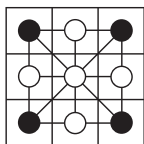


# In search of Kyle

MIRANDA VAN GAALEN



PHILAMONK

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## About the Author

Miranda van Gaalen was born in the Netherlands and has a degree in Business Economics. She lived in Australia from 2000 to 2007. Miranda has extensive knowledge of Feng Shui and loves sports. She co-authored 'Het Arnhems Kroegenboek' in 1992, had two short stories published in anthologies in 2012 and was a nominee for the National Book Week Contest in 2014. Miranda lives in Arnhem.



*To every minority,  
especially the redheads,  
may you grow stronger in diversity,  
this one is for you.*





Thank you,  
Claudia Fischer  
Natasja Sanches  
Margaret Pratt  
Arjen Beltman  
Charly  
Stefan ten Have  
Annet Tomasini  
Cindy van Roosmalen  
Beaumaris Book Club  
my darling brother  
Mum & Dad  
Ari  
Dr Jin Peh  
Vicki Sauvage!





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## Foreword

A book with Arnhem as decor? That's nothing new, witnessing the library that emerged after those ten famous days in September 1944. And there's lots more of course. But a spiritual novel about Arnhem? Arnhem and the supernatural? That's a first. So far, we only had the incomprehensible logical/illogical drawings of Escher where every perspective became relative. But now we have *In search of Kyle* where Miranda van Gaalen takes things another step further. In her book, time *and* space *and* energy interchange and merge flawlessly and completely naturally without taking away the clarity for a single moment.

*The most merciful thing in the world... is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents*, was the conviction of HP Lovecraft, author of fantasy and (cosmic) horror. When literature is an attempt to establish any kind of order in those contents, then *In search of Kyle* succeeds more than adequately.

Sky Beaumont—her name is obviously a metaphor—is searching for Kyle, the man she asked to marry her at age seven in Arnhem Land, in the northeast of the Australian Northern Territory. Kyle refuses and disappears from her life, on his way to the Netherlands. Arnhem as it turns out. He stays in touch with her grandmother through cryptic picture postcards that force Sky to go on an intriguing

quest. From the moment she first sets foot in Arnhem, the reader is taken on a kaleidoscopic exploration of the city, a rollercoaster ride through present and past, through the underworld and the one above, from Arnhem-North to Arnhem-South. Nothing is what it seems, and nothing seems what it should be.

In this game, the reader either visits clearly recognisable places with familiar names or enters the hidden places described as cryptically as the postcards from the wanted Kyle. Playfully accompanied by a selection of numerology or Aristotelian Element teachings, we stop at contemporary bars or other venues with picturesque names that demand decoding—The White Tiger, The Green Dragon or Peach Blossom, and there are more. And the naming is not at all far-fetched. Protagonist Sky simply thinks and feels different from the average Arnhemmer. When she visits the bridges over the river Rhine or ends up in the Middle Age tunnel network in the city centre, she relies on wind directions for orientation rather than street names.

Will the apotheosis on a Queens Birthday (back then 30 April, but then and now are a magical tangle in *In search of Kyle*) lead to a reunion with her lost love? There are more ways of connecting and what's most important is not the goal but the road towards it.

*In search of Kyle* is a profound book and two more books will follow. Who wouldn't want to know more about the adventures that await Sky? To end with Lovecraft—*Searchers after horror haunt strange, far places*. Those strange and faraway places are brought within reach with *In search of Kyle*. It's up to the reader to indulge in the abundance part one has to offer.

Jac. Toes, Arnhem, 25 April 2018

SUNDAY

# I

A car speeds out of sight, and I wave one last time, an unnoticed gesture by which I proclaim my existence. Now what?

On the drive to Kyle's city, the flat Dutch landscape changes into arboreal moraines. The driver tells me these remnants of the Ice Age embrace the province's capital around to the north. It's the region where my grandmother was born.

Although Helen receives postcards from Kyle, she refuses to elaborate on her relationship with him. The first card depicts a beautiful cityscape along a river with a cryptic note on the back. It fails to make sense. But it will. I want it to.

Dad's mum has been treasuring the cards for years. Despite her reluctance, she hands them over when I promise to take good care of them as I tell her the official version, I'll be studying there.

The straight hilly road leads past an abstract sculpture on the outskirts of town where villas alternate with apartment blocks, birds chirp and clusters of pink blossom flourish in well-maintained gardens. I'm euphoric when I recognise the phallus symbol rising high above Arnhem as Kyle's tower.

Countless nights I've fallen asleep imagining what Kyle's life is like, and I want to meet him. It takes a lot of convincing before my parents agree to me going on this journey. My best friend cries when we say goodbye, but I smile because excitement is overshadowing any feelings of sorrow. After ten years of preparation, setting

out a plan like an urban architect, I reach the antipode. My future is now as is my past.

It's Sunday morning, and I put down my luggage. The city is picture perfect in its own right, and it had better be because the images I dreamt up are lost, replaced by reality.

Young leaves on a nearby tree whoosh in a cool breeze, while grey clouds forecast prolific spring rain. Rundown mansions grace both sides of the street, car parks are occupied, and yellow flowers from a shrub at a corner are in full bloom. It's quiet.

There's a porch that leads to my new abode, and I sit down on one of its stone steps, confident that a fresh start means a lack of criticism. I'm carrying few possessions, and a blueprint of my being—a unique design displaying my evolution as life progresses. Leaving Australia in autumn, I arrive in spring, but it feels like winter.

To get to this destination of about fifty-two degrees latitude and six degrees longitude, I've crossed a distance of more than sixteen thousand kilometres in less than forty-eight hours. Here, the sun reaches its highest point in the south, but it's overcast. I clasp my army compass with luminescent paint on its arrows, a practical gift from my father that hangs from my neck like a talisman.

As a kid, I follow a wombat trail and lose track of time. There's a glow around the eucalyptus trees that intensifies the forest's beauty and inhaling its energy I wander higher up the hill. When twilight sets in, my stomach rumbles. Anxious, I rush down a slope. Tree trunks give way to a cut field where a ball flies past, narrowly missing my ear. A nosy woman disengages from her group and takes me with her one-gloved-hand to a building where I get to feast on lemonade and chips. When I'm picked up by my mother, her unexpected wrath is hard to digest.

The unfolded compass has four letters on it—N, S, E and W. I think of eight slices of pie because the non-cardinal directions exert

their influence too. Facing west, there are three-storey buildings with bicycles parked out front while from my grandma's veranda, I watch container ships coming and going on Port Phillip Bay.

I bite off a loose piece of cuticle before I pick dirt from under my fingernails. My hands are practical, like my mother's—broad, with a similar coarse skin structure and wide nails, which in Mum's case, are manicured. My slender body I inherited from my father, or rather from my grandmother. That's where any outward resemblance ends. Occasionally, I suspect my mum, then my dad of passing down their sound properties and imperfections as I'm still learning to cope with my inclinations and impulses.

An intrusive chill is freezing my bum, so I rub it before crossing the street. When I look back at my home, which sits in the east, I kick my foot like thunder to shake off the numbing feeling. The southerly wind makes me shiver.

It's seven to nine according to my watch, a parting gift from Chris. He's a ferociously attractive man whom I left behind with my virginity. Love with the swell of oceans between us. Impressed by his magical invention, I wonder how much closer I am to understanding myself. Does he really love me?

A cyclist rattles past, and I stroll across to lean against a tree. I take a harmonica from my denim jacket, but when I play, the notes come out wrong like an L-plater changing gear, and I fail to hold the tune. Doubt creeps into my mind. I'm cold and alone, in a country full of strangers. Was it a mistake to move?

I want to abandon these destructive thoughts since it's easy to make life look bleaker than it is. I need to get warm, and I need friends.

There's rubbing of trouser legs, shoes strike against the pavement, and a cat rushes into a porch. When the footsteps stop, I turn around.

'Sky Beaumont?'

Hungry eyes examine me from top to toe like a cattle judge. It's unlikely he'll be a gentleman. I nod, tuck away the harmonica and shake his soggy outreached hand.

'How are you?'

The fat-bellied man raises his eyebrows and pats his bushy red moustache. 'Follow me.'

I wait in vain for common courtesies. Like a pack donkey, I trail the auburn ponytail of the man up the steps to the entrance. He precedes me on what once must have been a stately staircase. Once upstairs, he's panting. As he wipes beads of sweat off his forehead, a soaked spot shows under his armpit.

Like a one-woman-band, I arrive at the landing. Before I can put down my luggage, he pushes two keys into my hand, and his clammy fingers hold mine a fraction too long. I back away from his touch and stale breath and insert a key into the lock. Then I try the other one. When I open the door, the sports bag strap slides off my shoulder and hindered in my movement I feel him brushing my lower back. I quiver.

'If you have questions, you can always call me,' the landlord says, leering on his way out.

A memory looms of a bloke who rubs his belly against my shoulders in a crowded fish and chips shop. Pinned to a display case, I push back and frown at his inappropriateness, but he's relentless. When I attract the owner's attention, he ignores my silent pleas for help and attends to another customer.

'But I count on your self-reliance.'

Aware I need to protect myself from obnoxious men, a world-wide occurrence, I force a smile and omit to ask his telephone number. Then I mumble a *thank you* but ignore his last words. The stairs squeak under his descending weight and as the front door slams shut I step into the sanctuary of my new home.

Relieved, I drop my belongings, lean against the closed door and

sit down on a carpet of an indefinite colour. The apartment has a high ceiling and natural light comes through long windows, framed by faded curtains but without views of a ridge, like my parents' living room. Its walls, constructed from different materials, but with a similar smooth finish, delimit it as my place. My mum's sister has arranged it for me, and it's a reassuring thought I have relatives here although Helen's past remains a mystery.

When I put my canvas bag right next to a vase on a table in the middle of the space, I avoid overturning the tulips. I'm eager for fresh air. After wiggling, I slide one of the window frames up but as soon as I let go, it groans and grudgingly falls down again. The same happens to its twin.

From a tiny balcony on the left, I overlook the cobblestoned street with its narrow sidewalks. It drizzles. When two scooters with roaring engines pass, a whiff of exhaust fumes finds its way up my nostrils. I prefer a bicycle to get around town. Shivering, I leave the squeaking glass doors ajar.

I nestle myself at the four-legged table like a yogi and close my eyes to enjoy the happiness I'm feeling of exchanging one life for another. Then I turn my attention to the bag in front of me. I undo the buckle and cord, take a leather-bound package out and untie the lace. It contains my most precious possessions—Kyle's nine postcards, dating from 1979 through 1987. When I see the first card at age nine, I dream for months of this alluring city where historical buildings grace a leafy promenade, a monumental tower reaches for the sky and boats are moored at the quay. With each passing year, the city's beauty grows on me, and the cryptic inscriptions on the back keep captivating me. Like a pit bull, I sink my teeth into the idea to find Kyle as it takes root in my being.

The starting point in my search for clues will be the church, but when I put its postcard on top, it slides off and whirls to the floor. As I kneel to pick it up, I spot a piece of wood behind a radiator.

Sliding a window up, I stuff it vertically into the opening, and fresh spring air floats inside the sparsely decorated room, and I jump for joy.

I've taken the plunge. Away from predictability, the long distance provides new opportunities. Apart from Kyle, I fall in love with this town when I glimpse a huge park on the drive into the city centre. I want to embrace the landscape, press it to my chest to tell it I'm here, and it'll be fine. In that moment, I crossed a magical border from fantasy to reality, one that surpasses my expectations.

This morning, after my aunt picks me up from the airport, she announces a break and exits the A12 before turning into a meandering road of a fairytale neighbourhood like Dinner Plain. Despite the early hour, it feels like bedtime.

I'm playing with my compass when in one chalet, a window lace moves. A woman with fiery golden hair is staring at me. When I look again, she's gone, and the fabric hangs motionless.

My aunt parks the car a few streets down as she has to give one of her regulars a haircut but I decline an offer to come in and wander around instead.

Near a bunch of trees, a group of futuristically dressed teenagers with strange hairdos is hanging about. As I approach them, they're quick to hide behind trunks but when I get to where I saw them—they've disappeared. I walk through the woods, fruitlessly looking up for tree huts and searching the soil for footprints or a hatch to a secret cavern. The wire fence surrounding the neighbourhood is too high to climb and intact, but they're gone.

I retrace my steps and stroll past chalets where cars are parked in carports or garaged behind vertically panelled doors. Window coverings obscure most living rooms but one has its curtains drawn back, and the woman with the copper tresses is standing there. She has spread her arms and gazes at me without blinking, like a Red

Phoenix. Frozen to the spot, I stare at her. The moment presses on, and I want her to smile, and when she does, she gestures me to meet her in the backyard.

‘You come here often,’ she says.

I shake no, but she nods as if she has a snapshot of my future.

Her hair falls in long waves onto her orange velvet dress. ‘Ah, you’ve forgotten. It’s important to know how to apply your skills again. Trust!’

Is she referring to a previous life? I follow her into a glasshouse. She points to a bamboo chair among the vegetation and waits for me to sit before choosing a seat opposite.

‘There are two ways of connecting with the universe,’ she says and touches the amethyst pendulum on her silver necklace. ‘The masculine way uses modern technology, like that watch of yours, but the spiritual way focuses on developing the inner compass. They can coexist, but you’ll need proper physical and mental training.’

I compare the digital wristwatch to the compass. Can a modern gadget outsmart ancient wisdom and somehow unlock the future?

‘Young ones come and go as they please, true to their being,’ the Phoenix says. ‘They apply their energy to accumulate spiritual knowledge for personal growth. In infinite space, they’re one. These kids love to be entertained with stories that shine a light on how life once was and where hope lies.’

Although she’s speaking, my throat is dry. Is she suggesting those teenagers come from the future and are able to appear and disappear at will?

‘It starts with questioning the established order because it causes trouble,’ she continues, ‘a necessity for laws shows a state in decline. Mankind is known for wanting to erase the past, but it’s impossible to deny oneself. Ignore those who shout the loudest as the wise speak softly.’

There are herbs in pots on the table and floor. She rises from her

wicker chair to pick mint and adds it to a kettle on a wood burner, careful to keep her wide sleeves out of the way. Flower baskets hang from beams, and the timber construction is decked out with recycled window frames of different sizes. Nature springs to life, both indoors and outdoors in a mixture of greens, highlighted by the bright colours of early blossoming flora. Then Phoenix offers me a cup of tea and when she sips from hers—I do the same.

‘Truth cannot be forced,’ Phoenix says. ‘It can be conceived by being aware of its rightfulness. A eureka moment only occurs when you surpass thinking. It needs a full trinity experience to understand what’s true.’

I know life’s energy is called qi and consists of yin and yang where one is divided into two and when in harmony, they’re one again. I deduce that when added up, it makes three. She takes another sip, rests her cup on a tree trunk and folds her hands in her lap.

‘History is everything that has been and is all that will be.’ She speaks softly. ‘Life existed five hundred as well as five thousand years ago, and millions of years before that. Today is a new day and so is tomorrow, and the time has arrived to acknowledge that earth’s procession through the *San Yuan* cycles has prepared humankind for a transformation.

‘Technology is a means to create comfort, but it’s vital to avoid turning humans into robots and cutting them off from their surroundings. The emphasis on material advancement stalls human evolution. Only sleepy people keep on dreaming.

‘Actual progress arises when a connection is established, between body, mind, and soul, and the next dimension unlocks itself when this trinity is interacting. Free yourself from customary thought. You’re responsible, and you’re here,’ Phoenix says with a hearty smile, ‘a being among five billion other humans, on a planet between eight others with twenty-five moons, all circling around a single

star in our solar system. The sun is only one of more than 200 billion stars in our galaxy the Milky Way. There are billions of galaxies. Your existence is futile.'

She pauses and gazes at me. There's a flow of loving energy emanating from her, and I try to grasp the full meaning of her words.

'However, realising your insignificance,' she continues, 'is key to understanding the universe. You're one. You have the power to contribute to the future advancement of humankind because every single one of your actions matters. Appreciate how you feel and dare to be. You want to find Kyle and you're here, that's a start, but there's another mission, which will become obvious later. This is your current life, in this shape and form, use it wisely as it takes an effort to transform. You can realise your dreams when you develop your skills and apply intelligent thinking. When you're happy, the demand for rules and laws disappears. Keep in mind that when you have clear objectives, things unfold as they should.'

Silence follows. When she stands up and gestures me to do the same, she climbs a wooden staircase. In doubt about what's expected of me, I stay put. When Phoenix descends, she gives me a green crystal I should caress when in need, as it'll protect me, and I leave flabbergasted.

I grab my bag and go out, but although the rain has ceased, a nasty wind cuts into my face, and I run upstairs to get a scarf. I head north and pass a red-light district on my right where scantily clad women display their wares in brightly lit shop windows. At the end of the street, a queue of cars with satisfied men is waiting for a traffic light. I saunter west, past a travel agency that offers memories for sale while further down a church looms. A bakery insinuates at delicious pastries, cakes, and chocolates.

My best friend loves croissants, and I vividly remember a summer's day nine years ago. I'm trotting along the water's edge

from where the tip of Anthonys Nose almost juts into the water towards the Yacht Club. It's daring to run blind and avoid the waves that wash ashore but impossible to tame the capriciousness of the sea. Elated, I increase my pace until arrested in mid-flight, a croissant falls to my feet in the soggy sand. I yell from fright and rub my arm.

The pain is real. Startled from my musings, I face an angry punk. 'Are you okay?' I say.

Head and shoulders move backwards, and I'm being frowned at.

'I should hope so,' a girl with a red Mohawk says.

'Do you know where the church is?'

Her frown grows deeper, she wants to say something, but changes her mind, leans forward and peers into my eyes. 'You're standing in front of it.'

Three steps lead to a pair of wooden doors with wrought iron fittings. Above an arched window, there's a sculpture of a man sitting on a throne adorned by the bust of an angel, eagle, bull, and lion.

I shake no, hurriedly extricate the postcard from my bag and hold it to her nose as I stab with my finger at a picture of the church. 'This one here.'

An arm decorated with studs takes the card. 'Smartass.'

The insult softens her expression. She has more earrings than I have piercings, and tired blue eyes waver over the words. The punk is shorter than I, has an oval shaped face and a fresh gash mars her almost perfect forehead.

'That's your opinion,' I say.

Church doors open and churchgoers flock to the pavement, offering a simple perfunctory nod to us.

She hands it back. 'Isn't that a card from your boyfriend?'

I sigh and feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. 'He's the reason I'm here. It's a long story ... I'm looking for that church.'

Her eyes suddenly shine, like a predator sighting its dinner. She

wants me to follow her, scuffles off and abandons me as I wait for a pedestrian light to turn green. Stoically, the punk keeps walking. Her skinny legs are tucked into black pants, and her leather coat flutters like a bat. Drawn on the back is a circle with an 'A' within.

Kyle's tower is visible, but when I cross the outer ring road, it ducks behind other buildings like a naughty schoolboy. In Musis Sacrum Café on my left, grey earthlings sip from their coffee cups and eat cake with a fork and spoon, savouring lavish voluptuousness. To the right is a municipal park where little birds twitter on a lawn with a veil of yellow dandelions and faded narcissus chalices.

The punk's army boots march forward, like anchors scraping along the sea bottom. When her pace slows, I catch up with her but only after passing a cafeteria and crossing the inner ring road.

She's smiling. 'You're not a local.'

'I speak the language,' I say, 'thanks to Mum and Dad's mother, they're both Dutch.'

She appraises me. 'Your hair isn't red.'

Her thick eyeliner, Mohawk, and gloomy outfit make her appear hostile as a combat soldier. She stands out while I count on passing in a crowd. Although the faces are colourless, there's a Caucasian familiarity and a local dress code that befits me more than it does the punk.

'I know it's black, but I'm still human.'

A strong gust of wind surges along a tall apartment building. It sneaks past my neck and causes my nipples to harden.

'I come from a land Down Under.'

She waits as I rearrange my scarf. 'You came here for a man. Why didn't you wait for him to find you?'

'I've already waited ten years! Maybe I'll like it here.'

Cars, buses, and cyclists are directed around the centre as we enter its plain mouth called Roggestraat. In a shop window, mannequins are wearing pumps, wide pants, silk blouses and linen

blazers with shoulder pads. Another displays high-waisted acid wash jeans, shorts, and skirts with tucked in oversized, bright coloured T-shirts.

‘The village where you grew up, isn’t it different?’ she says.

‘How do you know?’

‘There’s more privacy in a city with less condemning stares and indignant whispers, and I hated how the pew sitting hurt my butt.’

I dislike being a reserve player too. ‘Which sport?’

She pouts. ‘I don’t do sports.’

‘What’s happening here on a Sunday?’

‘Isn’t there always something to do? What are you in to?’

Interests, besides sports? ‘Looking for Kyle.’

‘Will he recognise you?’

‘I doubt he’d know I exist. When we meet it’ll be a first, for all I know, he could be black.’

‘What?’ Aghast she stands still, pointing at me with a metallic blue polished fingernail. The red in her bloodshot eyes matches her lipstick.

‘You leave everything behind for a guy you never met? You’re crazy!’

I shrug. We’re at a junction of five streets with a leather shop on its northwest corner. I wonder if she bought her clobbered bat cape there, a long time ago. She pulls me to the centre of Land van de Markt and throws me a naughty glance before heaving up her arms.

