones. Enigmatic symbols and fragments of text, half-buried in pigment, serve as signposts to what once was, or might have been. From the north, swathes of red oxide, hot winds blowing tongues of flame, or red dust from the desert, threaten to obliterate the neat green and gold lozenges of crop and pasture. It was one of those pictures that come out of nowhere, demanding to be made. But the two halves did not relate to one another; something was missing.

It was like the story I made and remade in my head for years, when I was a little girl. There is a country town, stone houses with corrugated iron roofs dotted along a grid of dusty roads. The main road leads up a low hill (the only one for miles) to the post office, where the postmistress peers long-sightedly at the letters she's sorting, holding them at arm's length because she has misplaced her glasses again. At the other end of town, at the foot of the hill, is the schoolyard, where hens scratch in the dust and sheep raised from poddy lambs graze contentedly alongside the vegetable gardens. The children sit in the schoolroom, longing for recess, sucking the ends of pencils and pigtails, scratching holes in their exercise books with sharp steel nibs, watching pools of ink spreading ineradicably across clean white pages. Rainbow dust-motes swim above their desks in the sunlight that streams through the casement windows and the children doze and daydream and wish the endless afternoon away. In twenty years, or fifty, the people will be gone. The town will be a ghost town. Then it will reappear on maps, the buildings will be heritage listed, tourists will come. In the meantime it is unremarkable, just another small town on the fringes of existence, beyond the desert. The inhabitants go on with their unremarkable lives. Perhaps it's a town I lived in once, in another life. I've thought about it ever since I can remember.

The other side of the story concerns a forest. It is purely imaginary, although I imagine that somewhere, somewhen, it has a counterpart in reality. The forest is dark and brooding, ancient, pine and fungus-scented, with gnarled roots and entangled branches, a storybook forest inhabited by lurking wolves, evil goblins, and witches partial to the *fleisch* of *Kinder*. Inhabited, if you believed my great-grandfather, by the Devil himself, who was fond of such places. It was the kind of place where anything might be found. X would mark the spot where treasure is buried—if there were a map. And, of course, there is a curse. The forest—the real one—was somewhere in the old province of Saxony, by the village where my great

grandfather grew up. But the forest in my mind is compounded of Freya's tales and my own childish imaginings.

Neither of these places is my natural habitat. I am a coastal clinger, a lover of shallow waters and mild, sunny skies. I am not an explorer, an adventurer, a seeker of inland seas or buried treasure. I am a gardener, an arranger of roses, a painter of still-lifes and views carefully by windows. I am an untutored listener to classical music and a tearful viewer of romantic comedies. I am an arranger of colour harmonies peaceful interior spaces. I do not love the harsh light and heat, the choking dust of the desert. I am pale and fragile: in the desert, I burn and shrivel. Neither does the cold, unwholesome dampness, the gloomy darkness of a European forest appeal to me. But something impels me to reprise the themes of desert and forest. They are the bright and dark sides of my moon, the strange siblings of alterity in my soul.

To return to the painting: my problem was one of composition. Every artwork needs unity. There must be a clue, something for the eye to follow, so the viewer can weave the disparate elements of the work into something resembling a story. I needed something to link the two parts, a lynch-pin, if you like.

As always, when I am stuck, I turned to my journals for inspiration. I had been making them since I discovered Freya's scrapbooks when I was seven years old. I would lie on my stomach on her living room floor and turn the pages, bringing to life a world of juxtapositions: pop-up cards and glitter stars, collages of coloured foil and pictures cut from magazines, recipes and snippets of advice to gardeners. Ten thousand things jostled for space among the pages of Freya's scrapbooks. I adapted her eclectic style to suit myself, constructing visual narratives unbounded by time or logic, cutting and pasting pictures, scribbling quotations, sketches and scraps of conversation. I built up layers randomly, guided by colour or by whim. The tasks of choosing, cutting, and pasting absorbed me so I lost track of time. Sometimes I got the feeling that the journals guided me, not merely in my selection of images, but in my life. But that day even the magic of my journals failed me.

*****

I went in to breakfast disconsolate. Cat was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee; she had brought her own plunger. At the farm, we had always had a pot of tea at breakfast. 'Tea not good enough for you?' I joked. But Cat gazed absently, crumbling a dry piece of toast between her fingers. She was probably distressed about breaking up with Rob. 'Are you okay?' I asked.

‘Yes. I’m just tired.’ She didn’t seem to want to talk.

I drank my tea standing at the sink, and grabbed a piece of toast to take with me. ‘Make yourself at home,’ I told Cat. ‘I’ll be back around six.’

‘Thanks.’ She looked distracted. ‘I have some stuff to do.’

I left for work. If Cat wanted to be secretive, that was her business.

*****

Absorbed in setting up a new exhibit at the museum, I forgot about Cat until I arrived home that evening to find her car gone. When I went inside, all her belongings were gone, too. There was a yellow note stuck on the kitchen table. *Travelling north. Thanks for everything.*

Stunned, then furious, I tore the little square of paper into confetti and tossed it in the bin. I might have known Cat would pull a stunt like this; she had no idea how her whims affected other people. One day her impulsiveness would get her into real trouble. I tried to calm down by breathing slowly, and then called her mobile. It was switched off. No surprises there. I called Rob in Sydney, thinking she might have tried to patch things up with him. But he was as bewildered as I was. I promised to keep him informed, and put the phone down. What now? I paced, trying to work out where she might be headed, trying to divine her thinking. But I was too angry. I decided to visit Grace.

When I arrived at the hostel, she was in the community room watching television. She grumbled at the interruption, but accepted the sweets I offered. ‘Mum, did Cat say anything to you about going away?’ I asked her.

‘Didn’t she go back to Sydney?’

‘No. At least, Rob hasn’t heard from her.’

Grace thought for a moment. ‘She was rather taken with that old letter she found in the hatbox.’

‘What letter? Who was it from?’

‘*Jack, Jack, the pastor’s son, stole a pin and away did run,*’ Grace chanted.

‘Mum, who are you talking about?’

‘Jack! Naughty Jack.’

‘Do you mean Johann? Freya’s brother?’

‘He was a tearaway, a runaway,’ Grace said. ‘Catherine’s just like him. The aunts used to whisper behind their hands, they said he was a bad apple. But Freya told me to ignore them.’ She prattled on, her eyes sparkling. ‘When Catherine was

four, she rode her red tricycle all the way to the main road—luckily Frank picked her up before she got any further. One day she washed all the chickens and hung them on the clothesline to dry!' She chuckled and shook her head. '"Catherine's such a naughty girl!" I said to Freya. And do you know what Freya said?'

'No Mum, what did Freya say?' I had heard it a thousand times. But we had to go through this ritual before I would get any sense out of her.

'She said "Well, Grace, you wouldn't want a namby-pamby child, would you?"' Grace laughed, like she did every time she told this story.

'Mum, tell me about Jack's letter.'

Grace put her finger to her lips. 'Shhh! Grandfather said we're not to talk about him.'

'Why?'

'Because of the curse, that's why. Greta made a bonfire in the yard to burn the things they sent home when he died.'

'What things, Mum?'

'Heathen things. Boomerangs and what not.'

'From Jack?'

Grace shushed me and shook her head. 'He was a naughty boy.' She would say no more.

*****

In my studio that night, I gazed at my incomplete landscape: the coast, the plains, the houses, the little creatures, the layers of suffocating colour. It was a country seen from the air, with ploughed and planted paddocks, orchards, vineyards, a creek running through patchwork fields, and then there was a shift, a blur, those enigmatic symbols and the swathes of red from the north, where everything was still unformed. It was a world unto itself. Then I realised what was missing. There were no roads in the picture, no way in, or out. I picked up a fork—one of Freya's old silver-plated table forks—and started making tracks. Not a royal road, but little scratches in the earth that might have been made by animals or birds, thin meandering lines that petered out and reappeared in other places: impossible trails, like the ones I would have to follow to bring my sister home.

Part Three: Travelling North

On The Road

As Cat drove back through the tunnel of pines, she breathed freely again. Travelling was familiar territory: she loved the lightness of moving alone through the landscape with the world awaiting her. At the end of the road, there was a gap where the last tree should have been. In its place stood a neat pyramid of mulch.

On the main road, she drove like the devil, leaving Lily far behind. As a child, Lily had always been a nuisance, trailing in the rear, her face streaked with tears, her mouth square and ugly with crying. *Wait for me.* Mostly, Cat had waited. But if anything went wrong (like the time they were swinging over the creek and Lily missed the rope) it was Cat who got the blame.

She should never have gone back to Kestrel Bay. If you stayed in one place too long, people began to expect things. You woke up one day to find yourself bound fast by a million sticky threads, more subtle than Gulliver's, spun from the touch of their hands and their reassuring words. *I'm here for you. Let me know….*

The cards had been right. Slipping through her hands like rain, they had whispered *wish-wish. Wish-wish. Wish-wish.* The card that had leapt free from the pack and landed at her feet had been *the Fool. Heed unusual signs and sudden impulses*. Jack had done that, and found himself a paradise. But what had led him there? She glanced at the blue leather hatbox beside her on the passenger seat. Whatever Freya had wanted her to do, Lake Illusion, where it all started, might give her a clue. She had been shopping, bought camping gear and a sturdy pair of boots; she was ready for adventure.

She drove north along the coast and through the city of Adelaide, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel as she waited for traffic lights to change. Cyclone-fenced car yards, grimy shops, and brick houses gave way to lush green market gardens, then to farmland. Pastures and fields of wheat, still green, whizzed by the window, punctuated by billboards. *Eat. Drink. Drowsy drivers die. You are now leaving Paradise. Thank you for visiting.* She turned on the radio. Rock music blasted from the speakers, and everything seemed suddenly unreal, as if her life were a movie. *Leavin' it all behind. Yeah. Headin' for the North country.* In the great hinterland to the north, the land was empty. There was no traffic on the road. She drove for hours across unending plains, passing a line of mountains far to the east, their shadowed folds shifting from blue to indigo in the dimming light. She drove until the sky lost its colour and air its heat, and the steel-cold desert night descended.

She turned up the heat and turned on the headlights. Beyond their reach, the darkness deepened.

The neon lights of a roadhouse pulled her in. She filled the car with fuel and walked stiffly into the shop. Three truckies in the dining area glanced up as she passed, then resumed their conversation. Cat paid for the fuel and bought a sandwich, coffee, and a roadmap.

Outside, she parked the car, got into the back seat, switched on the interior light, and planned tomorrow's route. She would continue north through Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, and then turn right onto the Barkly Highway. She knew Gottlieb's mission station had been somewhere on the Barkly Tableland. She put the map away and opened the hatbox, searching randomly until her hand closed around a small notebook. She flipped idly through character outlines, fragments of dialogue, and diagrams. An ink drawing caught her eye, a sketch of a pin with an elaborate head shaped like a miniature wheel—four spokes radiating from a central ring to an outer rim. There was a gap on one side, perhaps where the rim was broken: the Radnadel. Lily had been right.

Cat replaced the book, turned off the light, and curled up in her quilt. But her sleep was broken by feverish dreams in which shapeless predators chased her across empty plains. Whenever she increased her pace, her pursuers matched it. She could hear their breathing, feel their pounding footfalls vibrating in the earth. If she stumbled, they would be upon her. She woke, her heart thumping, her body cramped. She told herself it was only a dream, but the hunted feeling would not go away.

Before dawn, she splashed cold water on her face at the soap-scummed basin in the ladies' loo, brushed her teeth, and drove away. The radio fizzed, and she twisted the dial. *Stand by your man,* drawled a woman's voice. Cat turned it off and drove in silence. Something pale with four legs and pricked ears stood beside the road, silhouetted in pink-gold light. Before she could identify the creature, it was gone.

The stars faded and the sky brightened to blue. A sliver of light split the horizon and sunrise spilt across the sky like broken egg yolk. Cat drove until hunger stopped her. The silence was overwhelming. She got out of the car and walked up and down beside the road, feeling the soles of her feet inside her shoes as they pressed against the earth, disturbing dust and twigs and scurrying ants. She breathed warm, spicy air, and listened to the small sounds of the bush: the quarrelling of birds,

the whirr and click of insects, the rattle of spinifex. She saw a scribble of insect tracks in the sand, gossamer threads strung on scrawny bushes, and a striped lizard motionless on a rock. A thousand miles of road lay before her, and there was no hurry.

As she drove, something that had been trapped in her broke free and flew out to meet the curved rim of the horizon and the boundless sky. Her body drove, but her spirit hovered high above, looking down on her car as it crawled, beetle-like, dragging its shadow, along the narrow road that crossed the vast bowl of the plain. The road curved left and the engine roared white noise. A motionless kangaroo sprang suddenly to life, bounding away in rhythmic arcs. The shadows of spinifex shrank, and the world was subsumed in heat and light. The desert, a bright blur, stretched empty before her. The world was baking earth, burnished sky and a vast, humming emptiness.

She drove all day in a kind of trance. It was growing dark when at last she turned off to the east. The road seemed to go on forever. Out of the darkness, lights suddenly loomed and she swerved, skidding to a halt. In front of her was a crossroads with a weathered signpost pointing to illegible destinations. Beside it, through the swirling dust, she made out a building of pale stone, three storeys high.

Heartbreak Hotel

The building had the appearance of a prosperous homestead, the kind you might find on a cattle station, solid sandstone, with wide verandahs on three sides, and some kind of park or orchard beyond. A pair of carriage lamps illuminated a flight of sandstone steps and a wrought-iron sign bore the inscription ‘Heartbreak Hotel. Travellers welcome’. Cat squared her shoulders and climbed the steps. The place seemed a bit creepy, but she longed for a comfortable bed. Geraniums in terracotta tubs lined the wall, and a pair of Chinese lions guarded the door. Cat bent to stroke a broad stone brow, amused by the incongruity. Lily would appreciate that. Through a frosted window she saw a corridor lined with rows of doors, and thought longingly of hot water, fresh linen, and dreamless sleep.

She stamped her boots on the mat and searched for a doorbell but found only a brass knocker in the shape of an owl. She rapped three times, but nothing stirred. She pushed, and the door swung open. ‘Hello?’ she called. ‘Is anyone here?’ Her voice sounded thin and childish. She stepped inside, her boots loud on the timber floor, and walked toward the faint bluish light at the end of the corridor. An archway opened into a tiled atrium with potted palms and watery reflections rippling across its walls. She smelled the chlorine before she saw the unmistakeable colour of a swimming pool through a set of glass doors. Tropical plants, banana lounges and little tables were scattered around the pool area, and overhead was a glass dome where stars glittered in an inky sky. The pool was lit from beneath to display an elaborate series of mosaics featuring mythical marine creatures.

She heard splashing and saw, in the far lane, pale muscular arms cleaving the water and a head turning regularly as the swimmer breathed. She watched as he reached the end of the pool, executed a neat turn, and headed back. The effortless rhythm of his strokes reminded her of the freedom she had felt as a child swimming in the sea at Kestrel Bay. She kept watching as he climbed out, sleek and dripping, picked up a towel, and disappeared among the foliage. Perhaps this was a private club, she thought, and not a real hotel at all. She thought about sneaking out before anyone saw her.

But it was too late. ‘Get a good look, did you?’ His accent was European—probably German or Swiss. She turned to see the swimmer, hair darkly plastered to his head, regarding her with amusement. His eyes were friendly, his nose faintly

freckled. A towel was draped about his neck and shoulders, and water ran in rivulets down his chest.

'Yes. I mean no,' she replied, flustered. 'I got lost. I was daydreaming.'

'But it's night.' He pointed to the starry dome above the pool.

'Those stars look fake,' she said, squinting at them.

'Well spotted,' he said. 'They are. Like so much else in this place.' She laughed, because he did, though she was not sure why. His legs were muscular and he had high-arched feet and well-shaped toes. Possibly in his mid-thirties, she calculated, and very fit. Suddenly aware that she was scrutinising him as a possible partner, she became embarrassed. 'What *is* this place?' she asked.

'It's a grand hotel,' he said teasingly. 'Don't you have a reservation?'

'I just stumbled in here,' she admitted. 'I couldn't find anyone.'

'Which way did you come in?' She pointed down the corridor. 'Ah,' he said. 'The front door. No-one uses it.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'But I'm sure there's a story to it. Reception is on the other side.' He waved a hand toward another shadowy corridor.

'Could you show me?'

'Of course,' he said. 'Follow me.' He removed the towel from his shoulders and rubbed his hair, which sprang into dishevelled curls. Then he knotted the towel about his waist, and strode off. She followed, and had almost caught up with him when he stopped so suddenly that she collided with his back, her mouth and chin crunching into his naked shoulder blade. 'Ouch!' She stepped back and rubbed her jaw.

He turned, apologetic. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes.' She blushed.

He offered his hand. 'I forgot to introduce myself. Daniel Adler. But my mates call me Dingo.'

She wondered why. The light was better here, and she noticed his smile was slightly lopsided and his eyes were a clear, light blue, like a summer sky seen from underwater. Rob's eyes were brown. The hand that hovered in front of her was clean and long-fingered, the nails trimmed. Fine coppery hairs glinted on the wrist and forearm, and the scent of a familiar soap, something amber and translucent, filled her nostrils. The smell was subtle, not pungent like Rob's favourite cologne.

She hesitated, and the man dropped his hand. She had taken too long to reply. ‘I’m Cat.’ The light behind him made his hair a messy halo.

‘So, we are natural enemies,’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Cats and dogs,’ he said. ‘You and me—oh, never mind.’ He walked on down the corridor, and she followed, ill at ease. ‘Here’s reception.’ Behind the desk, a sleek young woman with cropped blonde hair smiled a professional welcome. When Cat turned back to Dingo, he had disappeared.

The young woman entered Cat’s details into her computer, gave her a key and told her how to get to the guest car park. Cat went to fetch her car from the roadside and noticed neon signs, fuel pumps, and a fast food store on the eastern side of the hotel. To anyone approaching from the north or east, the Heartbreak Hotel would seem like any other outback truck stop. But approaching from the west, as she had done, the building appeared bizarre, like a private colonial mansion in the middle of nowhere.

There was plenty of space in the car park, and she parked carelessly, cursing as she swung a little too close to a Toyota ute in the next bay. She heard a faint scraping sound, but when she got out to inspect, there didn’t seem to be any noticeable damage to either vehicle. In any case, according to a sticker on the windscreen, the Toyota was a hire car. Cat hoisted the luggage from her car, locked it, and went to find her room.

The room was comfortable and stylish, but bland; only the art on the walls was in any way remarkable. Square, unframed canvases bore painted patterns that appeared at first glance entirely abstract, but when examined more closely revealed camouflaged images: a desert pea plant, a flock of birds, a thorny devil.

Cat headed for the shower. Twenty minutes later, clean, damp, and swaddled in a bathrobe, she sat on the bed and opened Freya’s hatbox. Putting Jack’s letter carefully to one side, she took out a Bible bound in black leather, edged and embossed in gold, and inscribed in the flyleaf ‘To Elfrieda, from your loving Father’, and several bundles of letters tied with ribbon. She loosened the purple ribbon on one of the bundles and the papers slumped into a soft pile on the quilt: postcards from Freya’s sisters, letters from relatives in New Zealand, and carbon copies of two letters Freya had written to her brother Kurt in 1934. Some of the words were smudged, but Cat managed to decipher most of them. The first letter began

conventionally enough: Freya thanked Kurt for his birthday greetings and enquired after his family's health. But then came this.

> I blame your precious church for Mama's early death. If anyone was a martyr to a religious community, it was she: the uncertainties over Father's employment and his never-ending disputes with the church ruined her health for good.

Cat remembered Grace talking about the mysterious illness that had kept her great-grandmother bedridden for almost a year before she died at the age of fifty. None of the doctors who attended her had been able to identify her condition. The letter went on.

> In my opinion, you preach too much and practise Christian principles too little. Since our poor Mama's death, the only service I have attended in your church was for our sister's wedding, and even then I felt a hypocrite. Father may tell people whatever he wishes, but to say we are irreligious is ridiculous. It is quite possible to be a good Christian without belonging to a particular denomination. The elect will be chosen from everywhere.

Freya recounted her objections: the hypocrisy, the rigidity of beliefs, the petty internal disputes, and the separation of Aboriginal children from their families on the missions. It was this last injustice, she argued, that had been the source of Jack's final disagreement with their father and the reason he had run away from Lake Illusion. At best, the missionaries were misguided, she wrote, and at worst, sadistic.

> I know all your arguments backward, brother mine, so please don't send me any more pamphlets. If you do, they'll go straight in the fire.

Cat had thought of Freya as a peaceful woman, but this letter showed another side to her. Cat looked for Kurt's reply, but found nothing. She smiled to herself, thinking Freya had probably burned it. But she had written Kurt another letter.

> 17 August 1934
> Dearest Brother,
>
> I am not angry with you. Naturally, as a clergyman, you feel it your duty to write as you did. I don't think it hypocrisy if you pray for me, but I will never again belong to your congregation. As you say, I do not believe in your church. The bitterness I feel would make me a wicked sinner if I went to communion with you: I cannot live a lie. Goodness, when I think what it did to our parents. The only happy time they had was when we were

babes in New Zealand. You are too young to remember what Mama had to put up with. All those years when Father was seeking work, nobody lifted a finger to help him. Instead they tore his reputation to pieces under the cloak of religion. It was only when he started negotiating with the opposing faction that the church leaders finally offered him a job in Australia—because it would reflect poorly on them if he joined the other lot. Father's temper had a lot to do with his troubles. Thank goodness you inherited Mama's placid nature. Be careful, my dear lad: when you get your ordination you will find them quite ready to tear you to pieces as well. Why don't you go into politics instead? We need a few Christian men there, and in my opinion you would do a lot more good in that capacity.

I won't reply to your next letter, so if you write again, it will give you the satisfaction of having the last word.

Love to you as always, Freya.

P.S. Do give a thought to becoming an MP.

Cat thought of all the years after Jack disappeared that Freya had lived under her father's roof, forced to live a lie, as she put it. They must have seemed never-ending.

In the bottom of the hatbox was a mess of notebooks and papers. Cat dumped everything on the bed and sifted through the pile, looking for evidence of Jack. Finding nothing, she stuffed the papers back into the hatbox, and spread her map on the writing desk. The road by which she arrived continued east to Mount Isa and Cloncurry on the Queensland coast, while another road led north through the Barkly Tableland to the Gulf of Carpentaria. There were a number of lakes in the area, but she could find no mention of Lake Illusion.

She showered, put on the only dress she had brought—a sheath of crimson silk—and studied herself in the mirror. Not bad. At least she didn't look her age. But perhaps the red dress was too dramatic. Oh, what the hell, she thought, I'm on my own, I'll do as I please. And at the back of her mind was the thought that she might run into Dingo again. Carefully, she applied mascara, lipstick, and a subtle sweep of blusher to accentuate her cheekbones. She never wore foundation; she couldn't bear the claggy feel of it. It was late as she navigated the empty corridors; the hotel restaurant was almost empty. A couple was just leaving, and a solitary diner, a man in a rumpled business suit and open-necked shirt, ate distractedly while tapping into a small electronic device. Cat ordered a steak, medium rare, a salad, and a half bottle of cabernet sauvignon. The meal was excellent. She wondered who could afford to run a place like this in the middle of nowhere. The hotel was up for sale, the waitress

told Cat when she enquired. ‘Owners come and go, like the guests. It’s not the kind of place anyone stays forever.’

‘But what kind of person buys a place like this?’ Cat asked.

‘You’d be surprised,’ the waitress said. ‘There’s plenty about with more money than sense. And anyway, travellers have to stop. There’s nowhere else for miles.’

Making a mental note to fill up with fuel and buy a detailed local map before she headed off next morning, Cat left the restaurant.

Hearing music from the direction of the bar, she decided to have an after-dinner drink and get an early night. The bar was noisy and claustrophobic, with garish carpets and dark wood panelling, and the smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke drove her to a booth in the far corner of the room where she could sit back and survey the scene. Men in shorts and work shirts leaned yarning on the bar, teenagers lounged around the pool table and a gaggle of grey nomads hooted and fussed about their tables. Cat scanned the crowd, but there was no sign of Dingo. She swirled the cognac in her glass, staring into its honey-coloured depths, and found herself eavesdropping on an argument about how the Heartbreak Hotel had got its name.

Everyone had a story to tell, even the drifters passing through. The Heartbreak Hotel was a legend in the outback, it seemed, but every speaker had a different version of the truth. ‘Listen.’ A bold voice cut across the cacophony, and Cat peeped around the partition to see a clean-shaven lad in a cowboy shirt. ‘I got this story from my Gran,’ he said. ‘I swear on my boots it’s the truth. My Gran was no liar.’ He glared at his companions as if daring them to contradict him. ‘This place was never meant to be a hotel. It was built by a fellow from Darwin for his sweetheart, the most beautiful girl in the Territory. He’s crazy for her, right, and begs her to marry him. She knocks him back, but he keeps on asking, month after month. She just looks down her nose at him, until one day, tired of his pleading, she says, “All right. I’ll marry you when you build me a house three storeys high with forty-seven bedrooms, a cellar and a swimming pool. You must build it in a place where three roads meet and you can see the horizon all around, a place as far from any city as a man can go.” She is sure this will stump him, but the fellow is over the moon. He thinks he’s finally won her heart, that she dreams of filling all those rooms with his children. So he does just what she asks. He finds this place, buys the land, orders

the best materials, and hires the most skilled builders and carpenters, plumbers and glaziers, painters and decorators. He pays them extra to camp out in the desert while they build his dream, and it takes seven years, rising stone by stone from the dirt. He worries over every detail, spends every minute and every cent he has to make a palace fit for his queen. When it's ready, he fetches his beloved and shows her the grand house he has built for her. The creamy stone walls are thick and solid, panelled inside with rare timber, the floors are finished with Italian marble, and the furnishings are of finest silk, wool, and linen. "Now, dear heart,' he says—having a flowery turn of phrase for a Darwinite—"Now will you marry me?" And she looks down her nose at him and says, "Even in such a grand house, who would want to live out here? Who would marry the man fool enough to build this?" And she made him drive her home to Crocodile Creek, and he never saw her again.'

There was silence in the bar after the young man had told his story, but soon the babble of voices rose again. 'If you want to know the real story, ask Jim,' said someone. 'Go on, Jim. Tell us how the Heartbreak really got its name.'

'Elvis slept here,' someone suggested, and there was laughter.

'Nothing to do with Elvis.' Cat turned her head to catch sight of the speaker. The man—presumably Jim—was lean and wiry, a stockman of the old school. 'Clem was a country lad who went to the city to try his luck,' he began, and the buzz of conversation died away. Cat listened, toying with her drink coaster, a red and white disc of cardboard advertising 'The Territory's Finest Ale'.

'Clem was a battler,' the stockman went on. 'He worked all hours for five years as a bartender, then a supervisor, working his way up to hotel manager. Four years after that he was a big boss managing a chain of hotels across the country. To top it all off, when Clem was twenty-eight he met the woman of his dreams and she agreed to marry him.'