‘Kyle, reveal thou presence! Let her feel thou art here.’ She points at me and pedestrians fling us wary glances.

A man in a green telephone booth is laughing as he speaks, watching her every move. With vicarious shame, I pull down her arm, but she breaks free.

‘From afar she has come for she’s worthy.’ Her voice lures an audience like a Siren’s to the rocks. ‘Step forward and subject her to thee.’

Although uncomfortable with her declarations, I muster the courage to join her. When we're both chanting Kyle's name, the strength of sharing takes away the awkwardness of the situation. More earthlings stare at us, and some shake their heads while others snigger. Nobody steps forward.

'Isn't everybody looking at me? I'm sure they were listening too,' she says in a normal tone before bowing to the public.

'Who's crazy now? If Kyle is around, you've scared him off for good.'

'Doesn't curiosity always win?'

As she plods off again, I follow her into a side street that leads southwest. A retired couple comes our way but passes us at a safe distance.

'You're up early?' I state—both a declaration and a question.

'Still. Later becomes later until it's early again.' She smiles, stops and offers me a slender hand with a silver antique-finish ring on each finger. 'I'm Izzy.'

'Sky.'

Izzy's handshake is firm. She gets a pouch of tobacco from inside her coat and rolls a cigarette. Underneath her camouflage, I detect a pale, innocent face. Her breasts are bigger than mine but have a lump between them like a malignant tumour. As it moves up, a pointed snout with two beady eyeballs peeps out. I scream. She smirks as she lights her smoke, grabs the rodent and puts it into my hands.

'Ah,' I cackle.

It's grey with a cute head and sniffs my fingers. I try to ignore its tail that has the same length as its body.

'Welcome stranger! Izzy and Bossy greet you,' she says and bows.

I caress the furry creature, holding it to my chest, but it escapes and crawls onto my shoulder. I squint to keep an eye on its movements.

'Why don't you extend your arm?'

As I do, the rat races down, leaps onto her hand and rushes up to her neck where it nestles. ‘How long have you had it?’

‘She’s full-grown but has a short life span. The last one got cancer. Dead within two years.’

‘What did you feed her?’

‘Besides a bottle cap with beer every now and then, anything, there’s not much she doesn’t eat. Somebody needs to take care of her. Didn’t we see the night change into day, huh Bossy?’ Izzy nudges her nose against the pets’.

Izzy and her rat are like Charlene and her dog—a smart, loyal being that instils horror into wildlife but always greets me enthusiastically.

‘I’ve been up and about for quite some time too.’

She touches the wound on her forehead and rubs around the broken skin like drawing a protective circle. We continue in silence, sharing our exhaustion under a veil of secrecy and stroll right into a deserted lane and past a coffeehouse before turning left. A gothic church emerges straight ahead of us.

‘This is it.’ Izzy points at colourless arched windows. Don’t you live close by?’

Part of the tower is visible over adjacent buildings and my stomach buzzes with excitement as I take in the view. When I turn around, she’s already walking backwards but maintains eye contact. Does she want to know my home address? I point to the east.

‘It’s a shared house, first floor. Street side. Up the steps. The green door on the right.’

Izzy shakes her head. ‘Meet me at Peach Blossom tonight, after ten.’

I nod, happy with the invite, and wonder if it’ll be nearby Station—a bar I glimpsed under the rail bridge this morning, near the lovely park. Without another word, she pivots and strides away. I yell a *thank you* after her. She waves her ringed fingers in

the air and disappears from sight as she turns a corner. It's still cloudy, but I can feel welcoming rays of sunshine.

## II

I touch the cold stone of Kyle's tower, put my cheek to the wall and caress the surface like a lover. I've landed, and I'm keen to store the moment in my mind forever.

As I walk backwards, the church looks like a drawn snake—with a raised head, a big hump on its back, and a small one at its tail. I rub my burning eyes and amble around the imposing building.

My thoughts drift to Helen, in 1979. She has left the city because she wants to live closer to her grandchildren, and her house is situated high on a hill behind our bungalow.

I use a shortcut through backstreets and parkland to a fence lined with banksias and shrubs. I crawl through an opening between a bottlebrush and a wattle at the lower end of her garden onto a patio with a white wrought iron table and chairs. Terraced flower beds skirt the path, and a wooden staircase leads up to the veranda.

The elevation offers an excellent view of the bay and the shipping channel that runs closest to shore in our town. A dot in the distance gradually transforms into a colossus that glowers and greets me with a sonorous call. I wave. Then it turns forty-five degrees and continues on its pre-determined course.

Quietly, I walk up to my grandmother. She sits at her mahogany writing desk in the living room. Her back is straight, and underneath her low bun, a pearl necklace shimmers. The roll top

escritoire has many drawers, pigeonholes, and hidden chambers. It's a great place to stash secrets, but my parents teach me to respect other person's possessions, so I stay ignorant of its private contents.

I peep over her shoulder and admire the ornate letters she writes on a light blue paper. A green underlay matches the leather of her seat. If she notices me, she ignores my presence, and I enjoy my invisibility a little longer.

Her delicate fingers are wrinkled. On her ring finger, she wears two golden rings, one of them decorated with a sparkling gem. Absentmindedly, she hooks a strand of silver that tickles her cheek behind her pearl clipped ear.

On the wall hangs a gold-framed colour photo of a smiling Helen in a tailored dress posing like a model in front of a classic car in a desert. Below, on top of the desk, rests a postcard portraying a romantic city on a river and I pick it up.

There's an inscription on the back from Kyle—'Water flows as life does, from the mountains to the sea.' Intrigued, I ask her who he is.

She closes the aerogramme, appends the recipient and the address before swivelling round in her captain's chair. She has pencil drawn lines along her plucked eyebrows as though to invigorate the words that roll from her lips.

'He's fifteen and a handsome boy, far away, who goes to school like you and sends me a card because he thinks of me.' She pokes my tummy.

When I want to know when he'll visit, the spark in her eye vanishes and a frosty expression settles on her face. Like an ice queen, Helen commands me to quit asking questions.

After a lap around the church, I'm pleased to conclude it matches the picture on Kyle's card. I read his scrawl—'Contemplate the yoke of misery. A pile of laid bricks that can fall apart.' The vague postal

stamp shows the year 1980. He has bad associations with the church although it has to be a symbol of, or for, something. I need somebody to explain its history.

Inside, the church is peaceful yet sterile like a hospital. In the centre where the nave crosses the transept, I measure its orientation. Built on the cardinal lines, it's exactly aligned north to south and east to west.

As I admire the organ, a man with white hair in corduroys and vest strolls my way. He has his fingers interlaced and radiates serenity like Jesus.

'Could you tell me something about this church?' I say as I approach him.

He sends a tight-lipped smile my way. 'In this spot, more than a thousand years ago, stood a small Roman church.'

He untwists his fingers, moves on and elaborates on the remains of the old foundations in the cellar. While I adjust to his pace, I calculate that ten centuries are at least forty generations. That's more than the mere eight of colonists who occupy the Australian continent, and Helen only arrived in the forties.

'Back then, Arnhem was a small settlement, but it prospered in the Middle Ages and had a city wall with four entry gates.'

I'm amazed by the size and architecture of the church, so I keep looking up at its ceiling and ribbed vaults. Although my neck is protesting, lying on the marble floor seems inappropriate.

'In 1452 they started building the current church around the old one,' he says. 'It's named after Eusebius and took more than a century to finish. After the iconoclast, it changed denomination and subsequently refurbishments, from lavish decorations to austerity.'

With contained gestures, he adds emphasis to his continuing story, pointing to the craftsmanship of the pulpit and memory plaques, leading me to a mausoleum of the Duke of Gelre. It fits a whole family.

I think of visiting the forlorn grave of a drowned schoolboy with Charlene when his classmates show up with a slab of beer. ‘Do they throw parties here to commemorate him?’

The friendly man looks concerned.

‘It’s a reason to gather and connect spiritually,’ I quickly add.

The tension disappears from his face. ‘A physical presence of human remains isn’t required for a commemoration. The Duke died more than four hundred years ago, and he’s best remembered for regaining rule over this city. Parties as you call them, aren’t thrown here. This is a place of reflection.’

‘Has the church ever collapsed?’

‘The Eusebius has suffered a long history of construction works,’ he says. ‘Its tower burned down due to lightning in the seventeenth century and again at the end of WWII when it collapsed. The stones used in the restoration afterwards were too soft. In 1972, a stone tumbled off the bell tower, and up to six years ago, fragments have fallen off regularly.’

I nod. The church is a troubled building, like the Sydney Opera House. I wonder if Kyle is religious. Maybe someone he knows was hurt, or he’s involved with the restoration. Is there a link between the church and WWII?

‘It’s been sheathed in scaffolding, burlap and wire mesh,’ he continues, ‘to protect innocent passers-by until the renovation was complete in 1983. Nobody was injured.’

Relieved, I put a hand to my heart and thank the gentleman for his explanation.

‘You’re a child of God,’ he says.

He holds my hands for a moment before he mentions the name of the parish where I can find him. His hands are pleasantly warm. As a ray of sunshine bursts through a window, it lights up the marble floor, and it feels as if I sense his presence.

Outside, I pull my scarf tighter. As I avoid a few puddles, I walk

to the far end to take a picture of the lonesome cowboy standing forlornly in a brick-and-mortar dominated square. It's a personal victory to be at a place that's precious to Kyle. Fluttering with joy, I get a bottle from my bag and sip water—it's my sparkling rosé, a poor man's champagne.

I recall a topographical map in my old room where I've marked Arnhem Land with a black pin. Charlene tells me the Aboriginals are the original inhabitants of the Australian continent and the Yolngu people have been living up north for many thousands of years. She reckons Kyle is one of them.

When I ask my mother when we'll go there on a holiday, she replies we're unwanted there. I'm sinking into quicksand. I start crying and yell I want to live in Arnhem, followed by more sobbing. Mum smiles and brings out an atlas, turns a few pages and points to a black dot with the same name. She wipes a tear from my cheek and reassures me I'll always be welcome there. Contented, I spend my pocket money on a world map and put a yellow pin in that city in Western Europe.

When I explain to Charlene where Kyle lives, she figures he must have raided the town, being a pirate. She wonders if he's happier living among the *Balanda*\*. I promise to ask when I find him.

I check my watch and leave time for what it is—an illusionary concept that seduces human beings to rush forward, forever unable to get ahead and losing every moment in the now as the seconds tick by.

While zigzagging through the streets, I play with the crystal in my pocket and note the clouds and wind are intent on staying. The compass confirms I'm heading east before I reach the ring road again, but further south.

There's an unshaven man with greasy hair rummaging through a bin, I suppress an urge to avoid him, and ask if he knows Kyle. He asks me for some change. The answer is the same.

Ahead, in a park behind Musis Sacrum that separates the inner city from the outer suburbs, a person leans heavily on a stick and crawls forward. A black woollen coat covers the lump of a back. The head seems to be missing.

Looking at it, I fear for my decline for at such a pace little can be done in a day. Still, I slow my step too and notice the senior women's head is bent over her chest, so she resembles a horseshoe, to be thrown over the left shoulder for good luck.

Is it age, lifestyle or are hereditary traits responsible for future bodily conditions? When is life such a burden it crushes all hope and forces one to look down instead of up where passing cloud formations inspire one to dream?

The dark figure stops and turns around as if she's reading my mind and a head pops up like a tortoise from its shell. A strand of white hair overhangs thick-rimmed glasses and her eyes probe right through me. Ashamed of my thoughts, I press on but I'm captured in her gaze, and now we're only metres apart. The Black Tortoise is wearing wide trousers and blanket-stitched shoes. I want to ask her if she knows where Kyle is, but before the question leaves my lips, she already responds, 'you will not find him in the clouds.'

Astonished, I let her grab my arm as she points east to abandoned offices. From the corner of my eye, I spy a teenager in an Emmapeeler catsuit who ducks away behind a tree. After a little tug on my sleeve, I turn to the woman with the penetrating eyes, drawing me in like a sinkhole.

'Most humans are disconnected from the surrounding landscape,' she says, 'unaware that man is the connection between heaven and earth. They're completely in the dark about how earth's energy is affecting them. The natural and manmade landscapes can make you feel great, but they can hinder you too. Like every day is a good day, but some days are better than others.'

I stare at her as I recall Helen speaking of the same trinity.

‘It’s about *San He*,’ Tortoise says. ‘Always check a landscape for nearby obstructions and pay attention to the general shape of adjoining buildings as similar in height is best, without extreme protruding features.’

She takes my hand and points across the street.

‘Look at that office over there. It has an obstruction in front of the entrance. The residents will suffer, however mildly, as the pole positioned in a straight line with their door prevents the energy from flowing freely, like a toothpick keeping its mouth open. However, Lauwersgracht Park is a refuge of tranquillity that adds to the beneficial energy of most buildings on both sides. Remember, you’re at the centre of your universe. Choose your location wisely and make it work for you, instead of against you.’

Although I lacked an influence on the location of my new residence, at least I can position my bed favourably. As I smile, she nods.

‘The Trinity of heaven, man and earth surpasses the duality of yin and yang because it functions as one when in harmony,’ Tortoise says. ‘You have all the strength you ever need inside. You can always draw from it when you ignore the outside world for it’s only a mirage of low-frequency vibrations you can easily transcend while reconnecting to your inner source. Be quiet and go to the core of your being and feel. Keep establishing this connection till it becomes second nature. Know you’re one. If you’re lacking energy, go outdoors and find an old deciduous tree. Ask the universe and immerse yourself. Now focus on what’s here.’

She touches my heart, and her hand is warm. An exhilarating power is emanating from within as if it wants to connect. I wonder how and stare at vague shimmering stones and the blades of grass next to the path. I smell spring, hear a siren, traffic, and rustling of leaves.

As I close my eyes, the sound of inhaling and exhaling deepens. When my breathing slows, my feelings intensify—there's a pleasant dizziness in my brain and a circular roaring in my stomach, like being on a rollercoaster. They're merging to form one powerful force. It's eager to get out and pushes its way up my chest in waves, and it makes my head wobble. My upper body is spinning on the inside and allowing the flow is full on, like levitating on a giant's stride. The sensation is so overwhelming that I want to cry for joy. It feels so good, and I'm ... connected. Overcome by this phenomenon, I get scared and my ratio takes over, so I open my eyes and jolt back to the present moment, but Tortoise has vanished.

Still dazed, I wonder if I can find Kyle by asking the universe. Can life be so simple?

I assume Kyle lives in town, but I know he's six years my senior, and I hope he's tall and athletic with green eyes and black hair. Just like a neighbour back home, a handsome boy who plays with my brother but who ignores me although I adore him. I'm about seven years of age when I muster the courage to ask him for his hand in marriage ... and he turns me down. Perhaps Kyle is a redhead too. Could he have met Tortoise? Maybe it's these kinds of encounters that attracted him to this city and following Kyle's footsteps like Dirk Hartog followed Willem Janszoon's, I walk home.

With the detergents from the kitchen, I spring clean my apartment and remove unfamiliar filth left over from previous tenants. Then I unpack my large backpack and sports bag and put my few belongings on the shelves of the open built-in cupboard. From the three cardboard boxes my aunt has supplied, I take the radio and plug it in.

The compass is lying on the round table and the needle is stable. Facing the window, it resolutely points west. In every corner of the square room, I check its measurements and establish that the deviation is less than two degrees from its original bearing.

The bed is positioned left of the door in the east. It's an inauspicious location and direction for me, so I drag it to the northwest, place it against the wall next to the window and turn it around, so my pillow heads west. I blow a kiss, curious if my parents will stir from their dreams, roused when my big smack lands on their slumbering cheeks.

After lighting a stick of incense, I draw circles in mid-air like an Olympic gymnast in the ribbon event as the sweet smell of sandalwood fills the space. I pluck the leaves from a droopy yellow tulip, toss them into the air and whisper an incantation. My home has been blessed.

Suddenly, there's a loud knock, the door swings open and a smiling girl holding a pink mug walks in. As she sniffs the air, her nostrils curl up like a rabbit's.

'Hello, fellow student.'

'When classes start again after summer I will be,' I say, 'but my job finished earlier than expected, the ticket was relatively cheap, and I figured I might as well explore the city beforehand. I could earn some cash too.'

'In line with expectations.' As she chuckles her gold Creole earrings bounce up and down, and she blows a bubble, pink as her V-neck sweater. 'I'm Daphne. Welcome to frog land.'

She extends her hand, lets the bubble pop and swoops the chewing gum back in with her darting tongue. Her red polished nails match the lipstick on her heart-shaped lips.

'Pleased to meet you, I'm Sky.'

She squeezes my fingers and wiggles past on pumps, clad in a pair of acid wash jeans. I close the door.

'Is the frog your national emblem?' I say.

Daphne puts the mug on the wooden table and shakes her carrot coloured perm. 'You occasionally hear them croaking in the lowlands although their numbers have been heavily reduced. That's

how coldblooded we are.'

I visualize her chasing them with a stick, running in heels, through pastures and jumping over canals. Maybe she wants to kiss one. I smirk.

'I've met a Black Tortoise and a Red Phoenix today. Strange people but very compassionate, but I'm unsure what to think of them.'

Daphne is taller than Izzy and almost my height. She looks around and creases her winged eyebrows.

'It sounds as if you went to the zoo. Didn't anyone tell you, you shouldn't talk to strangers?'

I'm an adult, I talk to whoever I feel like. 'I just met you, so, until that moment, we were strangers too.'

'You and I have a lot in common, you're my age, and we live in the same house.'

'Hello, those women had a message for me.'

'Shit, they're after your money. Forget about them. On the street and in the park you usually find crazy folk. The lazy ones who don't study or work.'

Pensioners and mums with children excluded, I presume. I need to let go. Since when is it safer to only meet humans inside a building? I deduce that when I know a building's purpose, it looks as if there's common ground, but it takes the mystery out of the equation.

'It's more spontaneous,' I say.

'But very impractical.' Daphne opens and closes the balcony doors as though she's a handyman inspecting recent handiwork. 'Don't you want to know what a person can do for you?'

I shrug. It means I should search for Kyle indoors once I figure out what his interests are. If he's like Sodapop, he's into cars, but if he's like Dallas, he'll be into redheads like Daphne.

'Otherwise, you'll end up with someone else's craziness,' she says.

'Look what Phoenix gave me.' I hand Daphne the crystal.

She flips it around between her slim fingers. 'That's actually a really nice gem. What does she want from you?'

I frown. 'Why should she want something in return?'

'People always do. That's the way the world works. If you didn't give her anything, you owe her.'

'I doubt that. Perhaps it was for my birthday.'

'Shit, is it?'

I giggle. 'Maybe a belated present. More likely it's a time traveling device.'

'As if. There are no buttons.' She hands it back.

'Be careful. I'll figure out how to push yours.' Grinning, I put it in the safety of my pocket where I cradle it before I bow. 'Welcome to my humble home.'

'You'll collect more stuff,' Daphne says while checking out street life. 'Do you have a bicycle?'

When I buy a second-hand panel-van after getting my license, I ignore my bicycle altogether as my existence finally expands beyond neighbouring towns. It must be full of dog hairs now Charlene has to clean the car.

'I know how to ride one,' I say.

'It's lively out here. You'd think it's quiet at the rear, but my comfort is disturbed by the sound of cruising Johns in cars and screaming children.' Daphne turns around. 'All right. I have two bikes. You can borrow one.'

Staggered, I thank her while considering what she wants from me.

'Do you often get lost?' She focuses on the compass on the green table.

'Usually, I'm able to locate the eight directions, but here I'm confused as the sun travels through the southern sky. To measure is to know.'

'Shit, it's always in the south! You must be suffering jetlag.'

‘It’s travelling through a northern arc in the Southern Hemisphere although the sun still rises in the east and sets in the west.’ I yawn, and my eyes are burning. ‘Could you do me a favour?’

Daphne nods, so I ask her to take a seat on the bed in the northwest corner. Her frizzy hair is radiant orange against the sunlight. Content, she drinks her coffee, stares out of the window and then back at me. I point to the north position of the apartment.

‘Now sit at the wall over there,’ I say.

‘You make it exciting, but I don’t understand what you want with this.’

As soon as she sits, she spills coffee on the floor. She curses, then frowns and bites her lip. I wave it off. Treatment of the stain can wait as the carpet has faced even bigger challenges.

‘I’ll explain later.’ I close the compass.

‘You’re funny.’ She gets up and looks around once more. ‘Will you join me for dinner tonight? I’m cooking.’

What I had to eat has long been digested, and the gnawing in my belly spurs me to accept. Happy, she leaves the room the way she entered, like a whirlwind. After closing the door, I sit on the bed and unfold Charlene’s letter. A few tears roll over my cheeks as I re-read it, reminded of a friendship I cherish but left behind. Enclosed, is a U2 cassette and a photo from our last holiday together, camping in my panel-van in Kosciuszko National Park, well away from a dead dog hanging from a gum tree. In the Lower Snowy River, we try to wash off the alarming sight and the animal’s stench from our memory. We only stay one night. I stick the picture with Blu-Tack on the wall and lie down, head to the west.

I’m content with a safe landing in my mothers’ and my grandmothers’ homeland. I drift off, thinking of my ancestors as a line going back from acid wash jeans to mini skirts to broad-shouldered knee-long dresses that in return hands over women’s rights, sexual freedom, and economic independence.