The stockman paused. Cat sneaked a peek over her shoulder and saw the circle of listeners, mostly men, watching Jim, waiting for what came next. Something had to go wrong for Clem, she thought. 'On Clem's wedding day,' continued the speaker, 'his bride left him standing at the altar and ran off with his best man.' There was a ripple of disapproval from the listeners. 'You can imagine what that did to Clem,' the stockman said. There was a murmur of sympathy. 'He swore off women for life, drove his BMW as far as he could go into the desert, and built a hotel on the spot. And there he stayed, far from the corrupting influence of the city.'

‘I heard a different story,’ said a male voice, and Cat glanced around to see a balding man in a faded T-shirt. ‘A couple called McGovern named this hotel, after struggling for twenty years to make a living here. They gave up and went to the west coast to run a fish-and-chip shop, and before they left, they put up a sign: “Heartbreak Hotel”.’

‘No, the McGoverns split up. He took to the drink, and she went down south, to Port Augusta, to manage a fast-food franchise,’ protested a woman’s voice, the husky voice of a long-time smoker. ‘Chicken Licken, it was called,’ she said firmly, as if that clinched the argument.

‘Whatever,’ the man said. ‘If he took to the drink, it was probably her that drove him to it. At any rate, it was them put up the sign.’

‘You’re wrong,’ the stockman said, with quiet authority. ‘As true as my eyes are blue, it was Clem thought up the name. I know. He was my mate.’

Cat stood up and leaned over the partition between the booths. ‘We don’t hear much from the women in these stories,’ she observed, gazing innocently around the group. ‘Don’t you think it’s funny how all the different stories sound the same?’ she asked. The men gaped, but a woman smiled and nodded in agreement.

‘What do you mean, lass?’ the man in the faded T-shirt asked.

‘She means that in all your stories, when something goes wrong, it’s women who get the blame,’ the woman said.

‘Hang on, Ettie, that’s not fair. It’s not like you to wave the feminist flag,’ said a man. Ettie called on her friends across the room to back her up, and everyone began to argue loudly.

Cat withdrew discreetly by sinking back into her seat behind the partition, and found Dingo looking at her. ‘You started something there,’ he said, amused, his gaze lingering on the neckline of her red dress. ‘May I buy you a drink?’

She hesitated, rattling the ice in her glass. One drink was enough, and she wanted to get an early start. But she was pleased that he had sought her out. He wore a white T-shirt and faded denim jeans, and despite his breathtaking physique, he reminded her, somehow, of a boy she had known in primary school. Perhaps it was the freckles across his nose, or the earnest expression in his eyes. ‘A lemon squash, please.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Sure I can’t get you anything stronger?’

‘Normally I’d say yes,’ she said. ‘But I’m tired, and I want to get an early start.’

‘Fair enough.’ He went to the bar and returned with a squash for her and a beer for himself. ‘What brings you to this part of the country, Cat?’ he asked. ‘You don’t look like a tourist.’

‘Have you heard of a place called Lake Illusion?’ she asked.

‘I know of it,’ he replied.

‘Have you been there?’ she asked. ‘What’s there? I’m trying to track down some family history.’

‘It’s a cattle station, about fifty kilometres north. The land was handed back to the Indigenous owners a few years back. It’s managed by an Aboriginal family, the Gibsons. The lake is a saltpan, almost dry at this time of year, but spectacular in the wet season. Thousands of birds come from everywhere.’

‘Do you know anything about a mission that was there once?’

He frowned. ‘No, can’t say I do. Sorry.’

‘My great grandfather worked there during the Great War,’ she said. ‘I was hoping to find out some of its history.’

‘Maybe you should try the Darwin archives,’ he suggested. ‘They’re pretty comprehensive.’

‘Good idea,’ she said. ‘But I want to see the place too. Can you tell me how to get there?’

He drew a map on the back of a coaster, and gave directions: take the road north for sixty kilometres, and make a left turn onto a dirt road. ‘There is a sign at the turnoff,’ he said. ‘But the homestead is about twelve kilometres up the track. Give the Gibsons my regards, won’t you?’

She said she would, tucked the coaster into her bag, and sipped her drink. ‘And what brings you here, Daniel?’

‘Call me Dingo,’ he said. ‘Daniel is too formal for Australia.’ He pronounced it *Owstraahlia*. ‘I’m here partly for business, and partly for pleasure. I flew in to Darwin last week, and headed down to Alice Springs to see some mates. Next, I’m going up to the Gulf country, hoping to reconnect with some of the people I worked with when I did my doctoral fieldwork eight years ago.’

‘What’s your area of research?’ she asked.

‘Archaeology.’

‘Excavations and stuff?’

He laughed. ‘Well, I don’t do much actual digging. I’m a social archaeologist. Working with artefacts. It’s incredible what you can learn about people and their cultures.’

She was intrigued. ‘These things tell you stories?’

‘That’s a good way of putting it.’ He leaned forward. ‘My current research is in Europe. There is interesting cross-disciplinary work happening with anthropologists and palaeontologists. We discovered just recently that Bronze Age funeral mounds were spatially constructed with reference to seasonal astronomy—they can actually be read as cognitive nodes in the cultural landscape.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, with a quick, self-deprecating grin. ‘I lapse into jargon when I get excited. It just means our ancestors in prehistoric Europe weren’t quite as barbaric as we thought. When someone died, they chose the burial site in accordance with celestial events like the equinoxes, and performed special rituals. That means they had a religion. Some kind of solar cult, we believe.’

‘They worshipped the sun?’

‘Not exactly. But their lives were ruled by the heavens. For instance, harvest was begun each year when the Pleiades appeared in the sky. And people decorated the artefacts they used in sacred ceremonies with gold and celestial symbols.’

‘I’m not really into religion,’ Cat said.

‘Neither am I, as such. But when you hold a sacred object in your hands, and think about who else has held it, what it meant to them—it gets to you,’ he said.

‘I see,’ she said with a smile. ‘You must love your work.’

He smiled back. ‘I could show you some interesting sites around here. If you want a tour guide, I’m your man.’

She hesitated. ‘Thanks for the offer,’ she said. ‘But I’m leaving first thing tomorrow.’

‘I’m in the area for another week, if you change your mind,’ he said, handing her a business card. ‘Then I’m off home to Germany.’

‘I thought I recognised your accent.’

‘Sprechen sie deutsch?’ he asked.

‘No, but my grandmother did, a bit. Her parents were German.’

‘The missionary?’

‘Yes. His name was Gottlieb.’

Dingo chuckled. ‘How could you *not* be a missionary with a name like that?’

‘Yes,’ Cat agreed. ‘He must have been born for it.’ She stood up. ‘Must get my beauty sleep.’

‘You look pretty good to me. Won’t you have one more drink?’

She shook her head. ‘No, thanks. Good night.’

‘Shame,’ he said. ‘It’s been nice talking to you. Good night.’

The Mission

Early next morning, Cat carried her coffee to a sunny courtyard at the rear of the hotel. It was deserted except for a red dog, his black lips hanging slack around his blunted teeth, and his barrel chest rising and falling gently as he snored. Cat sat at a table beside a pond where bright fish slid beneath lily pads. A nearby aviary housed a dishevelled galah shuffling sideways on its perch and a number of small blue budgerigars. The dog woke up, whined and ambled over to Cat's side, and she reached out to pat its warm flank. The dog moved closer, pushing its head into her hand. When she grew tired of stroking it, the dog returned to its patch of sun and lay down with a grunt. If only people were that uncomplicated, Cat thought.

She stretched out in the warmth and closed her eyes, thinking idly that she should send Lily a postcard. The birds crooned and she drifted into a stupor. You could waste your life in a place like this, cocooned from the outside world. Something stirred nearby, and she felt a warning prickle along her spine, heard someone breathing. Her eyes flew open and she sat up, her heart beating fast. The dog was sitting up too, gazing intently toward the doorway, ears pricked. 'Who's there?' she demanded. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she made out the shape of a man leaning in the shadowy doorway.

'Good morning.' It was Dingo. The dog wagged its tail at the sound of his voice. The man approached. 'May I sit down?' He nodded toward the bench opposite Cat.

'It's a free country,' she said.

'Thank you.' He sat and leaned toward her, smiling. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Almost too comfortably, for someone who's trying to rough it,' she said. He was getting a little close for comfort, too. He was good-looking, good-natured and seemed good-hearted, too. But she mistrusted the attraction she felt; it was too soon.

The dog walked stiffly over and butted its head against Dingo's hand. 'Good boy,' he said, scratching its ears. The dog lifted its chin and narrowed its yellow eyes. 'Can I get you another coffee?' he asked.

She shook her head, smiling. 'I have to get going.'

'Need any help with your luggage?'

'I don't have much,' she said. 'But sure, if you like.'

Together they carried her bags to the car park and loaded them into the boot of her car.

‘What’s that?’ Dingo sprang to inspect the rear of the vehicle parked next to Cat’s, the big utility truck which now in daylight she could see was a vivid lime green in colour. He ran his hand along its flank where the film of dust had been disturbed. ‘Someone’s scraped my ute!’

‘That would be me,’ Cat said, going over to peer at it. ‘Don’t worry, it’s only a little scratch. The rental company won’t even notice it.’

He frowned and as he turned away, just for a moment, the set of his jaw and the expression on his face reminded her of Rob. He would make an issue of something like this, spinning it out for days or even weeks, using it to get back at her. She threw the last bag on to the seat. ‘Nice meeting you, Dingo,’ she said. ‘Good luck with your research.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, coming over to offer his hand. He seemed to have forgotten the scratch. ‘I hope you find what you’re looking for.’

Cat got into her car and turned the key in the ignition. There was an excruciating screech, and then another. She sighed.

Dingo peered through the window at her. ‘How long has it been doing that?’

‘Ages,’ she said. ‘Just one of its little quirks.’ She tried again, with the same result.

‘You really ought to get that starter motor fixed, before you go hooning off into the desert.’

‘It got me this far,’ she said. ‘I’ll be fine.’

He looked troubled, but stepped back and gave her a brief wave as she backed out and turned on to the northbound road.

The air was warm and the sky had paled to a clear, dazzling brightness, like Dingo’s eyes. She smiled and shook her head. He was as bad as her sister for worrying about things that might never happen. Which reminded her, she’d forgotten to buy a postcard for Lily. Mulga trees raised their twisted limbs by the roadside, and a grey sea of saltbush stretched ahead. She reached for the radio, but changed her mind and listened instead to the growl of the engine and the hum of the tyres on the road. It was like some kind of mantra, a meaningless sound that lulled her mind to quietness. The desert was empty of distractions. The rattle of the car and the whistle of the wind made a percussive backdrop to the lives that clamoured silently for attention from the blue hatbox.

Why had Jack run away? What had become of him, his wife, their children? It must have been his children Freya had meant by her cryptic message, though they would be in their sixties by now, with children and perhaps grandchildren of their own. She had no clues but old letters, and a hunch that following Jack's trail might answer her questions. She had hoped to free herself from the past, but found herself drawn deeper into it, as if her DNA were some kind of trickster, twisting inside her, pulling her to places she had never been to re-live scenes from the past. She felt compelled to fill the gaps, to find out the truth about her history. Otherwise she would go on replicating past mistakes—not just her own mistakes, but the family failures that were repeated generation after generation. Red hair, a fiery temper, the need to be alone—how much was inherited?

She had passed the milk-can mailbox and the hand-painted sign on the gatepost before she saw them, and almost missed the turn-off to the Gibsons' place. She bumped across the cattle grid and rattled up the dirt track until she came to a large homestead with outbuildings and cattle yards. As she drove through the yard gate, two frenzied kelpies flung themselves at the car. A woman with cropped grey hair, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, called the dogs to heel, disengaged a bottle from the mouth of a guzzling calf, and waved. The calf stood bemused, butting her arm and blowing a froth of milk from its pink muzzle.

The woman looked thoughtful when Cat introduced herself and asked her if there had ever been a church mission on the property. 'I'm Sue Gibson. This could be the right place, but 1917 was long before my time. My husband might know something.'

'My great grandfather lived at Lake Illusion for a few years during the Great War, working on the mission,' Cat explained.

'I run the station with my husband Mike and his brother Toby. It's their land, but I don't know how much history they could tell you. They were raised in Melbourne. Tell you what, come in and have a cuppa. We'll ask them about it when they come in for lunch.'

Cat sat with Sue in her kitchen, drinking tea from a china cup. 'My mother and grandmother would approve of these,' Cat said, and Sue smiled.

The back door slammed, and footsteps sounded in the hall. When the Gibson brothers appeared, Sue introduced them, and got up to prepare a lunch of sliced cold meat, cheese, bread, and salad. Mike was a stocky, cheerful man with dark, curly hair

and capable hands. His older brother Toby was tall and lean, with wiry grey-streaked hair and a craggy, serious face. Cat told them about her quest to find the mission and to learn what had happened to her great uncle Jack.

Mike shook his head slowly. ‘I don’t know anything about a mission,’ he said.

Toby looked thoughtful. ‘What about those old ruins near the lake?’

Mike looked at him in surprise. ‘I’d forgotten about them. You could be right.’ To Cat he said, ‘ We’ll take you there. Don’t get your hopes up though. There’s not much to look at.’

As the Gibsons’ truck jolted across the dry country toward the lake, Cat felt a sense of anticipation, as if some kind of epiphany awaited her, some clue to Jack’s disappearance.

But there was nothing, just a ruined chimney and a few lines of tumbled stone. She scanned the plain, the dry grass and clumps of scrub, the low, rocky cliffs. The outlines of the landscape stood aloof, yielding nothing.

Cat was disappointed, but decided she wanted to camp overnight. Perhaps if she spent time in this place, it would relinquish its knowledge. The Gibsons thought her crazy for wanting to sleep there, but gladly supplied her with water, provisions, and extra blankets. They waved from their verandah as she drove off, escorted as far as the gate by the dogs yelping and snapping at the wheels of her car.

It was important to pick the right spot for a campsite. Poppa Ray had taught her that. You must never camp in a dry creek bed in case of flash flooding. That was a practical consideration, but the place had to feel right, too. The ground around the ruins was low and even, overgrown with grasses and shrubs, and ringed with trees. The air was still and the leaves hung motionless from the trees. Despite its beauty, the place felt oppressive; she didn’t want to stay there.

She scrambled down a shallow gully and walked beside a dry creek bed. Small plants flourished in cracks and crevices, and she saw a single paw print, perfectly preserved in dried mud. She climbed a low escarpment of bluish rock and looked back across the low scrub and red-dirt plains. Something rustled in the grass behind her, and she whirled about to see a big kangaroo erupt from the bushes only metres away. They stared at each other in surprise for a long moment before the kangaroo turned and bounded away.

Cat made to follow and then stopped. Looking about, she realised she had found her camping spot. She stood in a flat, grassy area shaded by two large casuarina trees and surrounded by silvery-grey shrubs, tall native grasses, and a number of curious plants with small, round flowers like tiny pink cotton wool balls. She felt safe here, and content, as if, for a short time at least, she was where she belonged. She put down her pack and stretched. The late sun was warm on her skin, and a wave of wellbeing flowed through her legs and spine to the top of her head. She took a few steps toward the bushes from which the kangaroo had emerged and, through a gap in the foliage, the salt lake came into view below her like a vision from another world, a mirage that hovered between earth and sky, a glistening expanse of pale water encircled by a crust of shining pink salt.

She turned reluctantly and rubbed her sore calf muscles. She had to get her swag and the rest of her provisions from the car, collect firewood, and set up camp before nightfall. She made several trips, forcing herself to continue despite her tiredness, her hunger, and her aching back.

She built a fire methodically, as her father had taught her, digging a shallow hole and laying stones, paper, kindling, wood. Curious black ants ran everywhere, waving their feelers as if assessing the unexpected renovations. The sun set over the lake in fiery trails of colour, and a great flock of white birds, long-necked and wide-winged, wheeled and descended on the water, filling the air with their harsh cries. They settled, calling softly, with an occasional burst of flapping wings, and slowly subsided into silence. The last burnished bit of sun disappeared, and the lake and sky went dark.

The air grew cold and Cat lit her fire, watching with satisfaction as the little flame grew, the paper curled, and the kindling took light. Now she was hungry, but it was too hard to find things in the dark, even with a torch, so she abandoned her romantic idea of a hot supper with toasted marshmallows for dessert and ate Sue Gibson’s sandwiches, along with cold baked beans. She managed to make billy tea, though, and sipped it sweet and black from the old enamel mug she kept inside her swag. She heard rustling, pattering, and creaking, and the cries of creatures she could not identify. When the fire burned low, she reached for a fresh piece of wood. It was a slender branch, rotten at one end, with a few dried leaves attached. This is for Rob, she thought, and tossed it decisively into the flames, though she was uncertain whether she meant it as homage or effigy. The fire lapped at the branch and caught

the leaves in a crackling blaze. The life she had shared with Rob seemed far away: the harbour-view apartment pleasingly arranged with things that told them who they were, elegant dinners, empty friendships. Apart from those things, they were just two stick figures, silhouettes on a screen with the sound turned down, moving jerkily together and apart like dancing puppets. The branch glowed red, and fell apart.

She picked up another piece of wood, a knobbly lump of mulga root. Mulga was a hard wood that burned long and with a clean, bright flame. She held it in both hands, feeling its callused roughness against her skin, and placed it carefully in the fire. She had been twenty-eight years old and in another country when her father died. She had been in Barcelona when she heard, just returned to the hostel by bus from Guell Park, awed by the intricate inventions of Gaudi. There had been a telegram; no emails in the eighties. She had felt helpless when she read it, frozen, like the child who had watched in shock as the yellow tractor rolled toward her father standing oblivious, fiddling with the gate. He had fallen awkwardly, with a surprised shout, and the great wheels had rolled forward, pinning him to the ground, while she stood gawping, useless. It was only when he lay quiet that she ran at last for help. The rest was a blur: her mother and her sister running out, the shrieking ambulance that carried him away. He had been lame for the rest of his life. The hospital expenses had ruined him. The farm was remortgaged, then sold. He had apologised to them, but she knew it was her fault. The root of mulga wood glowed gold and scarlet in the flames, and the dull pain that lived inside her leaped and tore at her chest. A ragged sound escaped her throat. There was no relief.

The night grew very cold. She felt empty, and crawled into her swag, grateful for warmth and the possibility of sleep. She lay listening to the night sounds and thought of Mike and Toby, and their people who had lived here long ago, for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. This was their country. Their history had been lost, except for fragments, but they belonged here. *The land remembers*, the Gibsons had said, *even if we don't.* But Cat was a stranger in this place, just like her forebears: their presence altered everything. Though she might feel an affinity with the land, she did not belong here. She murmured acknowledgement, a kind of prayer, not knowing to whom she spoke: her ancestors, the Gibsons', the spirits of the land? The circle of stones around the fire glowed white in the gloom. She longed for something sweet to send her off to sleep, like warm milk with honey, or a grandmother's lullaby. But there was only the wind shifting the soft needles of the

casuarinas, whispering of time, and change. Eventually she slept, but fitfully, waking and dozing, floating in and out of strange eventless dreams, watching the trees sway above her and lightning flicker far to the south.

Something cried out and she woke with a jolt. Sitting up, her heart thudding in her chest, she looked wildly about. Nothing moved. She lay down again with the unaccountable feeling that she was being watched. Gazing at the numberless stars glittering sharply in the abyss above her, she felt she might fall into the sky. She traced the connections between each bright point, conjuring the constellations as Freya had taught her. The Southern Cross, the False Cross, and the stars of Orion: Heka, Betelgeuse, Bellatrix, Alnitak, Alnilam, Mintaka, Saiph, Rigel, and Hatsya at the tip of the sword. Humans were the only ones who saw patterns in the stars, Cat mused, the only ones who needed an explanation for everything. But explanations were only stories, not the truth. Searching for Sirius in the south west, she finally fell asleep.

She woke before dawn, her sleeping bag soaked with dew where the canvas of her swag had fallen aside. The fire had gone out, and her limbs were stiff. This night had brought her nothing but confusion. She did not know whether the mission had even been in this spot. But the cool, sweet air caressed her skin and the twittering of birds was a hopeful sound. Perhaps she would go to Darwin, as Dingo had suggested, and scan the archives for evidence of Jack.

After a quick breakfast, she packed up, threw earth on the coals of her fire, and drove to the homestead to thank the Gibsons and to return the blankets and food containers they had lent her. The house smelled of bacon and eggs. The Gibsons, too, had been up since dawn, returning for a late breakfast after working in the yards. They bustled about the kitchen, clearing up, washing dishes, preparing to go out again. Sue filled Cat's thermos with hot, milky coffee. 'Find anything out there?' she asked.

'No,' Cat replied. 'Nothing.'

'Shame.' Sue looked at her sympathetically.

'How did you go, sleeping in that place?' Mike asked Cat.

'I couldn't,' she replied. 'I had to find another spot.'

'Don't blame you,' Mike said with a shudder.

'Restless spirits there, eh Mike?' Sue teased, winking at Cat. Mike glowered at his wife and shook his head as if she didn't know what she was talking about.

‘You want to watch out, Susie,’ Toby said. ‘You might just be right.’ He looked across at Cat as she drew back her chair, impatient to get going. ‘I was thinking,’ he said slowly, turning to his brother. ‘Aunty Lizzie might remember something about that mission.’

Mike slapped him on the shoulder. ‘You’re a genius, Toby.’ He turned to Cat. ‘Lizzie was born on this station back in the days when whitefellers owned it. Must have been seventy years ago.’

They filled Cat’s car with fuel, and drove to the house where Lizzie lived with her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. She was a small, wrinkled woman with frizzy white hair, sitting hunched in a rocking chair near the door where she could hear the comings and goings of the household. When Cat mentioned the mission, Lizzie jerked her head sharply and gazed in her direction with milky eyes, as if searching for something. ‘Come closer.’ Her voice was high and cracked. Cat drew nearer, and the old lady’s fingertips moved delicately across her face. ‘There was a sickness,’ Lizzie whispered. ‘A big one. They closed the mission down, and sent all the kids away. My mother was only little. They sent her to Groote Eylandt with a lot of others. When she grew up she came back to visit and met my Dad. He worked here as a stockman. She married him, and worked for the whitefellers as a cook. Mum showed me the old mission place, but she never let us kids play there.’

‘Why not?’ Cat asked.

‘She said it was sick country.’

Mike and Sue exchanged glances, and Toby nodded knowingly.

Lizzie confirmed that the mission had been located at the site near the lake, but she knew nothing of Gottlieb or Freya or the boy accused of stealing. When Cat asked about Jack, the young man who ran away, she thought for a long time, and shook her head. ‘Not here. But there was a white man called Jack long time ago in the Gulf country. My uncles worked for him sometime.’ Cat questioned her eagerly, but Lizzie could tell no more. Cat asked the old lady to accompany her to the ruins, but Lizzie refused. ‘Let them lie,’ she said.

But Cat could not resist a final look. She took her leave of the Gibsons and Lizzie’s family and returned to the ruins to walk the ground that had been trodden by her forebears and by Charlie, the boy who loved stories. She paced among the stones that had once been the walls that enclosed their lives. She remembered Freya’s letters to Kurt, her outrage at the incarceration of children in missions. She would probably

never know what had happened here. She laid her hand on a stone, wondering what secrets were locked inside it, and recalled Lizzie's words. *Sick country.* Though Cat did not completely understand what the old woman meant, she felt truth in her words. Cat picked up a rusty horseshoe, thinking to take it with her as a memento. Then she let it drop: they had taken enough already.

Stranded

As Cat drove away from Lake Illusion, the sun was still low in the eastern sky, but the day was already warm. She turned north on to the main road, planning to drive straight through to Darwin. The country was flat, and the road a single-lane highway, a straight ribbon of red ochre stretching ahead as far as she could see. To the west, a line of low hills interrupted the sweep of the horizon. A haze of fine red dust hung in the air, stirred up by the pale, horned cows that grazed by the roadside, lifting their heads to stare as the car approached.

At ten, she stopped and poured herself a coffee. As she stowed the thermos behind the seat, her hand encountered the velvet bag containing Freya's Tarot cards. She felt a twinge of guilt. She had stashed the cards there on the night of the storm, but had always meant to return them. She picked up the bag and walked a little way along the road, stopping to watch a pair of wedge-tailed eagles soaring on the thermals high above. She opened the bag and drew a card, for luck. *Seven of Swords.* She looked it up in the booklet. *Too many thoughts crowding the mind*, it warned. *Beware of confusion. Try to keep a clear head.* Seven was supposed to be a lucky number, but this sounded ominous. Cat replaced the card, took out her map, and calculated that she would reach Darwin some time that night. Munching an apple, she resettled herself in the driver's seat and turned the key in the ignition. Nothing happened. She tried again; still nothing. It was dead.

Thinking the problem might be something simple, like a loose wire, she released the hood and got out to have a look at the engine. The sun burned her neck and arms as she traced and tugged at various leads and wires. She was no mechanic, but none of them appeared to be loose, worn, or out of place. Perspiration pooled beneath the collar of her shirt and between her breasts and soaked the hair at her temples. She fetched her phone from the car, but the screen read 'No service'. She looked for higher ground and moved about, trying to get a signal. There was nothing.

She sat down in the shade of a scrawny bush and took a careful swig of water, wondering how long it would last if nobody came. She remembered what Dingo had

said about the starter motor. Whatever it was, there was nothing she could do except wait for someone to come. She was alone in the desert, with nothing to protect her. She gazed at the landscape. Sitting on the ground, she realised, gave an utterly different perspective than sitting in a car. The sky directly above her was a deep cobalt that grew paler at the horizon. There was horizon in every direction: it encircled her. The earth was iron red, a colour so intense it made her squint. Pale-leaved saltbush lined the road and dotted the plains beyond. A mirage shimmered like water on the road. She stretched out beneath the bush and fell into a dream.

She woke with a jolt, her face burning. She stood up, and checked her phone. '12:23 No service'. There was a rumble in the distance, and she leaped out into the road, tense, preparing to flag down the vehicle. As it came closer, relief at the prospect of rescue mingled with anxiety. Tales of stranded travellers who accepted lifts from strangers in the outback nearly always had grisly endings.

The vehicle roared past her in a cloud of dust. It was the lime green ute. Speechless, she stared after it.

The ute rumbled to a stop and backed up. Dingo leaned out, smiling and squinting into the sun. 'Hello! What's up?' he said, as if they were chatting over a back fence.

'My car won't start,' Cat said, her relief at seeing him outweighing her embarrassment.

'Want me to take a look?'

'Yes, please,' she said meekly, waiting for him to say *I told you.…*

His mouth twitched with the ghost of a smile, but he said nothing, just strode to the car, and began fiddling and tweaking wires, just as she had done. Then he swung himself into the driver's seat and held out his hand for the key.

She threw it, and he caught it deftly. But when he turned it in the ignition, nothing happened. He swore under his breath, got out, inspected the engine again, and slammed the hood down.

'It might be the battery, but my guess is your starter motor's finally died. Unfortunately, I lent my jumper leads to a bloke who never returned them, so we can't test the battery theory. You'd better come with me.' He nodded toward the ute.