During the summer holidays that follow Kyle's last postcard from 1987, I'm working for a real estate agency. The boss's son Darcy is telling the receptionist he'll do a property inspection of a house that's been vacant for more than two years, and she and I both insist on coming along. Jessica has the hots for him, and I want to deduce why it refuses to sell.

In the back of Darcy's car, I tune out of the ambiguous conversation in the front. I enjoy the winding drive up to Arthurs Seat where we pass under four dangling feet from a chair above that lifts a couple to its summit. At various hairpin bends, we get an uninterrupted view of the bay that glistens like a blue diamond. After fifteen minutes, we turn left onto a dirt road on the ridge of a valley before we eventually stop at a chain locked gate.

Poplars behind a fence line impede views of the building. With the engine running, Darcy alights from the car and locates a fitting key. The lock opens smoothly. Weeds are infiltrating a driveway adorned with pampas grass. He parks near the carport on the right. The dilapidated fibreglass roof is full of composting leaves, which stain it with tannins. A penetrating mouldy odour makes me sneeze while gray clouds clench into a dark fist, like a pre-warning of a storm to come. Green foliage is rustling apprehensively.

'The man who lived here has died, and none of his children wants to live here,' he says.

'I understand why. This place gives me the creeps,' Jessica says.

'Do you smell it? The body is buried here,' I say.

She shivers and steps closer to Darcy.

'Come on girls. It's a prime secluded location. With a little tender loving care, this home can be easily restored to its former glory.'

He always stays positive even if it's only dollars on his mind and he's somewhat of a sleaze too, but his smooth talking charms the prosperous older ladies, and blokes cope with his debonair flair. Jessica has taken hold of his arm, either feigning fear or more

likely, seizing an opportunity to be near him and sniff his liberally applied Old Spice aftershave.

Flowerbeds are overgrown with weeds too, and a fading red scoria path leads to a 60's yellow brick bungalow where a tree branch is feverishly tapping on the roof tiles. While Darcy walks up to the front door in search of the correct house key, we look around at the bewildered garden. Suddenly, there's an eerie creaking sound. Just in time, we jump aside to avoid a falling eucalyptus branch, which has grown tired of waving at the sky and wants a good lie down.

'Please stay close,' Jessica says and follows on Darcy's heels.

I'm a little shaken too, but I sense the place is trying to tell me something. Maintenance springs to mind, and I drag the tree branch to the side.

I sketch an outline of the building with its various nooks, measure the orientation from every corner, and jot the results in a notebook. Walls facing the same direction show a wide range of compass bearings. It's a bad omen.

A dense path to the right leads to an abandoned granny flat tucked away behind shrubs and a sunny field with a well-kept vegetable patch at the back of it. Strawberries, ripe and succulent as sweethearts seduce me to savour. I pop one into my mouth, suck it, and as the flavour of the stolen fruit fills my mouth with juice, I feel somebody's watching me. I choke and swallow it whole. Quickly, I head back.

Darcy must have unlocked the garden doors, and I step into an open plan living room void of furniture. My colleagues are in the middle of a conversation, and although I want to inform them of my spooky non-encounter, a strange sensation restrains me from speaking up.

There are several doors that lead off the corridor. I inspect one room after another and shine a torch around empty bedrooms,

over wooden floors and worn chintz curtains. A stench of decay has seeped into the building and the odour of grimy wet rags assaults my nose. The house has been uninhabited for so long that reserves of yin energy are stored up inside.

When I pull open a jammed door of what used to be a pantry, I'm showered with grit that sticks to my hair and troubles my sight. I brush it off and extricate a fragment from my eye. Grubs are dining on the remains of a deceased rat, and as I sidestep the rodent, I climb up a staircase at the back where I unbolt a hatch before entering an attic.

Where angled rafters meet the walls, the height is minimal, and floorboards are covered in dust as are my hands. I sneeze. Most of the cobwebs are deserted as if the wolf spiders are wagging school today. There's a clear path to halfway where a skylight illuminates a half-a-meter high, round metal tub, like a floodlight lights an instrument on stage.

Dust particles animated by daylight are tumbling through the air in a rainbow of colours. Fascinated by the surreal atmosphere, I step into the tub. I reach for the skylight that opens and see roof tiles everywhere, and the still darkened, threatening sky.

Looking down, I think of our paddling pool set up in the backyard that triumphs over going to the beach on a hot summer day. I love to lean with my head on the inflated side and face the sun while splashing water with my feet before I push the weight of my upper body on the edge so it sloshes onto the lawn.

After reliving the memory, I discover that I lie on my back in the tub and gaze at a bright blue sky. The sense of cold metal plates fades, and it sculpts itself around my recumbent form. A thrill is creeping from my ankles up to my thighs, and I let the flow of a positive vibration engulf me. Closing my eyelids to the blinding light, I take a deep breath while spreading my arms and legs like the Vitruvian Woman.

I raise my hand and experience more resistance than normal, so I open my eyes. There's an azure substance circulating in the attic that inflates my blazer, like when jumping into a swimming pool fully clothed to secure the Bronze Medallion in lifesaving. It billows and swells and threatens to overwhelm me.

Clothes become uncomfortable, so I strip. As I tickle my leg with a toe and rub my tummy, I feel all restraints disappearing. Skin is touching skin. I'm staying afloat while turning around on my axis like a corkscrew.

When I think of lying in the surf on the beach, the blue colour changes to yellow, and I filter the sandy texture through my fingers, which drops softly onto my arm. My memories are inviting the changeable substance to mould to my thoughts. I feel the blood pumping in my veins and when I listen to my heartbeat—I slow my breathing.

Then I imagine the circular tub as a horizontally placed mouse wheel, reach for the rim with my toes and rotate it like a ballerina en pointe, and I push the edge above with my fingertips. Apparently, it's the bottom plate, disconnected from the side panel, that's revolving. I increase the momentum of my feet and move faster and faster until I'm spinning right round like a record.

Another memory springs to life. It's twilight when I leave the forest feeling thirsty and hungry, but the friendly woman with the one-gloved-hand rewards me with chips and lemonade. When Mum picks me up, I tell her enthusiastically about my trip but she's unusually quiet though, and once we're in the car, she starts screaming. Dumbfounded, I feel life's energy depleting.

Suddenly, I relive the accompanying excruciating pain. It's destructive. On impulse, I explore a world beyond the normal boundaries and the wonderful adventure allows me freedom, but is met by being shatteringly reprimanded. It hurts as if my gut is cut open and intestines are torn inside out. I'm crying, and snot is running

into my mouth as I sob uncontrollably because I'm afraid Mum will think I'm a bad girl and stop loving me.

Emotions are whirling through me, and I desperately want to suppress this suffering until I realise it's unnecessary. Good or bad it's just a feeling, and it's my choice to either submerge in it or to let it go. Mum's outburst of outrage comes from sheer concern. She's frightened she'll lose her child who has wandered off again and who is constantly unaware of time and horrified that she has to revisit the feelings of loss again and again.

Agony is on its way out. We're together in this. Instead of suffering alone, we need to share each other's burdens, because if they stay hidden, we suffer their withering impact. Sorrow might be there, but we can heal it with love. From now on, I will soak myself in good feelings, I will forgive, and I will love.

I snap out of it when among this ocean of awareness—I hear a voice in the distance calling my name, and I put on my dry clothes. When Darcy calls again, I yell out for him to come up.

'We're going, are you coming?' he says.

I shake no. 'Over here, have a seat and tell me what happens.'

He sighs, moves closer and steps into the tub. I nod, still blissfully happy.

'What do you feel?'

'It's made of wood, has a silver lining and is soft. Not cold at all,' Darcy says.

It proves the personal experience. 'Do you notice anything?'

He assesses the attic. 'Except for a lot of dust, a dark sky, and stacked cardboard boxes, not much.'

He's unable to see colours, and I fail to see the boxes.

'What happens when you lie down?'

Although a big frown pops up, Darcy complies, but he jumps up after mere seconds. 'Bloody hell, I'm lying in my coffin.' As he climbs out, he kicks the metal, and a strange echo fills the space.

‘This house will never get sold,’ he mutters and descends the stairs.

I trail him and whisper to his deaf back, ‘it’s essential you have the right intentions.’

When I wake up, I’m confused for a moment as to my whereabouts. As I stretch my aching body, a leg pushes open the door and a delicious aroma fills the room.

‘Dinner is ready.’ Daphne is holding an enamel frying pan with pink oven gloves.

Without waiting for a reply, she hurries off. Before following the scent of hot food, I grab a bottle of wine from the shelf and wine glasses from the kitchen. I’ve developed a taste for red wine and pasta, picking grapes during the Easter holidays and have brought with me two Underground bottles.

Daphne’s apartment, slightly bigger than mine, is like Hansel and Gretel’s gingerbread house but predominantly pink. Although the balcony door is ajar, a stench of smoke hangs in the air. We sit at her desk that for the occasion has been transformed into a dining table. It’s set with pink placemats and lit candles. She gestures me to serve myself while she opens the bottle and pours the wine. I appraise a romantic black and white poster by Robert Doisneau depicting Paris, hanging lopsidedly on a wall. She lacks a carpenter’s eye after all.

‘*Proost*,’ she says.

We clink glasses before she interrogates me about my past as though it’ll inform her of my present. I’m hungry, and I tell her, rolling the spaghetti with the fork onto the spoon, the *Women’s Weekly* feature-length story of my life. Pausing from moment to moment to sip and chew, I omit to mention Kyle suddenly feeling rather childish and a little vulnerable about my actual purpose here.

Daphne though, keeps her family details to a minimum, only

mumbling something about a bad marriage. She cuts the spaghetti and pricks it onto her fork, making excuses for her amateur skills, claiming this way she avoids stains. I check my white jumper, and it's clean. She's from the west, close to the coastline and has chosen this school a hundred kilometres away because of its excellent standing. I giggle at the meaningless distance, as Down Under I could barely make it into Melbourne.

'I can picture you in Frankston.'

She quizzes me. It's too late to take back, and all I manage is that it's a city on the beach, but I withhold to mention its reputation. I judge her based on looks, even when I prefer to be judged on actions.

She puts down her cutlery. 'Boyfriend?'

'Left him behind.'

'Was he too big to fit your bag or did he refuse to move?'

'Both.' I cringe thinking of Chris.

I eat more spaghetti Bolognese savouring it with tongue, cheeks, and lips. Discussing him is unlikely to bring him closer.

Daphne senses my reluctance. 'Shit, just as well, it wouldn't be practical, him being there and you over here.'

She sounds like my mum.

'Find yourself a nice cheese-head instead, you're not ugly,' she says.

I'm flattered she's trying to lift my mood with her reverse compliment. Glasses clink as we toast again. A radio is playing pop music, but the jingles differ from those on the station I've tuned into.

'I have a boyfriend,' Daphne says. 'He's seven years older, owns a bar and has plenty of money he doesn't mind spending on me, and he drives a Dodge.'

Her face lights up like a cherub, and as she leans forward, she plays with the golden heart on her necklace. 'I also have an admirer. He's a student who lives with his parents.'

I finish my plate before she does and wonder how handsome they are. After we clean the desk and wash the dishes, she makes coffee pouring it into pink mugs before we sit on the couch. She puts her feet on the table and opens a blue bag. Curious, I follow her skilled fingers rolling a pluck of tobacco into a piece of paper, which she deftly licks and rolls into a smoke. I deduce that cigarettes are expensive or she's a poor student or both. She lights it and offers me the pouch, but I decline and put my feet up too.

'Where will you find a job?' Daphne says, as the smoke of her cigarette rises and coils towards the balcony where it's caught by outdoor air.

'I'll look for one.' I add powdered milk and stir it through the coffee.

'You can work at a bar. Not too difficult. They always need help. It's what I do, a shift on the weekend, but back home.'

Undoubtedly at her boyfriend's joint. 'I prefer real estate, and I have experience.'

Daphne purses her mouth into a thrifty smile before she switches off the radio and pushes a button on the black and white telly to watch the news. It leaves me time to muse.

Two summers ago, in December 1987, I meet Chris, a free spirit who plans his day unbothered by conventions, getting up whenever he wakes. Hardly ever am I allowed to enter his study. When he locks himself in there, it means I must go. The shelves and L-shaped workbench are stuffed with equipment, including a Commodore-64. Between a keyboard and various monitors, fine tools are spread out. He likes to talk about wavelength, bits, and code. When I ask him what he does, he answers, 'programming future discoveries'.

He always hermetically seals off his granny flat whether he's at home or tending to business in town, and it's impossible to peek in, as the windows and sliding door are covered with cloth. Even if

his Pajero is parked in front, he's either unwilling to come out or gone surfing. On our first date, unaware of his *modus operandi*, I find the door closed and wait on the veranda. After half an hour, he steps outside but forgets to ask me how long I've been sitting there, and although it's rude, I'm unable to leave.

There's a jet aircraft like an F-18 Hornet blasting through the sound barrier that attracts attention, but it's impossible to get a visual because of thick clouds. An image of a church on TV reminds me of Izzy.

'Let's go out tonight,' I say.

Daphne tilts her head and weighs my invitation. 'School doesn't start until ten tomorrow. Yeah sure!'

After finishing her coffee, she jumps up to turn the telly off and the radio on. She rushes to a mirror to brush her bob-length perm before she reapplies red lipstick, wets a finger and pushes her eyebrows into shape. Then I rise from the snug couch.

'I want to check out Peach Blossom.'

She surveys me. 'Shit, you're in town for less than a day and already familiar with local waterholes.'

'How many are there?' I say.

'Enough to get socially drunk.' Daphne reshuffles the contents of her brown shoulder bag. 'Hitting the bars is the best way to unlock a city's secrets.'

### III

With twilight, northbound traffic increases and most drivers turn east, eager to satisfy their needs in the red-light district. Daphne and I turn west into a quiet street with Brussels style houses. She chews bubblegum as she chats about her studies while I wend my way like a slalom skier around bicycles parked on the footpath.

As I peek into living rooms, I wonder which home belongs to Kyle. All I have are his name and cryptic messages, and Phoenix implies I'm wasting my time on chasing a dream. Why did he send postcards and why stop?

Rising over buildings across the street, Kyle's monument peers at me. I punch a traffic post. The road on the right is void of oncoming traffic and pedestrians are crossing further north, so I put my foot forward.

'Watch out!' Daphne pulls me back with a jerk.

A chain of cars from the left roars past, emitting gusts of fumes, and I step away further. My heart is palpitating, and I hold onto the pole where a red sun on a yellow sticker smiles at me. I'm a novice to right side traffic after all.

'You're not in the countryside here.' She shakes her curls before she elbows me. 'Shit, pay attention!'

I nod compliantly. Guided by a green pedestrian light, we traverse Lauwersgracht Park and crisscross through the streets of the city centre.

Peach Blossom is a corner café, tucked away between alleys, somewhere in the northwest of the city. It faces south and has an entrance in the middle of two large windows.

Daphne marches straight up to the front bar. A scrawny boy with messy hair plays a pinball machine on the right while alternative music plays through a sound system. There's a pool table with a dartboard opposite at the back. When she hands me a beer with a rich foam head, we find a table beside the west-facing window, and I position myself with a view of the door. The place is filling up with youngsters and most dress in black.

'Shit, what are we doing here between these outsiders?' Daphne rolls her seductive eyes.

I have yet to tell her about Izzy, but I must admit I love where she has led me even if we stand out. The venue has an accepting atmosphere like a warm welcoming womb. I lift the pot in her direction and make eye contact over the glass.

'Meeting extraordinary people. Cheers!' I say.

The beer has an agreeable, slightly bitter taste. Across the alley is a fenced-off patio full of weeds next to an old warehouse blinded by newspapers. A banner on the blackened pane on the right informs me there's a poolroom.

Daphne fashions a cigarette and when I explain about my encounter with a punk, Izzy in the company of male friends, walks in. I watch her group take possession of a table left of the doorway. She looks around, and when she sees me, she strides over.

'Hey Sky, I didn't think you'd make it.'

I'm pleased to see her, and that this joint turns out to be a bar rather than a punk dungeon.

'I risked my life getting here,' I say, and Daphne and I giggle.

She winks. 'I should put her on a leash.'

'Forget it, I'll get the hang of it.' As Izzy frowns, I explain, 'street crossing, traffic, wrong direction.'

I flop my hand up and down as though to dismiss it but her frown grows deeper, and I wave it again. 'She'll be right.'

'Cars, near death, a helping hand.' Daphne sniggers.

Izzy withdraws, and I quickly say, 'how's Bossy?'

She pats her chest. 'High and dry in her little hideout.'

We laugh, but Daphne clenches her teeth like a capsized sailor.

Izzy points to her. 'You've found solace in church after all. Didn't you pick up a fellow believer?'

'Always hard to tell.' I smile as Izzy is probably the most religious of us all.

Daphne is scrutinizing Izzy, and she, in turn, does the same. I introduce them, soft candy meets black liquorice, and warily, they shake hands.

'Can I get you a drink?' I say.

Izzy looks at her friends and shakes her head. 'Hang on,' she says before walking away.

I continue the story of how we met, and show a sulking Daphne the postcard of the church.

'I'd have told you,' I say. 'Besides, I wanted to stop you from thinking I'm insane. Yes, I agreed to meet her here, and I asked you along, but I thought you'd love to meet other people too.'

'Shit, I said nothing,' Daphne shrieks.

It's true, but her face speaks volumes. 'Okay, thanks for coming out with me, cheers.'

Then Izzy returns. She puts a beer on the wooden table, pulls up a chair, turns it around in one action and sits down straddling it, and leans forward.

'Haven't I been thinking? Kyle hates this church, most likely all of them.' She gulps from her drink, and the froth leaves a moustache behind. 'I like him.'

Izzy places her glass on the table and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand before she opens her tobacco pouch. It's the same

brand as Daphne's.

'All churches?' I say.

'Doesn't he call the subjection of mankind to religion the yoke of misery? It can only be conquered when the institution collapses.'

Izzy extracts the last cigarette paper from a pack and rolls a smoke.

'Interesting point of view,' I say, considering Kyle chose this particular church.

'Religion brainwashes people,' Daphne says, 'and stops them from using their brain. They blindly follow and to top it off they reject others with different views. As such, religion is very narrow-minded.'

'It is, but some people want to be guided.' Izzy accepts a light that Daphne offers her, inhales and blows out circles of smoke.

'Why do they have to exclude fellow human beings?' Daphne says, 'because a holy book says so?'

'How many different Bibles are there?' I say.

'One Bible, millions of copies, plenty of versions and various interpretations,' Izzy says as though reading a well-practised script. 'Some people follow the text precisely and others don't. You can't forbid them from socialising with those who don't use a knife and fork, but they try. Don't we all need to eat, regardless of how we put the food into our mouth or at what time dinner is, either at five, five thirty or ten at night? Can you believe back home, I was told off for buying bread at another bakery because our local had run out, just because they're of a different persuasion?'

Daphne is circling her finger around the rim of her half-full glass. 'Shit, I don't want to live where you're from.'

'I left.' Izzy plucks at her coaster.

'Run away is more like it.' Daphne smiles. 'But what could you change if you stayed?'

'Nothing. That's just it. I don't want others telling me how to live my life. I'm quite capable of that myself.'

A guy with a big ducktail, tight pants and black pointy shoes walks in, together with a girl dressed in a short black skirt. They're followed by a few more lookalikes.

'I love to hear what your beliefs are Izzy, but let's focus on Kyle now.'

'He doesn't agree with the church, and maybe Eusebius is just the most striking example,' Izzy says.

'This church is special to him. Something has happened that sets it apart.'

'If he studies architecture, can't he be disappointed with the design?' Izzy says.

'If he's an Art Academy student, you can ask administration if he's registered,' Daphne says and examines the postcard again. 'Is the text connected with the picture or does it have its own meaning?'

Izzy and I stare at her. This is a new angle, I'm oblivious of any social turmoil at the time and what I recall is a footy team, Richmond—The Tigers, taking out the premiership in 1980 trouncing the Magpies in a legendary win.

'Are you related to Kyle?' Daphne says.

'If there's a blood bond, I'm sure Helen would have told me. So far he remains a mysterious stranger who still has to show himself. Although...' I'm winking at Izzy. 'Somebody has already informed the public about my mission.'

Izzy chortles. 'But he doesn't know yet. Hell, he doesn't even know you exist.'

'Shit, you better make up a family connection,' Daphne says looking stumped, 'you'll need that to get any official information. He can be your uncle.'

I squint. 'Kyle is twenty-five.'

'What about a cousin then?'

'Better think of him as your uncle because the closer the link, the better,' Izzy says.

A bloke with cowboy boots and a sleeveless jeans vest over his leather jacket parades in and talks to the scrawny boy at the pinball machine, who steps aside.

‘How many cousins do you have?’ I say to Izzy as I tuck the postcard away, out of reach of her fingers that have transformed a previously square coaster into a sphere.

‘Wouldn’t you put siblings before relatives?’ she says. ‘I have three brothers and two sisters and plenty of extended family so I can discreetly sneak out at family gatherings.’

‘Looking like that, you wouldn’t,’ Daphne says. ‘Shit, they’d wonder where the black sheep went. Was it a personal choice to antagonize your loved ones?’

Under the table, I kick her.

‘If I wanted any fashion advice from you Barbie,’ Izzy is spitting words at Daphne, ‘I wouldn’t ask *your* mother!’