'Where are you headed?' she asked doubtfully.

'Little place called Barramundi, in the Gulf country.' He pointed in a north-easterly direction.

‘But I’m heading north, to Darwin.’

He shrugged. ‘That’s my offer. I suggest you take it. You can easily get a lift to Darwin tomorrow.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Really. But I think I’ll hitch back to the Heartbreak Hotel.’

He frowned. ‘It’s not getting any cooler.’ He had certainly mastered the Australian art of understatement. ‘And you may not get another lift.’ Undecided, she looked anxiously from him to her car. ‘Please come,’ he urged. ‘It’s not safe to stay here. Trust me.’

She didn’t have much choice, she realised. She had to trust him. She hauled her gear out of the car. He made a dive for the heavy pack, but she grabbed it and swung it across her shoulder. ‘I can manage.’

He picked up the swag instead, which was bulky but light, and took the blue hatbox in his free hand. ‘Lovely leather,’ he remarked.

‘It was my grandmother’s,’ she said, heaving the pack into the tray of the ute and taking the hatbox from him. As she climbed into the passenger seat, her foot struck something hard, and she gave a brief yelp of pain. Glancing down, she saw a hessian-wrapped parcel of irregular shape secured with packaging tape.

‘Sorry about that,’ Dingo said. ‘If it’s in your way, I can put it in the back.’

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Secret men’s business,’ he said with a wink, and started up the engine.

None of her business, in other words. She unfolded her map and searched in vain for a town called Barramundi. ‘Where did you say this place was?’

‘Near the mouth of the MacDonald River—southeast of Crocodile Creek.’

There were many rivers with Scottish names: Brodie, Macgregor, Robertson, Stewart, Rose. Picturing hordes of Scottish explorers dying of thirst and collapsing on the banks of rivers subsequently named in their honour, she laughed aloud. Dingo glanced across and raised a querying eyebrow, and she hesitated. ‘You probably won’t think it’s funny...’

‘Try me.’ He smiled, and she did her best to explain the image that had struck her. He chuckled. ‘It’s too true to be funny, almost. A lot of explorers died. The ones who made enemies of the locals, or didn’t think to ask for help.’ He gave her a sidelong glance, and she wondered uncomfortably whether he was having a dig at

her. She bent her head to examine the map, and found the Macdonald River, a spidery line that meandered east and flowed into the gulf near a group of islands.

'I found the river,' she said. 'But I can't see Barramundi.'

He shot her a playful look. 'Well, perhaps in that case, it does not exist.'

He was teasing, she knew. But anxiety overcame her; after all, she barely knew him, and did not know at all where he was taking her. 'Please be serious,' she said, her voice tight.

He glanced at her. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Barramundi is about four kilometres inland from the river mouth.' She scanned the area on her map and made out a tiny dot that might have been a flyspeck, or a town too insignificant to be named. 'There's a detailed map in the glove compartment if you want to check.'

She did. His glove compartment, unlike hers, was tidy, and contained only a folder of maps, a pair of sunglasses and a German book. From the tourist map she learned that Barramundi had been a frontier town in the early days of settlement, and renowned for lawlessness until a police station was established there in 1888. Now, it was a fishing spot.

'What's your business in Barramundi?' she asked.

'I'm chasing something up for a museum in Europe, and doing some follow-up on my doctoral research. Photographing and cataloguing artefacts, interviewing elders, that kind of thing. I might even be allowed to film parts of some ceremonies. Some parts are taboo. The elders decide what I'm allowed to document and how it can be used.'

'So that stuff about secret men's business wasn't a joke?'

'Absolutely not. Some things can't be shared. But I'm putting up a website about the other stuff—stuff that's okay for public viewing. It's a way of preserving knowledge in the community, as well as sharing it with other researchers. A lot of the old ways are disappearing.'

'Like Barramundi,' she said.

'Yeah, it's pretty much a ghost town these days. Once it was known as "the nerve centre of the north." It had a Chinese market garden, a bank, two stores, three pubs, a football oval, a picture theatre, a town hall, and even a library. There was plenty of work on the stations, and everyone came to town to buy supplies, catch up with their mates and sell their produce.'

'Salt, three pounds per ton, or six pounds delivered to town,' Cat murmured.

Dingo gave her a questioning look. She had been thinking of Jack's letter, and Lizzie's remark about the white man her uncles had known. 'A relative of mine worked a saltpan in the 1930s,' she explained. 'Somewhere in the Gulf country.

'Really?' Dingo asked, interested. 'Do you know much about him?'

'Not yet,' she said. 'He was a runaway. Tell me more about Barramundi.'

'The cattle stations were bought up by overseas consortiums, and the mining companies moved in. At first that brought jobs and money back to the town, but now they're building a new road straight through from the mines to Crocodile Creek and on to Darwin. Barramundi is completely bypassed.'

'So what happens? The town just fades away?'

'Pretty much. There's no high school. Smart kids head for the cities, and the rest spend their lives trying to hold their communities together. Unless they turn into addicts or worse. The only people who stay now are the old and the crazy.' He spoke softly. 'And the ones who love the place.'

She was silent, moved by the depth of feeling in his voice. He shook his head slowly, staring at the road ahead. 'I've been told the government has withdrawn funding from the health clinic. It will close. Aboriginal people make up nine-tenths of the population here, and their health is already critical. Merran is furious.'

'Who's Merran?'

'She's a nurse, counsellor, and ministering angel. You should meet her. She might be able to help with your family research.'

'Really?'

Cat gazed out of the window. This Merran sounded too good to be true. A cloud of red dust followed them across the plain. Cat slid Jack's letter from the hatbox, propping the envelope on the dashboard while she reread it. When she lifted her head to gaze out of the window, the dust and glare hurt her eyes. A heat haze shimmered on the road, and the desert became an ocean. On the far horizon, a ship rose and melted away, reappearing moments later in the shape of a canoe with people beckoning. She stared, fascinated, at the detail of the mirage until it melted away to be replaced by something else. Then she closed her eyes and dozed.

Her eyes flew open as the ute lurched to the right and began jolting along a corrugated dirt road. 'Where are we?'

Dingo didn't look around. 'The road to the coast,' he answered tersely. He looked grim, just as Rob did when something upset him. Perhaps Dingo's frown just

meant he was concentrating; the road was pretty rough. But it alarmed her. What if he had made up the stuff about research and ancient artefacts? She had seen no evidence to back up his story. He might even have sabotaged her car himself. *Get a grip, Catherine,* she told herself. *He's just an ordinary bloke.* But she held tightly to the door handle, just in case.

The dirt road veered north again, and the vegetation along the roadside changed from saltbush and spinifex to thicker scrub, and then to soaring eucalyptus trees that spread their branches against a brilliant sky. For the first time in days, she could feel moisture in the air: her skin relaxed, and she could breathe without swallowing dust. The air tasted light and fizzy, almost sweet. There was a knot of tension in her neck that ached all the way down her shoulder blade; she probed the sore place with her fingers. Dingo looked across at her. 'You okay?'

'Fine, thanks.' She managed a smile.

The road crossed a river, passing a huddle of corrugated iron and timber shacks beside the bridge, then followed the river's winding course. They came to a square stone house with a green roof, a wide verandah, and a cluster of sheds, new and old, enclosed by a post-and-rail fence, and Dingo pulled over.

'Why are we stopping?' Cat asked.

'Got to see a bloke about something,' Dingo replied, getting out of the vehicle. Cat unclipped the seatbelt, eager to stretch her legs. 'I won't be long,' he said, turning back to her as he headed for the gate. 'Todd's a moody bastard—not keen on unexpected visitors. Best if you stay here.'

Dingo strode through the gate, closing it behind him, ran up the steps to the verandah, and rapped on the door. Cat wondered who Todd was, and what Dingo wanted from him. Dingo paced up and down the verandah for a few minutes, then disappeared around the side of the house.

Lily: The Wandering Gene

I dreamed of a summer of untrammelled creativity: walking through clear water on a white beach, picking up smooth stones, and working all day in my studio, getting lost in the fluidity, the infinite possibility of paint. In the evening a glass of white wine, a green salad, a grilled fish. Cut lemons on a blue plate. The bitter fizz of tonic, aromatic gin. I wanted to paint, taste, feel everything: the sky, the scratchy sand, every ripple of the glass-green water, the soft night full of sharp stars that prickle in my mouth like shards of ice, then melt into sleep…

But I am awake now, and it's winter. My canvases face the wall like naughty children and outside, the world beckons. There is no time for anything but to pack a few clothes and the box of manuscripts before I fly out the door in pursuit of my sister. I look for Freya's Tarot cards on the hall table, but they are gone. Anger rises in me, but then I remember something Freya said, long ago. Perhaps I don't need them anymore; perhaps it's time to let them go.

But I have to follow Cat. As a child, I always followed her, but this time it's different. This time she did not insist; she simply disappeared. Perhaps she doesn't want to be found. I have to try, even though I know it's not sensible.

After she left, I went to work, tried to take up my usual routine, but it didn't seem to fit me anymore. I couldn't concentrate. So I decided to take leave. I've told the police where I'm going, and given them my phone number and Cat's details. Tomorrow I'm heading north: past the Flinders Ranges and on to Alice Springs. After that, who knows? I'll have to wing it.

As I see it, this is all Great Grandfather Gottlieb's fault. Grace was rambling on about a letter and an old family quarrel. She even mentioned a curse. She wasn't making much sense that day; she didn't have a clue where Cat might have gone.

It must be in our genes, the roaming and the rambling; we're Irish on our father's side. But Gottlieb's Germanic discipline must have concealed a rogue gene, too. With his fiery hair, his daydreaming and his passionate outbursts, he might have been descended from the Celts or some forgotten tribe from northern Europe.

You can get your DNA tested now. Genetic scientists can pinpoint exactly where your ancestors came from, and when. Or so they say. Fascinating. But it alarms me, too; genetics could become the new excuse for elitism and exclusion. Scientists amaze me. They scurry like rats in a maze, convinced there's only one right way to the cheese. Or they see themselves as fitting together the pieces of a

gigantic jigsaw puzzle, and fall over each other to find the final piece so they can unveil the big picture of how the universe works. But who's to say that the big picture is not a pale pink rectangle of cardboard with a question mark on it: the next Chance card in the pile on a Monopoly board? Everything changes. The act of perception alters the nature of what is perceived, not to mention the perceiver. Trying to solve the mystery of the universe is like trying to look at the back of your own eyeball. Some scientists have finally understood this, but an artist could have told them long ago.

I load up my car, ready for an early start in the morning.

Part Four: Ghost Town

Barramundi

Waiting for Dingo, Cat became bored and finally, annoyed. She scribbled a note on the back of an envelope, stuck it on the windscreen, grabbed her pack and hatbox, and started on foot along the road in the direction they had been travelling. She walked for perhaps twenty minutes past empty paddocks, crossed a bridge spanning a slow-flowing river of muddy water, and came to a dilapidated wooden sign: *Welcome to Barramundi, pop. 438.* It seemed an oddly precise number. How long had it been, she wondered, since anyone had bothered to count the inhabitants of Barramundi?

The houses at the edge of town were crumbling ruins with broken windows and weed-choked yards. But further on, she saw signs of habitation: washing on a line, chooks pecking in a yard, a tethered goat gazing with alien eyes. The road led uphill past a schoolhouse and deserted playground, a shuttered health clinic, and a general store. Black tape criss-crossed a shattered window, and fuel pumps stood silent in the empty forecourt.

The road climbed more steeply then. At the top of the hill Cat came to a building of red brick with a flight of steps leading to a porch. The sign above the door said 'Post Office' in old-fashioned lettering, like something out of a storybook. She sat on the bottom step to rest. The post office stood like a lookout tower above the town, which lay like a map beneath Cat's gaze, the bleached pinks, reds, and browns of roads, yards, and houses laid out on either side of an iron-blue streak of bitumen. In the distance, a green swathe of trees curved about the perimeter of the town in a semi-circle. Barramundi had been built on this hill, probably the only high ground for miles. Sensible, she thought, with all those flood-prone rivers nearby.

She saw a moving plume of dust travelling toward the town. It came from the green ute. She got up and climbed the steps to the enclosed verandah of the post office where she would not be seen from the road. She leaned her pack against the wall and placed Freya's hatbox beside it. Why was she hiding from him? *Walking into town*, she had written on the note. *Catch you later*. Dingo wanted to help, and was probably harmless, but she wanted to do this on her own. She would find a place to stay, sort out the problem of the car. She might seek him out later, when she was ready.

She rummaged in her pack for water and gum, and sat down with her back against the post office wall. The concrete floor was cool beneath her legs. Hearing

the rumble of a passing vehicle, she peered out to see Dingo's ute disappearing over the far side of the hill. Idly, she drew the velvet bag from the pocket of her shorts, and slid a card from the middle of the pack. *The Hermit.* The little book's advice confirmed her feelings. *Let the mind be detached from mundane events, people and things. Practical plans must flow from the inner fire.* She replaced cards and booklet in their bag, pocketed it, stood up, and tried to summon some inner fire.

She set off down the hill in the direction the ute had taken, and came to a ramshackle building of stone and timber, the Barramundi Hotel. From its open windows came a buzz of voices and the smell of beer. She spotted the green ute among the vehicles in the adjoining car park, and decided against enquiring about accommodation. Getting to sleep at night might be a problem. She would investigate the town a bit further, she thought, as she continued down the road.

She stopped at a building perhaps even older than the post office, judging by the weathered brickwork and the quaint lettering above the arched doorway. It was carved into the brick, and spelled out the words 'Police Station'. Perhaps she ought to report her stranded vehicle. But when she climbed the stone steps to the porch, she found the door locked, and saw a fly-spotted sign taped to the glass.

OLD POLICE STATION MUSEUM

~FEATURING ORIGINAL GAOL~

& ARTEFACTS OF HISTORIC BARRAMUNDI

OPENING HOURS 10AM—2PM TUES. & WED.

OR BY APPOINTMENT

M.J. TODD (PROP.)

This was not a working police station, but a museum. Peering through the glass-panelled door, she saw outlines of display cases and exhibits on the walls: framed photographs, a canoe, spears, and guns. Intrigued, she decided to come back during the week, and continued on her way.

At the bottom of the hill she came to a bridge over a wide river fringed with native grasses and tall trees. She realised she had seen it from the top of the hill, concealed by trees, and that it was the same river she had crossed on her way in; it encircled half the township like a mediaeval moat. She stopped to adjust the straps of her pack, which were cutting into her shoulders. She was tired; perhaps she was getting too old for adventures. When she was younger she had never given a thought

to her own safety, but now she felt vulnerable. It was a primal sensation: alertness mingled with fear.

She crossed the bridge and came to a high cyclone wire fence. A faded sign on the open gate announced the 'Barramundi Caravan Park and Camping Ground. Self-contained cabins for hire, all facilities included'. Beyond the prefabricated cabins were caravans and campervans parked in rows. As she went through the gate and headed up the driveway, the smell of grilling meat wafted toward her, and she saw a group of people seated in deck chairs around a barbeque. 'Office is that way,' called the cook, waving a pair of tongs toward a squat building of cream brick.

The office was empty, but a smell of frying onions wafted from another room, so Cat rang the bell on the counter and waited, staring at racks of postcards and dog-eared brochures. Idly, she picked one up. It showed a man in a dinghy proudly holding up an enormous fish: 'Lumey Island Fishing: your Adventure of a Lifetime'. Though she was prone to seasickness and not at all interested in fishing, Cat stuffed the brochure into her pocket as a large woman in a print dress and apron shuffled out. She was perhaps sixty, with curlers in her hair beneath a floral scarf. 'Hello, dear.' She peered through spectacles that reflected the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. 'I'm Mrs Minchinton, and you'll be…?'

'Wanting a cabin,' Cat said. 'Please.' She completed her details on a form while the woman prattled about the weather, the impact of the mining boom, and the favourites in the forthcoming rodeo at Crocodile Creek. Cat made polite noises, paid her deposit, and tried not to yawn as Mrs Minchinton listed the rules and facilities of the park. 'No visitors after ten o'clock, no noise after midnight.' She handed Cat a key and placed a small carton of milk on the counter. 'Your cabin's number eleven, in the first row. Give me a hoy if you need anything, won't you, dear?' Cat nodded.

In the cabin, Cat dumped her pack on the floor, placed the hatbox on the table, and locked the door behind her. The cabin reminded her of the warehouse apartment she had rented in Sydney before she met Rob. It was cavernous, big enough for a whole family. The main room had bunks along one wall, a sofa, a vintage dining suite that had probably been there since it was new, and a kitchenette. In a smaller room was a queen-sized bed, but, as Mrs Minchinton had warned, there was no en-suite bathroom; she would have to use the communal facilities. Cat made herself a cup of tea and wondered whether to go back to the pub, get some food, and

see if Dingo was about. But it was getting late, and she was tired. She decided to skip dinner and go to bed.

A Warning

Cat woke early, stretched, and lay listening to the birds. The park seemed deserted as she made her way to the shower block. The day was clear and sunny. She locked up the cabin and set off for the town centre, stopping to rest and take in the view at the top of the hill. Already a haze of heat shimmered on the horizon. The trees along the river cut a dark swathe through the bleached grasses. Somewhere a dog barked, and further away, an engine started. She thought to check her phone, and found it full of messages from Rob. She didn't bother to scroll down and check them all, but turned the phone off and jammed it in her pocket.

As she headed downhill, she felt a surge of optimism. She would start afresh, get supplies for the next few days, and work out what to do about her car. Outside the store, she waited until the manager arrived. 'Morning,' he said. It was a statement of fact rather than a greeting. While he found his key and unlocked the door, Cat took her phone from her pocket and dropped it in a rubbish bin. That was simple. No more Rob. She followed the storekeeper inside.

As he organised his till, she explained the situation with her car. 'You're sure it's the starter motor?' he asked.

'No,' she admitted. 'It might be a flat battery.'

'The supply truck from Crocodile Creek is due on Friday. If you know what you want, you can phone the garage there and ask them to send the parts. Or go to Crocodile Creek yourself and talk to the mechanic. Or you could hire a tow truck. That's probably your best option.'

'They all sound expensive,' Cat said, thinking it would probably cost more than her old car was worth. She was tempted to abandon it, despite what Lily might think. Or Dingo. The storekeeper turned and began stacking tins on a shelf. She thanked him and wandered off among the aisles, contemplating shelves of groceries, fishing gear, and camping supplies, and freezers of meat, ice-cream and bait. Among the shrink-wrapped goods and cartons in the dairy cabinet, a few limp vegetables and lacklustre fruits wore exorbitant price tags. She wondered at the dearth of fresh produce, musing that an enterprising gardener could do well in this town. You'd need a reliable water supply, of course, and an irrigation system. She picked up a basket and chose a couple of wrinkled apples, a loaf of bread, milk, coffee, a cheap tote bag, a postcard of a tropical island and a red plaid shirt wrapped in plastic.

Hearing voices outside, she looked up to see a white Toyota crammed with dark-skinned people. It was joined by another, and then another, all crowded with passengers. Soon the driveway and the roadside beyond it were congested with vehicles. Men in shorts and singlets laughed and slapped one another across the shoulders; women in print dresses shouted greetings and waved from open windows; and children in T-shirts emblazoned with slogans leaped from the backs of trucks and ran here and there, chattering excitedly. The mood was carefree, as if they were on holiday. A swarm of people crowded into the store, all talking at once. They were everywhere, laughing, joking, and calling out across the aisles. A woman in a purple scarf noticed Cat's bewildered expression. 'It's pension day, love,' she said. 'Everyone comes to town to spend their money.'

'But where have they all come from?'

The woman laughed. 'Not from the Territory, are you? People come from all over—outstations, islands, camps along the coast. Most people live on their own country these days, and just come to town once a fortnight for shopping.'

It was like a dance: people moving back and forth, pulling things from shelves, stowing them in trolleys, effortlessly keeping up multiple conversations with friends and acquaintances. Apart from the storekeeper, Cat was the only white person there. She was trying to keep out of the way when an elderly man pushed past her and knocked her basket to the floor. He did not move as she bent to pick up the spilled contents. The skin on his bare, splayed feet was callused and the toenails were thick and gnarled as tree roots. When Cat straightened, the old man glared at her. He wore a flannel shirt like the one in her basket and the tendons in his neck stood out like cords. The lenses of his spectacles magnified his eyes alarmingly. 'Leave us,' he growled. His breath smelled of coffee. 'There is nothing here for you.'

Cat stared at him, shocked. The hubbub continued around them. Nobody else paid any attention; it was as if they were in a world apart. Unable to speak, Cat tore her gaze from the old man's face and turned away, heading for the counter. She did not look back, but fumbled for her wallet, thrust some notes at the storekeeper, and made for the door without waiting for change. She walked quickly down the hill to the camping ground, her heart thumping.

In her cabin, she flung her shopping on the bench. The plaid shirt in its plastic pack slid to the floor. *Calm down*, she told herself. *He's just an old bloke with a chip on his shoulder*. But she was trembling. She made tea and sat tracing the green swirls

of the laminated tabletop with her fingertips. She went over in her mind what had happened in the store, trying to make sense of it. Had the old man mistaken her for someone else, or did he just bear a grudge against tourists? She was no ignorant sightseer tramping through his country with no regard for culture, but he didn't know that. She hoped she was sensitive to such things, and she had good reason to be there. A family connection. Maybe. Would it make a difference if the old man in the store knew this? Was it his blessing she wanted?

She finished her tea and went to sit outside on the step in the sun. Perhaps Barramundi was not such a harmless place as she had thought. The old man's words were a warning. Perhaps she should have stayed in Sydney, or even Kestrel Bay, where the land, the sea-scented air, and the ways of the people were familiar. Perhaps she was getting too old to travel. She went inside, lay down on one of the narrow bunks, and tried to rest. But her bones no longer fitted comfortably inside her skin. Behind her closed eyelids, the old man's gaze accused her.

*****

At six o'clock that evening, Cat stood outside the door of the Barramundi Hotel listening to the babble of voices and the clink of glasses. She should talk to the locals if she wanted to learn anything, and what better place to start than the pub? Some distance away near a side wall she saw a line of men queuing to buy cartons of beer from a hatch in the wall. Most of them were young, she noticed, and all were Aboriginal. She squared her shoulders, and pushed open the door.

In the front bar, despite the open windows and the incessant beat of ceiling fans, the air was thick with smoke. Men in shorts leaned on the bar drinking beer, groups clustered around tables talking, playing cards, or idly watching television. At the far end of the room a game of eight-ball was in progress. Through an open doorway in the dining area, she saw people helping themselves to salad and desserts from a buffet. It was a scene typical of any country pub, but there was something odd that Cat couldn't quite pin down. Several men glanced around as she crossed the garish tartan carpet to the bar and pulled out her wallet. She nodded to them, and realised what was strange: there were no black people in the bar. She looked around, and saw faces that might be Asian or Melanesian among the white Caucasian ones, but none as dark-skinned as the local Indigenous people she had seen at the store or queuing outside for beer.

The barmaid was looking at Cat, waiting for her order.

‘Is there some kind of apartheid going on here?’ Cat asked.

The buzz of chatter died away. The barmaid gaped as if she hadn’t understood, and Cat put her question more bluntly. ‘Do you serve Aboriginal people in this bar?’

The girl pointed to the sign on the wall behind her. ‘Anyone’s welcome as long as they stick to the dress code,’ she said. ‘Anyone over eighteen and not inebriated is entitled to be served.’ She was young, and simply reciting the rules. But among the men who leaned upon the bar, Cat sensed a tension that was not new.

‘What about the queue outside?’ she persisted.

‘If people want to buy their beer from the kiosk and take it home, that’s their decision,’ said the barmaid, parrot-fashion.

‘Well, that’s all right, then,’ Cat said. She glanced around and saw the resentment in the eyes of the white men around her, heard the simmering hostility in their muttered remarks as they resumed their conversations. She smiled at the barmaid. ‘I just wanted to make sure,’ she said. ‘I’ll have a dry cider, please.’

‘You do like to stir things up, don’t you?’ said a voice at her elbow, a voice she knew. She turned to see Dingo looking at her in a pleased way, as if he’d just received an unexpected gift.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I do.’

‘You could get into big trouble this way,’ he said.

‘Tell me about it.’ She paid for her drink, then saw the confused look on Dingo’s face. ‘I didn’t mean literally,’ she explained. ‘I meant, I know. Getting into trouble used to be a habit with me. I’m out of practice now.’ She tossed her head nervously, flicking the hair out of her eyes.

‘I wouldn’t have guessed it,’ he said. ‘By the way, you look nice tonight.’

Cat glanced down at her modest denim skirt and plain black T-shirt. She had applied only a dash of lipstick, and her hair was shaggy and newly washed, blow-dried by the wind. ‘You must be joking,’ she said.

He looked offended. ‘I don’t joke about such things.’

‘Well, thank you,’ she said, uncertainly, flattered by the compliment but somewhat alarmed at the intensity in his voice.

He must have sensed her ambivalence, for he at once assumed a tone of casual friendliness. ‘We’re about to order a meal’, he said. ‘Will you join us?’

‘Sure, thanks,’ she said, wondering who he was with. Dingo took her elbow and steered her through to the dining room, past families and tourists, toward a table where a woman sat alone, studying a menu. She was sturdy and curvaceous, with creamy golden skin, high cheekbones, and smooth black hair cut in a bob. She was wearing faded jeans, a red tank top, and a necklace of red and black beads. She was a woman who would look elegant in just about anything, Cat thought, and was surprised to feel a twinge of jealousy.

Dingo introduced them. ‘Cat, this is Merran McKinley, community nurse and counsellor extraordinaire. Merran, this is Cat. I told you about her.’

Merran’s dark eyes flashed as she smiled hello. Cat wondered what Dingo had said about her.

‘I was wondering when I’d see you again,’ Dingo said to Cat, drawing out a chair for her. ‘You did the disappearing act on me! Merran was sure I’d made you up.’

‘I’m a big girl, I can look after myself,’ Cat said. Realising this might sound a little harsh, she added: ‘Anyway, do you realise how long you were gone? I could have died of heatstroke. Or boredom.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I forget you city girls are high maintenance. You found a place to stay?’

She let the city girl remark go, and nodded. ‘The caravan park.’

Merran laughed. ‘Did old Ma Minchinton give you the third degree?’

‘Not really,’ Cat said. ‘She was too busy telling me all the local news.’

‘She must like you,’ Merran said.

‘She’s not that talkative with everyone?’ Cat asked in surprise.

‘Oh, no,’ Merran replied. ‘She can be quite frosty.’ Cat found this hard to believe.

They ordered their meals, and Cat asked about Merran’s work, learning that she was seconded to the Barramundi District Health Clinic for a week in every month from the hospital at Crocodile Creek where she was based. The clinic serviced eight outstations, or regional communities, and a number of smaller settlements in the area. This was her second visit.

‘You left your swag in the back of the ute,’ Dingo reminded Cat. ‘Do you want me to bring it over later?’

Cat nodded. ‘Thanks, that would be great.’

‘I could drive you to Crocodile Creek tomorrow, if you want to try and sort out your car.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘I’ll work something out.’

Dingo looked worried. ‘You’re taking a risk, you know, leaving it out there. Is it insured?’

She looked at him without answering. The car was a nuisance. If she paid to have it towed and fixed, she couldn’t afford to stay in Barramundi for long. She imagined what Lily would think if she arrived back in Kestrel Bay with no money, no news of Jack, and a patched up car that might break down again within weeks. On the other hand, being stuck out here with no vehicle made her reliant on people she hardly knew.

‘I’ll take that as a no,’ Dingo said. She made a wry face. He looked at her gravely, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

Their meals arrived, and Cat attacked her fish and chips with relish. Merran had ordered the same thing. Dingo had a steak, which he demolished in minutes.

‘What brings you to Barramundi, Cat?’ Merran asked when their plates were almost empty.

‘I didn’t get a choice,’ Cat replied. ‘Your friend here brought me.’

‘You would have ended up here eventually, though,’ Dingo protested. ‘Only you would have taken longer to find it, because it wasn’t on your map.’

‘What do you mean, I would have ended up here?’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, smoothing out the creases before handing it to her. ‘You left this in the ute.’ It was the envelope she had scribbled her note on—the envelope from Jack’s letter.

‘Look at the postmark,’ he said.

She peered at it. The imprint was faint and smudged.

‘It says Barramundi,’ he said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘So he did live around here,’ she said, staring into her drink, watching the tiny golden bubbles rise and pop. Merran and Dingo looked puzzled. ‘That letter was written to my grandmother by her long-lost brother, Jack,’ she explained. ‘I want to find out what happened to him. But I’m not sure if I can stick around.’

‘Why not?’ Merran asked.

‘My car broke down, my money’s running low, and…’ She hesitated, then told them about the old man’s warning.

‘Don’t let the it get to you,’ Dingo advised. ‘He probably has his own agenda. Though most of the locals are great, as long as you’re straight with them.’

Cat sipped her drink, thinking about Jack.

‘If this Jack lived in the area, you’ll find out something soon enough,’ Merran told her. ‘People have long memories around here. I’m looking for information too,’ she confided. ‘My mother and uncle were taken away from here when they were kids.’

Cat examined Merran’s creamy complexion, and then dropped her gaze, embarrassed. ‘They were Stolen Generation?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Cat—I’m Aboriginal.’

‘That’s awful,’ Cat said, and blushed. But Merran and Dingo both laughed. ‘About your mother, I mean,’ she said, flustered. ‘I’m sorry.’ It sounded pathetic.

But Merran was matter-of-fact. ‘They survived. But you’re right. It was pretty bad. Even worse for their mother, I imagine.’ She paused. ‘I often wonder about her. My grandmother. Mum didn’t like talking about the past. Said she didn’t remember anything. But last year, after she died, I started making enquiries with the help of a friend who works for an organisation called Finding Family. We learned Mum and her brother were evacuated with a group from Crocodile Creek Mission during World War II.’

They left the pub together. Dingo offered Cat a lift back to the caravan park, since her swag was in his ute. Merran had her own car, a smart black Subaru sedan with Aboriginal colours flashing proudly from the bumper bar. ‘People say I’m mad putting that sticker on,’ Merran said. ‘They reckon someone will trash my car.’

‘Does it worry you?’ Cat asked.

‘I’d like to see them try,’ Merran grinned, but Cat could tell she meant business. ‘Cat, I’m visiting one of the outstations tomorrow morning. Want to come along and meet a few of the locals?’

‘I’d love to,’ Cat agreed. ‘Thanks.’

On the way to the caravan park, she shot a sideways glance at Dingo. ‘Is there something between you and Merran?’

‘What makes you think so?’ he asked, looking at her.

‘Just—a certain familiarity,’ she said.

‘No. We’re just good mates...’ But he hesitated.

‘There was once?’ Cat persisted.

‘For a little while,’ he admitted. ‘But it’s over now. We make better friends than lovers.’ He stopped the ute outside the caravan park, and Cat leaped out, glad of an excuse to end the conversation. He might have told her more than she wanted to know. Worse, he might have enquired about her own love life.

Outstation

By nine o'clock, when Merran drew up outside Cat's cabin in the clinic van, the day was already hot. 'The drive is not the most comfortable,' Merran warned her. 'The roads are unsealed and hardly ever graded.'

'How long will it take?' Cat asked.

Merran laughed. 'As long as it takes.'

'So why this outstation thing? How come people don't live in town?'

'Some do,' Merran said. 'There was a time when almost everyone from the outlying areas moved in to town. But now they're moving out again. Some prefer living on their traditional land and some go to be with family.'

The journey, which might have taken twenty minutes, lasted almost an hour, because Merran stopped every time she saw someone walking or driving along the road to exchange greetings and news. Sometimes this involved only a brief, shouted conversation through the open window of the van, but sometimes Merran would turn the engine off and get out to hold lengthy conferences, or even brief health checks, at the side of the road.

'People can't always make it to the clinic,' Merran explained as they drove. 'So I try to see as many people as I can while I'm on the road. I get to catch up on local news and keep an eye on people's health at the same time.'

'Dingo said the clinic might have to close,' Cat said. 'Is that true?'

'It's a damned disgrace,' Merran said. 'The government expects people to travel all the way to Crocodile Creek for health checks and routine medical attention. It's true, the facilities are better there, but a lot of people just can't make the trip. Life is unpredictable here. Cars break down, rivers flood, people get too sick to travel or can't afford the fuel.'

'Who makes decisions about funding?' Cat asked. 'Do the bureaucrats ever come out to see what's actually going on here?'

'Not too often,' Merran said. 'The communities are not consulted properly. The so-called health solutions they dream up in Canberra might impress the politicians, but they don't work in practice.'

A group of women in bright garments hailed the van, and Merran pulled over. The women unrolled swathes of boldly patterned textiles, hand-woven, they said, from pandanus leaves, and dyed or painted in traditional patterns with pigments from local plants. They held the bolts of fabric aloft like sails, tracing the designs with

their fingers, relating the stories they contained. The colours shimmered and rippled on the breeze ‘These are amazing,’ Cat said. ‘So bold, so alive.’ The artists’ faces shone with pride. They told her they were on their way to the post office in Barramundi to send their work to Sydney for a big exhibition. In a few weeks, they would fly down themselves to conduct workshops in traditional dyeing and weaving. ‘Good luck,’ Cat and Merran called as the women waved goodbye and continued on their way, singing.

Merran drove on, stopping to pick up anyone walking in their direction, so the van grew more and more crowded as they neared their destination. Finally, they crossed a cattle grid, passed a muddy lagoon and followed a winding dirt road to the outstation buildings. To Cat’s eyes, it seemed a dry and desolate place: a couple of dozen unpainted concrete-block houses with corrugated iron roofs, scattered beneath a rocky ledge crowned with eucalyptus and tamarind trees.

As they toured the settlement meeting Merran’s patients, Cat was dismayed by the living conditions. A typical house for an extended family of ten or more comprised just one or two bare rooms without heating, cooling or running water. A single tap outside the back door supplied each household with cold water for washing, drinking and cooking. There was little furniture, just a table and perhaps some chairs. Bedding was a pile of blankets on the floor or a foam mattress rolled up beside a campfire. There was a single pay phone in the community but Merran said it was out of order more often than not. Teabags and playing cards lay strewn about in the dust, and washing flapped from a strand of barbed wire strung high between two posts.

Beside the road, half a dozen young men and boys tinkering with the engine of a truck waved and shouted greetings. Old people sat on their verandahs or gathered in groups beneath the trees. Dogs wandered about the camp or lay stretched in the shade of trees, while pigs and goats foraged for food between the houses and scrawny cats sauntered about or lounged on tree branches, keeping a wary eye on the children who ran about, laughing and shouting. That day the children had other interests; they were trying to catch a young colt. As Cat watched, the foal kicked up its heels and veered away. ‘Leave him alone now!’ bellowed an old man, and the children at once stood still. The colt cantered off, shaking its tail.

Merran stopped the van beside a rainwater tank. An old man hobbled from a nearby house and held Merran to him in a fierce embrace. He wore glasses with

thick, smeared lenses, and his bare feet were splayed and callused. Cat recognised those feet. It was the old man who had admonished her in the Barramundi store.

'Hello, Uncle,' Merran said, breathless from his hug. 'This is my friend Cat.'

The old man shuffled forward and Cat took his hand nervously, but he showed no sign that he recognised her. 'Welcome,' he said.

A tall, beautiful woman with high cheekbones and curly black hair emerged from the house, her eyes flashing as she came forward to embrace Merran. 'This is Ruby,' Merran said, turning to Cat. And to Ruby, 'This is Cat.'

Ruby smiled. 'Hello.' She turned, picked up the toddler who trailed after her and settled him on her hip. She wiped his nose with a rag and kissed his chubby cheek, and the little boy gazed at the visitors with wide dark eyes. Three older children ran up and clung to Ruby's sides, smiling shyly at Cat.

'Little Lionel is Ruby's grandson, and these three are her niece and nephews,' Merran explained. 'Ruby looks after them all.'

'This one's mother lives here too, sometimes,' explained Ruby, tousling the head of the smallest child. 'But just now she's in Crocodile Creek.'

'Do you want to see the lagoon?' the little girl asked Cat.

'We'll show you!' the boys clamoured.

'Is it okay?' Cat looked at Merran.

'Go with them, if you like,' she replied. 'I have a few more people to see.'

Along the way, they were joined by more children, who talked and laughed and ran in circles, keen to show off their skills. The girls showed Cat how to dig with sticks in the mud for turtle eggs, while the boys climbed trees, turned somersaults and fought fierce mock battles with fists and sticks.

Expecting a peaceful waterhole adorned with water lilies and paddling birds, Cat was disappointed to find the lagoon was a stagnant, reeking swamp, its shore trodden to mud by hundreds of hooves. Nothing grew in or near the water.

'Do you swim here?' she asked the children apprehensively.

'Not any more, we're not allowed.'

'The lagoon is poison now.'

'Too many cattle.'

'We used to dive for water lily root,' said an older girl. 'All gone now.'

One of the boys ran to a nearby tree, and prised several lumps of resin from the trunk. He gave one to Cat, popping a piece in his own mouth to show her how it was done. ‘Chewing gum!’ he said, beaming.

Cat placed the resin in her mouth and chewed cautiously. It was curiously textured and strangely bland, unlike commercial gum. But it proved subtly refreshing, and the flavour did not fade away.

As they headed back to camp, several children pounced on something lying in the dirt and squabbled heatedly over it. The victor, smiling triumphantly, presented Cat with a large, somewhat bedraggled feather, black banded with red-orange. It was the tail feather of a red-tailed black cockatoo, a special bird. Touched, she stuck it in her hat.

In the camp, the children ran off after the foal, and Merran beckoned Cat to join a circle of women seated in the shade of a large, spreading tree. Introductions were made: your name, where you came from, to whom you were related. These facts told the women everything they needed to know about a person. Sitting on the ground beside Merran, Cat felt comfortable in a way she had never known before. Nobody was competing with or challenging anyone else. There was no need to prove yourself or to show off. The subtle but ever-present element of pretence that pervaded white society was missing here. It was something she had never noticed before, because it was like the air she breathed. These women did not care how much she earned, what job she had, or whether she had one at all. She felt free to be herself here, and for a moment she glimpsed the possibility of living in a different kind of world. It shone like a distant star, reflected in the dark brilliance of the women’s eyes.

Museum Piece

That afternoon, Cat climbed the stone steps of the old Barramundi Police Station, and found the door unlocked. Inside, the lights were on, though nobody seemed to be about. To her left was a closed door marked PRIVATE, and on the opposite wall an open door leading to some kind of storeroom with cupboards and filing cabinets. The room in which she stood had a musty smell, not quite masked by the sharp odours of cleaning fluid and furniture polish. Old photographs in heavy wooden frames lined the walls, each with a printed caption beneath it, and a series of glass cases displayed ceremonial objects and relics of the town's past. Part of a tree trunk stood in one corner. Some of the bark had been stripped away and a date with the year 1845 carved into it. According to the plaque, this had been done by Ludwig Leichardt, a famous explorer in the region.

Against one wall was a large display case containing a scale model of Barramundi as it had been in 1891, perfect in every detail. The town was laid out before her, just as she had seen it from the post office, but bigger and more prosperous. The river looped around the cottages and market gardens at the edge of town, the main road swept grandly over the central hill with post office, shops, bank, hotels, and police station clustered around it. Fascinated, she gazed at the tiny houses lining tiny streets, the tiny people going about their business. There was a shuffling of feet, and she turned to see a man watching her. He was neat and balding, but there was a furtive air about him that made her shudder. Though well-pressed, his brown suit was several sizes too large, and hung on him as if it belonged to somebody else. He nodded toward the model town. 'Not bad, eh?'

'Did you make this?'

He puffed up his chest. 'Sure did.' She shook the hand he offered, which was moist and clammy. 'Todd's the name,' he said. 'Malcolm Todd.'

She withdrew her hand as soon as she could without appearing rude. 'I'm Cat Willoughby. This is very clever,' she said, turning back to the model. 'It must have taken years.'

'Kept me out of mischief,' he said with a wink. 'Can I help you with something?'

'I'm trying to trace a man called Johann or Jack Weis. He might have lived around here in the 1930s.'

‘The name doesn’t ring any bells, but you’re welcome to look through the archives.’ He led her through to the room with the filing cabinets, and started opening drawers. ‘Births, deaths, marriages are here, land leases in this one, police records here, all filed alphabetically. You might find something. I’ll leave you to it.’

She spent some hours searching through legal documents, official records, property deeds, newspaper clippings, and journals. Although the records were well organised, she found no mention of the name Weis in any of them. Finally she gave up and wandered back through the main room.

Malcolm Todd watched in silence as she browsed among the photographs on the wall: a family in front of their homestead with their Aboriginal servants, all in Victorian dress; a uniformed policeman on horseback with a rifle slung beside the saddle; a group of Aboriginal men in ceremonial body paint; and a smiling white man with a bushy beard, dressed only in shorts and a battered hat, standing beside a log hut, surrounded by strange, feathery trees. There was something about the man’s expression and posture that struck her; unlike the stiffly posed subjects in the other photographs, he seemed relaxed, at ease. ‘Who was he?’ She indicated the photo.

‘Feller by the name of Robinson,’ Todd said. ‘He had a leasehold on Rufus River. Locals called him the wild white man. A character, he was. Kept hundreds of goats, and got about naked except for a piece of cloth tied round his middle, like one of them Malays.’

‘A sarong,’ Cat murmured.

She moved across the room to look at a set of old tools meticulously arranged on a pegboard, each resting against its blue painted shadow. Beside these, in a mounted display cabinet, was a collection of weapons and related items: rifles, pistols, a shotgun, a set of old police handcuffs, a dingo trap. A glass case labelled ‘Miscellaneous Items of Interest’ contained a brass bullock bell, a copper funnel for drenching cattle, a home-made toasting fork made of wood and fencing wire. In the centre of the cabinet was a gap, an empty satin cushion bearing an indentation, and below it a printed caption: ‘Rare Bronze Age Artefact’, and a fragment of text apparently clipped from a magazine, headed ‘Link to Prehistoric Cult’. The world began to blacken, and Cat held on to edge of the display case to prevent herself from falling.

‘Hands off the glass please, ma’am.’

Cat took a breath, straightened, and turned to face Todd. ‘Where is the Bronze Age artefact from this display?’

The museum keeper leaned back on his heels, folded his arms, and stretched his lips into a smile. ‘It’s a very valuable artefact, that. I’ve had a lot of interest in it. Bloke from the BBC wanted to put it on the telly, and a scientist came out from London to test it. She got all excited, and told me I ought to hand it over to the British Museum. I said no way.’

‘So why isn’t it here?’

‘Security reasons.’

Cat was impatient. ‘What does it look like?’

‘It’s a wheel-headed pin, bronze, about six inches long.’

Her thoughts spinning, Cat closed her eyes. When she opened them, Todd was watching her curiously. She took a deep breath. ‘Can I see it?’

He folded his arms. ‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘It’s not on the premises at present. Come back tomorrow.’

That night, Cat sat with Merran in the hotel dining room, eating chips and toying with a piece of fish encased in greasy batter. Her thoughts were still on the conversation she'd had with the museum keeper, Todd. She wondered whether his precious Bronze Age artefact and her great grandfather's Radnadel were one and the same. If they were, then Jack must have been involved, somehow. She didn't share her speculations with Merran; she wanted to see the artefact first. Instead, she said, 'Tell me about your mother. That is, if you want to.'

Merran pushed her plate aside. 'She and her brother John were sent south during World War Two as part of a mass evacuation. From Alice Springs, they were sent to a children's home in Victoria, where they were told that their father had died, and their mother had given them up so they would have a better chance in life. Then they were separated from each other.'

Merran's voice was matter-of-fact. Her Uncle John, she told Cat, had been moved to a boys' home in South Australia, and her mother to a girls' home in New South Wales. 'They did not meet again for fifteen years. Mum lost everything, even her name. In the home they called her May Smith.'

'What was her real name?' Cat asked.

'I don't know. If she remembered, she never said.'

'What about your uncle? Did he remember anything?'

Merran shook her head. 'Not much. He was even younger than Mum when they were taken. And the government records are sketchy.'

'Your surname, McKinley. That's your father?'

Merran gave a short laugh. 'Mm. I've thought about changing it. Hugh McKinley wasn't much of a father. Not much of a husband either. Mum was only seventeen when she met him, fruit picking in the Riverland. They travelled together for six years, had three children. I was the eldest. When Mum was expecting her fourth, my little brother Ross, Hugh ran out on her.' Left her for a white girl—the boss's daughter. Mum brought us kids up on her own.'

'That can't have been easy.'

'She was a hard worker. Low-paid jobs—seasonal fruit-picking, cleaning, housekeeping, cooking—whatever she could get. She kept herself to herself, and shifted us all to a new town whenever people got too friendly. Nosy, she called it. It

was tough on us, all the moving. We were always the new kids in school, not to mention being Aboriginal.'

'So how did your uncle track her down?'

'The good old bush telegraph, I guess, combined with a bit of luck. They kept in touch now and then, but their lives went in different directions. Uncle John got married and settled down in Adelaide, and Mum kept on the move.'

Merran took a sip of her white wine. 'I asked her once why we never stayed in one place, and she said, "To keep you safe, lovey."'

'What did she mean?' Cat asked.

'I didn't understand then, either, but I do now. Her idea of safety was to keep us out of sight. She never gave information to anyone who asked questions, especially if they wore a uniform or wielded a pen, and she never asked for government assistance. *Welfare* was a word that had only one meaning to her. Whenever someone knocked on the door, she'd shoo us kids into hiding, and peer from behind the curtains. I can't tell you how many times we huddled together in cupboards or under beds, not daring to make a sound, until Mum gave the all clear. Even after we grew up, Mum never answered the door until she knew for certain who was waiting on the step.'

Cat looked at Merran with respect, wondering how this strong, compassionate woman had survived a past rooted in fear. 'I read some of that report—Bringing them Home,' Cat said. 'But I've never known anyone who was personally affected. It's not just about the past, is it? You've made me see the impact on families, whole generations of them. The culture is torn apart.'

'That was the general idea,' Merran said, a note of bitterness in her voice. 'Rip the little ones from their families and send them as far away as possible. Allow no contact, so they grow up with no identity, no power, and worst of all, no understanding of what they've lost. Just this gut-wrenching pain. Nothing is passed on except fear. They called it assimilation. I call it genocide.'

'The worst thing that happened in our family was my father's accident,' Cat said. 'His foot was injured, and he had to sell the farm. It was a big deal to us, but your family's story puts it in another perspective.'

Merran looked at Cat with sympathy. 'All families have their problems,' she said. 'I guess it's up to each new generation to try and work them out. I never tried to

make Mum talk about the past, after the first time. But now I have to find out.'

'Have you checked the records at the Museum?'

'I can't go in there. I've tried, but that guy gives me the creeps.' Merran shuddered.

'Todd? I know what you mean,' Cat agreed.

'Did you find anything about your uncle?' Merran asked. Cat shook her head, but before she could elaborate, Dingo appeared at their table, beer in hand. 'Hello! May I buy you ladies a drink?'

Merran declined, indicating her untouched glass, and Cat shook her head. 'Sit with us,' she invited.

'We were just talking about the museum,' Merran said, as Dingo pulled up a chair.

'I've been looking for clues about Jack,' Cat said. 'But no luck so far.'

'What about your grandmother's little blue case?' Dingo asked her.

'I looked through it, back at the Heartbreak Hotel,' she replied. 'I didn't find much.'

'Did you look through it properly?' he persisted. 'Piece by piece?'

She stared at him, and shrugged. 'You're so German.' But her search had been less than thorough. She looked down and bit her lip.

'Don't tell me,' Dingo said with a smile.

'Maybe my methods are a bit random,' she admitted.

'Shall I show you how to look properly? Like an archaeologist?' Dingo's face was alight with more than curiosity.

'If you want to.' Cat tossed her head and flicked her hair back.

Merran glanced from Cat to Dingo, and grinned. 'I think I'll have an early night, if you two will excuse me.' She hoisted her bag on to her shoulder. 'Be good,' she said as she departed.

*****

There was a chill in the air. When they got to her cabin, Cat pulled the plaid shirt on over her T-shirt. 'It suits you,' Dingo said.

She raised an eyebrow. 'It's just a cheap shirt from the local store,' she said.

He touched her sleeve. 'It's a man's shirt, but it's soft. Sexy.' Cat blushed, but Dingo had turned away. He pounced on the Tarot cards which she had left lying

on the table. ‘Nice art deco design. I’ve not seen a deck like this before. Are you into this kind of thing?’

‘They belonged to my grandmother.’

Dingo began to shuffle the cards, sliding the coloured boards between his hands. ‘Hold your question lightly, with a clear intent,’ Cat said softly, echoing Freya’s instructions from long ago.

‘What question?’

‘The one that’s in your mind.’ A slow smile crossed his face, which she pretended to ignore. ‘Now pick a card,’ she said.

He chose a card, sneaked a look at it, and held it against his chest with a teasing smile. When she made to snatch it, he held it high, hidden in his palm. She reached for his hand and he danced away across the room. She pinned him to the wall, forcing open his hand, but found it empty. ‘The Magician?’ she murmured, and he shook his head. She kept hold of his hand. It was warm and callused. Gazing into his face, she had a sudden urge to kiss him. His eyes suddenly serious, he moved closer. ‘I’ll make coffee,’ she said, releasing his hand and backing away.

When she set the mugs on the table, he took the Tarot card from his pocket and handed it to her. It showed a leering triple-eyed goat with serpents emerging from its chest, standing on a wheel of fire. Inside the wheel, tiny human figures ran in futility, while in the background a line of creatures queued up with sacrificial gifts.

‘The Devil,’ she whispered.

‘What does that mean?’ he asked. ‘That I’m evil?’

‘No,’ she said, flicking through Freya’s little book until she found the right page. ‘The Devil is about knowing your dark side. Your shadow.’ She showed him. *You may be implicated in the abuse of power. Whether this power is wielded by you or others, you are responsible for your actions. Ponder your motives carefully.*

‘Wow, that’s heavy.’ He frowned. ‘But it makes sense.’

‘Because of your work? The ceremonial stuff?’

He looked at her gravely, and hesitated. ‘Because of my work,’ he said. ‘Yes.’

‘And something else?’

He shook his head. ‘Who are you writing to?’ He indicated a half-written postcard on the table.

‘My sister, Lily,’ Cat said. ‘She’s a worry-wart like you.’ He looked gratified, as if she’d paid him a compliment.

She placed the hatbox on the table. ‘Let’s get on with this,’ she said, opening it and handing him Jack’s letter. He read with absorption, his face soft and open. He seemed transported, as if he could see the hand-hewn hut, the lush gardens, the great eerie trees, could hear the voices of Jack and Pearl and the children, and the rush of the river running past.

‘Closer to God in the bush than in any church,’ he murmured. ‘I like that.’ He smiled mistily.

‘Hey, don’t go all mushy on me,’ Cat said. ‘You’re not religious, are you?’

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘But I can see the fascination. This Jack is quite a romantic character, isn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ she said, studying Dingo’s face. He looked different tonight. Softer. His hair stood up in little tousled curls around his head. It was not ginger, she realised. More a coppery gold. When he handed the letter back, his hand brushed hers, and hovered there a little longer than was necessary.

She took the empty mugs to the sink, and then picked up the hatbox and upended it on the table. The contents cascaded around them. She picked up a dog-eared family portrait: the stern, bearded patriarch in pastor’s garb, the mild-eyed woman at his side with two toddlers at her knees, and the group of older children gathered around them.

She turned it over. ‘Lake Illusion, 1916,’ she read.

Dingo came around to stand behind her, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder as they studied the photograph.

‘That’s my grandmother, Freya.’ She pointed to a young woman with long hair tied back in a plaited knot holding two babies in her arms. ‘Those are her twin brothers, Kurt and Karl.’

‘And who’s this, standing next to her?’

He pointed to a young man, a little taller than Freya, a lanky but broad-shouldered youth with unruly hair and intense dark eyes.

‘That must be Jack, just before he ran away.’ She peered at the picture. The figure seemed somehow familiar.

‘Do you know why he left?’ Dingo asked.

‘Not really. There was an argument with his father. Something had been stolen. Freya was forced to punish one of the mission children, and she was terribly upset about it. When she got the chance, she left her father’s church for good.’

‘How did she manage that?’

‘Married an Anglican!’

They laughed.

Dingo sat down again, and together they went through the documents meticulously, sorting them into piles and reading every word, working late into the night. There were letters and postcards, notes for stories, recipes, newspaper clippings, birth and death notices, but no mention of Jack. Nor was there any sign among the photographs of the family group mentioned in Jack’s letter. Cat propped her chin in her hands. ‘Looks like another dead end.’

Dingo picked up the empty hatbox from the chair beside him. With careful fingers, he searched the folds of pale blue satin, and, finding a torn place, he felt inside the lining, and drew out a folded slip of paper. Without a word, he handed it to Cat. She unfolded it and smoothed it out on the table. It was a letter written in flowing script, in faded purple ink. Cat’s eyes met Dingo’s.

‘Go on,’ he said.

She read aloud.

> 24th September 1934
> My dear sister,
> I was glad to receive your letter on Monday last. There was a bit of a mix-up at the PO, since I forgot to tell you that I no longer go by the name Weis. I wanted to make a clean break and—well, it’s a long story, which I’ll tell you in person should we meet again. Please, if you reply to this, address your letter to J. Robinson.

‘That’s why I couldn’t find his name in the archives!’ Cat exclaimed, thinking back to her fruitless afternoon in the museum. ‘And that photo, the wild white man, it must be him!’

‘Cat, slow down!’ Dingo said, perplexed. ‘What photo?’

She described the half-naked man, his wild hair and bushy beard, his serene smile. ‘His name was Robinson, the museum keeper said. He lived by a river.’ She read on.