Daphne is quick to place her wrist against her forehead and says in a pompous voice, ‘I can only bear your presence in small quantities.’ She smiles impudently.

Izzy tilts her head towards me. ‘Didn’t I want to escape the straitjacket? This outfit matches the music I like. It doesn’t bother me that my parents disapprove and the village is outraged.’

‘I love ska but why should I have to change how I look?’ I say before swallowing another mouthful of beer.

‘Don’t you want to demonstrate what you stand for?’ Izzy says.

What punk stands for baffles me, but I dislike having to conform, even to non-conformity, to express my musical preferences. ‘It’s impossible to read people’s minds just by looking at their clothes.’

‘But you’d get a pretty good idea.’

‘Maybe the more reason not to adjust,’ Daphne says. ‘Besides, I like disco. You can actually dance to the rhythm.’

Izzy has created a coaster that now fits the bottom of her glass perfectly, and she’s drumming on the varnished table in sync with

the bass line. ‘Music! Don’t I love it? The tempo dictates your moves to the beat, punk and disco just differ.’

Glasses are nearing empty, and I elbow my way to the bar. Daphne and Izzy are attempting to chat amicably, but after ordering more beers, I notice our table is empty—Izzy is sitting with her friends, and Daphne is gone.

The innocence of the situation becomes obvious when Daphne returns from the bathroom with an invitation from Izzy to join her friends.

‘Shit, their dole money must have come in,’ she says.

I put our drinks on their table between an overflowing ashtray and half-full beer pots and pull up a chair. Izzy introduces us to Adam, Lukas, and Ben. With primitive grunts and nods, they accept us into their group. Their leather jackets are stuffed on a window ledge, and I throw my denim jacket on top but keep my little sack bag close by while Daphne slings her brown suede coat and her bag over the back of her seat.

‘Fifteen million people,’ Ben, a guy with spiky red hair, says.

‘14.85,’ Lukas, with a shaven skull and John Lennon glasses, replies.

‘Mate, you’re a control freak.’ Ben wags his head. ‘Rounded up that’s fifteen.’

‘Mind the details,’ Lukas says with a deep nasal voice. ‘With those added 150,000 of yours, we can fill another city this size. It’s made a huge difference we collected 1,100 signatures instead of only 800.’

‘More signatures than there were voting forms,’ Adam, a handsome guy with a red Mohawk says. ‘The council had no choice but to agree.’

They all cheer. Izzy sits next to Adam, and they look like a pair of Major Mitchell cockatoos. I picture Bossy with a Mohawk too.

Daphne rolls another cigarette. 'What do you study?'

'Life!' Lukas says, throwing his hands up in the air. 'Why pay tuition fees for rigid school programmes? They're useless in daily life. After graduation, you're left with a debt from your student loan that'll take years to repay.'

'An education means knowledge, a degree secures a better paying job, and more money provides freedom,' I say.

Ben, sitting beside Daphne, offers her a light. Flirtatiously, she leans sideways and sucks until it catches with a little flutter of fire. It chars the paper immediately.

'I'm charmed by your naivety.' Lukas smiles and dimples appear on his cheeks. 'Your wish to be educated is commendable, but you've given no thought to the system in which you'll apply your know-how.'

'Shit, he likes causing trouble!' Daphne pokes me, but I shrug.

'Trouble?' He straightens his back. 'We fight for a cause as it's the only option to show that the government is ruining our country. Doing nothing, that's a crime!'

Daphne yields to his blatant stare. 'Like I do nothing!'

'They keep you busy,' he says. 'But what you study is them teaching you how to work in their system by the rules they set.'

'From within an organisation I can change things,' she says.

'Really?' Lukas raises his eyebrows, one, then the other. There's a long hair sticking out as though it's ready to start a revolution on its own.

'It'll corrupt you, and you'll be indoctrinated with the rigours of company policy. Try to hold your ground then! You support the rotten system by taking part in it.'

'This is a democracy.' Daphne ignores the laughter from his mates. 'Shit, what have they ever done to you? You're a stirrer who hasn't outgrown puberty yet. Why don't you get a job and earn a living?'

‘There are no jobs!’ Lukas rubs the safety pin in his ear.

‘No wonder they pick on you, look at you!’

‘I dress how I want. It’s called freedom.’ He crosses his arms in front of his muscular chest.

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘the scrappy-black-self-mutilated-army look is an excellent way to attract attention. Don’t you think dressing more appropriately will make you come across as a more serious job applicant?’

A dark cloud forms and descends over the punks, but Lukas points at Daphne’s pink cashmere sweater. He laughs, brushing the cloud formation aside, and it eases the tension.

‘Listen,’ Lukas says. ‘We’re doing something, rather than ignore what’s happening. You fail to see the web of slavery that government, pushed by corporate interests, is spinning around you. You accept everything as a slave. Even when the media pictures us as violent outcasts, we generated a public outcry and brought apartheid in South Africa to the public’s attention.’

‘Bullshit, as if that’s your doing!’

‘Mate,’ Ben says, nudging Daphne’s elbow, ‘when they don’t want to listen, we make them feel. The boycott will work.’

‘Our efforts may appear flimsy,’ Lukas says, and his blue eyes shine, ‘but our numbers are a lot bigger than just the three of us.’

Izzy, who’s been listening while making a show of French kissing Adam, throws him a discontented glance, but he fails to notice. She then kicks him, but he ignores her.

‘When humanity unites it makes a difference.’ Lukas addresses Daphne. ‘Only because you’re ignorant of important issues doesn’t mean you know best! Our battle concerns you too.’

‘No thanks.’ She shakes her head and sighs.

‘Thank me later.’

‘Is it possible to live in peace?’ I say to anyone willing to listen, wondering if humans will ever be able to agree to disagree.

‘When rats can fly,’ Izzy remarks.

‘No!’ both Lukas and Daphne yell, turning their heads to me.

He removes his spectacles and cleans them studiously with his T-shirt, inspecting them several times before putting them back on his face. ‘Have you ever heard of nuclear waste shipped off to third world countries or dumped into oceans?’

‘Just across the border, mate,’ Ben says.

‘Although they claim it’s safely interred in containers,’ Lukas continues, ‘in twenty years’ time, those containers will start to leak. Imagine the contamination of the ground in which they’re buried. It’ll ruin the soil for decades to come. Anybody stupid enough to live there or grow crops on it will drastically shorten their life span. Look at what happened in Chernobyl.’

‘Don’t you take radiation lightly. It speeds up death,’ Adam says while fiddling with Izzy’s earrings.

The bartender comes over to collect the empty glasses that have been silent witnesses to the dialectical discourse.

‘You’re quiet, Izzy,’ Daphne says and whispers something to Ben that makes him blush.

‘So is Adam,’ Ben adds and sniggers.

‘It’s my night off,’ he says, and Izzy smiles.

‘We can see that, mate!’ Daphne and Ben say simultaneously.

‘Good on you! Love will conquer everything,’ I say to the care-free lovebirds.

‘If only love could smooch things over,’ Lukas says, and as he laughs crow’s feet appear around his compassionate eyes.

‘It can,’ I say, ‘like metal can be conquered with fire. Books and pamphlets help to educate people and increase their knowledge.’

When someone knocks on the window, Izzy disentangles from Adam and goes outside to greet a friend. He gets up and wanders off in a different direction.

Lampposts cast a yellowish filter over an unceasing flow of late

night visitors. A girl with henna-dyed hair and a checked skirt, fishnet stockings and knee high boots, walks past chatting with a girlfriend, dressed in black too. They talk to the guy with the tight jeans and Metallica T-shirt who has been playing the pinball machine non-stop, and he steps away with flair, leaving it for them to play. The music sounds louder.

‘Anything else you want to share?’ Daphne says.

Lukas squints as he notices her sarcastic tone of voice. ‘In the West, rich men produce loads of luxurious insanity and sell their crap to consumers. They get richer and richer while workers are being exploited. The world is out of balance.’

Although he’s looking at her, I sense he’s talking to me, but he forgets persons consume because they can. However, I doubt that material possessions bring happiness. Daphne pouts her lips in ridicule. It’s all the encouragement he needs.

‘We try to change the political climate. We’re against nuclear power, exploitation of energy resources, milk and butter surpluses, food monoculture, breeding farms and animal testing.’

Charlene and I have sworn off makeup because we feel sorry for the creatures. I wonder if Izzy’s eyeliner, mascara and lipstick are tested on animals.

‘All these industries create waste,’ Lukas says, using his hands as he speaks, adding to his charm, ‘production waste, nuclear waste, plastic wrappings and shit, and our environment is being destroyed.’

It’s the first time I hear of most of these problems, but I agree that ruining the planet we live on is stupid.

‘Shit, can you believe he’s for real?’ Daphne says and grabs my arm. ‘Riding high on his horse, pretending to be a knight in blackened armour, but he looks more like Sancho Panza on his donkey *Dapple*.’

I get up to order another round of drinks. A frolicking bartender

fills the glasses and puts the pots with a friendly smile on the bar while I take the change from my wallet. The girls are still playing the pinball machine, and everybody is smiling when I place the beers on the table without spilling a drop. Ben gawks at Daphne and Lukas who are discussing the utopian ideal.

‘A minimalistic lifestyle cuts the cost of living,’ he says.

‘What a lame excuse. You break in and occupy someone’s home!’ She’s outraged. ‘Bloody squatters!’

Izzy comes back followed by Adam, and she asks Daphne for a cigarette paper. She nods to help herself, and Izzy grabs the pouch.

‘When you don’t recognise authority, laws aren’t applicable, so everything you do for a cause is just,’ Lukas says.

‘That’s one way to legitimize your illegal actions,’ Daphne snorts and shakes her head in disbelief, ‘but I doubt it’ll hold up in court.’

I nod in agreement as using violence means lowering standards to an unacceptable level. ‘What do you do every day?’

He moves to the edge of his chair. ‘There’s plenty to do when you don’t slave for a boss. First, I get up and brew coffee before I sit down to read the news.’

‘Mate, you have a piss before that.’ Ben laughs.

His hands are smudged black like a mechanic’s. The kind I should stay away from as a man should always have clean fingernails if he comes calling, my grandmother says. Daphne holds a lighter in front of his unlit cigarette, returning the favour.

‘After I get rid of ... Anyway ...’ Lukas smiles at me.

‘Once everybody has made it into the kitchen,’ he continues, throwing a knowing glance Ben’s way, ‘we talk about the jobs at hand. There’s no hierarchy, and we go by consensus so at our meetings we discuss everything until everyone agrees. We have committees and sub-committees, and you decide what you want to contribute.’ He raises a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug.

‘You forget the part where you clean the toilet,’ Adam says,

removing his arm from Izzy's shoulders.

'I didn't spill.' Lukas shakes his head.

'Forgot to pull the flush pipe, mate?' Ben says.

'We take it from there.' He ignores their remarks.

'It's a system of sorts,' I say.

It's romantic that earthlings work collectively for the greater good and try to achieve something positive, but it suggests that one has to function within a large volatile group too.

Izzy is French-kissing Adam again, and although Daphne is flirting with Ben, her ears are pricked up, and I know she's listening too.

'A cooperative organisation puts everybody's skills to good use,' Lukas says, 'cooperatives are the future.' He folds his arms behind his neck and leans back.

I admire his muscles. I could picture him talking to councillors and getting things done. Daphne must at least appreciate their industriousness. Smoke is hanging in the air like smog, and the bartender props open the door before replacing the full ashtray with an empty one.

'Democracy is nothing more than a system that subjects people to slavery thanks to the laws. You'd be foolish to accept a system that decides how to live for you.' His enthusiasm flushes his cheeks, and he gets lovelier by the minute.

'It's what we've chosen,' I say and ponder his suggestion.

We've inherited a system and are bound by it. Only when it fails to support its people should it be rejected. I might be blind to the punks' frustrations, but so far I'm satisfied with how democracy works. I take another draught.

'Without law and order, society will turn into chaos,' I say. If the system needs an overhaul, I'm sure I'll be able to contribute.

'Individual freedom is limited under the guise that the majority decides for us,' Lukas speeches as though he's addressing a group

of followers.

‘The government rejects the arguments of the minority—like a master a slave, a Nazi a Jew, and a man a woman. They ignore that we’re equally human. Imagine belonging to a minority that disagrees with what the current moral censors think just. They expect you to adapt. A majority can be wrong! A society should cater to the personal development of its people. It’s your life, and you as a person are accountable for your choices. We’re against any system that exercises power over others because they’re richer, stronger, male or of a specific religion. We fight for freedom!’

‘That’s what women have been doing,’ I say, ‘fighting for an independent legal state, to be allowed to drink in public bars and to end inequality.’

Could we find enough common ground to turn a minority into a majority?

‘Some issues are addressed,’ Lukas says, ‘and progress has been made. But there’s more to be done. We have to focus on society as a whole.’

Daphne shakes no. ‘Why are you so sure you’re not acting out of pure self-interest?’

‘Save planet earth,’ Izzy yells.

Everybody wants a better world. The aware are leading the blind at this table. As I navigate through a throng, I catch flashes of happy chats before I wait in line for the girls’ toilet. Men sidle past more often than women. With one foot propped against the wall, I look back at the crowd. A guy with bushy eyebrows and a sharp jawline reminds me of Chris.

I recall how he caresses my face. It’s a hot summer day when I carry handpicked produce from his veggie patch up the veranda but a tangled string of hair is blocking my vision, and I try to blow it aside. Seeing me struggle makes him smile. He comes closer, but instead of taking the crate from me, he gently brushes the hair

away. Both his soft touch and his musk scent unleash jitters in my belly.

When I open my eyes, the adorable dude is smiling at me, and I avert my head. The line dwindles and in the safety of the toilet, making sure the door is locked, I put two fingers between my legs and one hand to the wall. Quickly and silently I come.

Satisfied, I sit down and reflect on the graffiti as it takes a while before the pee pours out. 'I rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy' and 'Free Palestine' vie for my attention. Attached to the side is a sanitary towel holder with blueprinted paper bags.

A girl is waiting to take over my warm seat. In front of the mirror, I try to move my eyebrows independently from each other but conclude Lukas is unique. In passing, I lock eyes with the cute guy again, and a hot flush spreads across my cheeks.

Daphne and Lukas are in the middle of a discussion, and she's blowing smoke in his face.

'Stereotyping,' he says, looking at me. 'A better question is to ask why it's happening. It's been a problem for years, and the government has done nothing while many houses are empty. Owners hold on to their vacant properties with the prospect of making loads of money when they sell them in the future.'

His mates nod in agreement.

'Shit, that's their right, mate,' Daphne says.

'Where should they go?' Lukas says.

'Stay at home with their parents until they get allocated a house or work so they can afford to rent or buy.'

The punks turn as one and look mutinously at Daphne.

'No,' Lukas says. 'This social injustice needs to be addressed. There's too much unemployment. Squatting means a roof over your head, and it's a forceful signal that government policy is failing.'

'You're still a criminal when you disobey the law!' She shoves

back her chair.

Izzy rolls her eyes before turning away from Daphne while Ben stares at her.

‘You can’t expect us to stand by and watch how our future is being destroyed. Necessity has no boundaries,’ Lukas says.

‘Do you get into trouble?’ I say.

‘Our house has been a squat for ten years already,’ he says. ‘No justice order has managed to kick us out. We’ve done a lot of work, very successfully.’

‘Is change possible without breaking the law?’ I wonder why having a place to sleep has to be such a struggle.

‘According to article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed into being in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, everyone is entitled to housing. That’s something a government needs to supply. We’re putting pressure on ours to keep their promises.’

‘My mate likes his details,’ Ben says to Daphne.

‘Someone has to take the lead.’ Lukas smiles at me. ‘It’s hard to throw overboard everything you’ve been drilled to believe and comply with. Question the government if current laws contradict human rights! There are laws you obey now, but what happens when they change them overnight and limit your freedom? Are you willing to accept that?’

Peach Blossom is packed. Earthlings bump into my chair more often, voices are growing boisterous, and the excitement is tantalizing. The pinball machine is still occupied.

‘The government has the best intentions for its civilians,’ Daphne says, ‘they will protect you.’

‘Dream on. A government is made up of people. They used to be social but have become greedy. There’s a culture now where business interests and personal gains take priority over the common interest of the people.’

‘Shit, that’s why there are elections, you can vote for a party that serves your interest best.’ Daphne finishes her beer.

‘Voting is nothing more than allowing the current system to function.’ He laughs. ‘Before long the system will cave in.’

Soaked, unmolested coasters lie bedraggled on the cluttered table. Lukas raises several interesting points I should give some thought to, but it’s all getting too serious for me. I yawn.

I suddenly remember the date stamp on Kyle’s card. ‘What’s the most important event in 1980?’

‘Queen’s coronation,’ the blokes say simultaneously.

‘The day the daughter took over the throne of her mother,’ Daphne explains.

‘It’s more than that, mate,’ Ben says, kicking Adam under the table. ‘No housing, no coronation.’

Adam snorts and kicks back, smiling mischievously. Ben makes a fist.

‘They were too young though,’ Lukas says, ‘There was a shortage of affordable houses. People turned to the streets to protest, and we called it National Squatters Day.’ He pulls a painful grimace and rubs his shoulder like he got hurt that day.

I imagine Kyle wanting to overthrow the queen, but I have yet to come by a throne made of bricks unless I count a bricked up BBQ in the backyard where you’d burn your bum sitting down. However, he was sixteen at the time, a good age for rebellious behaviour.

‘Do you know Kyle?’ I say.

Lukas lowers his head and looks up from the rim of his glasses. ‘No,’ he replies.

I search Ben and Adam’s face for signs of recognition of the name, but they shake their heads in unison. I draw a blank again. Intoxicated, I rock my chair on its hind legs in tune with the music while holding onto the table. Lukas imitates me, and I take another swig.

‘Music is the true unifier of people,’ he says. ‘We like it tough and fast. Sanitary Towel is playing this Wednesday in The Travelling Horse, you should come.’

I burst out laughing, choke on my beer and spray liquid over the table as my chair slaps back down on four of its legs. The band must have a strange preoccupation with the female gender.

‘How are you going with the posters?’ Lukas says to Izzy.

‘Coming along, I’ll paste them later this week,’ she says.

Suddenly darkness descends, and someone is quick to call out to bar staff, ‘it’s not closing time yet!’ There’s a lot of mumbling, but within seconds the lights are turned back on.

‘Is The Travelling Horse a similar venue like Station?’ I want to know.

‘It’s close by,’ Daphne points to the northwest, ‘but there’s another train station at the end of our street.’

‘Walking home is quicker,’ Lukas says.

I shake no. Station is located north from here, underneath the rail bridge, and I wonder why they mistake the venue for a train station as its flashing neon lights certainly have attracted my attention.

Izzy, released from her Adam cocoon, is tapping her fingers and feet to the music. As I recognise the first notes, I point to the thick polluted air and say, ‘that’s a great song.’ She bounces up, ushers me forward, and I gesture to Daphne to get up too, and we create our own little dance floor. I shed the craziness of the world as I ‘Dance This Mess Around’.

MONDAY

## IV

A vivid dream floats around the surface of my dawning consciousness. Chris, dressed in a pink shirt and white skirt, is skipping through the deserted hallway of an apartment building. He waves. I take the elevator to catch up with him, but he's popping up like a Jack-in-the-box on a different level, one step ahead of me every time.

Still in bed, I tuck a velvet curtain aside and bleak light filtered by a clouded sky floods in. I crawl under the doona. My thoughts drift back to the day after the tub experience when I return to the house that refuses to sell.

I knock on the door of the granny flat. Again, more forcefully, but it's in vain, so I sit down in the shade on the veranda, opposite the ambiguous yellow bungalow. In the overgrown garden, a tortoise statue is smiling at me, proud as a supporter. The heat is making me lazy, and I postpone going to the beach and linger, pondering who would be responsible for putting an emotion-evoking machine in an attic.

Eventually, a sliding door opens, and an athletic young man with wispy hair and stubble steps out with crossed arms. I recognise him at once as the handsome surfer I saw at my favourite beach. Although he kept his distance, he watched Charlene and me surf. He's in his late twenties, wears surf shorts and a grey singlet that flaunts the letters 'NWA'. I stare and admire his straight nose and

full lips while emerging butterflies flap their wings in my belly. Then I realise I came to see him.

‘I’m here for your veggie patch.’

‘I know, that you know, that you’re telling me a little white lie.’

He laughs, closes up and passes me barefooted. Shyly but elated, I follow his shapely bum, broad shoulders and muscled biceps to his backyard. There are neatly cultivated rows of vegetables and small fruits, cherry trees, and an old fig tree while a passionfruit vine embraces the boundary fence. Separated by a row of lettuce, I face him.

‘I love your strawberries.’

His eyes, blue like a fairy-wren stare straight through me, and I try to steady my feeble knees, which I fear might give in under the weight.

‘You developed a taste for something all right, snooping around like that.’

He grins and shows a perfect set of white teeth. The blood rushes to my cheeks as I trace a tuft of armpit hair to the blond hairs on his arm before looking toward the strawberries he’s pointing at.

‘You choked on it yesterday.’

‘You startled me.’ I avert my eyes before I look up again. ‘Who’s responsible for what happens on this property?’

‘It’s mine to use until the house sells,’ he says haughtily with a sparkle in his eye, ‘and the granny flat has all the comforts I need.’

A chestnut mare from an adjacent paddock trots up to the fence but when I walk over it canters off.

Annoyed, I say, ‘why did it take you so long to come out?’

‘I wanted to know how determined you are.’

His smile is divine. I forgive him. Hypnotized, I watch his moves, deaf to the sounds he utters, but responding with an occasional automatic nod. I kick off my thongs and kneel beside him. His agile fingers are pulling weeds, so I follow his example, and when he slides

sideways, I close the gap. My dress creeps up my thighs, and I soak up his body odour in the languid summer heat. Drops of sweat roll from my eyebrows past my nose, down my neck, and between my breasts. Every time he peeks at me, my heart pounds more fiercely. When I want to say something, he puts a finger to my lips, preventing me from uttering foolish words. My insecurity, multiplied by the silence that follows, is changing into arousal. He picks a strawberry and holds it to my mouth. Sucking it, I savour his salty fingertips, mingled with the fragrant juice. I'm in love.

It's hot and wet, and biting the doona, I muffle a scream as I drag back my hand. I relax and lethargically stretch my limbs before lifting the sheets, swinging my legs out first, followed by my torso a moment later.

I put on yesterday's knickers and a top before opening the heavy curtains and balcony doors, eager to feel what nature has in store, like a mission briefing for the day. Car parks are empty, and as freezing air flows in, I run for the shower and step over an envelope that barely had enough room to be pushed under the door.

I undress in the tiny bathroom where I notice that my pale bikini imprint contrasts with the surrounding tanned skin. A pile of red hair clutters a drain behind a lurid pink shower curtain, and a daddy longlegs crawls along the wall. I step on thongs into a shallow tub and inspect the arachnid while I wait for the water to heat. Even though Mum explains that spiders here are harmless, I still wish it to be out of sight the next time I look up.

My parents think Kyle is a leftover from a childhood fantasy, and Helen always dismisses questions about him. Charlene is the only one who knows my quest for Kyle is the real reason for moving overseas. I'm thrilled to be in the city of Arnhem, aware of the historical connection to the continent of Australia and wonder who Kyle is, where he lives and what he does.

When I wash my hair and comb through the tangles, I notice the

water level rising to the edge. With clenched teeth, I grope in a pool of stale foam until I perceive the metal of the drain, and I squeeze the putrid gunk and dispose of it in the bin. The water swirls away. After I relish another minute of balmy flow, I feel rejuvenated.

With the towel draped around me, I tiptoe to my room and dress in a string, T-shirt, white jumper, jeans and sneakers before I pick up the envelope. It has a flat, L-shaped key and a regular one with a plastic cover over its bow. The accompanying note is from Daphne, 'Green bike. Always attach to a post to prevent theft!' The criminal implications are disturbing, but I add these keys to my globe keychain.

I choose the sporting club with the best sounding name from the council guide and call the secretary, asking about training sessions. Afterwards, I fan out Kyle's cards on the varnished table and examine them, as though they're a tarot spread, and once again, I try to extract new information from the familiar. As far as I know, Kyle only sent postcards, and it has been more than two years since Helen received his last one.

Humming, I put two apples into my bag and trot down the steps. The large key fits the chain lock but I'm at a loss as what to do with the little key, so I leave the bicycle locked up where it is. I had better master local traffic on foot first.

Velperpoort train station sits on top of an embankment across from the north end of the street, and the track runs diagonally back past the red-light district. It's pictured on Kyle's third postcard, and the building hovers above ground level, looking like a cream-between, with most of the ice cream licked out. However, the old station has been replaced by a cubistic concrete design in grey, yellow and red, located further down. A train is approaching, and its pneumatic breaks screech to a stop.

I remember Kyle's cryptic inscription, but get the card from my bag because I hope that touching it will elicit his words—'See

the tracks run off parallel into infinity.’ It’s dated August 1981, and if meant as a birthday card, the salutations are missing. Maybe he refers to their lives being forever separated but still together. The track could illustrate a path he’s following, but it’s unclear if Kyle means he’s alone or with someone, or that only a train stopping at all stations can reach his next destination.

When I ascend the stairs, I dodge a hasty, descending mob by flattening myself against a wall. I’m annoyed by their impetuous actions until I realize that road rules must apply here, suggesting it prudent to always keep right. A whistle sounds when I arrive at the platform. Doors close and the train draws itself forward. Jokingly, I run after the squeaking noise, like tramping through the sand at Squeaky Beach on Wilsons Prom.

Velperpoort is located northeast of the church, and the cold wind from that direction whips my face. I take pictures of the track and surrounding buildings as I intend to do with all of Kyle’s locations. Once the film is developed, I want to construct his narrative and understand better what those places mean to him. The chill prompts me to move, and I descend, neatly keeping right.

I wonder why stations make me experience the weather, instead of protecting me from it, and I’m glad I donned my ankle-high sneakers instead of my thongs. When the coolness of springtime indicates what winters will be like, I hope a long hot summer makes up for it.

In the summer of 1980 when I’m ten, I’m running along the beach with my eyes closed and I flap my arms like a butterfly when a sudden bump stops me in my tracks.

‘What are you doing here?’ I say.

There’s a broad-nosed kid in front of me, and I rub the spot on my arm where we collided.

‘My croissant.’ He shakes his black-cropped curls, either in disbelief, or already accepting the permanent loss.

‘I was playing blind, you’d have seen me running?’

His head comes to my chin, and he plucks at his green shorts before he looks up. He shrugs and averts his dark eyes. Shards of pastry lie in the sand and drawing circles with his foot he hides them from sight.

‘I’m here to wave goodbye to Kyle, he’s the captain.’ I point to an approaching ship. ‘He’s going all the way to Arnhem Land.’

‘I see no one.’ He holds a hand above his eyebrows and stares at the giant.

‘We’re too far off.’ I walk into the bay. ‘Let’s swim to the pole.’

We run through the surf, and when it reaches his waist, he dives in and powers forward with quick strokes. I crawl after him. Halfway, he turns around and waits for me.

‘We can wave from here.’ I swing my arms erratically while treading water. ‘Greetings Kyle, from Sky and...’

‘Charlene,’ he says.

‘You’re a girl?’ I study his face.

‘I’m human,’ the changeling responds.

I dive under the surface and watch her legs move rhythmically before I come up, spit water out in a large arc and turn effortlessly onto my back. ‘We both are!’

We swim around the marker before we lie exhausted at the beach staring at a bright blue summer sky. When the water drops evaporate, they leave a crisp layer of dried salt on our bodies. After a while, I roll to my left and sift sand over Charlene’s arm while I compare hers to mine.

‘Why are you so brown?’

‘I live outdoors. It’s light there, so I’m black. You live inside where it’s dark, so you’re white.’

‘I’ll discover the world one day,’ I say with half closed eyes.

‘I’ll have many children.’ She opens hers to slits. ‘Surely four.’

When she gets up humming the ‘Red-back’ song, I join in.

Following her through the sand, I imagine her with a big belly and three babies on her arms. A sandy path leads to the foreshore where we both climb a tree with bark like a newspaper left in the sun too long.

I point to a Volkswagen Kombi Transporter on the site, parked next to a tent. Orange curtains decorate the windows. A girl is reading a book in a yellow beige striped hammock. Among the scattered toys, there's a bow and several arrows made from twigs.

'I love those new campers,' I say.

'They always camp here during the summer holidays,' Charlene says, 'but never in the same spot. The parents sleep in the van and the big children in a tent. They're okay, but Carmella, she's very bossy.'

The mother comes out dressed in a long hippie skirt that sweeps the ground, followed by a boy in shorts who's wearing what looks like her beaded necklace. After she says something, he rushes screaming to the beach and imitates a forever-hungry seagull. His shrill voice rings in my ears, and the older girl gives us a thumb up. Charlene waves.

'I'm ten, and I live there.' She jumps out of the paper-bark-tree and runs off to join her colourful family.

Best friends since that day, I feel a stab of guilt for leaving her behind, but Charlene, born in the tropical north, already shivers when the mercury drops below twenty degrees. I imagine her walking these streets wearing gloves, beanie and scarf.

In Steenstraat OLB Sports is selling sports shoes, and trucks are unloading fresh supplies. Cars that zoom past differ from the Kingswoods and Commodores that rev hard at intersections, wanting to get a drop on the competitor, all Peter Brock or Allan Moffatt wannabes. The ghastly smell of fumes is replaced by a scent of sweet baked bread that makes me doubt whether a vegemite

sandwich was enough for breakfast.

A swelling sound of singing distracts me from window shopping. There's a group of smiling women and men with their heads shaven who move along in a conga dance. They're clapping their hands while the leader beats a drum and two others are clashing cymbals. Most outstanding are the shades of orange-coloured garments, draped like sarongs around their bodies. They're reciting, 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.'

One guy is ecstatically looking up as if he has found answers in the clouds that Tortoise says are found elsewhere. I stop to watch. As I wonder what a life chanting the day away will bring, an attractive man steps forward. I ask for his name and then if he knows Kyle, but he shakes no and offers me a book instead. It has a colourful Indian cover that puts a smile on my face, and I give him a rijksdaalder in return.

The striking procession continues. Passers-by glance at them from the corners of their eyes. I read a few pages, but am put off by constant references to the Supreme Personality of the Godhead, another name for who knows what's out there. The variety of ways to believe in the divine is limitless, and although these humans add colour, I prefer to consider the unexplained as energy rather than an idol. It's what my grandmother declares when I'm eleven.

A sudden urge stirs me to look up, and through a window, I catch the eye of Tortoise. I smile, and she reciprocates. Seeing her inside this establishment dismisses Daphne's suggestion she's crazy.

The café breathes nostalgia. Tortoise gestures me to sit opposite her as if she has been expecting me, and places a basket of flowers out of our line of sight.

'I'm still looking for Kyle,' I say.

She smiles thriftily and beckons the bartender by blinking both eyes at him like Jeannie. It's agreeably warm, so I divest myself

of jacket and scarf. A respectable old gent in a shirt, vest and tie, comes over to take my order.

‘She’ll have hot apple pie with that,’ Tortoise adds. ‘You’re too skinny.’

The familiarity with which she proposes her judgement is amusing. I want to retort, but being lean is easier to fix than her stocky disfigured posture, and I bite my tongue. She’s different from the tall, gracious woman I drank tea with in the glasshouse.

‘Is Red Phoenix a friend of yours?’ I clutch the crystal in my pocket.

Tortoise gets a lens cloth from her spectacle case, takes off her glasses and rubs them clean. I study her face, small piercing eyes below fine eyebrows, thin lips, and a long philtrum that matches her tortoise appearance.

‘It’s a provincial city.’

I have the impression that the fairytale neighbourhood where Phoenix lives is another town, but it’s interesting that they know each other.

‘Once you know how to gain access, distance is irrelevant.’

Tortoise is speaking in tongues again. Does she hint at time travel or telepathy or clairvoyance? Black Tortoise and Red Phoenix each have their own approach but refer to the same principle of one. Phoenix is fixated on the future or heaven, and Tortoise is grounded in the earth, but the two women connect with my heart where they fuse my coloured feelings to emanate pure white.

The bartender returns with two coffees and pie. Tortoise puts on her glasses. I try to nudge her for more information, but she focuses on eating, breaking off piece by piece with a little fork and savouring it without losing crumbs before she drinks her coffee and neatly replaces the porcelain cup on the saucer. After I add milk to the brew, I dig into the delicious taste of crunchy hot apple and cinnamon, but it falls to pieces. I prick them up, using the back of

my fork and then my fingers before wetting my fingertip to gather any minute morsels. She still has half a slice left.

‘Helen is stubborn like her dad,’ Tortoise says. ‘She grew up on a hundred-year-old farm. The yields from the land provided food for eight hungry mouths. Even when she showed an interest, her father only taught the two boys the principles of farming. Her tasks were domestic and included maintaining a vegetable garden, and she spent as much time as possible outdoors, either among the crops or in the paddock between the cows and wildflowers. After studying nature, she accurately reproduced the floral beauty on a slate.’

I wipe the crumbs from the corner of my mouth with my tongue. It sounds like Helen. She’s a grandmother and an artist too and creates the most beautiful watercolour paintings of native flora. I remember a visit after school.

Helen works from her studio and uses the filtered and indirect southern light. There’s a closed cupboard next to the door and a five-drawer plan-cabinet behind her where she keeps large sheets of paper and stores her finished canvasses, which wait patiently to be framed. It’s a palace that smells of paint, pencil shavings, and a cornucopia of flowers like Celia Rosser’s studio, always filled with a ceaseless fruitful tribute to nature.

‘Why have you changed them around?’ I say.

I sit opposite Helen on a piano stool. A week ago the desks were positioned perpendicular to the window, but today they’re placed diagonally. It looks more playful, but it feels awkward.

‘Aren’t you comfortable where you’re sitting now?’

There’s a blank sheet with coloured pencils in a porcelain mug in front of me while my drawing of a surfing girl is stuck on the wall above the cabinet. My legs are dangling, and I grab the desk, push my feet off the wall and spin round and round.

‘I like it better how it was.’

Helen has already completed last week’s sketch and is selecting

colours from a box with tubes of paint before carefully choosing a brush. It takes days to fill in the details.

‘I’m sure you do,’ she says smiling, ‘but I spend a lot of time here and this way I get more work done.’

‘Because you changed the desks?’

‘Precisely.’ She stops what she’s doing to give me her full attention. ‘You should know there’s an invisible flow of energy everywhere. It sustains life. It’s beneficial but can be obstructive too.’

‘How do you know?’ I turn the wooden stool in the other direction.

‘My Chinese friend explained. She learned from her dad who was taught by his, going back in lineage a long time.’

‘How can I use this energy?’

‘Always face one of your four favourable wind directions when looking straight ahead.’

‘I must be doing that as I’m doing well at school,’ I say beaming, ‘but when I sleep, I have my eyes closed.’

‘As you lay down, the crown of your head must point to a good direction.’

It sounds easy, and I want to test it, but I refuse to go to bed before bedtime, so I have to wait. Helen is searching her drawers. The stool has reached its lowest point, and I wonder how high it can rise.

‘What happens if I use a bad direction?’

‘You had better sit still.’

I nod. I love to watch her work as it makes me feel creative too. Sometimes, I’m even permitted to play with her crystals, which she keeps in a golden display cabinet.

While she goes to a tiny scullery, I measure the new setting. My desk is facing southeast instead of east and Helen’s faces north-west rather than west. It’s very mysterious. She returns, with two water-filled jars and a cloth.

I spin again. The stool swings faster and faster and rises in height with every turn, and as I set off for more speed, the seat flies out of its core. I hit the floor, and the massive stool bumps into my upper arm before it rolls to the ground. I scream.

‘I should have been thinking of you dear. Come here, my little sensitive girl.’ Grandma rushes over and checks my limbs. ‘It’ll bruise. We need to put Arnica on it to help it heal.’

As Helen searches the drawer for cream, she adds that I’m lucky the skin didn’t break and that she’ll ask her friend what my positive directions are.

When I rouse from my musings, I finish my coffee. A peek at the compass shows I’m facing west, a favourable direction. Tortoise is still sitting opposite and stares at me with a kind light in her eyes instead of her penetrating stare.

‘Please tell me. What’s Kyle’s relationship with Helen?’

‘I take it you haven’t found the letter?’

Bewildered, I look at her. I only have postcards. What letter I want to exclaim but Tortoise raises a scaled and crooked finger.

‘She has a mind of her own, your grandmother. I’m pleased she has pursued her dream successfully.’

I nod. At what price?

‘You’re still here,’ Tortoise says. ‘Off you go.’

It takes a moment before I realise she’s asking me to leave. I have to press forward with my mission, and I have Kyle’s cards, but now I need to find a letter too.

## V

Downstairs, in a west-facing library in Koningstraat, men are sitting at white tables, quietly reading newspapers while drinking coffee from plastic cups. The crackling of turning pages alternates with half-suppressed, periodic coughs. Oil sullied birds are still current news.

I flip through books I gather from steel shelves on various floors and fill my brain with local knowledge, outlaying multiples of ten cents for black and white copies. The books, turned by many fingers, show coffee stains and other excretions of daily use, but I love the sour smell of old thick pages, and the aroma of fresh ink and the plastic of more recent editions.

At an information desk manned by a woman, I ask about K Kam-bier. That's the name written on Helen's aerogramme. The librarian checks a Rolodex and then some folders, only to deny that Kyle is a member, a colleague or an author.

Although it's still overcast, spring brings out an irrepressible cheerfulness in the shopping public that, like kangaroos or perhaps frogs, hops along the shop windows with summer fashion on display.

The city council at the end of the street is located east of the church and pictured on Kyle's eighth card from 1986, and I recall its words clearly—"The network of the future is located underground." To the left side of the building with its white marble walls there's a ledge and below it, a ramp going down to subterranean parking.

It could hide a classified network of emergency phone lines. Maybe it's where Kyle works.

The council entrance is on the other side, at the start of a large square, and to speak to an officer, I need to draw a number from a ticket dispenser. After waiting a short while, I'm called to a booth where a friendly girl registers me as a citizen. She then searches the register for Kyle Kambier and Helen Coppin, grandmother's maiden name, but both times draw a blank.

I kick a pebble over white pavers accentuated by black flagstones, which skims across the square. It comes to rest further down. As I want to kick it again, I jog up to it, under the watchful eye of council workers behind large windows in the offices above. I pretend to be Kevin Bartlett on the footy field at the MCG, ready to score. The pebble ricochets past the imaginary goal posts and ends up in a flowerbed. I've missed.

Earlier, a bank clerk refused to disclose any information about their customers, and after a visit to the Palace of Justice and Huis der Provincie, I'm convinced that Kyle is neither a solicitor, judge, civil servant nor a convicted criminal.

Even the playful golden sculpture that pops out from the wall of the Huis der Provincie when the carillon plays on the hour is insufficient to brighten my mood. It sinks deeper. After all the rejections, I feel utterly stupid for pursuing this mad idea. Kyle is like an energetic force that exercises his power over me, invisible yet omnipresent.

I hit my head against the bricks of a walkway, and I scream once. When I put my ear to the wall, I'm unnerved to catch a whisper of indecipherable sounds.

Unhappy with this ludicrous experience, I step back and realise its walls belong to Sabelspoort, once a madhouse. There's a tower on each side, and the overhead construction has three pointed roofs with battlements like a fairytale castle gate.

Sabelspoort is located south of the church and pictured on Kyle's fifth card from 1983 when he's nineteen years of age. It's the only one of four gates dating back to the Middle Ages that's still standing while Velperpoort, now a train station at the end of Steenstraat, used to be located at the start of the pedestrian area in Roggestraat.

The message on the postcard reads—'A thick wall with pricked ears smothers my now stifled cries.' It sounds like he might have been locked up, or suffering from depression. Maybe it gets to him that Helen lives on the other side of the world and refuses contact. However, he kept sending her postcards, and she addressed the aerogramme to him so it may be the letter Tortoise is referring to.

At the riverside, concrete steps lead to a quay where boats are moored. After walking downstream for a while, I sit on its edge and eat an apple. Water can be still, flat, rapid and wild like life itself with smooth sailing and bumpy rides. From below an old arch bridge upstream that connects the northern and southern parts of town, a barge with pyramids of coal chugs to the northwest, where a modern flat bridge also connects both sides of the city. The murky water of the Rhine is darker than the patchy grey sky. It disguises what's beneath, although an angler in the distance is patiently awaiting a catch.

Landlocked between the bridges, stone piers and tiny beaches front the green floodplains, and there's an inlet where houseboats gently float atop the surface surrounded by trees. Its residents will see the city as pictured on Kyle's first postcard from 1979.

I ponder about his words—'Infinite life flows like water, from the mountains to the sea.' The oceans connect every continent, and when Kyle conquers the seas, he can physically reach Helen. Although she's geographically distant, she's present in his thoughts as he's in hers. Kyle is fifteen when he's talking about his love for her, expressed by a lovely picture of a cityscape on a river, but a year later, his second postcard of the church voices his frustration

with the situation because of an alleged injustice. However, on the third card portraying Velperpoort, he comes to terms with the fact that they live their lives separated from each other, but by the time he's nineteen, he feels miserable.

There's a pain aching in my heart, and I wish for Kyle and Helen to meet one day, and sort out whatever is unfinished between them.

Can love be strong without a blood bond? Humanity is one big family, and it can exist in unity, but a blood bond is valued highly. Strangely enough, most cultures trace their lineage via the male line, but it's only possible to ascertain the child's mother.

When I toss the apple's core into the river, it disappears, but I understand it's there, travelling on invisible to the eye like the unseen currents that operate in the human body, sometimes conscious in thought or subconscious in being, but functioning all the same.

After I turn the ring on the compass to check I'm sitting southwest of the church, I draw little hearts with a sharp edge of the crystal on my jeans while my legs dangle over the side of the quay. When voices float into earshot, I turn my head and watch two young men, smoking and dressed in stained overalls, coming my way.

'Did you hear how much he cashes in?' the tall guy says, and a high-pitched whistle follows.

'With an offer like that, I'm gone too,' the short one chuckles and rubs his index finger along his thumb in a universal gesture. 'We can use the extra cash.'

'You'll be away for three months.' The tall guy licks his lips. 'Let me take care of your missus.'

'Hands off mate or I'll have a go at your dog.' He punches his colleague on the arm before he pokes his head towards me. 'Look at that. Talk about a hot chick.'