I have finished the irrigation system for the vegetable gardens and the orchard. We are harvesting supplies for the wet season, when the roads will be impassable. You should see our vegetables—barrowloads of them—and our watermelons, as large as geese! There are plenty of fish to be had, and a dugong hunt in the offing. The dugong is a type of sea-cow, most peculiar to look at, but quite placid in nature. It makes very good eating.

The favour I want to ask you is this: would you be a legal guardian of my children, should anything happen to me? I would rest easier knowing they will be cared for. I know it is a lot to ask, but if you agree, I'll put it in my will so everything is legal.

Freya, you ought to come up here and visit, if you can. Meet Pearl and the children. It is a simple life we have here, surrounded by these ancient trees, but a grand one.

Please tell Mama that I am well and happy.

Your loving brother, Jack

'He asked her to be guardian to his children!' Cat said.

'Nothing unusual in that.'

'But Jack died in 1941,' Cat said. 'And Freya never mentioned his children.'

Dingo took the letter and examined it again. 'Do you think she ever made that visit?'

Cat frowned. '"Find the children." That was the message she left for me.'

'Perhaps Jack never got around to making that will.'

'I'll check the archives again, now I know the right name.'

'A lot of Aboriginal children were evacuated from this area during the war,' Dingo said. 'Most never returned.'

'*Aboriginal* children?'

'Yeah. They rounded up all the kids with light-coloured skin and sent them to children's homes in the south.'

'Government policy, I know.' She stared at him, stupefied. Why had it not occurred to her before that Jack's children might be Aboriginal?

'"These ancient trees…"' he murmured. 'He must mean the cycads. There's only one place in this area where there's still an entire grove of them—out by Rufus River. I know it quite well—it was a traditional meeting place and ceremonial ground. A lot of Aboriginal people lived there until the fifties, when they started moving into town. There's a salt pan too.'

'That must be Jack's place!' Cat leaped up from her chair.

'There's an old feller still living out there. He'll know something.'

'When can we go?' Cat paced the room excitedly.

‘Whoa, steady on!’ Dingo came over and put his hand on her arm. ‘It’s a four hour trip on some pretty rough roads. I’ll drive you out there, but I can’t get away for a couple of days.’

‘Why not?’ she said, irritated, as always, by the voice of reason. ‘Come on, let’s go tomorrow!’ She gazed into his eyes, smiled persuasively. Nobody refused her when she was in this mood, ready for adventure.

Dingo stood back and shook his head. ‘Sorry. There’s something I have to do first.’ His voice was firm.

‘Right.’ Nobody could accuse him of being impulsive, she thought. Very German. Suddenly, she wished she had her car.

‘I’ll meet you at the pub tomorrow night, okay? Around six.’

‘Okay,’ she said.

He kissed her on the cheek when he said goodnight. Like a brother. Either he hadn’t noticed her sudden coolness, or he was pretending to ignore it. Or maybe she had misread the signs, and he wasn’t interested in her that way at all. Perhaps he had decided that she, too, made a better friend than a lover.

Lily: The Photograph

After another dreary pub meal and no clues to Cat's whereabouts, I sit cross-legged on the bed in my motel room in Alice Springs, and open Freya's box. I pick up a manuscript entitled 'The Visit', and something falls from between the pages. It is a carbon copy of a typed letter, folded around a faded photograph that looks as if it were taken with an old box Brownie: a small, dog-eared rectangle, its monochrome faded to sepia, the faces blurred, the horizon tilted.

A small family group stands at the front door of a house made of rough-hewn wood, surrounded by strange trees waving feathered tentacles at the sky. The man in shorts and open-necked shirt is smiling, his arm about the shoulders of a pretty, dark-skinned woman in a print dress with kindly eyes and short, curly hair. In her arms she holds a small boy with chubby cheeks. The smile she gives the camera is shy but proud. The man's right hand rests on the shoulder of a little girl who stands in front, holding a toy sewing machine, her wavy hair tied back with a bow. Like her mother's, her gaze is direct, but her expression is solemn.

The palm of my left hand tingles, and I am eight years old again, sitting at Freya's table, squeezing my eyes tight shut to avoid looking at the card in front of me. There is darkness, and a breathless stillness. Then from the darkness, there is pinpoint of light, and four figures walk toward me, holding hands: a man, a woman with curly hair, and two children. The man vanishes, and the woman kneels to embrace her children, but they are torn away from her. The sound of her grief is unbearable.

My heart pounding, I unfold the letter. It is dated 7 June 1941 and addressed to the Director of Native Affairs.

> Dear Sir,
>
> I write to you regarding my search for my niece and nephew, whom I believe were among a group of children evacuated from the Barramundi region under orders from the Military authorities. My brother, Mr Jack Robinson (formerly known as Weis) was killed in a tragic accident earlier this year. I implore your assistance in this matter, as my inquiries so far have been fruitless.
>
> The children's names are Maisie Robinson and Jack Robinson, Junior. I suspect they may have been placed in a so-called 'Half-Caste Institution' such as those run by the Church Missionary Society in the southern capitals. If that is the case, I request that they be returned to their mother as a matter of urgency, if she is still alive and capable of caring for them. Her name is Pearl, and she belongs to a clan from the Rufus River.

Failing that, my husband and I are most willing to provide these children, who are our blood relatives, with a loving Christian home.
Yours faithfully,
Freya Forsythe

I remember something.

It happened the summer I was sixteen, just after Cat left home. It was a day of breathless, clobbering heat: the kind of day it takes an effort just to move. Mirages shimmered on the stubble, the tar on the road had melted to indigo goo and small birds with gasping beaks crept beneath the geraniums. I was home from school, recovering from a stomach bug. There was no more clutching pain in my body, just a dreamy lassitude that was almost pleasurable on such a day. I was sitting on the back verandah trickling iced water from a glass over my bare toes, watching the drips make dark circles that instantly vanished on the faded cement, when the phone rang, its shrill outdoor bell clanging above my head like an alarm.

Mum came running up the steps, out of breath, and into the house, leaving the screen door flapping. The floorboards creaked as she ran down the passage. Grace always ran to answer the phone, afraid it might stop ringing before she got there, afraid she might never find out who had tried to call.

"Hello?" I heard her say. There was a pause. "Yes. That's right." Then she was quiet for a long time. So long, in fact, that I got up and went inside to see what was wrong. She was gripping the phone tightly, her free hand twisting a tendril of hair below her ear until it was wound tight. Her lips were pressed together and her eyes stared blankly at the wall. She nodded occasionally in an automatic way without uttering a sound. I moved closer. The voice coming from the receiver was that of a man, explaining something in measured tones. I couldn't make out his words, but I recognised the rising inflection of a question. Grace stared and nodded.

"Mum!" I nudged her. "He's asking you a question!"

Grace opened her mouth but no sound came out. The man asked another question and this time she croaked "No. I don't think so. No thank you." She replaced the receiver carefully on its hook, gazing at it as if she'd never seen a phone before. Her hand was shaking.

"Make me a cup of tea, Lily," was all she said.

I ran to put the kettle on. Had there been an accident? Had someone died?

Mum would not say a thing, but I kept pestering her. "Who was that man on the phone?"

Finally, she caved in, as I'd known she would. "He was a lawyer."

"What did he want?" I didn't trust lawyers. Dad had been through hell, trying to save the farm.

"It's nothing for you to worry about, Lil."

"But what did he want?" I persisted.

"He said someone wanted to contact me, someone claiming to be a relative."

"But don't we know all our relatives?" Mum had researched the family tree exhaustively for decades.

"Yes, of course we do."

'But Mum, what if we don't—what if it was some long-lost rich uncle who wants to give us money?"

Mum gave me a severe look. "And how likely is that, Lily?"

"Anything's possible." I shrugged.

"More likely some con-man after a handout," she said. "Anyway, I said we didn't want to meet them."

"Them?" I echoed. "there's more than one?"

"Apparently."

"Aren't you curious, just a bit?"

"No," Grace said. "I'm not. End of subject."

And that was that.

I pick up the photograph again. Tears spring to my eyes. So this was Freya's secret. This was why she seemed so sad. Not only did she lose her brother; she lost his family, too. And she never told me.

*****

Early next morning, my phone rings. I spring to answer, hoping it is Cat, but it is a policewoman, telling me Cat's car has been found by the roadside. My voice trembles as I ask for details. The officer says Cat might have picked up by a passing motorist, since her wallet and luggage are also missing.

'That's a good sign?' I ask, thinking it could mean she's been robbed or abducted.

'We're investigating,' the officer says. 'We'll let you know as soon as we have anything concrete.' There had been no accident, she told me, and there was no obvious damage to the car. Apparently, this was another reason for optimism.

‘Catherine was seen leaving a hotel on the Barkly Highway. A place called Heartbreak.’

‘How do I get there?’ I ask. She tries to dissuade me, but I am determined to find my sister, and in the end she gives me directions. I pack my gear, pay my bill, and set off for the Heartbreak Hotel.

The Devil

Cat studied the photograph of Jack Robinson. If you took away the beard and the battered hat, the face with the raffish grin looked just like the boy in Freya's photo, only older, more sunburnt. It had to be her Jack.

'Can you tell me more about this man?' she asked the museum keeper.

Todd was bent over a display cabinet, squirting the glass with blue liquid from a spray bottle, and polishing it carefully until all the streaks were gone. When he had finished, he straightened and regarded her with suspicion.

'Robinson? Why?'

'He was an interesting character, from what you tell me.'

'Town was full of 'em, back in them days. Tramps and loners, odd bods and outlaws—all sorts that couldn't get along in ordinary society.'

'Couldn't—or chose not to?' she asked.

'He was a bit too friendly with the natives, if you get my meaning. Upset a lot of people in town. But I suppose he was happy enough out at Rufus River, him and his Swedish mate and their darky girlfriends,' Todd sneered.

Cat tried to control her temper. 'So what if they married Aboriginal women?'

Todd chuckled. 'Marriage, you call it, do you? Not by our laws, darling. Jack was a strange one, is all I'm saying. Had a temper on him, too. He threatened my father with a shotgun once. Only the once, mind. My father did not take kindly to that kind of nonsense. Your precious Jack Robinson did time in a police cell, my word he did.'

'What for?'

'Poddy dodging.'

Cat looked bewildered.

'Stole another bloke's calves and put his own brand on them. Oh, he wasn't the only one to do it, not by a long shot. But he was fool enough to get caught,' Todd said with relish.

Cat regarded him sceptically.

'He died soon after this picture was taken,' Todd added.

'How?'

'Shooting accident.' He shook his head, whether in sorrow at the waste of a life, or in condemnation of her great uncle's foolhardy ways, she could not tell.

‘Anyway, it’s all in the past. Let it lie.’ He leaned back on his heels and folded his arms across his chest.

She frowned. ‘Why would I do that? I’m here to find out about him.’

‘Some things are best left alone,’ he said ominously.

Cat left then, walking up the hill and dropping the postcard to Lily in the letterbox on her way to the store, where she bought milk and a few unnecessary items. An hour before closing time, she went back to the museum, determined to continue her research. Todd was busy with some paperwork, and did not look up as she stole past his office to the back room where the archives were kept. Quietly, she opened drawers and flipped through the alphabetical files of past residents. There it was: a bulging buff-coloured folder bearing the label ‘Robinson, J., 1899-1941’. She shuffled quickly through copies of legal documents, letters, and news clippings. There was no sign of a will. A newspaper headline caught her eye. ‘Death of Aboriginal Woman. Startling Allegations—Inquiry Demanded.’ Beneath the headline was a printed letter to the editor of the *Crocodile Creek Times*, published in April, 1933. She skimmed the contents, glancing now and then toward the door.

The letter called for justice for a group of Aboriginal people charged with cattle killing and held in the Barramundi gaol. The author, a J. McAllister, claimed to have offered himself as a witness in defence of one of the accused men, who had been in his employ as a cattle drover at the time. Upon hearing this, the arresting officer, a Mounted Constable Todd—Cat caught her breath—had promptly altered the date of the ‘alleged offence’. The constable had then arrested a number of others, ‘including a woman named Lucy. When I asked him what she was charged with, he told me he could charge her with a dozen offences. Lucy appeared to be in good health when I saw her, but died a few days later in suspicious circumstances.’

She read the remainder of the letter intently.

> During the journey on foot to Barramundi, Todd chained the prisoners up all night under a downpour with no shelter … Todd ordered his police tracker to restrain the women while he thrashed them with sticks. Lucy, besides being continually beaten was given nothing to eat for three days and nights but salt and cooking water and compelled to walk naked carrying a heavy load of beef. When she collapsed from exhaustion, she was tied up and carried to the camp at Rufus River, where she was left until she died. She was buried in a hole only two feet deep in the riverbank … there was no examination of the body nor official certification of death. To date, her death has not been reported as suspicious, nor has any request been made for a post-mortem examination.

McAllister's letter concluded by demanding an inquiry 'by some impartial tribunal' into the woman's mistreatment and death, and calling for 'all those who mean to be a friend to the Aboriginal' to ensure that 'witnesses would not be beaten up and intimidated.'

Hearing voices in the front room, Cat tucked the file under her arm and slid the cabinet drawer closed. She stifled a yelp of pain as she caught her finger in the mechanism, and ducked out of sight behind the filing cabinet.

'Got a minute for me, mate?' It was Dingo's voice.

'Just about to close up.' Todd's voice was close, as if he were about to enter the room where she was hiding. Then she heard a thud and a click as the glass panelled door closed. She could hear the men still talking, though their voices were muffled. She crept across to the door, and squatted awkwardly, craning her neck to peer through the glass without being seen. Dingo and Todd stood together beside the display case next to the guns, talking earnestly. Dingo entreated; Todd resisted. Then Todd pointed at Dingo accusingly. Dingo put his hands in the air, shaking his head.

Then both men laughed. Panic churned in her stomach. What were they were up to? She knew little, she realised, about the nature of Dingo's business. He might even have lied about being an anthropologist. The foreign contacts, the objects concealed in his ute, the 'secret men's business', could point to something utterly different; he might be smuggling artefacts out of the country and selling them on the black market. It was obvious, at least, that they were negotiating some kind of deal. She certainly didn't trust Todd.

She watched as Dingo patted Todd's shoulder and glanced toward the archive room where she was hiding. She crouched low, her heart thudding. After a while, she heard the slam of a door, the rattle of a key, and the click of a lock. She leaped up and ran to the door, but the two men were gone. She was locked in.

She prowled the museum perimeters, searching for a way out. But Todd was cautious and methodical, and every door and window was securely locked. She searched for something—a knife, a piece of wire—to trip the lock. If she had to, she could break a window, but that would betray her presence. Perhaps there was a spare key. She went through desk drawers, and felt above the door jamb and in the pockets of a coat she found hanging behind a door. Nothing. Recalling Freya's trick of taping a spare key beneath a small table on her back verandah, she felt beneath every table

and cabinet. Success! Taped beneath the desk in Todd's office was a brass key. But it was too small. The front door remained resolutely locked.

As she passed the glass cabinet containing 'Miscellaneous Items of Interest', she halted in her tracks. The empty place had been filled.

The Radnadel blazed like fire.

She gazed at it. It was exactly as Freya had drawn it: a pin the length of her hand, its head a wheel with four spokes radiating from a central ring to an outer rim, with a little damage to one edge. Beneath it was the fragment of text she had noticed previously.

> **Link to Prehistoric Cult**
> Wheel-headed pins recovered from a Bronze Age gravesite may have been used in prehistoric religious rituals, according to experts. The motif of the four-spoked wheel is unusual, as this type of wheel was unknown in Bronze Age Europe. Archaeologists speculate that such wheel-like embellishments may instead be symbolic representations of the sun, fashioned for ceremonial use in the rituals of a solar cult.

Dingo had known about this! He must have been trying to persuade Todd to part with the Radnadel. It was probably worth a lot of money. But neither of them had any right to it.

She tried the lid, but the cabinet was locked. She fetched the brass key she had found in Todd's desk drawer and inserted it into the lock. It fitted perfectly. *Click.* She raised the lid, and lifted out the Radnadel. It lay cold and heavy in her hand. She stared at the shape that had imprinted itself on her memory, now solid and real in her palm. It grew warm, like something alive. Her head swam, and her body felt incredibly light...

Darkness. She breathes in the scent of resin, hears the sound of water dripping. There is a distant drumming—or is it just the muffled beating of her heart? She sees treetops silhouetted against a misty sky, a forest glade, figures dancing in a circle. Women's voices chanting. Their language is unknown to her, but the rhythm of their song is familiar. As the music reaches a crescendo, the glade is suffused with light.

Cat woke up on the floor of the museum, freezing cold. How long had she been unconscious? She lay for a few moments breathing in the stale air, then sat up

slowly. Her hand still clutched the wheel pin. She thrust it deep into her bag, along with the file on Jack Robinson.

Searching once more for a way out, she saw a chink of light coming from behind a cupboard in Todd's office. She managed to move it a little and discovered a small window looking out onto a disused laneway at the side of the building. It was stuck fast, but had no lock. She heaved the cupboard aside and worked the window loose using a blade and a metal ruler she found in Todd's desk drawer. Open, it was just wide enough for her to squeeze through.

She climbed the hill, stopping long enough outside the hotel to scrawl an angry note, which she stuck beneath the windscreen wiper of the lime green ute. Mean words that she didn't really mean. But she wanted him to know he had hurt her.

She walked to the clinic on the other side of town. Merran was out. She mooched disconsolately out of the clinic to the glare of the street. A black Subaru screeched to a halt in front of her. 'Hey, Cat!' Merran called. 'I'm driving out to Rufus River to see a feller who might know something about my mother. Want to come? I'll pick you up first thing tomorrow.'

Lily: Abandoned

At the Heartbreak Hotel, the receptionist confirms what the policewoman has told me: Cat stayed here on Friday night. I go straight to the bar, showing Cat's picture to everyone I meet, but there aren't many people around. The barman is new to the job; he shakes his head, and calls out to someone in the kitchen. A fleshy, freckled man shuffles out. He remembers Cat; says she caused a ruckus in the bar with some comment she made, and that she'd been talking to a red-haired man, a visitor on his way to the Gulf country.

'Did you hear what they said?' I ask hopefully.

'No,' he says. 'Sorry. It was a busy night.'

Seeing my disappointment, the freckled man wrinkles his brow and scratches his head. 'That feller had a funny name for a foreigner,' he says. 'Dingo, that was it.'

*****

I leave the hotel early the next morning, heading for Crocodile Creek, the next big town on the map. The road is a single lane stretching to the horizon, the country so parched that even the saltbush hangs lifeless and grey. There is a line of low hills, purple in the distance. The sky is blue and flat, as if it has been painted on with a roller. Except for the dwindling highway, there is nothing in the landscape to give any sense of perspective. The earth is an expanse of red so intense it's like neon, daubed here and there with square clumps of scrub and tufts of grass. It looks just like a Fred Williams painting. And I had always thought of his work as abstract.

I slide a CD into the player and the car fills with music, giving shape and suspense to the monotony of driving, allowing me to pretend that I'm a character in a story and that anything might happen.

Nothing happens. I keep driving.

I tried to call Cat again this morning. For once, I got through, but there was only the ringing and the message on her voicemail. *Cat here. Leave a message, I'll call you back. Ciao!* Hopeful, I left a message, though I know for a fact that Cat rarely checks her voicemail.

There was once an artist who lived alone in the desert in North America. She tied back her hair, wore simple black clothing, and painted pictures of stark beauty. Her paintings were stripped of sentiment, reduced to essential forms. A single flower, magnified beyond recognition to become something alien, sensuous, labyrinthine. The sun-bleached bones of an animal lying on the sand, pointing to past and future.

Like the desert, this woman's work removes what is superficial: skin, flesh, habitual ways of seeing. Would I have the guts to live like she did, abandoning everything for art? And if I did—what would become of me?

I pass a wrecked car partly hidden by a bush; there is something familiar about it. I slow down, peering into the rear vision mirror until I can no longer see it. Then I think, what if that's Cat's car?

I put my car into reverse until it is alongside the wreck. I get out, and stare in shock. The car is stripped and torched, a blackened skeleton, The windows are smashed. There are no seats, no number plates, no tyres. The engine has been removed. The dashboard looks like something out of a painting by Dali. The wreck might have been here for years, but I am convinced it is Cat's. On the rear window, I find the powdery remnants of a sticker. It had been the glittery kind, purple lettering on a silver ground. *Magic happens.* That's what it said. I know—I gave it to her.

My chest constricts with fear. What has happened? Is she alive? Is she okay? My hands are shaking, and I have to fight to control my breathing. There's nobody to help me if I succumb to a panic attack out here. I get back into my car, and slump forward over the steering wheel with my head on my arms. Tears leak from between my eyelids.

She'll be okay, I tell myself. Cat is a survivor. But still I am afraid.

Two black crows flap slowly across a cobalt sky, their mournful cries wavering like a worn out cassette tape. *Aa-aark. Aaa-aaaark.*

*****

Further north, past the Tropic of Capricorn, the air changes. The bone dry heat of the desert air becomes soft and moist. Where there was low scrub there are now tall, graceful trees. Driving through this tropical wilderness, I wind down the car windows. My skin, eyes and muscles relax and for the first time I become aware of the tension I've been carrying in my body.

I pull up at a service station outside Crocodile Creek and try calling Cat again. But my phone shows 'no service'. The public telephone booth in the main street is broken. I try the local police station. A young officer goes off to enquire, and comes back smiling to tell me that my sister is staying at the caravan park in a town called Barramundi. A message has been left, asking her to get in touch. The officer gives me the number, and offers the use of a telephone.

The man at the caravan park does not appreciate the urgency of the situation. He says that he's seen Cat, but that she's not there at present. He answers my questions tersely. When I ask him to take a message, he is not pleased. I wait while he writes it down, listening to his wheezing breath, the scratching of his pen.

Then I call Grace, and tell her all is well. It is a lie, but only a white lie.

The young policeman draws me a map.

I get back in my car and head for Barramundi.

After several hours of driving, I stop the car beside a bridge over a wide, brown river fringed with gum trees. I sit and gaze at the water. The setting sun is reflected in ripples and dancing leaves, playing tricks with my eyes. I hear the calls of birds, or is it children's laughter? There is an old cattle truck, rusting, half-hidden by trees.

It is almost dark when I arrive in Barramundi. I drive slowly through the town, irrationally hoping for a glimpse of Cat, or some evidence that she is safe. There are men staggering about the hotel car park, throwing cans. They stand in a ragged circle, cheering, as two men swing their fists at one another.

Down the hill at the caravan park, all is quiet. I ring the bell, rap on the door marked RECEPTION, and call out, but there is no response. Hearing voices from outside, I venture around the side of the building and find two men in the middle of an argument. 'What do you mean, she checked out?' a tall, red-haired man is saying. He doesn't sound like a local; he has some sort of accent, probably German or Swiss.

'Like I said, mate, she checked out,' says the other man. He has a beaky nose and thinning grey hair, and wears baggy tracksuit pants and a singlet. 'Took all her stuff.'

Hope surges in my chest.

'Where did she go?' the first man demands.

'Search me, mate. Took off with a lady in a black Subaru.'

'Aha,' the red-haired man says. 'Merran McKinley.'

I have to interrupt. 'Who are you talking about?' I ask. 'Only I'm looking for my sister.'

The taller man turns and grins at me. 'Is her name Cat?' he asks. 'Stubborn woman with dark hair that she flicks back?'

'That's her!' I am so relieved I hug him. I don't mention that she only does that thing with her hair when she's flirting with someone.

‘I’m Lily.’

‘Dan Adler, known to my friends as Dingo.’

‘You’re the guy she spoke to at Heartbreak,’ I say.

‘Has she been telling tales on me?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘I haven’t heard from her.’

‘Her car broke down,’ Dingo says. ‘I gave her a lift.’

‘I saw the car.’

‘Anything left of it?’

I can’t speak, but he sees my expression, and puts a hand on my shoulder in sympathy. ‘She’s okay though.’

‘I hope so.’

‘So, Lily,’ Dingo says. ‘It seems we’re both chasing after Cat.’

‘Chasing after Cat is the story of my life,’ I say, and he smiles wryly, like someone who has found an ally.

‘If you folks are all sorted, I’ve got work to do,’ grumbles the grey-haired man.

‘I need to book a cabin for the night,’ I say.

‘See the missus round at the office,’ the man says as he slouches away.

‘There’s nobody there—’ But I’m talking to his back.

‘Cheerful bloke, isn’t he?’ Dingo says, as we stroll toward the office.

Inside, I ring the bell on the counter.

‘Cat’s on a mission to find out about some long-lost uncle,’ Dingo tells me.

‘I thought it was something like that,’ I say. ‘She’s always on some mission. It’s a wonder she didn’t drag me into it this time.’

‘Looks like she did.’ He smiles broadly.

‘Mm, very funny. Has she found anything?’

A buxom, bespectacled woman in a print dress bustles out from the back room.

‘Apparently he was known around here as Jack Robinson,’ Dingo says. The woman behind the counter gives a start, and eyes him curiously. Cat can tell you about it herself, when we catch up with her,’ he says. The woman behind the counter looks disappointed.

‘*If* we catch up with her. I’d like to book a cabin, please. A single.’ The woman gets out her register and copies the information from my business card.

‘Cat doesn’t trust me,’ Dingo says. ‘Keeps giving me the slip. Thinks I’m the Devil.’

‘Pardon?’

‘She has these Tarot cards.’

‘Oh?’ So it was her who took them. Who else? ‘Look, I must find her. Do you have any idea where they’ve gone?’

‘Possibly,’ he says. ‘But first thing tomorrow, I’ll drop by the clinic where Merran works. They’ll know where she’s gone.’

We arrange to meet the next morning, and Dingo leaves.

‘Any preferences, dear?’ the woman asks. ‘There are plenty of cabins available. I’m Mrs Minchinton, by the way.’

I tell her I’m Cat’s sister and ask whether I can have her cabin. ‘There’s no need to clean it,’ I add.

Mrs Minchinton looks shocked. ‘But we always clean the cabins, dear. You should see the state of some of them! You never know what you might find.’ Eventually she relents, but insists on following me to inspect the cabin. ‘I couldn’t help overhearing,’ she says. ‘The name Jack Robinson—I knew him, you know. Or at least, my father did. Are you related?’

‘He was my great uncle,’ I say.

‘It’s outrageous, isn’t it, how things are misrepresented in the press? Sensationalised. Exaggerated. And sometimes just plain wrong.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘“Missing Believed Drowned”, the headlines said. But they never found a body, did they? And then when he turned up hale and hearty in the backblocks and got done for cattle duffing with his mate Barney Hill, “Local Man on Trial” the papers screamed. But they never linked him to the young lad who went missing from Lake Illusion ten years before.’

‘You’re talking about Jack?’ I ask.

‘Yes, dear. Didn’t you know? Those two spent months in the town jail. They were quite famous around here. While they were in there, they read every book in the town library. And it was quite a library in those days, I’m told. Then they got off on a technicality, but that was never in the papers. The press is only interested in headlines, not the nitty-gritty. Did they pinch a calf or two? Well, it’s not for me to say, is it, dear, but I believe it was a common enough offence in those days. The

station bosses mostly turned a blind eye when some young drover helped himself to a couple of calves to get started on his own. It was a different story, though, if a blackfeller speared a beast to feed his family. Even if it was his ancestral land.'