I guess it's a compliment, but it sounds patronizing, like the mechanic explaining to Chris how to replace the spark plugs on

my car.

‘Have you seen Kyle?’ I say, but I already know the answer.

Still, I must keep trying. Eventually, I will run into him, or at least meet someone who knows him.

I tuck the compass and the crystal away before I check my watch and look up in time to see the short bloke feigning to come my way. Startled, I grab hold of a mooring bollard but miss, lose my balance and slide off the quay. In a split second, I scan the edge for the nearest ladder before I suck in air, close my eyes and brace for a plunge, expecting a cold and wet disaster.

However, the freefall lasts longer than the mere metre it is from the quay to the river. I break my fall by kneeling on impact as I land on a slippery surface that sparkles like a jewel. Perplexed, I blink feverishly. I sense some drops on my face, sweat or water, it’s hard to tell, but a quick inspection shows my clothes and hair are dry. I jump up and down to test the fragile charm of the glasslike floor. It’s tough. Below, a school of diamond shaped fish swim past like I’m on top of an aquarium.

I’m inside an enormous wave, like a *Crystal Voyager* tube. Stacked layers of glass form walls and ceiling, and the gradient of its polished curves runs from one side to the other as the contour lines on a topographical map. Each layer has its own shade, varying from aquamarine to indigo fluorite. Feeding my eyes with this incredible beauty, I feel a pulsating heartbeat that connects me with my surroundings. I pivot on my heels and walk through the immense cave. Light hits the curvaceous sides in different spots. If only Helen could witness this, she should be able to catch this frosty colour palette on canvas.

There’s an arched opening leading to the Rhine and daylight reflects on a creek that runs through the water wave. I run my fingers through the cool liquid that tastes of salt, remarkable, considering the river is far away from the sea. It’s difficult to

estimate the water's depth and its direction, so I use the compass. The Rhine's tributary arrives from the northeast, so I must be below the streets. I put my ear to the icy floor to listen and do the same on a nearby wall, but all I hear is the soothing sound of water.

When I go downstream, I'll end up in the river, so I walk deeper into the water wave, keen to shake off the cold. It's adorned with glass and plastic objects with colourful patterns, like hand-blown vases. While I admire the ceiling, black as opal, I stub my toe on a small item and pick up the kidney-shaped paperweight. I slip it into my bag. Following the creek upstream, there's a large pedestal with a flat boulder on top. When I notice Helen is lying on it, covered by a thin sheet and appearing delicate, I'm floored. She waves an emaciated arm. I rush towards a shrunken image of her.

'Grandma!'

I take hold of her frail hand. Even the slightest movement has the loose rings flopping around her fingers. Her cheeks are sunken, she's pale as a geisha and veins are surfacing, but her lips are lipsticked, as always.

Last Thursday I bade farewell because Helen was busy with an exhibition in town. She was fine then. Full of life. Now she's terminally ill. Is this a preview of the future?

She welcomes me with an affectionate but thrifty smile and a little shimmering in her brown eyes. 'Good girl,' Helen whispers and points at my compass. 'You've kept the astrolabe. Treasure it. Stay a good girl. Grow up to be a good woman.'

She's delirious, and I put my head closer as she wants to speak again.

'Parallel to the paddock runs a ditch,' she says. 'It's where I hide in the tall grass between the poppies, cornflowers, and everlasting daisies.'

She sighs as though reliving her youth in the Netherlands. I long to pick her a bunch of red, blue and white flowers and be able to see

life through her eyes, watching her reality as it once was, but I had yet to be born. Helen coughs and tilts her head away from me, and when I face the direction she's looking at, there's a window. To my surprise, it's showing green fields and the ditch, and if she's there, she's hiding.

'They're calling for me,' Helen says as a painful grimace heightens the sickness in her face. 'I refuse to listen as it means my time is up but I have to be a good girl, so I obey and make my way back to my chores in the kitchen. I hate what being a good girl entails. It's a trap. I dislike the sound of church bells on Sunday. Be a good girl. Do this, do that. Avoid bringing shame to the family. But I did.'

Her glance freezes, and she goes through agonizing moments, but the window only shows the farmhouse and the abundance of nature in late spring. It hurts seeing Helen half the size she used to be, fighting her demons. It breaks open the floodgates, tears roll over my cheeks, and I rub her icy hand.

'Nanna, you're a brave woman. You've achieved so much.' My speech falters. 'I admire you.'

'I detest the cold,' she says, 'but the ice flowers, they get me through winter. My sisters are downstairs, but I linger in our bedroom. I put my fist against a frozen pane, and when I take it away, it has melted into a little circle. There's morning frost on the fields. The stern voice of Dad is spurring Mum on before I watch them leave the gravel path in their best dress on their way to meet the bank manager. Only after shutting out the outside world, I notice the crystals on the window. They're delightful.'

I wipe off the tears, pleased with the prospect of seeing ice crystals next winter. I tell Helen about everything that has happened since my arrival including my search for Kyle.

'He has become a kind and handsome young man,' she says as if she has known all along.

'When did you see him?' I say.

The window now shows a snow-covered field near a canal. In a darkened shed a door opens, a small patch of light illuminates youthful earthlings dancing, and the voice of Edith Piaf floats into the night. Someone calls out for Helen. She's squatting by the water-side where she picks up a compass from the snow, tucks it away and hurries back inside. It looks exactly like mine.

'You're a good girl. You do what you have to do.'

She squeezes my hand and closes her eyes. She's fatigued.

'Grandma, I want you to get better, let me help.'

'It'll be a while. When my time has come, I'm going to heaven. Remember the angels.'

I grit my teeth, terrified of losing her, but I try to be courageous. 'You'll be welcome there,' I say, and I long to tell her I love her, but the words are stuck in my throat.

Helen fixes her gaze. 'Be wary of men,' she says and squeezes my hand once more before pulling it back from mine.

I take a good look at my dear grandmother before I plant a kiss on her forehead and close my eyes. In this water wave, I'm feeling happy and sad. My heart is overwhelmed with the mixed blessing, and I trust the raging turmoil to serve a higher purpose.

When I open my eyes, the wake of another passing barge sloshes water up to the quayside, well below my swinging feet, and I hear the blokes' laughter trailing away.

The quay is separated from the boulevard by a wall of cemented rocks. There are modern apartment blocks on the northwest side and historic buildings with dormers on the other. I walk up to the arch bridge in the southeast where bullet holes in its pillars are a reminder of a dark past.

The Rhine Bridge is pictured on Kyle's last card, on which he has written—'Your eye will open and spirit sees all.' It's dated 1987. He's then twenty-three years of age. Kyle could refer to an All-Seeing

Eye. Its function is to make humans aware that they're being watched, and results in persons behaving in a way they think is expected of them. But 1984 has passed, and I visualize a prettier world. It'll be better in 2024. Most likely, Kyle refers to a Third Eye that empowers earthlings to see consciousness levels beyond the material world. One view offers a narrow perception and the other a comprehensive entirety, which goes further than I can imagine, but it might explain my experience in the water wave.

I have to thank my Barbie dolls for showing me there must be at least three levels of consciousness. Although I'm invisible to my dolls, I give meaning to their lives by creating a world to play in. So there's the Barbies and me, but when I'm playing with the dolls, who's then playing with me?

Kyle is real, but a figment of my fantasy too. Perhaps when I combine reality with imagination, and a wish to experience the trinity of consciousness as one, I can use the power invested in me to reach the next level. Maybe it's what Kyle already understands.

After crossing the river, I descend the steps, and the cityscape emerges as I remember it from Kyle's first postcard. This cherished picture has kindled a desire at the core of my being and led me here. The actual sight shows its true colours and its beauty is stunning—amazing, in my face and real.

A sandy track through bushland leads to a cove where various houseboats are anchored. A bird like a small kookaburra sits on a branch overhanging the water, and I freeze to admire its orange and blue feathers, but it flies off and refuses to show itself again.

One of the boats has a small hut haphazardly built on top of the ark. Planks vary in width and the paint is peeling. It looks so fragile that the big bad wolf could blow it away. The embankment is filled with jerry-built sheds, tables and chairs, and a mélange of rusty junk. Grass reaches over my ankles as do the weeds. It's sad the city's panorama can only be viewed from this side, a neighbour-

hood that radiates a romantic poverty.

When I walk towards the deserted boat, someone yells. A broad-shouldered man in faded clothes steps out of the woods with an axe in his hand. He wipes the sweat off his forehead, and he stares at me for a while without saying a word. A cigarette dangles from his thin lips and two white milk bottles rise from black combat boots.

‘You may come aboard,’ he says. A tuft of ruddy hair sticks to his armpit, and there’s a large stain on his torn shirt, pointing to his belly button.

‘Only if your name is Kyle.’ He must be the same age.

‘It’s worth a lie.’ His eyes twinkle as he chops the axe into a tree trunk and comes closer.

‘Scott, alias Skipper.’ He taps two fingers to the peak of an imaginary cap. Dull straight hair hooked behind his ears falls over his lean muscled chest.

I smile, as I’m able to maintain my fantasy image of Kyle a little longer. I say my name and salute like a scout.

‘How many years were you a skipper?’ I say.

He raises his eyebrows and hesitates a few seconds. ‘Skipper of my yacht for as long as I’ve been living here.’

‘Is Kyle around?’

Scott straightens his shoulders, and a set of yellow yet straight teeth is smiling at me, but he shakes his head. ‘I didn’t picture you as the obsessive type. Coffee?’

I nod my consent, and he walks over a wobbly gangway to his dilapidated home. There’s a chair with three backrest bars missing, but with a minimal accumulation of green algae on the seat that could smear my butt, so I sit down.

The place reminds me of Chris, who gets by on meagre resources. He stores rainwater from the roof in two round tanks which he uses to irrigate his crops and when he hooks it up, for the bathroom as

well. So far, the toilet is a hole dug in the ground, which smells less like a cowshed than I expect. Using original seeds from Heronswood, he grows plenty of vegetables, but when I suggest he starts a veggie shop, I'm reminded nobody is supposed to know he lives there. I'm also forbidden to visit the attic again until he has finished the work on his science experiment. However, electricity to run his equipment still comes from the power grid.

When Scott returns, he wears an oversized sweatshirt that hides his sorrel chest hair, and he carries two chipped mugs in his coal-shovel hands.

'Why do you think Kyle lives here?'

'You must know many people.' Hot vapour is rising from the mug, and I hold it tight.

'Locals yes, visitors not necessarily.' He winks.

The church is standing tall across the river, and the vibration from ceaseless traffic that crosses both bridges is barely audible. It's an oasis of rest.

'How rough is it here?' I taste the bitter coffee, and as I blow on the surface ripples fan out like the wake of a boat.

'Are you made of sugar? There's no water or electricity, and gas comes from bottles. Living nearby the city but in the middle of nature keeps me grounded.'

'But having a home on the water makes life volatile. Money comes in but runs out faster.' That's what my grandmother tells me.

'I need little and living here is cheap.' Scott places his mug on a wobbly table and spreads his legs as he leans back, and rolls a cigarette.

A bird is singing, and I count several nests in the trees. 'How long have you been here?'

'A while. Since the first boat moored, others followed. It's tolerated, but there have been plans for an estate here.'

'That'll be right, building houses on floodplains, they must like

to get their feet wet.'

He blows circles of smoke into the air and shrugs as if the councils' logic is beyond him too.

I play with a grass leaf I pull from the soil. 'There's plenty to do here.'

Chris's household is more luxurious. Maybe because it's a house instead of a boat or because he's using fine china, or perhaps I'm still wearing rose-coloured glasses.

'I don't have to work forty hours a week to keep this place going,' Scott says.

'What's your job or do you study?'

The wind picks up, and I cross my arms, holding them tight as threatening clouds are moving in closer. Scott gets up to get a sliver of wood, puts it under a table leg to restore equilibrium before he looks at me for a long time.

'Study, school...' He rubs his temples. 'Life has more to offer, it can't be taught at school.'

He either knows Lukas or it's the general tendency of a rebellious town. 'What do you want to achieve in life?'

'You're such a girl.' When he purses his lips, two wrinkles crawl over his forehead, and as they disappear, he shakes his head.

At a loss as to what he means, I ignore his remark. 'You've found yourself a beautiful spot.'

'Now all I need is a cool girlfriend.' His dejected look changes into a smile.

'Where will you find her?'

'She'll know where to find me.' He winks again.

'Do you think girls love to take a step back in time?'

It has a certain adventurous charm, living a simpler life more in touch with nature and focusing on essential survival skills. But before long, I reckon the hard work of chopping wood, lighting the fire, cooking food, and collecting water will become a drudge,

consuming too much of my precious time.

Mankind has mastered the basic needs with the flick of a switch. Now that technology has taken care of freeing up time, I want to understand what it means to be human and learn more about how my rational mind, instincts and emotions influence my life. That kind of progress paves the way for evolution, but maybe Scott has a point.

Becoming aware again of our inherent connection with planet earth will fuel our aspiration to grow as a species. I'll have to master yet unknown human skills as a requirement for accessing the next level.

'Are you a girl from the future?'

'It was 1989 when I left Australia, and it still is. I want to master time travelling, and I've met people who suggest I could if I want to.'

'How?'

'I want to find out. There must be more to life than what we know.'

'You haven't been abducted by aliens, have you?' Scott rolls his eyes.

'Why do you say abducted? That sounds awfully negative.'

'It's highly unlikely they'll come in peace. If they make the effort, they'd want earth's resources in return, or perhaps perform experiments on our bodies.' He grimaces as though visualising being subjected to such things.

'You must love your sci-fi movies,' I say, 'where the good humans defeat the evil aliens. Why on earth should more intelligent life forms stoop to a primeval warlike level as projected in those man-made movies? You'd reckon they've outgrown that. Only idiots think there will be war.'

'Says the idiot believing she's a genius. With the technology in place, it feeds the hunger to conquer planets, exercise power and

make money.'

'How can a technology-based future make the world a better place? It ignores the human aspect,' I say.

'When pride, greed, envy and anger have taken over?' Scott throws his cigarette butt in the tall grass.

'We need to break those habits,' I say, 'and focus on evolving as a species. Learn to understand our human nature and overcome our negative inclinations. That's real progress when we go exploring instead of conquering. Cooperate rather than kill. It'll be fun to learn how to read people's minds and become telepathic as then we'll be able to communicate so much better with each other.'

The heat has seeped away from my coffee. Brown circles like year rings of a tree appear near the bottom. The sludge tastes even bitterer. As I toss out the residue, it fans over the embankment.

'I don't want other people reading my mind! When they do, they'll manipulate me,' Scott says.

'What are you afraid of? You have so much brain space available, store your secrets in a corner somewhere.' I wonder if I want to read his thoughts.

There's the first drop of rain. The heavens have turned black as though an irritated squid has oozed ink into the clouds.

'I might even disperse the clouds and create sunshine,' I say thinking of Wilhelm Reich's cloudbuster.

'You can shelter on my boat.' Scott gets up to collect the chopped wood.

'Thanks for the coffee, but I'll be on my way.'

I hurry to the stairs and run up, eager to reach the north side of the Rhine Bridge, but it's too far. The heavens burst open. Raindrops fall with increasing frequency. They soak my hair, doubling its weight and pushing my head to bend over forward. The load of library books proves to be a nuisance. My eyebrows are overflowing with water, and I wipe the drops from my lashes

as rain seeps along my neck. I hold my head up high, so I face the sky and receive the heavenly blessing. There's thunder after I cross the bridge, and I rush down the steps to take shelter. I could have stayed at Scott's but I have Chris on my mind.

Chris and I never date, but when we're apart, I long for his proximity, so I visit his place a lot. It's annoying he's often away, either gone surfing or working on his project at CSIRO. That's what he tells me. However, on one occasion, he invites me to dinner two days prior.

We're sitting on a log facing his backyard. He emanates warmth, and I'm thrilled every time our bodies brush. We eat a pit-cooked dish of roast and sweet potatoes while the western sky above the horse paddock is colouring orange and red. After I fill our glasses with red wine, he pulls me close, and I curl up in his arms. He points to the waxing moon, positioned like a banana in the sky.

'The gravitational pull of the moon creates waves for surfing, but it influences plant growth too,' Chris says and focuses his blue eyes on the life above. 'The four phases of the moon cycle start with the new moon when she's invisible. Remember to always plant seeds in the first three weeks of the moon cycle, everything planted between the last quarter and the new moon will not grow.'

'Better to prune and remove weeds instead,' I say and nestle my head on his shoulder.

The sunset is changing to indigo blue, and when the first stars show, I search the sky for the Southern Cross constellation. I find south by drawing an imaginary line from top-to-bottom star and then down to earth.

'Do you prefer the sun or the moon?' I run my fingertips over his arm.

'They're both beautiful. Most nights I get an enormous amount of work done while the rest of the country has succumbed to Hypnos. I find the dark cloak of silence inspiring. I go outside at

least once a night to look at the sky and stare at infinity with its sparkling lights from the moon and the stars. When my bits freeze off, I go inside again.'

'Are you naked?'

'I soak up life, and it's comforting. Being nude outdoors is the best feeling there is.' He caresses my ear.

I consider to give it a go when I'm completely alone.

'Another great moment,' he says, 'is witnessing sunrise while I wait on my board for the first set of waves to come in. I admire the landscape as it gains intensity, sharpness and contrast, like a film developing, unfolding and revealing itself.'

He puts down his glass, gestures me to do the same and then he kisses me. While our lips part and our tongues find each other, the seconds become minutes.

Chris leads the way to the bedroom, strips and falls face down on the bed. I take off my clothes and lie next to him before I run my fingertips over his manes and caress his neck and muscled shoulder blades. While I explore his smooth olive skin, he peeks at me through squinted eyes and says my hands are cool as penguin feet. I smile. I circle the little scar on his lower back until I reach his soft buttocks, hot as coal. With a minor detour along his inner thighs, I reach the tip of a protruding shaft, soft as my clit. As a powerful sigh rises from the pillow, I pull back my hand.

He rolls onto his right side and leans forward. Through my heightened heartbeat and the intensifying influence of locking lips, the passion pours into my veins, nerves and muscles like a tantalizing tornado. My tongue draws circles around his and pushes hard and deep before withdrawing to wait if he wants more. Within seconds, he devours me. Thirsty, I swallow his juice.

Rolling over the bed, I embrace his warm torso, dig in my nails as I search for grip, and rub and knead his skin while holding him tight, united in an everlasting moment. Sitting on top, I exercise

my power by tensing my thighs and entangling calves and shins, preventing him from an escape if he should so wish. He's trying to lift his leg, and I push it down with force.

I nibble on his lip, capture his tongue and suck it like a lollypop. The heat is rising to my head, strands of hair stick to my forehead and I'm craving for fresh air. While I brush the hair from my face, my clasp loosens, and he flips me on my back, using his strength to keep my legs in place, pinning my arms alongside my body. I struggle in vain to get loose, but his iron grip renders me defenceless.

He grins at me with big swooning eyes. He slides his tongue past my neck and my jugular notch to my left breast and then the other, circling my areolas and sucking hard to see how high my aroused nipples can rise. I lose any resistance and surrender. There are tingles in my belly, goosebumps on my skin and I'm melting like ice cream in the sun.

His hands take over caressing my breasts as his mouth descends to my crotch where it searches the bush for a path between the mountain ridges to a smooth clit. That's where the pleasure is when it's touched the way I love. When he hits the correct location, I squeak. He lifts up my buttocks up and licks the curves in circles. There's an increasing number of little whimpers until I squeal with satisfaction.

Afterwards, he kisses my forehead and a sweet, sour smell reaches my nostrils while his penis is rubbing against my inner thigh. He thrusts in. When something snaps, I grab his nipples. He's slowly moving his torso back and forth, and the first ache's easing while his moves become more rhythmic. I watch his slanted eyes and cramped features and admire his stomach muscles and pull him closer. As his breathing speeds up, so do his movements. I moan with delight. After a few more pushes, a satisfactory scream leaves his lips. Chris opens his eyes and slumps down before rolling off.

I return to the present moment as I'm stiff from squatting under the bridge. The thunder is drifting off to the west and the rain changes to drizzle, so I walk home.

If houseboats are only located between the two bridges, I deduce Kyle has solid ground under his feet. His fascination for postcards from the city might mean he lives in its centre. How many possible Kyles are there? If five to ten thousand earthlings are living in the inner city and if half of them are male, and if one fifth falls into the age category of fifteen to thirty, then I end up with around 750 young men. He's twenty-five years old, so I could narrow it down more, but there are many assumptions. Maths is unlikely to solve the problem of where he is, and a coincidental meeting is more probable, but how do I find Kyle who's unaware how important he is to me?

## VI

Soaked to the bone and frustrated with the search for Kyle, I arrive in my apartment and take a hot shower until both cold and moodiness ooze off. I tie a string between cupboard and balcony door and hang my drenched clothes to dry before filing the bank documents and hiding the cash from the exchanged traveller's cheques. Exhausted, I set the alarm and lie on the bed.

After a seventeen-minute power nap hoping to shake off the jetlag, I reheat and devour the spaghetti. It's after seven, and if Daphne has been home, she's gone again. A box with books is waiting to be unpacked, and I kneel to read a few spines—poems by Pushkin, a series by Carel Beke, Kafka and Kamasutra before reading a few pages of 'The 120 days of Sodom' from which a sultry scent rises. I put the novels on the yawning shelf, sort them by colour, add Krishna next to De Sade and begin a letter to Charlene as promised.