'Racism,' I say.

'Indeed,' Mrs Minchinton agrees. 'The stories I could tell you.'

'What happened to Jack after he got out of jail?'

'He settled down with a local girl, out Rufus River way.'

'Have you told any of this to Cat? She's trying to find out about Jack.'

'She never mentioned it to me. Anyway, that Constable Todd, he got off scot free.'

'Constable Todd?'

'A nasty piece of work, he was. Beat the natives, treated them like slaves. One poor woman died, but it was all hushed up. There wouldn't even have been an enquiry, if McAllister and Robinson hadn't made a fuss.'

I am confused, and desperately tired, but I make a mental note to tell Cat about all this.

'Well, I mustn't hold you up, dear.' Mrs Minchinton shuffles to the door. 'Give us a hoy if you want anything, won't you?' And she leaves me in blessed silence.

I scour the cabin, looking into cupboards and behind doors for anything Cat might have left behind. There is nothing.

Part Five: Jack’s Country

The River

It was a rough road to Rufus River, even in the dry season. ‘This road is impassable in the wet,’ Merran said. ‘It floods. Anyone who lives out this way is stranded until the dry.’ She told Cat about Spider Gustafson, whom she had met at the clinic during one of his rare visits to Barramundi. He had grown up by the river, worked on the cattle stations for fifty years, and returned to the river as an old man. Another patient had told Merran that a sister and brother from Rufus River had been among those evacuated during World War II, and she hoped Spider might be able to help her identify them.

Cat told Merran about her escape from the museum, and the document she had found in Jack’s file. She didn’t mention the wheel pin, which nestled in her bag beneath the seat.

‘Did the cop get away with it? Let me guess!’ Merran frowned angrily. ‘Do you think Jack was involved?’

‘That’s what I want to find out.’

‘Old Spider might remember something about it.’

Merran’s car rattled and bounced along the corrugated road. Cat felt ill, but when she mentioned it, Merran only laughed. ‘You whitefellers need to toughen up.’ Cat had no answer to that.

After almost two hours, they turned into an unmarked gateway, crossed a cattle grid, and followed a track that looped and meandered among abandoned cars and trees. Cat pointed to a stand of tall, odd-looking trees with reptilian trunks crowned by clusters of feathery fronds. ‘What are those?’ Cat asked.

‘Cycads,’ Merran replied. ‘See those yellow fruits? They are a traditional food of this region. The people would grind them into flour. But they’re toxic if they’re not soaked for a long time. A few white explorers learned that lesson the hard way.’

‘They don’t look like trees at all. More like aliens.’

‘They’re ancient, from the time of the dinosaurs’, Merran told her. ‘They’re guardians of this place. There’s an important dreaming story about them.’

As they drove, Cat saw more of the strange trees. They were everywhere. ‘Tell me.’

‘Sorry, I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Only the custodians of this country have that right.’

In the silence, Cat stared at the cycads, taking in their eerie power.

Merran pulled up beside a building that looked rather like the nest of a bower-bird. Its core was a hut of hand-hewn logs, but there were so many extensions in such a variety of materials that the hut had lost its original shape. Odd pieces of timber, lengths of corrugated iron, canvas, hessian sacks, and an old car windscreen had been added, creating a ramshackle effect that was oddly appealing. Tiny windmills made from soft drink cans turned slowly, and strands of fishing line strung with tobacco tins rattled tunelessly above a mound overrun with flowering pumpkin vines, their yellow and green vivid against the dirt.

Beyond the makeshift house, rusting car parts and fallen logs lay in the soft red dust. Brindled goats nibbled on dry grasses and low bushes. Eucalypts and tamarind trees swayed gently, and the fronds of the cycads made a scratchy rustling sound. Cat sniffed the air as she got out of the car. Beneath the aromas of dust and spice she caught the fecund scent of the river. Merran stood beside the car, looking about as if she were trying to identify something.

‘What’s up?’

Merran shook her head. ‘Nothing. It just feels weird here.’

Cat looked about her. There was no trace of the lush gardens that had produced barrow loads of vegetables and melons the size of geese. There was no running water, no plumbing. Empty jars and rusting tobacco tins lay strewn about in the dirt; hens roosted in the wrecks of cars. The fate of everything in this place seemed to be a slow subsidence beneath layers of powdery dust. She found it difficult to imagine the idyllic life of which Jack had boasted.

A small, wiry man appeared from around the side of the house and half-skipped, half-hobbled toward them, waving his arms in greeting. He had leathery skin, bright black eyes and a wicked grin.

‘Hey, Uncle Spider!’

The old man gripped Merran in a fierce embrace, crowing with pleasure. When she introduced Cat, he hugged her too, with surprising strength. He stood back and regarded them, smiling broadly. ‘Welcome to Rufus River, ladies,’ he said, flinging his arms wide to offer them his empire of grass and trees, water and sky.

He led them past the house to a campfire overlooking the river and invited them to sit down. The stone hearth was surrounded by an eclectic array of seating: a

fallen tree trunk, a leather car seat with the stuffing coming out, and several faded floral armchairs. The river murmured below, its topaz waters reflecting the sky and the trees that hung over the far bank.

Spider piled fresh wood on the fire and fetched water from a nearby tank in a battered billycan. He hung the billy from an ingeniously-constructed tripod above the flames and settled back into the worn remains of a regency-striped sofa, which almost engulfed him. Merran chose a wooden kitchen chair, turning to sit astride and lean her elbows on the back. Cat lowered herself gingerly on to the car seat.

'Look out for eggs!' Spider cackled. 'Chooks like to lay in that one.' He and Merran erupted into laughter as Cat leaped to her feet.

'You shouldn't tease her, Uncle,' Merran said.

'Why not?' retorted Cat. 'You're obviously both enjoying yourselves.'

'Ha, you should have seen the look on your face!' Merran said.

Cat poked out her tongue, and sat down with exaggerated dignity.

Spider threw a handful of tea leaves into the billy and lifted it from the fire.

They sat sipping hot tea from the enamel mugs that Spider handed out. 'Tell me, Uncle Spider,' Merran began. 'Did you know some children who were taken from here during the Second World War? A brother and sister?'

Spider tilted his head and his bright, dark eyes regarded her thoughtfully. 'A whole mob of kids was taken up to Crocodile Creek Mission during the war,' he said. 'Brothers, sisters, cousins.'

Merran waited, pressing her lips together as if prepared for disappointment.

'My best friend was a feller called Jack Junior,' Spider said. 'He had a big sister, Maisie.'

'Jack Robinson's children!' interrupted Cat.

'That's right,' Spider said. 'My Dad and Uncle Jack leased this place together to work the saltpan. My Mum and Pearl were cousins. Sisters, in the old way.'

'Jack was my great uncle,' Cat said. She looked at Merran. 'If Maisie was your mother...'

Merran swallowed. 'They lived here,' she said, her voice wobbly. She shuffled a foot back and forth in the dirt, making circles with her toe. Her eyes gleaming with unshed tears, she pushed back her chair, stood up and stalked off among the trees.

Cat stood up, but Spider put a hand on her arm. 'Let her be.'

Cat sat down and finished her tea. It tasted pungent and smoky.

‘People learn not to get their hopes up,’ Spider said. ‘I’ve seen it time and again. Even when families are reunited, it doesn’t always work out. Too much has been lost.’

Merran wandered alone among the trees. When she came back and sat down by the fire again, she was quiet.

‘Tell us about Pearl,’ Cat said to Spider.

‘She was my aunty, my second mother,’ he said. ‘Always singing, she was. That’s what I remember best. All kinds of songs—language, blues, jazz, country. But sometimes she was shy.’ He shook his head. ‘But when Jack and the kids were gone, there were no more songs.’

‘Why didn’t the welfare take you, Uncle Spider?’ Merran asked. ‘Your skin is as light as my Mum’s.’

‘Too ugly for ‘em, I guess,’ he joked. ‘Nah, I was lucky—my mother hid me.’

‘In a cupboard?’ Merran asked.

‘In the goat-pen with my brothers,’ Spider said, and they laughed.

A black and tan goat nosed in among the circle of seats and nudged Spider’s elbow. ‘He wants a biscuit,’ Spider said. ‘Not today, my little mate.’ He gave the animal an affectionate smack and sent it to join its brethren, descendants of the five hundred goats that Jack had kept. It was the river that brought the white men here, Spider said, and the salt that made them stay, two adventurers nearing middle age, looking for a livelihood and a place to settle down. In the dry season, they had employed local people to collect and bag the salt, which they ferried to Barramundi in their ketch.

Spider said he had something to show them, and they followed him downriver, past the circular corral of split logs where he penned his goats at night, to a wild place where the banks were steep and fringed with pandanus and brooding cycads. In a clearing nine hand-hewn wooden posts, weathered silver, formed an open rectangle, enclosing a patch of dirt that had been cleared of weeds and raked smooth. Merran bowed her head.

‘This is Jack’s grave,’ Spider said.

There was no headstone, no epitaph, not even a name or a date carved into the wood, just a rectangle of dirt. At least, Cat thought, Jack had been laid to rest in the place of his choosing. ‘How did he die?’ she asked.

‘He had a terrible temper,’ Spider said. ‘That’s what started it. But I was just a young feller. My mother sent me across the river to my uncles when it happened. Best you hear the story from Emily.’

‘Who is she?’ Merran asked.

‘An old lady who was there, Pearl’s aunty. Lives on Lumey Island.’

It was arranged that they would stay the night at Rufus River, and travel to Lumey Island the following morning. In the afternoon Cat went walking on her own, followed by a straggle of curious goats. Their blank eyes stared curiously into hers, as if they were waiting for something, an answer to a question that she did not understand. The brown river flowed silently, overhung with thick scrub and trees. The place had a desolate beauty that could not be compared with anything she had previously known. She sensed a presence ancient and immense, and felt alongside it her own spirit, small and feeble. She clambered down the crumbling riverbank and loped along a narrow sandy beach until she could go no further, her path blocked by a tangle of shrubs and mangrove roots. She sat on the sand and pulled off her boots and socks to cool her feet in the water. It was quiet; too quiet, she realised. There was no splashing from fish or frogs, no flurry of feathers, no twittering of birds, only a couple of hawks circling lazily, high in the sky.

Back at camp, she asked Spider about the absence of bird life. He pointed to what looked like an old tree trunk floating in the river. She stared, puzzled, until the log moved, opening a cavernous jaw lined with rows of pointed teeth in a great yawn. ‘Old Charlie,’ Spider said.

It was a crocodile, three metres long. Cat froze, thinking of how she had paddled her naked feet in the water just upstream.

‘Does he ever come out of the water?’ she asked.

‘Only when he’s hungry,’ Spider said, grinning.

Their evening meal was a gift from a neighbour who ran a business shipping mud crabs to city restaurants. As their dinner simmered in the pot, Spider told—or rather, re-enacted—a story about the time he had been putting the live crustaceans into a sack when one attached itself with vicious pincers to his hand. The crab, in Spider’s rendition, was a warrior, mocking, even in death, the feeble antics of its

human foe, who danced in pain like a demented clown. Even when he tore the body apart, and bit down on the tendon, the crab's claw did not relinquish its powerful grip. Finally, with help, the claw was removed, but his hand was deeply wounded. Chuckling, he showed them the scar.

They ate the crabs in silence, coaxing the sweet white flesh from the shells, the juices running down their chins.

Afterwards, as the empty shells lay smouldering on the fire, and the evening closed around them, Spider talked about his childhood. He waved his hands as if to sweep away the dilapidated hut, the rusting cars, the rubbish-strewn camp. His high, lilting voice conjured up a paradise that shimmered enticingly beside the riverbank, a place where people lived together in harmony. It was a simple life, yet peaceful, just as Jack had said.

Spider had learned from his Aboriginal uncles, and his white fathers, and from the land itself. He came to know the river, sea, and shore. Across the river was the camp of his mother's people, and, further north, the old ceremonial ground, an important place where the clans came together for meetings and for ceremony. The white men never crossed the river to the sacred place. When Cat asked why ceremony was no longer held there, Spider merely shook his head. 'Things change,' he said. There was no regret in his voice, merely a hint of resignation. He remembered playing on the banks of the river with Jack Junior, wading into the brown water, slapping its surface with the palms of their hands, *thwak, thwak*. They stood waiting, watching the water for the hooded eye of the crocodile. At the slightest sign of movement they would scramble up the bank to safety, shouting with excitement.

Spider could ride a horse, muster a herd of cattle, track a kangaroo, spear a turtle, and hunt a dugong. He knew where to pick edible plants and how to prepare bush medicine for coughs and colds, cuts and bruises. His life, past and present, was all here. He had lived with his parents in a wooden house with a thatched roof and a proper indoor kitchen next door to the almost identical house Jack had built for his family. There was a guest house for visitors, a separate bathroom and laundry, and a work shed. Two wells and a small lagoon supplied water to the vegetable gardens and fruit trees. They had grown beans, peas, tomatoes, pumpkins and watermelons. Spider spread his arms wide to show them the size of the melons.

'Then it was gone,' he said.

‘What happened?’ they asked, as they were meant to.

‘One morning, as we ate our breakfast, we heard rumbling and roaring from downriver,’ Spider said. ‘My mother and my aunties and uncles packed everything up quick smart and moved us to a camp inland. They knew it was coming, you see—the cyclone. And the rumbling we heard—that was a tidal wave. It came all the way up the river from the sea. When we came back, everything was gone. It would have broken old Jack’s heart if he’d been alive to see it. The houses, the camps, the gardens: it was all just mud. Nothing grew here for years and years afterwards. The soil was poisoned by the salt.’

‘Salt!’ Cat said.

‘A tricky spirit,’ the old man said.

‘Did Jack ever speak of his family?’ Cat asked. ‘I mean his parents, brothers and sisters?’

‘Not often,’ Spider replied. ‘But a lady came to visit once. She had a blue case like yours.’

The Visit

Rufus River, 1934

'You must be Pearl,' Freya said. She stood in the open doorway, holding her luggage: the brocade travel bag in one gloved hand, the new hatbox in the other. There was dust on her shoes, a fine, clinging dust that seemed to stick to everything.

'And you are Jack's sister,' said the woman, giving her a quick smile before she cast down her wide, dark eyes. She was slender, and wore a cotton dress sprigged with roses, and a blue apron. Her arms were bare.

Freya smiled back, put down her luggage, and stood there, suddenly shy. It was hot. Her grey travelling costume was stifling; she longed to the feel the air on her skin. She took a step into the room. It had a stone floor and a window looking out into the yard. Rough-hewn wooden benches lined one walls with pans and utensils hung above them. A wire-fronted cool safe stood in one corner, and a wood-oven in another. The sweet, warm smell of baking filled the room.

Wordlessly, Pearl poured water from a jug and handed her a glass. Freya sipped thankfully. The life they lived here was a world away from her own, but perhaps not so different in its daily rituals. The rest of the family could not understand why Jack had chosen this life. They believed it pointed to a weakness, a deficiency of character. But Freya trusted that it was right for him.

'This is your kitchen?' she said, simply to break the silence.

Pearl nodded, smiling proudly. 'Jack made all of this.' Her eloquent hands fluttered, taking in walls, benches, shelves and cupboards. 'The stove came on the boat from Crocodile Creek. But we cook on the campfire when it's fine.'

Freya followed Pearl outside, toward the riverbank, where a circle of logs was arranged around a large fire. A big cooking pot stood to one side and above the fire a billy hung from a specially-designed iron tripod. Freya smiled; that was definitely one of Jack's inventions.

He appeared then, with two giggling children clinging to his arms. They fell silent when they saw Freya. 'Maisie and Jack, this your Aunt Freya. Say hello.' The girl ran to her mother, clutching at her dress, burying her face in its folds. Clutching his father's hand, the little boy gave Freya a cheeky grin and a cheerful 'Hello.'

The girl turned her head away, pouting.

'Be polite to your aunty,' Jack growled.

‘Hello, Aunty Freya,’ the girl said, tossing her curls, her dark eyes darting sideways.

Freya smiled warmly at the children. ‘I am happy to meet you, Maisie, Jack Junior.’

‘Pull up an armchair, sis,’ Jack said, indicating the logs. ‘And let me take those bags.’ She surrendered them. As he took the hatbox, he pretended to stagger under its weight. ‘What’s in here, the latest hat from Paris?’

She laughed. ‘No, Jack, it’s a fruit cake. Mama’s recipe. The hatbox was just the right size for it.’

‘That must be one helluva cake!’

‘It’s well wrapped up.’

‘Just as well, it was a bumpy trip.’

‘And a long one.’

He put the luggage down and placed his hands on her shoulders. ‘Thank you for coming. Not many city folk will brave the hazards of the bush.’

‘I had to come,’ she said. ‘I had to see you, Jack.’

Pearl brought a tray with cups and a plate of steaming scones. ‘The billy’s boiled,’ Jack said. ‘Let’s have some tea.’ As they ate and drank, Jack beamed at them all, but his look lingered on Pearl.

He really loves her, Freya thought, with a small jolt of surprise. And bit her lip, reproaching herself. Of course he did.

‘You want to rest now sis, freshen up?’ Jack asked. Freya nodded. ‘Pearl, will you show her the guest quarters?’

Pearl took Freya to a cabin overlooking the river and showed her the screened shower Jack had rigged up with a watering can, fed by a hose from the nearest well.

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‘You’ve made a paradise here, Jack,’ she said to her brother that evening as they sat once more around the fire. ‘You’re so clever. And so brave, to live out here so far from everything.’

Jack smiled. ‘There is a lot to learn about living out here. Pearl’s people are the experts, they’ve been doing it for centuries.’

‘Do you ever regret leaving?’ Freya asked.

‘Not for a minute,’ he said. ‘But I’m sorry I left you to face up to Father. That must have been tough.’

‘It wasn’t so bad. You shouldn’t blame Father altogether. He had no more power to change things than we did.’

‘But even if he had, would he have tried? I doubt it.’

‘He hated Lake Illusion. The heat, the dust, the flies. Most of all he hated serving in the store: standing behind a counter, weighing out bags of flour and tea and sugar. It must have reminded him of the drudgery of his childhood, the market gardens in Saxony. Everything gone full circle, and him behind a counter again, his dream turned to a handful of dust and flung in his face.’

‘He might have said something.’

‘He couldn’t risk it! He was never popular with the Church administration. He might never have got another job. He was trying to get out of there, to somewhere Mother and the little ones would be comfortable.’

‘You speak so eloquently in his defence. That’s not the sister I remember!’

‘I’ve mellowed. All the years of waiting, caring for Mother, wanting to leave but knowing there was no way out. I had to practise ‘non-attachment’, as the Buddhists call it.’

‘You could come and live here with us.’

‘This place is beautiful,’ she said. ‘And your life here—it reminds me of our childhood in New Zealand. You live simply, yet you have everything. It’s what you always wanted, isn’t it? Living so close to the bush. But it’s not for me. I’m a suburban woman with a family now. But I’m glad I made the journey.’

‘Did you think about my request?’

‘Yes. I would be honoured to act as guardian for Maisie and Jack Junior, if that should be necessary. But I’m sure you have nothing to worry about.’

‘I knew I could rely on you,’ Jack said.

‘Jack,’ Freya said. ‘There’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you. The Radnadel—it was never recovered. I’m certain Charlie didn’t take it.’

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘I’ll show you.’

He led her to a grove of trees beside the river. The wind soughed in the branches above them, and there was the wheel pin, hanging from a twig, illuminated by moonlight, inky sky filling the spaces between its spokes and the circle at its centre.

‘This is where I want to be buried,’ Jack told her. ‘Right here, beneath these trees.’

Freya reached up and touched the Radnadel. ‘Why did you take it, Jack?’

He thought for a moment. ‘To punish him,’ he said.

‘He has never forgiven you,’ she said sadly.

‘For leaving? Or for stealing his precious artefact?’

‘I’m sure he misses you,’ she said. ‘Life has punished him enough. All his troubles with the church, and Mama’s illness. Now he’s had a stroke and can barely move. He depends on Anna for everything.’

‘I wish him no ill,’ Jack said. ‘I found what I was looking for.’

Freya traced the contours of the wheel pin with her fingers, its corroded surface rough against her skin. ‘You had another reason?’ she asked.

‘The elders at Lake Illusion said the mission made their country sick. They said the sickness came from the Radnadel.’

The broken edge of the wheel-shaped head bit into the sky.

‘Perhaps they were right,’ Freya said.

To the Island

Something tickled Cat's face. She brushed it away, rolled over, and tried to go back to sleep. The tickling persisted, along with the sound of Merran's laughter. She opened her eyes and squinted into the brightness of morning sunshine to see her friend sitting beside her, fully dressed, twirling a feather in her hand. 'Rise and shine!' chirped Merran, the early bird.

Cat groaned and pulled the sleeping bag over her head. 'Honestly, you're as bad as my sister.' She'd had a restless night, waking again and again to scratch her itching skin and to slap at the incessantly biting sand flies. She had pulled the sleeping bag over her head in a futile attempt to escape their attentions. Sweltering, she had emerged for air to hear the unmistakeable snap of crocodile jaws, followed by a splash. Shuddering, she had tried to roll away from the riverbank and found herself lying on a bed of sharp stones.

'Come on, sleepyhead, time to catch breakfast!'

'Go away,' Cat moaned, but Merran only laughed. Cat sat up and ran her hands through the tangled mess of her hair. 'What do you mean, *catch breakfast*?' She eyed her friend suspiciously. Bush tucker was all very well, but she really didn't fancy digging for turtle eggs with a stick at this hour, let alone hauling some reluctant goanna from its lair in a hollow tree.

'Not a morning person, are you, Cat? Take it easy. You only have to catch the eggs and bacon on your plate as Uncle Spider chucks them out of the frying pan.'

The three of them were sitting around the fire, enjoying the morning sunshine, when a little boat came chugging upriver, slowing down as it came abreast of them.

'Ahoy!' The skipper, a stocky, muscular man, waved, moored his vessel and climbed up the bank to join them. His stride was purposeful, but his bowed legs gave him a somewhat waddling gait, reminding Cat of a wombat. He dumped a wet, bulging sack at Spider's feet.

'You beauty,' Spider said, embracing him. ' Fish for dinner.' He turned to the women. 'This here is Emily's son, Joe. Joe, meet Merran and Cat.'

'Pleased to meet you, ladies.' Joe's gaze was direct and his handshake firm. He had a broad, amiable face, wiry, dark hair threaded with grey and the solid presence of someone who was assured of his place in the world. He sat himself down on a tree stump and planted his hands on his knees.

Spider handed him a steaming mug of tea. ‘Merran and Cat here would like to see your island.’

Joe looked at the two women enquiringly.

‘I’m looking for my people. Uncle Spider said your mother might be able to help me,’ Merran explained.

‘You must come to the island, stay with us,’ Joe said. ‘I’m heading back in half an hour.’

‘Thank you,’ Merran said. ‘We’d be honoured.’

They learned that Joe, like his father and grandfather before him, had lived on his country all his life, although the island had only recently been restored to traditional owners. He earned his living as a fisherman, exporting barramundi to the southern capitals, and escorting tourists on fishing trips.

Cat pulled a tattered flyer from her jeans pocket. ‘Lumey Island Fishing?’

‘That’s me.’ Joe smiled. He told them he was also a mentor in Turnaround, a rehabilitation program for young Indigenous men who had been in trouble with the law.

‘Oh, I’ve heard of it,’ Merran said. ‘You fellers do good work.’

When it was time to go, Merran ran down to the water’s edge and threw her pack to Joe on the boat. Then she took off her shoes, waded into the water and climbed nimbly aboard. As Joe stowed the luggage, Merran smirked at Cat, who stood nervously on the bank, holding her boots and socks.

‘Go on, you’ll be right,’ Spider encouraged her.

She glanced downriver, and stuck one toe in the murky water. There was no way of seeing anything that might be lurking beneath the surface. She took a deep breath and plunged toward the boat. The tepid water lapped around her ankles, knees and thighs. The mud beneath her feet was slippery, and she made a grab for the edge of the boat just in time to stop herself from falling. Joe reached out with strong hands to steady her, and she scrambled aboard, panting.

‘You had a lucky escape there, I reckon,’ Joe said loudly, winking at Merran.

‘Too right she did!’ called Spider from the bank. ‘Old Charlie will be looking for his breakfast about now.’

Cat scowled. ‘This country is full of comedians,’ she muttered.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ Merran said, and they all laughed, even Cat.

They waved goodbye to Spider and settled back as Joe steered the boat downriver. The sandy shores on either side of them soon gave way to steep, rocky cliffs hung with looped creepers and trailing foliage, and Cat, gazing into the water, fell into a trance.

After some time they emerged from the river mouth into the high swell of the open sea, and the little boat rose and fell alarmingly. A wave of nausea swept through Cat's belly and she gripped the seat for several sickening minutes until her stomach settled. She grew accustomed to the rhythm of the boat as it bumped and swung across the waves and even began to enjoy the sensation. It was like dancing to a strange, new music. Facing the wind, with her hair flying back and the salt spray stinging her face, she was swept into another world. This wild rush toward an unknown destination was exhilarating, a feeling she had yearned for throughout her life, every time she set off on a new journey. She knew the feeling would wear off but she knew also that she would not forget it. She might sink again into despair, feel trapped in a humdrum existence, but she knew this feeling would return unexpectedly, like a long-forgotten song or a whiff of familiar perfume, causing her heart to leap with sudden joy.

Lumey Island was a speck in the vast waters of the gulf. The trip from Rufus River had taken less than an hour. In Jack's day, Joe told them, it would have taken the better part of a day by lugger or dugout canoe.

Shell grit crunched beneath their feet as they disembarked in a little bay lined with creamy sand beneath a sky of flawless azure. Jagged blue-black boulders lined the shore and further inland Cat could see a tangle of low scrub. Surrounded by the shifting hues of sea and reef, clouds and sky, the island had a stark, windswept beauty.

The wind blew ceaselessly, making Cat restless and uneasy. When she remarked on the absence of trees, Joe explained that most of them had been uprooted the previous year by a cyclone, which had also hurled his brand new rainwater tank clear across the island. Joe showed them the guest bathroom facilities: he had converted the ruined tank into a bush dunny. 'So flash' he boasted, 'that it would pass for installation art in a Sydney gallery.' Some distance away, behind a brushwood screen but open to the sky, was a bush shower rigged from a bucket and hose, the runoff ingeniously collected and recycled.

Cat and Merran stowed their gear in the guest quarters, a corrugated iron shed with a concrete floor, half-a-dozen iron-framed bunks, a table and a few chairs. Outside was a spacious verandah with more chairs, a stone hearth with a fire laid ready and piles of wood stacked neatly beneath a shelter.

Joe invited them to his home at the opposite end of the bay, and as they strolled along the beach he talked about his island. His family had always lived in the region: on Lumey Island, or the surrounding islands, or along the mainland coast. Nowadays, few people lived on the islands during the wet season, though many spent months there in the dry season, hunting and gathering, preparing food in the old way and performing ceremony.

Joe's house was a fine large building of white-painted timber with an iron roof and generous verandahs that could be used as extra rooms. But instead of escorting them inside, he led them around to the backyard where an ebony-skinned woman with snowy hair sat regally in a black wicker chair in the shade of a great tamarind tree that had miraculously escaped the cyclone.

Joe introduced Merran and Cat to his mother Emily. She offered her hand and, taking it, Cat felt an almost irresistible urge to curtsy. But the old woman clasped her hand, nodded, and said, 'Welcome to our country.' Her voice was musical, like Freya's—a voice made for singing, for soothing. But instead of melancholy, this voice had an undercurrent that was flinty and fierce.

'I'm honoured,' Cat replied, and she did feel honoured.

When Joe introduced her, Merran knelt so that she was on a level with Emily, and looked up at her. 'I want to ask you something…'

But Emily shushed Merran, put a hand gently on either side of her face, and examined her features critically. 'You look like Pearl. What do you reckon, Joe?'

Joe nodded. 'There is a likeness.'

'Just like her,' Emily said firmly. 'When she was a young woman.'

'Was she my grandmother?'

'Tell me about your mother,' Emily said, taking Merran's hands as Joe slipped away toward the house.

'The name they gave her in the home was May Smith,' Merran said. 'She said she came from up north, but she didn't talk about her childhood much. Her brother, my Uncle John, told me they were with a mob of kids sent by cattle truck

from Crocodile Creek to Alice Springs. They thought it was a big adventure. They didn't know they would never see their families again.'

'That's right,' Emily said, nodding. 'Her name was Maisie. Her brother was Jack Junior, after his father.'

Merran's eyes brimmed with tears. When Emily pulled her close, Merran clung to her and sobbed like a child. Emily stroked her hair, rocked her gently, and spoke comforting words in a language Cat couldn't understand. Overwhelmed, she stood staring at the two women and beyond them to the glittering sea.

Joe returned, accompanied by a shy, lanky teenager whom he introduced as his son Mickey. Both were carrying chairs, which they set beneath the tree. Two little girls, five or six years old, came running to Emily, but hung back when they saw the strangers. Emily beckoned them. 'These are my clever grand-nieces, December and Emmy-Lou,' she said proudly. 'Girls, go inside with Mickey and fetch some cups, milk and sugar on a tray. Mickey, will you make us a pot of tea?'

Later, as the adults sat sipping tea, the little girls ran off to scour the sandy soil for shells and coloured seeds to thread into necklaces. A wren with a bright red throat and tail hopped and flitted among the branches above their heads, shadowed by its subtler-hued mate. Glancing from the tiny birds overhead to the peaceful family scene beneath the tree, Cat, for the first time in ages, felt a kind of peace. Following her gaze, Emily said, 'I look after these two now.' She nodded toward the children. 'Emmy-Lou's parents are away in Crocodile Creek. December's mother is dead.'

'Oh,' Cat said. 'Poor child. What about her father?'

'Locked up,' Emily said. 'He was the one who killed her.'

Shocked, Cat stared at the children, who played on, oblivious. There was nothing to say. She traced spirals in the sand with a finger, trying to comprehend. Their world was remote from hers in ways she had never imagined.

Joe and his son helped their guests make camp, bringing fresh water, towels and extra bedding. Mickey handed Cat a tray of freshly cleaned and filleted fish. 'You can cook these if you like,'' he said, smiling shyly. 'There's barramundi and reef cod.'

Everyone pitched in to prepare the meal of baked fish, potatoes and salads, which they ate with their fingers, sitting in a circle around the fire. Eventually the wind dropped and the moon rose fat and full, transforming the stark landscape into

something soft and magical. The crackling of flames, the chirping of crickets and the murmur of waves on the shore made a harmony to the rise and fall of their voices, their laughter and their silence. Sitting cross-legged in the circle of people around the campfire, Cat was content. She felt no urge to speak. For now, all she needed to do was listen.

Merran gazed into the fire. ‘Can I ask you something, Aunty Emily?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why didn’t Pearl and Jack try to stop the children from being taken?’

‘They did,’ Emily said. ‘There were rumours one time that the police were rounding up children. Any that were a wee bit white would go. Well, one day Jack spotted the policeman’s truck coming up the drive and he said to Pearl and the kids, “You go in there, in that work shed. Don’t come out till I tell you.” And he stood outside that shed with his shotgun. He wasn’t going to let them take his kids away.’

‘So what happened?’

‘Jack died,’ Emily said. ‘And, just like he feared, they came then and took his kids. Pearl had no power to stop them. She couldn’t even read the form they made her sign.’ There were tears in her eyes. ‘It was 1941. Evacuation, they called it, to keep the kids safe from the war. But that was just an excuse. They never brought the children home.’

‘It was done on purpose, to break our culture,’ Merran said. ‘They said they would turn us into whitefellers but they turned us into slaves.’

‘Pearlie nearly died of grief,’ Emily said. ‘First her husband gone, then both her kids. Always waiting, she was, always hoping for word of them. Not knowing—that was the worst thing.’

‘Mum and her brother were sent to institutions in separate states,’ Merran said. ‘Uncle John was fostered by a white family. He got an education and learned a trade, but Mum had to take whatever work she could get.’

‘Pearl called out for her children, the night she died,’ Emily said. ‘Did your Mum ever talk about her?’

‘No. She said she didn’t remember. I think it hurt too much. She would never cry in front of us. But she gave me this.’ Merran reached into her pocket and handed Emily the necklace of red and black seeds.

A tear trickled down the old woman’s cheek as she examined the necklace. Holding it up, she gestured to the big tree beside her house at the far end of the

beach. ‘These are tamarind seeds from the trees that grow here in our country. All our little girls learn to make these. Maisie must have held onto this. All those years.’

‘It’s come home at last,’ Merran said, smiling through her tears.

‘And so have you, my dear,’ Emily whispered. ‘Welcome to your country.’

Lily: The Gift

It turns out Merran McKinley, unlike my sister, is a sensible sort who has phoned the clinic with details of her whereabouts.

'Rufus River? Mrs Minchinton at the caravan park tells me that's where Jack lived,' I tell Dingo.

'Then what are we waiting for?'

As we drive, Dingo fills me in on Cat's adventures. Although I recognise the heroine of his story as my sister, his predictable exasperation is tinged, not only with amusement, but with admiration. This reminds me of how I felt about Cat when I was little and wanted to follow her everywhere. 'You like her, don't you?'

He glances at me with a rueful expression. 'I'm afraid it may be more than that.'

'Be brave,' I say, and we both laugh. But I think he would be good for Cat.

Spider Gustafson's camp is wild and strange, like the man himself. It's full of ghosts, and I don't just mean the wrecked cars that litter the place. Spider doffs a battered hat, bows to us like Charlie Chaplin, and gravely accepts our gift of tobacco. When he tells us Cat and Merran left just hours ago by boat, I curse aloud, and Dingo stares at me in surprise. But my exasperation is quickly followed by anxiety, and that queasy feeling I get in my stomach when Cat is up to something.

Spider regards me with amusement. 'Relax, my dear. Joe will be back tomorrow. He'll take you out to Lumey Island. Joe loves visitors. Want to know why?'

We both nod meekly.

'Because everyone around here has heard all his stories.'

We laugh. I raise my eyebrows at Dingo, who nods. 'You'll love the island, Lily.'

'Stay here tonight. At my place.' Spider indicates the surrounding scrub with an expansive gesture, as if it is a luxury resort.

We accept his invitation with thanks, and he takes us on a guided tour of the camp. He shows us his workshop, his boat moored beside the little jetty on the river, and Jack's grave beneath the cycads. I want to know what became of his wife and children, but Spider shakes his head and says 'All in good time.' As we walk, Spider greets dogs, goats, hens and geese in conversational tones, as if they are friends or acquaintances. Not only that, but he listens, too, watching them as if he can sense

their responses. Perhaps all this tropical air is too much for my brain because it really seems as if the birds and animals understand what he says. Even the wild whistling kites that wheel in the sky above us bank and look down knowingly when he addresses them. When I shake my head and remark on it, Spider stares at me in surprise. ‘Too right they know.’ He tells me that every morning he releases the goats from their pen and warns them not to wander too far and to return before sunset. And sure enough, every evening the goats return obediently to their pen before the sudden tropical dusk descends. It is a charming tale, but I’m not convinced that the goats’ behaviour is due to an understanding of human language. However, Spider is my host and so I nod politely.

During our brief stay at Rufus River, a new feeling of wellbeing and optimism seeps into my bones and muscles. Perhaps it’s the clean air or the calming rhythm of the river, or just the fact that the men are so relaxed. Dingo fits right in as if he’s lived here all his life, helping Spider with his chores and generally making himself useful.

In the afternoon, as we sit beneath the shade of a big old gum tree, Spider lays three knives on the flat stone that serves him as a table and sharpens them carefully, one by one. ‘One of these nights soon, I’m going to get me a dugong,’ he says. ‘One night when the tide is right. Stalking, following, like some fellers try to, that’s a waste of time. I know where his favourite tucker is. When the tide is right, I go and get him.’

‘So how do you know when the tide is right?’ I ask.

The old man winks at me. ‘That’s my secret. But I’ll tell you something else for free. I have a gift.’ He looks solemn. ‘Sometimes...’ He leans forward, lowers his voice. ‘Some special times, I tell the tide.’ He motions with both hands, as if shooing the waters out and beckoning them in. ‘I say change, he change.’

‘Oh, come on!’ I laugh. Perhaps he thinks I am as willing to be entertained by tall stories as the tourists who pay for escorted fishing trips. If so, he is wrong. But his face is inscrutable. I glance across at Dingo but his expression betrays no hint of scepticism. He must be humouring the old man. I feel my mind lurch sideways, as if I have slipped on a scree and found the earth tilting beneath me.

Seeing my expression, Spider chuckles. It is a sound that seems to come from a deep place, like the bubbling of a spring beneath timeworn rocks. ‘What is your gift, Lily?’ he asks softly.

I think of the family photograph I found among Freya's manuscripts and of the vision I had as a child. I think of the shifting, those moments out of time, and I realise that it hasn't happened since I found that photograph. I think of the painting at home in my studio that maps my journey to find Cat. 'I'm an artist,' I say to Spider. 'I make pictures.'

'That is a powerful gift.' Spider picks up a gnarled pipe and opens the small leather pouch slung about his waist. 'I was an artist, once.' He packs tobacco carefully into the pipe.

I am intrigued, unsure whether to take him seriously. What does he mean, *once*? Art isn't just something you do, it's a lifelong vocation. A way of seeing things, a way of being. 'What kind of art did you do?' I ask, swirling the tea leaves in the bottom of my mug and thinking of dot paintings.

Spider clenches his pipe between his teeth and lights it, sucking slowly until the strands of tobacco glow in the bowl. He exhales a cloud of pungent smoke.

'There was a time,' he says, 'when people would travel hundreds of miles to sit for me.'

'You did portraits?'

'I could draw a likeness as perfect as a photograph.'

I jump up, excited. 'Will you show me your work?'

But Spider shakes his head. 'All gone now.' In the pause that follows, I hear the papery rustling of the cycads and the buzz of bees. Then Spider lays his pipe aside carefully, gets up and darts into the hut.

Minutes later he emerges, cradling an object about a foot long, wrapped in soft blue fabric. 'I remembered this. It's the only one left.' He holds it out to me. I take it and unwrap it carefully. 'That sarong belonged to your Uncle.' The fragile folds of patterned cloth fall aside to reveal an intricate wood carving. It is a saltwater crocodile, perfect in every detail: the rough-textured scales on the back, the smooth pale hide on the belly, the lips drawn back from the teeth in a predatory grin, the hooded eyes.

'This is good,' I say. 'Really good.'

The carving is a masterpiece, far more than a chillingly precise representation. Once I looked into the eyes of such a creature. We were holidaying on an island off the Queensland coast, one of those tourist places where crocs are kept in pens. The granddaddy of them all looked straight at me and the wire mesh

between us seemed to melt. I froze, helpless prey caught in the beam of its gaze, transfixed by its knowingness, the ancient cunning in its reptilian eyes. Spider's carving captures the eeriness of that.

'Crocodile is smart. His strength is, he never lets go. Crocodile hunter has to know his weakness,' Spider says, tapping the side of his nose.

'What's that?' I ask.

'He never lets go.' Dingo laughs, and Spider winks and smiles broadly. It's like some Zen koan. I smile uneasily, trying to work it out.

'And this is the only piece you have left?' I ask, stroking the wooden scales.

'He's the lucky last.'

'You mean you actually gave up art altogether? Portraits, everything?'

'Yep.' Spider takes up his pipe, relights it, and puffs on it until the embers glow.

It is clear he is not going to volunteer any further information, but I am fascinated. 'What happened?' I ask, imagining some personal tragedy: an injury or a lost love.

'Nothing,' he says. He blows a perfect smoke ring and watches as it floats away and dissolves into air.

I'm perplexed. 'Then why did you give up?'

'It was a strain on the mind.' He pauses, puffs. 'I'd get caught up in it. I'd lie down to sleep at night and see the work hovering in the darkness before me. I got no peace.'

'It's obsessive, I know,' I say. 'But surely that's part of being an artist?'

Spider shakes his head. 'It's not healthy.'

I am shocked. It seems wrong to me, that someone should simply abandon their talent. I was brought up to make the most of my gifts, to shun idleness, to strive to do better. *Good, better, best: never let it rest, until your good is better and your better best.* I can imagine giving up almost anything but my art. It's part of me. But then I think it might be liberating to just let go. I gaze at Spider. 'Don't you still get the urge?'

'Yes.' He grins wickedly. 'It passes.' We laugh.

Yet I struggle to see how peace of mind and a good night's rest could be more important than making art. The notion is foreign to me. But then perhaps Spider's closeness to the natural rhythms of earth, river and sea, is also a way of

being an artist. I've always thought of myself as a free spirit, following my own calling, making my own rules. But I've never encountered any real alternatives to the Judaeo-Christian values I was raised with and I'm sure they must control me in ways I can't see.

I tell Spider the parable of the talents. As a child in Sunday School, I found this story confusing and a little frightening. I could never understand why the servant who was entrusted with only one talent was treated so harshly, cast into outer darkness simply because (rather sensibly, I thought) he hid his talent to keep it safe instead of trading it for profit like the other servants. I feared the fate of the unprofitable servant, the weeping and gnashing of teeth. To conclude my story, I wave the wooden crocodile ferociously in Dingo's face, and his theatrical rendition of weeping and gnashing has all three of us falling about with laughter.

'Greedy master, I reckon,' says Dingo. 'He wanted everything back, and more.'

'There's no such thing as a gift in the whitefeller world,' Spider says. 'Always strings attached.' Tenderly, he wraps the crocodile carving in Jack's sarong. Then, instead of carrying it into the hut, he presents it to me.

My heart leaps in awe. 'I can't,' I protest.

'Yes, you can,' Spider says, looking me in the eye. 'It's a gift.'

Homesickness

Emily took her visitors walking in the scrub. She gathered pointed, silvery leaves from a low-growing shrub, leaves which she said had the power to heal—but only if they were properly prepared. She snapped off a small segment from a vine that rambled rootless, among the branches, and gave it to Cat. 'Rub the sap on that sore finger,' she said, indicating the bruise that had developed where Cat had slammed her hand in the file drawer.

Emily taught them how to fish, island-style. Sitting on the bank of a creek, she whittled thin, straight branches into rods, attached lines and hooks, and handed one to each of them. Merran cast her line with dexterity, but Cat's cast was clumsy. She was apprehensive, afraid of actually catching a fish. She did not like the idea of killing anything. But, mindful of Merran's admonition to toughen up, she obediently mimicked Emily's actions, baiting the hook, grasping the rod and casting the line into the water. Emily looked sideways at her and smiled.

All morning they collected prawns and tiddlers to use as bait for sea fishing. Cat soon grew restless, but Merran and Emily seemed content to sit still for hours, hardly speaking, just watching the surface of the water. When Emily began chanting a rhythmic, monotonous song, Cat giggled like a child at such strangeness. The old woman shot her a stern glance and she fell silent, listening. The syllables of the song rang out, deep and sonorous, vibrating in the air and among the quivering leaves, dropping lightly and seeping like raindrops into earth, rocks and water. The song was a summoning, a prayer. Emily sang to her ancestors in the old language, to the guardians of her country, calling, as her people had always done, for their blessing and assistance in the sacred work of finding food.

Emily brought her line in, cut the hook from the mouth of a small, wriggling fish, and tossed it into a bucket. She baited her line again and cast it into the creek. She told them that the island was her grandmother's country. Emily had lived there since she was born and would stay until she died. She belonged to the island, she said. Health workers from the town had tried to persuade her to leave because of her asthma, but she had refused. 'I belong here,' she said. 'My Grandmothers taught me this. If I leave, I will die.'

Cat, the eternal traveller, struggled to comprehend. This country was rough, its climate unforgiving. Poverty, illness, addictions and violence were commonplace, and despair had taken root over generations. She had heard Indigenous people speak

of belonging to the land as a child belongs, perhaps, to a parent, or a tree to the soil from which it grows. Some had never seen their country, yet still they spoke of it with feeling. Cat did not understand Emily's connection to her country but she could sense its power.

After lunch, Cat sat on the verandah of the guest quarters and flicked through the file she had taken from the museum. The documents about the death of the Aboriginal woman Lucy under the custody of Mounted Constable Todd included a newspaper article about the inquiry conducted at Barramundi in 1933 and a letter from Jack Robinson alleging a conflict of interest. It appeared the Chief Protector of Aborigines, an employee of the police, was a member of the Board of Inquiry. Jack's letter also claimed that the Crown Law Officer, despite being conscientious, did not understand the 'pidgen English' spoken by the witnesses, and that a fair and just outcome could therefore hardly be expected.

The inquiry found that Todd had extracted false evidence by intimidation and that the Aboriginal men charged with killing a cow had no case to answer. Todd was found to have mistreated and assaulted Lucy, who died of unknown causes. The report recommended Todd's dismissal and an inquest into Lucy's death. A post-mortem and inquest were duly held, but no evidence was found for murder, or even manslaughter. Todd was merely reprimanded. Cat strode down to the beach, anger churning her thoughts. So little had changed in sixty years.

She wandered through the scrub beside the shore, following a narrow, meandering trail until it passed beneath a low branch which she was obliged to skirt. Wondering what had made this low-lying path, she noticed narrow paw prints in the sand and realised she had been following a wallaby trail. She chuckled and continued until she found herself in a hidden grove, a quiet space of filtered light, protected from the wind by a circle of young trees. Underfoot, low-growing emerald succulents with crimson flowers glowed like an exotic carpet. In the centre of the glade she found a shell, curved and smooth like bone. She picked it up, wondering what had lived within its luminous spiral walls. Surely not a sea-slug but some ethereal spirit, something that could sing. She held the shell to her ear and heard a deep, longing roar, rhythmic and without end: the song of the sea, according to her family's mythology. She replaced the shell on the sand and sent a silent prayer of thanks to her ancestors, Freya and Jack, for leading her to that place. All she heard in reply was the sound of the sea and the whispering of the wind in the trees. It made her uneasy.

At dinner that night she grew restless and found herself unable to join in the laughter. Emily gave her a sharp look. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘I don’t know.’ She felt hollow and all her bones ached. Perhaps she was coming down with something.

Emily looked her up and down and seemed to scrutinise the air around her. ‘You’re homesick,’ she pronounced. ‘Go back to your country. Then you’ll be right.’

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Cat carried her swag down to the beach that night, thinking of Emily’s words. The cure for homesickness seemed simple, but it wasn’t. Where could she find her country, her cure? Could it be Kestrel Bay, the place of her birth? Or was it some remote village in another land, the birthplace of a long-dead ancestor? If she did not know where she came from, was she doomed to wander the world, a homesick stranger her whole life? Perhaps, for people like her, home was an abstraction or a dream. Perhaps it wasn’t a physical place at all.

She slept alone on the beach that night, wishing to get close to the spirits that sang in that place. But the spirits were prickly. Sudden gusts of wind blew sharp sand against her skin and the night seemed to reverberate with the silent torment of unfinished business. At last she fell into a fitful sleep, torn by shards of nightmare.

Red, blood red, spinning an intricate geometry, a wheel of colour. She lies face up to the sun with her eyes closed, lost in spectral dimensions. She can’t walk out of here. The only way out is in. She rides the chariot of the sun across the sky like some pagan deity, wheels turning, flames leaping, memories burning, until all that is left is light and the throbbing beat of blood.

She is the beast, the other, because that’s what he needs her to be.

He will beat her again before nightfall. Tied to this tree she will fall, and fall again. There is no fruit to tempt her, no place to go, nowhere to land. She has passed through the barriers, the curtains of ragged flesh. Dry sand fills her mouth. She feels his pleasure as he beats her, the gush of power that lifts him with each blow into ecstasy, an ecstasy that dies repeatedly and must therefore be rekindled with another blow. She is the void that anything can fill. Consumed, consuming, she burns.

Each time she woke, pain seeped from the earth to fill her body until she could no longer contain it and had to cry out. Then the tears came, pouring from her eyes, a flood of relief, a drought-breaking rain, flushing the poisons that had lodged

there all the long years. Sobbing, she curled into her swag and fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

She woke to stillness and a thousand cold, brilliant stars. She lay there listening to the rush and murmur of the waves. The sky and stars filled her eyes and mind and she floated, then sped away. She soared upward until there was no land in sight, and she was a speck in the blue-black night. She knew she could never go back.

The city was a habit, a skin to which she had grown accustomed, but the country had got inside her blood and changed her. She had never felt so free. She knew that she would have to be human again and do the things that humans do, but she would never forget that freedom, that expansion into limitless possibility, that spacious exhilaration. She knew the truth. And it was not as she had imagined when she was a child and stood at the altar rail, waiting for the touch of the Holy Spirit. It was no blinding revelation, but a slow growth into knowing. It was the moments of a life, and how you lived it, the awareness in your fingertips as you cast a line, the feeling in your heart as you prepared a meal, and the loving in a look. She might forget what she knew, perhaps for years at a time, but she would never lose it. It would come back to her in a flash, in unexpected moments. She would never again believe fully in the fabrication that civilised people called reality, for it had been undone before her. When she was old, she would remember this. She would smile and nod to herself like a crazy person. Because now, like Jack, she knew. She had lain on a beach alone in the night until her mind had emptied and she flew.

In the morning, the sun's warmth travelled through all her bones and down through her toes into the earth, the ground that held her. She was deeper inside her skin and at the same time closer to the world. The small sounds of plants, birds and insects—stirring, calling, humming—were no longer obscured by the inane babble of incessant thinking. The world was close, as close as breathing. She no longer startled when a bird flew out of a bush. At times she would almost anticipate events. She was rarely surprised. She had got inside the rhythm of things. Time was no longer measured by the need to be somewhere else. Time now was rosy and round, like a slowly swelling fruit, each moment filled with juice. There was gladness in rising at first light, in the sustaining rhythm of work, in the easy community of mealtimes, the dreaminess of twilight and the peace of sleep.

Just living was enough. It didn't need a meaning.

Was this how Jack had felt? Was this the dream he had sought, the grand life he had discovered? Cat wondered whether she could sustain this awareness or whether, immersed once more in everyday life, she would forget this sublime simplicity. It seemed impossible. But everything changes.

Wandering along the beach, she found the pitted intertwining patterns of snake tracks in the sand. Lily would want to draw these, turn them into paintings. She strode out, stretching her muscles, feeling the sand crisp and silky beneath her feet, and breathing the wild salt air. White birds wheeled and called, a fish leaped in a sudden bright arc from the sea, and hundreds of tiny crabs ran along the sand, waving their pincers in the air as the waves crashed and tumbled to foam on the rocks.

She thought of Dingo, and the childish, sarcastic note she had scribbled and left on his windscreen. She knew she had misjudged him.

Merran and Emily were fishing with rods and buckets from the rocks by the shore. They waved to her.

'We're catching dinner! Bream and barracouta!' Merran called.

'Go up to the house, Cat, and get some potatoes to cook on the fire,' Emily sang out.

'Okay!' Cat walked up the beach and took the sandy path to the house. The little girls played on their swing beneath the tamarind tree.

'Hey, Cat!' called December, the boldest. 'Give us a push, will you?' Cat pushed her high on the swing, and she squealed with delight.

Emmylou hopped beside them, first on one leg, then the other. 'Hey Catty Catherine, can you run? Can you run real fast, like Cathy Freeman? You got the same name.'

'I think my running days are over,' Cat replied. 'But I could drive like the devil, if I only had a car.'

'I want a car,' Emmylou said. 'I want to live in town and drive a flash car like Aunty Merran. She's cool.'

December on the swing twisted around to look at Cat with serious eyes. 'What colour car does the devil drive?'

'Black,' Cat said, and then changed her mind. 'No, green.'

'Like Dingo's ute,' December said.

'What?' Cat stopped pushing the swing. 'You know Dingo?'

‘Yeah, a course we do, he’s our uncle, in’t he, Emmylou?’

‘Yes, and he’s coming to see us,’ Emmylou said.

‘When?’

‘Today or tomorrow, ’ December said. ‘Or p’raps the next day. Did you know, Catty Cat, if you swing high enough, you can touch the stars?’

‘No,’ Cat said, laughing. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘But only at night time,’ Emmylou said. ‘It’s my turn now.’

‘But you can’t touch the sun, not ever,’ December said, ignoring her. ‘Know why not?’

‘Why not?’ Cat asked, as she was supposed to.

‘Because if you touch the sun, you burn up.’

‘Of course,’ Cat said.

Lily: Fishing

I find her fishing in the creek behind the house. She does not look up. She wears a plaid shirt of soft flannel, red, with thin lines of yellow and black running through it. It's not the sort of thing she normally wears. The sleeves are rolled up. Her forearms are tanned. Her hair is tied back with a bit of elastic in a spiky ponytail. Her features are familiar: the wide, curved cheekbones, the small nose with its smattering of freckles, the eyes that change colour from grey to blue to green, mirroring her moods as the sea reflects the sky. But there is something in her face that I have never seen before. I hesitate.

She draws in her line and disentangles it from a dripping clump of weeds.

I give a little cough, and she looks up. She smiles, beckons me over, and hands me a rod. We sit together in the sun on the bank of the creek, and fish. 'I was worried about you.' My voice sounds plaintive, aggrieved.

Cat does not answer.

'You should have let me know where you were going. Something might have happened.'

Cat flicks her rod back and hauls in her line. She grasps the fish firmly, removes the hook from its mouth and drops it into the bucket at her side. Then she looks at me. 'I sent you a postcard.' She sounds curiously remote.

'I didn't get it.' I feel a twinge of irritation. Or anxiety. 'Mum was worried sick.'

'Was she?'

'Well, no,' I admit. 'But she would have been, if I'd told her.' Cat smiles, and I feel like shaking her. 'I was worried,' I repeat.