Time flies. I study the city map before I strap my sports bag to the bicycle rack, open the chain lock and fit the little key into the permanent locking mechanism on the back wheel between frame and rack. It shoots open. I turn right at Velperpoort before heading northeast and cycle uphill into another neighbourhood. I carefully approach every junction, annoyed again that after searching a whole day for Kyle, I return empty-handed. A door of a parked vehicle opens, and I swerve around it, cursing the driver in shock.

There are two young girls walking a dog, and I press on, ignoring the tension in my calf, but when a weight pulls me to the side, I stop to re-strap the slipped luggage. A car slows and pulls up. Its passenger window is open, and the motorist utters incomprehensible words. Preoccupied with my sports bag, I shake my head as I barely know the neighbourhood.

‘Do you want to earn some pocket money?’ a male voice says a little louder.

I bend over to the window. The man’s face is obscured, but I notice a doughy hand in his lap where flabby fingers mould a pink donger. Horrified, I pull back my head and scream a random selection of abusive words. It’s satisfying to see him gun the engine, departing unfulfilled with alacrity but I wish I had kicked a dent in his car, taken his registration or had a witty comment to wither his erection. I’m outraged at men who arrogantly assume their appendage holds any attraction and the audacity with which they dare display their miserable member of meat to strangers. My legs are shaking, and my stomach is in turmoil when I get on my bicycle again. I’m cycling uphill faster, rehearsing stiffy-crushing phrases.

I remember when Charlene and I have a break on our way to Lake Eildon where her hubby Ned is racing his powerboat. A truck driver gets out of his cabin to jerk off, and all I master is swearing loudly and throwing a half-eaten apple at him. When we encounter him again on the freeway, pushing him to the side of the road is sadly unachievable.

Grunting and cursing, I overcome the steepest part of the route. Nasty thoughts are creeping up until the effort of the climb numbs my mind. In a sweat, I arrive at the sports centre. A quintet of bicycles is parked close together in racks. Mindful of Daphne’s injunction to the need for security, I park next to them, as though they can keep each other safe hanging out in a group like that.

Three girls are in the middle of a discussion when I enter the

change room. I introduce myself and say I want to join the club. They're only a few years older and suggest I talk to the coach before they resume their chat. I've forgotten their names. A girl with a big belly and hair pressed flat against her skull is dominating the conversation until she breaks down sobbing because her boyfriend from the men's team has dumped her. When a girl with short spiky hair comes in, she drops her sports bag to the floor and kicks off her boots.

'I saw you this morning at the V&D department store,' I say remembering the redhead. 'You sneered at a perfect gentleman that you were quite capable of opening the door yourself. You left him reeling in shock.'

'Those scumbag men, always assuming that women are frail incapable creatures,' she says before cracking a smile, 'I'm Zoe.'

I shake her hand. It's pointless to argue about manners with someone who has strong principles.

'They're nasty all right.' I pull the kneepads over my feet and ankles before I explain about my upsetting encounter. 'Still, I'm happy the prick asked me instead of two twelve-year-olds.'

I put on my old sneakers, tie my laces and toss my folded jeans into my gym bag while Zoe unbuckles, hangs her pants by a belt loop on a hook on the wall, takes off her shirt and swaps her black bra for a sports bra. More girls enter the room, greeting each other loudly.

Zoe puts a hand on my arm. 'Smashing a few balls hard is a good way to get rid of your frustration.'

I nod, stuff the rest of my belongings in, zip up the bag and fill a water bottle. When my elastic hair band snaps, I curse.

'Use mine,' a tall girl says and grabs another one from her pocket.

'What is it made of?' I pull a face looking at the soft nylon before I tie it a few times around my ponytail.

'It's the ribbed part off a knee-high stocking. Once they're torn,

cut it off, and you gain something useful.'

There are three courts in the hall, and I'm amazed that sport centres thousands of kilometres apart look the same. The previous training has finished, and teams slowly retreat to the changing rooms. A sturdy man with short red curls and waggish eyes is leaning against a canteen window, preoccupied with his notes. I drop my bag beside a bench and walk up to him.

'Hello, coach! I'm here to train with you.'

He clamps his pen on a clipboard and asks what position I've been playing and if I can commit to training twice a week and competition on Saturdays. I confirm and tell him I'm an attacker since childhood, and six months ago, our team made it to the final. A ball rolls our way, he picks it up with one hand and throws it to a guy on another court. I deduce the coach knows everybody at the club, maybe on the volleyball circuit too, and I ask him about Kyle. He thinks for a moment and shakes no, so I consider phoning other sports clubs, asking if Kyle is a member.

Girls flock to the hall carrying a water bottle. We start the warm up by running a few laps around the court as divider curtains are lowered before we do some stretching exercises. The training is full-on, and it's difficult to master the diving technique the coach is teaching. I wipe the sweat from my face while my sweaty knees hold the kneepads firmly in place. The session finishes an hour and a half later following an enthusiastic game of five against five which we win, and four of us put poles, nets and antennas, and balls back into the storeroom.

The change room is filled with upbeat chatter. Every girl has returned to the spot where her clothes are hanging. The lukewarm showers are in a communal space without cubicles or modesty screens. Underarms and crotches are lathered up to wash away the sweat.

Skin colours range from frail pale to distinct pink and deadened

tanned, and the full body armour or facial camouflage of freckles resembles a Dreamtime painting. Chest sizes vary from tiny to huge and are round, uneven or pear-shaped with areolas from modest circles to vast rings in nearly white, lush pink or light brown. An attacker has nipples protruding like lipstick. Zoe has breasts like apples. The girls with big bosoms have red marks where the bra has cut into the flesh. Thighs and bums are firm and muscled, or skinny and flush while one is bumpy with cellulite.

Armpits are shaven, except for Zoe's. Pubic hair is shaved as a down-facing triangle but in reverse, and it makes me wonder why a landing strip is covered with, instead of cleared from bush. I'm the only person with a small black tuft and more moles than the others. I feel awkward, but it's a reassuring thought Phoenix suggests that true beauty comes from within.

My body is a temple and the vehicle with which I experience living in the material world. It has taken evolution millions of years to reach this level. However, an earth filled with wars and suffering is rapidly losing its attractiveness.

'I think, therefore I am', is an outdated aphorism, as life encompasses much more than reasoning alone. The destructive way of our thinking is poisoning our mind, body and soul.

Evolution is yet to reach its climax, but it'll take place on the spiritual plane rather than the material. Mankind is wise to let go of ego. When humankind focuses on positivity instead, we'll vibrate at a beneficial higher frequency, and we'll outgrow the need for a body and leave it permanently behind.

One girl after another saunters back from the shower, drying themselves with tiny towels. The change room resembles the morning after a party with piles of sports clothes, wet towels, scattered sports shoes and crumpled socks. The water has washed away the sweat, but my cheeks are still glowing. In front of a mirror, I brush my hair.

Naked, it's obvious if someone is male or female, but once dressed, the distinction is less visible and the fashion the girls favour only becomes clear after they don their casual clothing. It splits the group. There are four inconspicuous girls and two with the flair of prosperity. There's one sporty outfit, one you'd expect from the girl with the biggest mouth and one I-want-to-be-different-from-everybody-else. Although I dislike it, the way earthlings dress gives me a glimpse of their personality, and I wonder why I find some humans more interesting than others, realising at the same time how trivial this speculation is.

In the canteen, as to confirm my analysis, the brassy team captain, wearing a red G-string and bra underneath her clothes, announces, 'it's a girlfriend's thirtieth birthday, so we throw her a party. When she comes home from work though, she ignores the barking of her dog and rushes upstairs. Shortly after, she opens the living room door and calls for Bouncer in a soft voice. We jump up from behind the couch and yell "surprise". She's naked and has her crotch covered in peanut butter.'

Most girls quickly put a hand before their mouth and some giggle. I laugh. A tall attacker brings a tray laden with refreshments to our table while the players of the men's team hang at the bar. One of them is a real stud with medium-length hair, a lovely smile and bright bedroom eyes.

'You're staring, and Ryan has a girlfriend.' Zoe pokes me.

'I wish I had an eye in the back of my head though.' I throw him another lingering glance.

'In love already?'

'Just enjoying the view.'

'Looking, looking, not buying,' she says in a high-pitched voice as she raises her finger.

I burst out laughing and imitate her. She laughs too, and the guys notice. When I lock eyes with Ryan, we laugh hysterically, fan

our hand in front of our faces like extinguishing a flame but when we try to calm each other, it results in more laughter.

It's like this with Charlene. According to her, there's a handsome student, who deserves our prompt and diligent attention. In our breaks, we follow him through the hallways of the school and over the courtyard, hiding behind pillars and doors where possible. Every time he looks over his shoulder, we wait for him to move so we can tail him again.

Zoe tells me she's a social studies student. She invites me to her birthday party and promises to ask around for Kyle before she gets up to talk to the boys. A group of three teammates is embroiled in an unintelligible huddle while sipping lemonade and the others are continuing their earlier change room conversation. The sexy team captain with golden earrings holds a beer glass and a lit cigarette between her fingers.

'When a guy cheats, he's a goner,' she says and furiously serves the ball.

As she aggressively flicks ash into an ashtray, she shoots a poisonous glance towards the bar. The team agrees. Among the guys, I search for the adulterer they're discussing, but they all look innocent.

'Why did he do it?' a defender with a ponytail and protruding nipples says as she receives the ball, keeping it afloat.

Everyone is curious about the details.

'He never explained why he made a move on his colleague,' the pregnant setter says, playing the ball high to her right.

'She must have hit on him,' says the tall bony attacker, smashing the ball outside the volleyball court.

The team captain serves again. 'It doesn't matter shit, he shouldn't have followed his dick.'

Nods of agreement gather momentum, and they turn to the bar as one, and a glowering flash slams into the philanderer. It's a

wonder he lives.

‘Adultery means that a relationship has gone from being in heavy weather right into the eye of the storm,’ I say, playing the ball off centre. ‘Damage caused is hard to repair.’

The attacker runs for the ball and sets it up. ‘At least he confessed.’

Approving mumbles ensue, but the setter is having none of it and drops the ball over the net. ‘Confessed? No way! I caught him red-handed, the coward.’

Primal sounds rise from joint throats. They’re eager for more details so they can fine-tune their responses.

The setter serves. ‘No, not in our bed! She rang, wanted to speak to him, and I questioned her. I confronted him when he got home. He didn’t deny it.’

The pristine tunes change a notch, but the collective outrage remains.

Another defender, tanned because of the full freckle coverage, barely keeps the ball off the ground. ‘He just salved his guilty conscience.’

The team captain saves it and plays it straight into the other court. ‘Is it better you know nothing so you can’t blame him?’

‘Do you want to live with a lie? That’s worse,’ I say and dive for the ball. Accepting a lie is like chicory coffee, drinkable, but lacking taste and substance.

The setter takes the ball and delivers it high. ‘Bastard.’

‘What will you do now?’ I say and smash it within the 3-metre line.

The child will be born in three months, and the single mum now faces the birthing experience alone. The ball drops dead on the floor. Apparently, it’s too early for solutions, as she needs more time to dwell on her suffering.

Zoe returns chirpy with a twinkle in her almond-shaped eye.

‘Enjoyed your flirting?’ I say.

‘Men love to flirt with me, but I like girls.’

I swallow hard and take a long draught of beer as it’s a first I’ve met a lesbian. ‘I love boys.’

I want to make that clear, although I’m curious. ‘How do you know if a girl likes you?’

She tilts her head to the side, flutters with her eyelashes, and her tongue is visible between her teeth. ‘I’m trying to find out,’ she says and tilts it the other way, again followed by a flash of her eyes, and I blush.

The team captain gets up. ‘Who wants another drink?’

A few girls mumble their apologies and leave, but the majority stay. Out of earshot of the others, I ask Zoe who the father is. She describes a guy in his late twenties, who’s joking around with his mates at the bar but my glance strays to Ryan with his half-shut eyes, and when he looks at me, I smile.

When Zoe and I are cycling home, it’s after midnight and clouds are blocking the moon and stars from appearing. But for the tiny headlights on our bicycles and the odd lamppost penetrating the night, it’s dark along this stretch of road on the outskirts of town.

‘What happens in the future?’ I say.

‘How would I know? I’m not there yet.’

I laugh as we’re getting closer with each passing minute, even if the future always stays out of reach like the rabbit to a greyhound.

‘Would you like to know?’ I say.

‘Like a fortune teller informing me I’ll find a husband and have three children?’

‘You obviously went to a charlatan. But I mean, seeing the future with your own two eyes.’

‘Instead of with your third?’ Zoe frowns and casts a glance sideways. ‘Seriously, did you have some kind of vision?’

I nod.

‘Were there cars hovering through the sky and people wearing skin-tight uniforms?’ She’s laughing.

‘Weirder,’ I say, reminded of the futuristic-looking teenagers. ‘I fell into a water wave, and I found my grandma there, dying.’

‘Gosh, that’s terrible.’

‘She was still alive, and we spoke.’

‘How does that work?’

‘That’s just it, I was physically present below ground in the now and connected with Helen in the future.’

There’s a T-junction with a petrol station to the north where we wait for a traffic light. Zoe looks at me as if she’s judging my sanity. I shrug as I know what I witnessed, and it was real. We cross the road and cycle southwest downhill, so I stop pedalling, and it’s exhilarating, considering the effort it took to reach the top of the hill. After we pass an entrance to Sonsbeek Park, she turns right, following its boundary.

‘Don’t worry too much about it,’ Zoe yells, ‘see you Friday!’

Trailing southeast, I recognise Muis Sacrum downtown. By the time I get home, and despite Zoe’s advice, I’ve worked myself into a state. On edge, I ring Mum, using the phone in the hallway. I swallow the lump in my throat and blink feverishly to stop more tears from forming.

‘Mum, you need to check on grandma. She’s dying.’

‘Did you have a bad dream? Helen is fine, I saw her yesterday.’

‘Go see her, and tell nanna to see her GP, please.’ My voice breaks down. ‘Something is wrong with her.’

‘If you’re homesick, come home.’

Her reply takes me by surprise as her assumption is incorrect. How can I explain I fell below and into the future? I keep pleading and Mum keeps reassuring. When I hang up, Mum has at least promised to visit Helen and she’ll call me back if there’s an emergency. I crawl into bed and tuck the doona around like a

sleeping bag. It was shocking to watch my grandmother on her deathbed, and I sincerely hope that Helen is right that she'll be alive a lot longer.

TUESDAY

## VII

My daily rhythm is adjusting to the pace of life like an astrolabe to the night sky, and I wake up early. The letter to Charlene is lying on the table, and I want to write a few more lines, but my mind is elsewhere, so I phone home again.

The voice of my mother tells me how the day ahead has passed and that my grandmother is doing fine. A *tikkenteller*\* is ticking over fast like the hundred metre intervals on a speedometer when speeding. That it could prove costly is a concern that can wait, as I want to reassure Mum I love being here, especially after the panicky call after midnight. After I hang up, I frantically search my backpack for a letter she mentioned. It's only after I hold the bag upside down and shake it that two letters fall out. One has a typewritten note from Mum but the other... My fingers tremble as I unfold a yellow piece of paper dated 1946.

*Dear Helen,*

*Heavenly sunrays illuminated your elegant presence, and I keep cherishing the day I first laid eyes on you. Strutting around with your red knitted cap, scarf and gloves, smiling to nobody in particular, you looked perky. Chirping like a golden oriole, you charmed the girls in your proximity. The boys noticed but with a gracious hand gesture, you dismissed my brother and other*

*admirers before you went off ice-skating by yourself, daydreaming. You honoured me with a generous smile while I was getting back to my feet in the middle of the lake, and it has forever warmed my heart.*

*There are days I wish I had never met you, and think it is easier to ignore that you ever existed. But I know you would have attracted my attention even if I had seen you first at the cattle market or in church, although seeing you at mass was unlikely. You have caused me so much grief, and I cannot describe the pain I felt when you left. You know I would have been happy to give you everything your heart wanted, and I still would. How foolish of me. I am forever sad you are living your life without me. It might be for the best you are nowhere near, and I can at least pretend you never were.*

*The smell of your body, your hair and your hands is fading. But how could I forget you? Watching my vibrant daughter makes me think of you. The colour red suits her. She has your eyes and the same elusive sideways glances. She gives me joy, and often I hug her, seeking you in her warm embrace, but it is the smell of a child. Sometimes, I cannot bear to be near her as she is a constant reminder of your rejection. How dare you!*

*Although I now curse the hour I fell under your spell, I recall how I hopped on the wagon to collect the milk churns every day, hoping to catch a glimpse of you. You set my heart on fire when you accepted my offer for a ride into the village, and you enthusiastically told me your heart's dream of filling your years painting flowers. I admired your talent when you showed me your slate, and I tried to comprehend your depths. Despite our parents disagreeing, I wanted to marry you, even if the marriage had to be postponed because of my brother's death. I enjoyed each moment we spent together and find it hard to believe those months are gone. My little girl is all I have, and she is keeping the memory*

*of you alive. It can be painful, but I am grateful she is with me.*

*I care nothing for the gossip in town where the women shower me with their pity and their thinly veiled whispers while the men cast me sympathetic glances and pat me on the back. The work at the factory keeps me occupied, and before long, I will take over father's position now I am first in line. The housekeeper's daughter turns out to be a real angel. She nurtures our baby and cooks me the finest dishes, and I can only wonder what you would serve me. I comfort myself with the thought I will always have a part of you near. It is amazing how with the passing of each day, I recognize more of you in her. I hope he is treating you as I would, and I pray that you have found what you were looking for. May you be at peace with your decision! Please know your child is in loving hands.*

*With love,  
Oscar*

Dumbfounded, I put the letter aside. Helen has a daughter, and she leaves her baby girl behind like a hastily unwrapped then abandoned Xmas present.

It's Charlene's dream to become a mother. She's crazy for Ned, and she'd want to keep her kid if he were to abandon her. I imagine having a child with Chris, but the thought stops because I'm on the pill.

Safe sex prevents me from getting pregnant, but back in a post-war world, effective contraceptives still had to be developed, but still, the church is against every effort to abort unwanted pregnancies. Oscar could have impregnated Helen without her wanting a baby. It makes me wonder if she loved him as much as he did love her.

Sometimes, my grandmother looks at me but stares right through me. Off in la-la-land Mum says, and only when I wave repeatedly

in front of her eyes as though shooing away flies from a child's face, she snaps out of her trance. Oscar knows her to be enigmatic too, and that's the case before their child is born. Oh my God, Helen has another child. It means my dad has a half-sister and I have a half-aunt. Just how many secrets does my grandmother have?

It's a gloomy day, and I dress sharply like Ita Buttrose and tie my hair back. I want to find a job at a real estate office. I follow a parallel street north of Steenstraat and head northwest just before the centre. In the green strip between the ring roads, there's a repeating pattern of hedges, flowerbeds, statues and ponds with fountains that have yet to be turned on.

I cross left into an alley, then right into a square with a statue of a trumpeting horseman. Job agencies show a serious shortage of vacancies, and real estate agents display houses for sale at prices that even with a favourable exchange rate keep me dreaming.

As I stand with my back to the entrance of an estate office, I check the compass for orientation. Then I measure the wind directions of the other agent's doors. They're facing north, an unfavourable direction for me, as are south, east and southeast. It reduces my chances of finding a job there.

Traversing a car park, I reach a water feature with an abstract sculpture like a phoenix, impaled on an obelisk. Behind, there's a public transport hub where a spider web is suspended above with sets of equally spaced, high-tensioned cables going off in various directions. A north and a south-facing archway leads to another square, with a dome-shaped church in the middle, surrounded by still closed cafés and restaurants.

Opposite, at a redbrick neo-gothic post office, I get a stamp for my first postcard to Helen. It's a picture of a blue trolley bus. Before posting it, I write across the back—'A treasure from the past unfolds here as my future. Love, Sky.'

There's a lively market with fruit and vegetable stalls on a smaller square towards the west. It's where Tom Stark's real estate agency is located. I measure its entrance. The door is facing northwest, favourable for me, but they're yet to open, so I keep an eye on the white rendered wall of a clock-gabled facade from the nearby statue of the Duke of Gelre.

The buildings to the right are higher than those on the left, and I deduce it's a male bastion. It means the blokes are inclined to assign clerical jobs to females although they'd halt them from reaching their full potential and they'd be stingy with praise.

After eleven minutes, a tall male in a suit carrying an attaché case arrives, unlocks the door and holds it open to allow a woman and a man to enter. Upstairs, in front of the curtained windows are pink and red flower baskets that give the place a homely feel. Soon after, he comes out and adjusts his muffler as he descends the few steps. I walk up to him. His ginger hair is parted to the left, and at his temples, a few white hairs peak out expectantly.

'Good morning Mr Stark. I've come to work for you. To whom shall I report for further instructions?'

He's astonished and surveys my black pencil skirt, white blouse and school blazer I'm wearing for the occasion. What one has to say carries more meaning when dressing appropriately, and it's a rule I reluctantly obey.

He frowns. 'Why?'

'I'm sure you can use someone with international work experience, and from all the real estate agents in town, I like your agency best.' I put on my broadest smile.

Mr Stark glances sideways in thought. 'You're in luck for not coming down with a fever,' he says, extending a hand adorned with a gold-and-onyx ring, showing his meticulously trimmed nails.