'You must have been, to follow me all the way out here.' She makes a gesture that embraces the island and the sea that sparkles on the horizon beyond a tangle of low scrub and a stretch of sand.

'Cat.' I know I will regret what I am about to say. It is a leap into unknown territory, like coming to this place. It's not our country. We don't belong. But my anxiety is dulled by a weariness that seems to have gone on for hundreds of years. I am tired of repeating the same old stuff. 'Cat…' I falter. She does not respond.

'Cat.' I say her name a third time, hoping by some enchantment to cross the gulf that divides us, to claim her as family. She waits. The old Cat would never have waited so patiently for me to speak; she always took the lead. She would leap in,

anticipating my words. She would take my hands and dance me along the bank of the creek, singing some silly rhyme. She knew all the nonsensical words that rhymed with *Lily*. She knew how to make me laugh. As children we giggled hysterically for hours, until we were out of breath. Once I laughed so hard I threw up among the hydrangeas.

But now she says nothing. She goes on fishing, watching the water, two fingers touching the line as if she's feeling for a pulse.

'You stole the Tarot cards,' I say.

'No. I only borrowed them.'

'You didn't ask me.'

'I didn't think you'd mind.'

'Really?'

She looked at me then, for the first time. 'No. To be honest, I wanted to punish you.'

'For what?'

'For being the favourite. The one Freya loved best.'

I don't know what to say. I stare at my sister. She looks like someone in a photograph, remote, unfathomable.

'But I was the one who was left behind. Good old Lily. It was you, Cat. You were the star. The one everybody noticed. The one everybody worried about.'

She looks at me, quizzical, and then she laughs. It's not the kind of laugh that makes you want to join in.

'Why did you come here?' I ask her.

'Because I wanted to find out the truth,' she says.

'About Jack?'

She nods. 'Why nobody talked about him. Why he ran away, where he went, what sort of a life he made here. What happened to his children.'

I think of the photograph I found. The lost children.

'Did you find them?' I ask.

'Maisie is dead,' she says. 'But I found her daughter. Well, she found me. Jack died in an accident—I'm not sure how.'

'Why did you leave without telling me?' I ask.

'I just had to go,' she says fiercely. 'I had to find out. I'm sorry. We think our lives are our own, separate. We think what we do is nobody's business. But that's

wrong. The past is never over and done with. Things go on—especially when nobody talks about them. The past influences the present. Everything we do affects the future. And maybe the past as well, for all I know. It's all interconnected, but we don't acknowledge it. Good manners, it's called. But it's really denial.'

'What's the use of feeling guilty about the past, if nothing can be changed?'

'Of course it can,' Cat says, glaring at me. 'The things our forebears did are hurting people still. Gottlieb disinherited Jack because he lived with an Aboriginal woman.'

'Pearl.'

'How did you know?' She looks at me, eyes narrowed.

'I found a photograph.'

'Their children were taken away. Pearl never saw them again. Jack had asked Freya to care for them, Lily. But she didn't.'

'She tried, Cat! I found a letter—'

'It doesn't matter, Lily. She failed.'

I think of Freya, her sadness, and the story she started before she died. Too late.

'She failed,' Cat repeated. 'And so did we. We failed to look after our own flesh and blood.'

I am aghast. 'We weren't to know! Things were different in those days. I'm sure the authorities did what they thought was in the children's best interest—'

'No,' Cat says. 'That isn't true. They did what was best for themselves. Perhaps they didn't realise the extent of the damage they caused. But that's no excuse. The damage is still going on, Lily.'

'But what can we do?'

'Listen to the stories,' Cat says. 'And the spaces between them. Just listen.'

The silence closes around us like a shell. I stare at the dazzling surface of the water and there is a gentle tug on my line. I haul in a wriggling silver fish.

Cat grasps the fish, unhooks it, and drops it into the bucket.

Turn of the Tide

There was somebody behind her, hesitating among the bushes. A woman. Cat could feel her emotion disturbing the air, making little eddies. So, she thought, here she is.

The woman in the bushes cleared her throat and Cat, on cue, looked in her direction. Lily came towards her, smiling hesitantly. Without a word, Cat handed her a rod and they sat side by side, fishing in the creek. Just as they had when they were children.

Lily spoke, but Cat could not hear her words, only the familiar sound of her voice, light and mellow, falling and rising like music. Two scenes, past and present, unfolded simultaneously, linked by the sound of Lily's voice. Two grown women, two children, fishing in a creek.

Cat marvelled at her sister's presence. It was solid, real. Lily, she discovered, was not merely a spectre to whom she continually addressed her thoughts and justified her actions. She was not just a nuisance, or even a nemesis. Lily was inexplicably herself: a mystery.

Cat could feel the warmth emanating from her sister's skin and smell the faint sweet freshness of her, like apples. She could hear the beat of her blood, the rush of her breath. Here beside her was a being spun from the same material, yet utterly different from herself. Finite, yet unfathomable.

There was a nibble at the end of her line and she reeled it in. The fish flipped and gaped. She cut it free and dropped it into the bucket, regretting its suffering, yet glad for the catch. It was only then that she registered Lily's words. 'I sent you a postcard,' she said in reply.

'I didn't get it,' Lily said. 'Mum was worried sick.'

'Was she?' Cat looked at Lily, narrowing her eyes at the cliché, and tried to imagine their mother's actual response. More likely Grace would have been confused. Or amused.

'Well, no,' Lily said. 'But she would have been, if I'd told her more.'

Cat smiled.

Lily grew flustered and flapped her hands, trying to make Cat see how irresponsible she had been to take off without telling anyone where she was going. It was all just words. She waited for them to blow over. But she was impressed that Lily had made it this far.

Lily said her name over and over, like a song, like a chant, like a charm. *Cat—Cat—Cat*... Cat waited, listening to the rhythm of her speaking, watching the ripples on the water. Finally, Lily said something that made her think.

They talked. And then Lily asked a question. 'Why did you come here?'

Cat told her. She tried to explain the riddle of Jack, the black sheep whose story would not go away, despite the family's silences, despite Gottlieb's *verboten* and Greta's bonfire. The gap left in all their lives by Jack's missing story, she said, was something that needed to be faced, not filled. She had tried to find the truth and learned that there was not one truth but many.

Lily didn't understand. There were too many things in her way, Cat saw. Lily was afraid to come into a country where knowing is fluid, uncertain, and connected to feeling. But she knew that territory. She would get there in the end. The words they spoke that day were only words. But Cat knew now that she could trust Lily.

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On their way back to the beach they met Merran carrying baskets of bread and fruit. Cat introduced her sister to her friend. Their cousin. 'Here, take these,' Merran said, handing them the baskets. 'I'm going to help Emily. See you in a bit.'

Dingo was standing by the shore with his hands in his pockets, looking out to sea. Cat stopped. She gazed at his silhouette against the shining water. Her chest was tight; she could not get air into her lungs.

Lily took the baskets from her hands, gave her a gentle push.

Cat walked slowly down to the water's edge. Dingo turned and smiled. 'You're a hard woman to catch,' he said.

She looked at him, standing on the beach in cut-off jeans and bare feet, the sun glinting on his hair and on the coppery fuzz around his jaw. There was a buzz between them, a crackle in the air she could almost hear, and it made her want to run. She wondered if he had found the note on his windscreen. She hoped it might have blown away. But you never could rely on the wind.

'I saw you in the museum with Todd,' she said accusingly.

'So what? It was just business,' he said.

'What kind of business?'

'I want to buy something from his collection.'

'What?' she asked.

‘There’s a museum in Germany—’ He broke off and came close, gazing gravely into her face. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Are you involved in something dodgy?’ She had to give him a chance to tell the truth.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Then why all the mystery?’

He looked down at the sand, shuffled his feet like a child. ‘Insurance, I guess.’

‘Against what?’

He raised his eyes to hers. ‘Heartbreak.’ Her suspicion lingered. He must have seen it in her face. ‘Cross my heart and hope to die,’ he added, giving her that little boy look and crossing his arms in front of his chest.

This made her want to smile, but she regarded him with a critical look. ‘Spit,’ she said, and he obeyed. She smiled. ‘Okay, then. I believe you.’

‘There are conflicting theories about the origins of that ritual—’

‘I’m sure there are.’ He opened his mouth to elaborate, and she stopped him with a kiss. His mouth was warm, and tasted like oysters. Fresh, slightly salty. She remembered Spider’s remark about salt. It was a tricky spirit. He put a hand on her back and pulled her close, and a faint, exquisite tremor ran up her spine.

‘I’ll stop being mysterious,’ he promised, as they seated themselves on the sand. ‘All will be revealed.’

‘I’ve seen it all before,’ she said, and they laughed. Far out in the water there was a splash as a fish leaped clear of the sea. The whistling cry of the kites sounded high above.

Dingo smiled as he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and showed it to her. She turned her face away, embarrassed. ‘Why did you keep that?’

‘All the better to taunt you with!’ He waved the note in front of her, and she snatched it and tore it into shreds, scattering the pieces in the sand.

‘You’ve changed,’ he said.

‘How?’

‘You’ve stopped using your words like a shield.’

She watched a wave arch in a wall of green glass and crash in a rattling hiss of foam on the shore among tiny stones and shells. She picked up a handful of sand and let it run like silk through her fingers. *Wish-wish, wish-wish.*

‘Perhaps it wasn’t a shield so much as a chrysalis,’ he mused. ‘Will you grow wings and fly away?’ He rolled on to his side, leaned on his elbow and looked at her from beneath his lashes.

She dropped her gaze. It rested for a moment in the hollow at his throat and then followed the fine line from clavicle to breast bone. She reached to touch it with a fingertip, imagining how it might be to burrow in like some small creature, to hide in the cave of his ribs, to nestle beside his beating heart. She drew her hand back and laughed nervously. What a weird thing to imagine. But his arms were warm about her and she moved closer. He laid his head in the hollow of her shoulder and she cradled it. Perhaps he, too, was looking for a home.

They spent the night together on the beach. In the morning when they woke a cold wind was blowing from the sea. They sat up and wrapped themselves in Cat’s quilt. Then she saw tracks in the sand. She leaped up, pointing. ‘What do you think made those?’ The prints were clawed, enormous, and came up from the sea, circling the spot where the two of them had lain and returning again to the water.

Joe arrived, wondering about the fuss they were making. His eyes grew round and incredulous when he saw the tracks. Then he laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’ Cat demanded.

‘You two had a lucky escape!’ He shook his head and laughed until his eyes watered.

‘So what was it?’ asked Dingo.

‘Saltwater perentie!’ Joe announced, laughing even harder.

Cat frowned. She had not heard of lizards, even large ones, swimming in the sea. At least not in this country. She looked at Dingo. His face was pale. He laughed shakily. ‘Just as well it wasn’t hungry,’ he said.

‘What are you talking about?’ she demanded.

‘It’s Joe’s idea of a joke,’ Dingo explained. ‘Our nocturnal visitor was a crocodile.’

Cat shivered. Then she laughed. ‘That will make a good story for Joe to tell the tourists.’

They heard the rhythmic thumping of a boat across the waves and the roar of an outboard motor. There were two people on board and as the boat drew closer Cat identified one of them as Spider Gustafson. The other man wore a suit, a suit that

was too big for him. Malcolm Todd. Spider made the boat fast and helped his companion ashore.

'What's he doing here?' Dingo said.

Time for the showdown. Cat smiled, wishing she could have seen Todd's face when he discovered his precious artefact was missing.

Todd shuffled up the beach, fuming. Spider darted in his wake.

'Where is it?' Todd demanded, squaring up to Dingo, who stared blankly. 'Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about.'

'How about you tell me?' Dingo said.

'Something has been stolen from the museum. Something valuable.' He frowned at Dingo, who shrugged in disavowal.

'Not by me, mate.'

They glared at each other.

Lily came hurrying from the camp. 'Are you looking for this?' she asked.

She held aloft a glittering object, pointed, with a wheel-shaped head. Dingo, Joe and Spider stared at it. Cat stared at Lily.

'I was looking for my shoes,' Lily told her. 'I found this under your bed. It's the Radnadel, isn't it?' Cat nodded, and Lily handed it to her. The others looked bemused.

'It's a long story,' Cat told them. She traced the contours of the wheel pin with her fingers, marvelling at how far it had travelled.

Todd made a grab for it but was restrained by Dingo and Spider.

'I ain't leaving without that artefact,' Todd growled.

'It's not yours,' Lily said.

'Yes, it is! It belongs in the Barramundi Museum,' Todd said.

'It belongs to our family,' Cat said. Lily nodded in agreement.

Dingo gazed at them. 'How can you be sure?' he asked.

'Freya wrote about it,' Lily said. 'We think her father brought it from Germany.'

Dingo nodded slowly. 'That is possible. Similar artefacts have been excavated recently from Bronze Age burial sites in Northern Europe,' he said.

'Gottlieb took it with him to the mission at Lake Illusion,' Lily said.

'When Jack went missing, so did the Radnadel,' Cat added.

Dingo reached for the wheel pin. She let him take it. He examined it carefully, holding it up to the light, then brought it to his nose and sniffed suspiciously. ‘Someone has cleaned it with Brasso,’ he said incredulously, looking at Todd.

‘Needed a good clean,’ the museum keeper muttered, but he had the grace to look shamefaced.

Cat laughed, but Lily glared at him. ‘How did it come to be in the museum?’

Todd cowered before her like a dog that knows it has done wrong. ‘I found it.’

‘Where?’

‘Lying in the mud on the riverbank.’

‘You stole it, you mean.’

‘Finders keepers,’ Todd said defiantly.

‘It’s not yours. It belongs to our family,’ Lily said.

‘How do you know this is your Radnadel?’ Dingo asked. ‘I know it’s unlikely, but there could be another. They’re all quite similar. Look.’ He pulled a string of plaited leather from his pocket. Dangling from it was a circular amulet of similar, but not identical, design to the head of the wheel pin that Cat held. Instead of four spokes meeting the outer rim, there were eight, four of which continued through the inner ring to meet in the centre, forming a cross. ‘This is a reproduction, made to be worn as a pendant,’ Dingo said. ‘But you see what I mean.’

Lily hesitated.

‘This is definitely ours,’ Cat said with certainty.

Lily looked at her curiously. ‘How can you be sure?’

‘Freya sketched it,’ Cat said. ‘I’ll show you.’

Todd looked aggrieved and sceptical. He opened his mouth to protest, but Dingo laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s a significant artefact,’ Dingo said. ‘Several of them have been found in women’s graves. Most show traces of gold plating.’

‘What was it actually for?’ Lily asked, fingering the Radnadel in Cat’s hands.

‘It could be purely ornamental, or it might be practical—to fasten a robe, for instance. But some researchers think there is a symbolic meaning. Those are not the spokes of a wheel, but the rays of the sun.’

They bent over the pin, and Cat traced the spokes with her forefinger. ‘Then it’s not really a wheel pin,’ she said. ‘It’s a sun-pin.’

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That night, after they had shared a meal around the campfire and the little girls had been tucked into sleeping bags, Cat, Lily, Merran, Dingo, Emily, Joe and Spider talked long into the night, telling stories to illuminate the gaps in their histories, and the places where they coincided. Though there was pain as well as joy in the telling, they knew this was a ritual long overdue. Malcolm Todd listened in silence. Cat returned Freya's Tarot cards to Lily and showed her Freya's drawing. The likeness was exact. Cat stuck the Radnadel upright in the sand, so the firelight danced around the wheel and flickered between the spokes.

Emily gasped when saw it. 'I saw that thing once before, hanging in a tree by Rufus River,' she said. 'The day Jack Robinson died.' She related the events that had unfolded half a century before on the banks of the Rufus River.

'I was a young woman, twenty three years old. My husband Silas worked for Jack Robinson, though our camp was upriver, by the pandanus trees. It was the wet season. The rivers were flooded, the roads no good. We had plenty of supplies, but we needed fresh meat. So Silas took Jack's shotgun and went hunting in the scrub downriver. We had cleaned the house, Pearl and me, and decided to make a batch of johnnie-cakes. Little Maisie helped us. She shaped that dough so nicely, her little hands patting those johnnie-cakes smooth and round. My little Joey was in his crib, and Spider and Jack Junior played outside in the yard.

'Around mid-morning, Silas comes back into camp with the gun. "This gun's no good," he says. "Where's Jack? Where's the old man?"

"What's wrong with that gun?" we asked him. And he tells us a story about a fat kangaroo sleeping in the sun. An easy shot. Silas creeps up on him quietly, nice and slow. He gets real close, licks his lips, thinking about his dinner, you know? He aims that gun, squeezes the trigger. Nothing happens. The kangaroo sits up, looks at Silas, scratches one ear, shakes his head. Silas disturbed his nap. He cleans his whiskers, cocks one ear at Silas and hops away real slow.

'Silas finds Jack out the back, sitting on a bullock hide under a gum tree. He has that thing—that Radnadel—alongside him, and he's writing something in a book.

"Hey boss," says Silas, "this gun's no good."

'And Jack puts his book down and takes that gun from Silas. There's a bullet stuck in the barrel, he says, and he digs at it with his pocketknife, but the wretched thing won't come free. Jack gets mad and he whacks that gun against the tree.

‘We all run out when we hear the shot. Silas is kneeling down and Jack is lying under the tree, one leg all smashed and bloody, the other bent crooked underneath him. I shoo the children inside. Pearl is shaking so much she can’t speak.

‘Jack tries to move and shouts in pain. It’s the bent leg hurting him. He can’t feel the smashed one at all. “Straighten that leg, straighten that leg,” he tells us. “Then I can get up.” But we know it won’t work.

‘People come from across the river to help. Pearl sits by Jack and tries to calm him down.

“Carry me into the house,” Jack says. He says it over and over. “Carry me into the house.’ But no-one is game to move him. The leg looks bad. We bring blankets to keep him warm, and a tarp to keep the rain off. We try to make him comfortable.

‘Jack asks for his notebook and pencil. He scribbles something and tears out the page. “Here,” he says, “take this to Barramundi police station and tell them to call the Flying Doctor.”

‘Two of our young men take that note to Barramundi. They travel by dugout canoe, three days and three nights on the flooded river, out on the open sea and then inland across more rivers.

‘They’re half dead by the time they reach Barramundi. The policeman is away. His wife calls the Flying Doctor and they take off but when they get to Rufus River there is nowhere for the plane to land. The flat ground is flooded and the high ground is covered with scrub. Some young fellers set to work to clear a landing strip.

‘That Barramundi policeman’s wife is a nurse and she volunteers to go by canoe to Jack. Three of our people bring her to Rufus River across the floods. It’s a famous story, you can read about it in books. That little white nurse was brave, she got a medal for what she did. But her maid and the fellers that brought her, they got no medals. They were just doing their jobs.

‘The nurse is exhausted when she gets to Jack’s place but she never stops. She gentles him with talk and cleans his wound. The bone in his leg is shattered and can’t be mended. But she cleans up the splinters and puts a dressing and a bandage on it. ‘Jack is groggy by this time, talking crazy. The nurse says his brain is poisoned. He has tetanus, she says, and any sudden movement could put a strain on his heart that will kill him. The people make a stretcher. They lift him carefully and carry him into the house, to his bed.

‘The young men finish the landing strip. The Flying Doctor is coming now. Pearl and the nurse are in the room with Jack. He hears that plane come in and tries to sit up. The women rush to help him, but it’s too late. Jack dies listening to the plane that’s come to save him.’

They sat listening to the sigh of the wind, the hiss of the sea on the shore and the low roar of the fire. Cat bent to pick up the Radnadel and nearly dropped it. It was hot. ‘What about this?’ she asked.

‘It was left in the tree, I suppose,’ Emily said. ‘I never saw it again. Pearl would never have it in the house. She said its spirit did not belong here.’

‘Where did you find it, exactly?’ Lily asked Todd.

‘In the mud on the riverbank, downstream from Jack Robinson’s place.’

‘Perhaps Pearl threw it in the river,’ Lily suggested.

‘Or it could have been washed away in the flood,’ Cat said.

‘How old were you when you found it?’ Lily asked Todd.

‘Just a little tacker, four or five.’

‘Freya used to think there was a curse on it,’ Lily said. ‘She said Gottlieb had it when he was a boy. Jack was a teenager when he took off with it. Jack died young and Gottlieb’s life was full of trouble.’

‘The old lady at Lake Illusion said the mission brought sickness to their country,’ Cat said.

‘Pearl was right,’ Merran said. ‘This thing has brought nothing but grief to anyone.’

Malcolm Todd sank down slowly in the sand, all his bluster gone. His face was pale. ‘I never thought of it. My illness...’ he said, putting a hand to his chest.

‘Surely *you* don’t believe in curses?’ Cat said. ‘Gottlieb’s problems were his own fault. He had a fearful temper. And he used to line his children up and beat them.’

‘Common practice in them days,’ Todd said. ‘Never did kids any harm.’

‘That’s not true!’ Lily argued.

‘Kids need a bit of discipline.’

‘Beating children is abuse,’ Lily said.

‘Kids these days are spoilt,’ Todd said. ‘If I had kids I’d remind ‘em who’s in charge.’

‘I’m glad you don’t have children.’ Lily shuddered.

‘Me too. They’d mess up my stuff,’ Todd retorted.

Lily sighed, and the others laughed. Cat shook her head. Todd’s belligerence, she saw, was really a misguided attempt to relate to the people around him. ‘Why was the Radnadel so important to you?’ she asked him.

‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘It just got to me.’

‘It has a way of doing that,’ Cat agreed.

‘It should be in a museum.’

‘You’re right,’ Dingo said. ‘But not the Barramundi Museum. It should be somewhere where it can be properly studied. In its country of origin. May I?’ He held out his hand, and Cat placed the Radnadel into it.

‘How can you be so sure where it comes from?’ she asked.

‘A scientist came out here and tested it,’ Todd said.

‘Yes,’ Dingo agreed, turning it over in his hands. ‘She found its mineral composition is a match for a cache of grave goods unearthed only last year in a German forest. The bronze came from a mountain to the north of that site.’

‘They can pinpoint it that precisely?’ Lily asked.

‘Pretty much. The Staatsmuseum in Hanover is keen to have it for their Bronze Age collection. They’re willing to pay, if we can work out who the rightful owner is.’

‘Well, Merran is Jack’s direct descendant,’ I said. ‘Although, strictly speaking, he stole it.’

‘Strictly speaking, everybody who’s ever owned it stole it,’ Cat said. ‘Except the original owner. Bronze Age woman, whoever she was.’

‘It’s hard to say who it belongs to now,’ Lily said.

‘Well, I sure don’t want it,’ Merran said.

‘Perhaps it doesn’t really belong to anyone,’ Cat said. ‘It’s a free agent.’

‘Yeah, nice idea,’ Dingo said. ‘But if there’s money to be had, you’d be mad to refuse it. It could do some good in the community. Why don’t you three set up a trust fund?’

‘For people whose children were taken,’ Cat suggested.

‘Or for education for the local kids,’ Lily added.

‘Or to fund the clinic,’ Merran said. ‘Good idea.’

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Cat, Lily, Merran and Dingo sat on the shore, watching in silence as the first glimmer of sunlight showed on the eastern horizon. Cat felt as if all the parts of her body were connected, and the hollow places ached a little less. Dingo put his arm about her shoulders and she traced the contours of the Radnadel with her fingers: the rayed spokes, the broken place, the circular space at its centre. She thought of its great age, the journeys it had made, the tales it could tell. Tears welled in her eyes and she allowed them to run freely down her face, wet and warm.

She handed the Radnadel to Lily, who cradled it carefully without speaking, then held it out to Merran.

Merran took it gingerly and held it for a long moment with both hands, as if she were listening with her skin.

'There's grief in it,' she said. 'So many generations of sadness.' She traced the outline of the wheel with her fingers: the two circles, and the spokes that joined them. 'It must go back,' she said. She passed it to Dingo.

With a smile, Dingo handed it to Cat. 'It's a woman's thing,' he said.

Cat held it high. Faintly, as if from a great distance, she heard the beating of drums and the sound of women's voices, chanting, singing. Silhouetted against the rising sun, the spokes of the Radnadel were etched in darkness. The hollow disc at the centre blazed with light.

Epilogue: The Green Flash

When I stopped painting, I found a new way of being. I realised what Cat had been trying to tell me the day I found her. We each have to find our own way of seeing, of being. But it doesn't have to be a fight against someone else's way. When I first met Uncle Spider at Rufus River, the thought of giving up art horrified me. But it intrigued me, too. It was a bit like what Freya said once about the cards; being an artist is not just about the tools you use, it's about the way you look at things. So I decided to give it a try. To let go of what I'd been hanging on to, of what I held most dear.

For a long time I just looked. When I came home to Kestrel Bay, everything seemed strange: the house, the garden, the beach. It was as if I'd been away for much longer than a few weeks, as if some enchantment had spirited me away for a hundred years. Things looked different, as if the air had a new transparency. Plants, walls, and furniture were more solid, more real, yet at the same time vibrated with changing colours, shimmering and shivering like they might suddenly vanish and another world appear. My heart was so full with the sweetness of things, it ached.

After a while I emptied out a bit, and I got the urge to draw again, to try to capture that impossible juxtaposition of reality and illusion. I started slowly, trying to contain all the energy, allowing it to flow on to the page. It was like trying to draw smoke, impossible to capture the intricacy, the fluid shifting of light and matter. But it was the process that counted, and sometimes, looking back at my drawings, I am surprised at the results.

I drew for months before I picked up a brush again. Then I went straight to the canvas I had been working on when I left to look for Cat. The solution presented itself quite simply. A great spiral in the centre brought together all the wayward elements: north and south, past and present, form and chaos. Somehow this spiral form makes the composition work, though I can't say for certain what it represents. Some mighty force, perhaps, like sun or wind, or the spirit of a place that never really dies but just goes into hiding for a while.

They say that everything changes into something else: light becomes dark, stone becomes earth, water becomes air, joy turns to sorrow and back again. Sometimes the cycles are so vast we cannot see them and sometimes they happen in a flash, faster than the invisible beat of an insect's wing. I love to watch the slow changes in Freya's garden: the opening of buds, the uncurling of new leaves,

the almost imperceptible ripening of fruit. I love to see the light shifting on the hillside, the shadows of the cliffs as they shrink and lengthen on the beach and the squashed gold lozenge of the sun as it sets over the sea. I'm glad Cat is going to stay here, in Freya's cottage. I place a new bowl beside the front door, a bowl of green glass. When I fill it with water, light swirls inside it and casts shimmering reflections on the walls, all the way down the hall. There are no roses left in the garden; instead, I float cream-coloured frangipanis on the water.

Friends gather on the new deck overlooking the bay for the housewarming. Together, we gaze at the darkening sea, raising our glasses. We watch with narrowed eyes as the sun sinks low on the horizon, waiting for the green flash that is said to mark the moment of the sun's disappearance. Merran says she's never seen it. Neither have I. Someone mutters that the green flash is nothing but a myth, and Cat insists hotly that it's real. Someone calls out, there it is, I saw it! Cat looks disappointed. Now the sky is lit with reflected glory, a thousand bright tatters of cloud. Dingo puts his arm around my sister, shakes his head, and smiles.