A wide grin surfaces on his square face. 'Ask Annalise to train you. I'll be in later today. We'll have a chat then.'

He disappears from sight past the statue of the Duke, which looks more impressive in bronze than his stone mausoleum at the church.

When I enter, there's a glass door on the left that leads into a black-carpeted office, and a bell announces my entry. A leather couch is positioned against the wall by the window and on a low table in front of it are folders with Tom Stark's yellow and black logo. Annalise sits behind a rounded L-shaped counter and smiles when I introduce myself as her new colleague. She's puffing and sighing when I follow the tinkling of her charm bracelet to the coffee corner at the back.

'You met Tom in a good mood.' She grabs the handrail of a chair, moans as she sits and wipes the sweat from her chubby cheeks.

'It's typical of him to make split-second decisions, and it's what has made this office prosperous.' Annalise scans the tiny kitchen before sighing again.

I gesture for her to stay seated while I put the kettle on and make us a cup of tea. She's radiating like a rosy Rubens. I tell her about the real estate agency where I worked after graduation and explain I catered for refreshments, ran the errands, answered the phone and performed administrative duties.

When we finish our tea, she asks me to make coffee and describes how the machine works. She then introduces me to a smug-looking fellow in a partitioned office. I put a mug on his desk positioning its handle to his right before I shake his hand and catch a whiff of musky aftershave. He smiles before turning his attention back to his papers. Tom's room is located opposite, with a massive oak desk and matching furniture. With the tour over, Annalise points to a table behind the counter and instructs me what to take from a cupboard, and I sit down with a pile of folders, a notebook and a pen.

'Have a read through it, so you get a feel for what we're doing here. I'll explain the specific tasks later.'

I push the table away from the partition wall, put my chair in the freed up space, so I face northwest instead of southeast with a view of Annalise's back and the window. When she answers the phone, I listen and sub-vocalise the words of welcome, using the same intonation as her.

'It's hard being pregnant.' Annalise turns around. 'I'm tired, always hungry and there's this persistent pressure on my bladder.'

She disregards mood swings, but I guess they affect others more than her. Like Daisy Duck in white pumps, she waddles to the bathroom while I imagine Charlene heavily pregnant, bursting to deliver four babies all at once, like Ned's dog.

Towards the end of secondary school, Charlene moves in with Ned as one housemate leaves to work in the Kalgoorlie mines while the other relocates to Eildon. He lives in a weatherboard bungalow close to the shops and beach, and a rusty trailer lies forlornly in a garden overgrown with weeds. Deep tyre tracks of his Ute cut in the dirt driveway and old wooden chairs collapse on the veranda.

The screen door squeaks and the doorbell has long ago given way to decay, so I knock. When I step inside, two Golden Retrievers push through, barking merrily and wagging their tails. Charlene has shaven the side of her head, and her curls on top are shaped with gel into a hip hairdo. She's dressed in black-purple striped pants and a wide silk blouse.

'Hubby gone for the day?' I rub the dogs behind their ears and over their backs.

'He left with his mates, but says hi,' she says.

On a cream-coloured carpet sits an enormous leather couch that's seen better days. Black framed pictures of motorbikes and a dartboard grace the cracking and peeling plaster walls.

'Hi back.' I take a seat on a bar stool. The dishes and ashtrays have been cleaned. Coasters, tea lights, a huge skull lighter, and

a deck of cards in its box are sitting on the coffee table while newspapers and magazines are neatly stacked in a basket. Without asking, Charlene pours two glasses of tea.

‘Do you enjoy being a housewife?’ I say.

‘A home needs caring.’ She smiles. ‘He works, and I want to contribute too. You know what men are like.’

‘Slobs or lazy?’ I take the glass from her.

Is it because men work they’ve been excused from household duties?

In the backyard, washing hangs from a Hills Hoist, and her Moto Guzzi V65C is parked next to her surfboard that leans against a tin shed. Carmella has lent her a friend’s board and taught her, and she was allowed to keep it after they watched her surf in Venus Bay.

‘Best to avoid becoming a drudge.’ I burn my tongue on the tea.

Ned is six years her senior and dresses in a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled back to the top of his deltoids, and acid wash jeans. He carries his wallet on a chain, and his mates dress more-or-less the same. He makes himself scarce whenever I come over, but judging by her happiness, he’s a kind man.

She shrugs. ‘You know I won’t let that happen. We’ve divided the tasks.’

A dog ambles around Charlene while the other lies at my feet. The carpet has been vacuumed, but it’s hard to get rid of their hairs.

‘Do you want to marry?’

‘Maybe. When we start a family.’ She grins.

‘Just because you want children?’

‘Marrying means you show the world your devotion.’ Charlene shakes her head. ‘When you have kids, that’s an expression of that love. Do you prefer to stay single the rest of your life?’

‘I told you, I’m with Chris, and I dislike marriage.’ I blow onto the tea’s surface. ‘A relationship is something between you and your partner. Why involve the government? It’s so old-fashioned

that your social status as a woman depends on your husband and your reproductive capacity.'

'Only women bear babies.' She puts down her glass. 'It's natural. Besides, humankind needs babies to evolve. To grow up in a stable family gives a kid the best preparation for life.'

'Without an official stamp, that's still possible. Why do I want to wear the same ring every second? Everyone can tell you're a prisoner.'

'I'd hate to be married to you! You make the most beautiful thing sound awful, but it seals the connection between you and your man. I'll choose the ring and wear it with pleasure. I'm curious to see who you'll settle down with.'

'That's the beauty of it, the future is full of opportunities, and you'll never know what it'll bring.'

'Our marriage will be one of love.' She moves to the couch and adds, 'and everything is taken care of, financially and legally.'

The dogs and I follow her.

'Men must be the happiest people in the universe,' I say. 'They can pursue their personal interests and still have a family.'

'These days women also study and work.' Charlene hugs the hairy creatures before ushering them to their baskets.

'That's positive,' I say, 'but it's a long haul from equal rights. Women do the majority of work when it comes to raising children, feeding them, doing the laundry and taking them to school, and on top of that, they can work too.'

'When women have babies as their goal, they're happy when raising the little ones.' Charlene smiles at the dogs.

'Is that a goal or a social imperative enforced by the patriarchy? They've wasted their best years by the time the children have grown up and moved out. What do you propose they do then?'

'There's plenty of time for hobbies and volunteer work. Don't you want kids?'

‘Show me a man who’s willing to do the housekeeping and takes care of the children on a fifty-fifty basis. Then I’ll consider becoming a parent.’

‘You’re different, aren’t you?’

‘Critical,’ I say. ‘I dislike the stereotypical roles that exist between males and females. A woman is an autonomous being. Regardless of what’s written or said. Women can contribute their share when men give way. Maybe the Amazons should return.’

A market vendor is yelling, and his unintelligible words vibrate through the air like an SOS. Women carry canvas shopping bags full of fresh vegetables and other farm produce while the sun refuses to break through the clouds. As I turn another page in a real estate folder, my thoughts drift to Helen.

Perhaps Helen dislikes becoming a housewife too but is forced into family life when Oscar gets her pregnant. She has to give up pursuing an artistic career in painting, so she flees overseas with an English pilot she meets during WWII. She leaves the past behind, like a closed book buried in the smouldering piles of rubble from the war’s destruction. My grandmother fulfils her dream, but the price she has to pay is to forsake her child.

The traditional woman’s role is almost impossible to escape, especially way back in the forties. In 1946 when Oscar writes his letter, Helen gives birth to my father. She ends up with a family after all, many thousands of kilometres away from her parents and the social constraints of church and culture.

When the doorbell rings, a uniformed man delivers a bundle of post to Annalise while commenting on the weather. She replies she’s happy with the cold and as soon as he leaves, she puts it on my desk.

‘Open the mail, put a date stamp on it, register it in the book and separate correspondence from invoices.’

After twenty minutes, I hand it back, sorted and stacked. She explains how the computer terminal and the telephone system work and where to write appointments. She nods as I jot down notes before rushing off to the bathroom again, so I flip through a folder that lists the real estate.

When she returns, I say, 'do we know which wind direction the houses for sale are facing?'

Annalise leans over her desk and rummages through her lady bag's contents. 'There's information in the general description, and it tells you which gardens face south, but Tom has the property maps. Or use this,' she says and puts a city map on my table while she continues searching her leather bag.

'I want to match a potential buyer with a suitable home.' I need to verify the orientation of every house on location as using a map only provides me with a guesstimate.

Annalise stamps her feet in frustration. With a swoop of her arm, she pushes the repacked white bag aside, and it falls to the floor spreading out its contents.

'That's the general idea. Got it!' She jingles her charms as she waves a punch card in the air. 'I need to go see the doctor. You'll manage.'

She says it like a judge delivering a verdict in a legal case.

'What do you mean?'

'That you're in charge until I'm back after lunch.' She stuffs the paraphernalia into her bag, smiling.

Aghast, I watch her strawberry blond ponytail bobbing after her. With the other agent gone as well, I'm alone. When I check the diary, I realise the agents will only return late afternoon. I clear away the mugs and empty a smelly ashtray. Tom's desk is facing west, the business northwest, and judging by what Annalise says about his success, these directions must be favourable to him. I resist an urge to search his room for property maps and a staff folder as I want to know his birthday.

I remember my previous boss' frustration when a house inspection that lasts for more than two hours fails to lead to an offer. It annoys him that although sometimes he strikes gold immediately, at other times, it takes forever to get prospective buyers to fall in love with a place. When I tell him there's a way to avoid wasting time, he's all ears but remains sceptical.

As an entrance should be beneficial to a new owner, I suggest categorizing the available homes and prospective buyers into two groups. To the West group belong people that have a natural affinity with the southwest, west, northwest and northeast, while the East group people favour the north, south, east and southeast. So only West group people should visit a West group house and vice versa.

I launch into an explanation of the influence of the earth's energy, but he's indifferent to how it works. He just wants results and is prepared to put it to the test. With both the front door located in the facing of a house and a couple belonging to the same category, it's easy.

The most time consuming is getting the exact measurements on location. After that, it takes a number of weeks to generate the lists based on gender and date of birth of the clients. As soon as my boss shows matched properties to prospective buyers, the offers come in more quickly, and the sales increase like ducks flocking to a pond.

The *Aspidistra* next to my desk needs more light but rather than moving it, I remove the withered leaves and pour cups of water onto the desiccated soil. In the kitchen, I turn on the transistor radio. I'm peckish but I forgot to bring lunch and I'm stuck in the office, so I grab a pack of biscuits and eat them one after another, dipping them in hot tea and humming to the tune of 'Nine to Five'.

When a handsome bloke passes the window, I think of Chris. He disturbs my nerves, despite the distance. Awake, I'm besotted with him while asleep, he stirs me in my subconsciousness.

I remember being at his place while he's working, but his office door is open for a change. Bored, I flip through science magazines. He focuses on his task and refuses to turn around once. Impatient and horny, I sneak up on him and slide my hands underneath his arms and around his chest. He continues working. I know he's finally ready in the aloof way he touches one last key. When I kiss him behind his ear, he gets up, and as the chair falls sideways, he pulls me to him, and I hold him tight. Locked in an embrace with lips on lips like honeyeaters drawing up nectar, we stumble onto a sheepskin rug. His body weighs heavy on mine and my tongue searches his again while the equipment is crackling in the background.

I run my fingers through his long strands, along his neck, shoulders and back before I sneak into his pants, pulling his shirt out bit by bit. He lifts himself up, and I pull off his top, stroke his tight muscles and curl through his chest hair while he fumbles to take off my jeans and undies. My breasts are rising and falling, nipples protrude, and he slips his hand underneath, cups my breast and squeezes. I shiver when he takes off my shirt, and I push down his pants, and slithering like a snake around the rug, I roll him over and sit on top of him.

After I caress his nipples, I lower myself to kiss and suck them like a hungry kitten. As my tongue traces a dense path to below his navel, I catch sight of a lightning rod ready to hold its ground in an approaching storm where under its stem, I sense a pulsing heart that moves with my every touch. It sends shivers through him, pushes up his diaphragm and makes his toes dance. I slide on top of it and move back and forth like a rodeo rider until I scream with unbridled orgasmic delight, satisfied after losing my virginity to experience intercourse orgasm.

When the phone rings several times, it drags me back from my reverie. I rush to the kitchen to turn off the radio before explaining

that the agent will return his call later today.

Then I write in pencil the guesstimate orientation next to the listed houses based on the city map and sort them by directions. Using the clients' gender and date of birth I calculate their personal number. As I note it on their form, I add the corresponding wind direction too.

The numbers of the East group of 1, 9, 3 and 4 correspond respectively with the direction north, south, east and southeast. The numbers 2, 7, 6 and 8 belong to the West group with respectively southwest, west, northwest and northeast.

There's another ring, and a couple in discussion walk in.

'I don't intend to spend my whole income on a mortgage. I need pocket money,' he says.

I fly to the front desk, swallowing the last chunks of biscuit and washing it away with lukewarm tea while surreptitiously brushing the crumbs from my clothes before I sit down. They're both in their late twenties. He's wearing a suit, and she's casually dressed.

'You could visit the pub less frequent,' she says. 'Children cost money too, and I want a nice house for our baby.'

I ask how I can be of service while I'm guessing how much they have to spend although wearing a suit is insufficient to deduce his position in the ranks of a company and besides, she could be a business owner.

'It has to be a three or four bedroom house with a garden,' he says, 'not too expensive and near the city centre and a primary school. We're moving in together, and we want children.'

'Do you know what amount you want to invest?'

'150,000 Guilders.' He takes her hand.

'Is that all you have?' She points to the window displays.

'No, we have more houses. Please browse through the black folder on the table.'

She walks to the couch, but the man lingers, and I give him a

form and a pen.

‘When you fill this in, we’ll match your wishes with our listed properties and those that are available on the market. We’ll contact you as soon as we find something suitable.’

I serve them coffee but without biscuits. After ten minutes, they walk up to the counter with a filled-in form and ask to inspect a property. I tell them Mr Stark will call them when he comes back.

As the door closes behind them, it hits me how human beings come into my life and leave. Just like that. Some encounters are brief enough to stay detached, while a longer relationship involves attachment and later a feeling of loss, but hopefully memorable enough to last a day or a few years.

However, Kyle has always been an inscrutable phantom. Maybe I should accept that what Kyle was, is, and ever will be, equals an unsolved mystery and focus on humans that can be part of my life like my half-aunt.

Still, I type his name into the terminal that lists the purchases and sales, but it draws a blank. It’s sad, but there’s a shimmer of hope as it might mean Kyle has bought a home from another agency. If he lives in town without being registered, is he then an outlaw or free as a bird?

When Annalise returns, she’s carrying a box, and her azure trench coat twirls like a ballerina’s tutu. She calls me over to the coffee corner.

‘Choose,’ she says, pointing to six colourful cakes decorated with icing, fruit and whipped cream.

I pick a banana puff cake while she chooses a *Bossche bol*.

‘Thanks for taking over. What has happened?’

As she hangs her coat on a rack, I fill her in on the details and ask where I can order more biscuits. Soon after, Tom walks in with a theatrical flair like he has won a Tony Award. He chooses a vanilla slice, puts it on a plate and invites Annalise into his office. After-

wards, she tells me he has sold a house, and he wants to see me.

Tom sits at the round table instead of his desk and takes the last bite of cake as he gestures me to take a seat. At ease, he finishes chewing and swallows the mouthful before he speaks. He wears a wedding ring.

‘How did you enjoy your work and what can you offer this agency?’

‘I love it!’ Seated upright with my palms down in front of me, I explain about the tasks I carried out, the systems I learned to use and inform him about the new clients. ‘There was a phone call from a man regarding a specific property, and he said you’d know what it’s about.’

As I give him a note, he smirks upon reading the name. ‘Once I’ve finished the day-to-day tasks, I’d like your permission to set up a system that saves you time and sells houses faster.’

He quizzes me, and I tell him about my project and its successes. He rubs his hands and smiles like a lottery winner.

‘Your colleague has a good impression of you, and I accept her judgement. But unfortunately...’ He plays with his ‘TS’ engraved men’s ring.

I brace myself for rejection.

‘Unfortunately, I cannot pay you for today, so finish what you’re doing. But I want to see you back here on Monday at nine a.m. sharp for your first official working day.’

Delighted, I firmly shake his hand and notice a cufflink with the same inscription. I thank him. Annalise is surprised when I hug her, and after I clear my table, I walk whistling out of the door as I now have a job.

## VIII

I skip from the square where my office is, to the end of the shopping street around the corner where the old St Janspoort used to be. It overlooks another section of the ring road and is located northwest of the church. Willemsplein is pictured on Kyle's postcard from 1982 with its bus stops, trolley cables and a statue of a deer in the middle of a lawn among some trees. The phoenix pond is on my right and opposite to the north, there's a train viaduct.

On Kyle's fourth card is written—'Adventurous circles keep me from transcending earth.' Mysterious as always, it raises questions instead of providing answers. Are physical or mental circles preventing him from reaching his goal? Is it his intention to reach a higher level of consciousness or is he considering suicide? I need to explore the elusive link between his cards.

Hopping on a random bus guarantees a trip to an unplanned destination and I'm about to do just that. Then I glimpse Chris across the road and freeze. He's standing on the grass next to the deer, dressed in surf shorts and singlet, and his appearance is made up of trembling waves like a *fata morgana*. He beckons and flabbergasted, I wave. Then I run to him as fast as my skirt allows, fly into his arms, and everything turns black.

I'm surrounded by darkness and the traffic noises are gone. It's eerily quiet. I touch the cold concrete floor. The air is moist like a cellar. I move my hand in front of my eyes, but it takes a while

before I recognize the silhouette of my fingers. My head is swirling like a snow globe until the particles slowly settle. There's an opening on my lower forehead between my eyebrows, but the skin is intact.

'Chris,' I yell as I scramble to my feet, able to stand upright. The absence of pain hints at a lack of bodily harm, and centimetre-by-centimetre I scuffle around in a stiff-legged gait with stretched arms until I find a wall. Leaning against it, I caress the cool, tiled surface. I say my name, date of birth, the day of the week—it's a Tuesday, the address and the names of my parents and satisfied with the statements, I conclude I'm okay.

Disoriented by the unknown and enveloped in a clammy silence, I catch a whiff of jasmine. I untie the strap from the front pocket of my canvas sack, take out a mini torch and follow the scent through the white-tiled hallway. After twenty steps, the concrete changes to compacted dirt like in a mine shaft. I have one hand on the lamp and the other on the wall, searching for an opening or any irregularity. Stopping at twenty step intervals and jotting down compass directions, I discover the path is first heading east before curving southeast. I adjust my pace to make it more consistent and keep counting.

After three hundred steps, tree roots are pushing through a ceiling. There's a door that as soon as I touch it, opens. The floor surface softens, and I walk through a hedge arch where the smell of jasmine gives off a rich, exhilarating fragrance when soft fur touches my ankle. Startled, I jump aside, and a sudden side stitch makes me drop the torch in a pool of mud. As the door slams shut, I know it's closed. Still, I try to open it, but it's useless.

Daylight from the sky reaches a grass clearing with daisies, surrounded by fluorescent flowers, squirrelling shrubs and tall trunks. The odd combination of a tropical rainforest with an English cottage garden is inviting. To my great relief, I see Chris

sitting on a tree stump in the middle, showing his dazzling white teeth and pulling his toes back and forth in his thongs.

‘Sit and take off your shoes and pantyhose.’ His tone is more demanding than I’m used to, but his voice sounds hollow.

Dazed, I obey. The outline of the tower is approximately twenty steps wide, maybe more, as the walls are covered with intertwining trees and plants, but it feels spacious.

‘Where are we?’ Agitation crowds out wonderment.

‘We? There is no we. Not in the physical sense.’

‘Bollocks.’ I stride towards him, determined to grab his arm and demand an explanation, but when I reach for him, he disappears.

Skittish, I look over my shoulder. ‘Where am I?’

‘You’re in a safe underground location I’ve created, close to your new home and sufficiently unknown not to attract any attention.’ His voice crackles, and he’s now positioned near the path.

‘Bloody hell Chris, what’s going on?’ I yell, and as three disturbed birds flutter upwards, I gasp for air. ‘What part of you is here? Why are you playing games with me?’

‘Stop worrying and take advantage of the opportunity. I’m with you in thought. You’re strong and smart, so apply your skills and learn. Puigi will take care of you. Ultimately, you’ll understand.’

‘Puigi?’ I alarm another four birds. ‘Who the hell is Puigi? What do I, for God’s sake, need him for?’

Chris has disappeared, and although I search the chamber, he’s gone, and I walk back to the exit. I touch the solid wooden door and push down the handle, but it stays locked.

‘Chris?’

I curse the heartbreaker for the stunt he has pulled on me. I’m under pressure as he drives me crazy, and pumps up the volume of my raining blood while he forgets about me, and the happiest days of our lives.

While I pull as hard as I can, the exit remains closed. I try again.

Failure. Moving the handle upwards. Fail. Try again. Catastrophic.

Chris leads me here and then ditches me. Again. My red-hot temper is looking for an outlet, and I hit the door with my weight. It hurts my shoulder. I want to kick it, but realise in time I'm barefooted and preserve my toes. I tramp back and forth like a raging bull, but the dampening carpet reduces the effect. As I stomp the grass, I rock my head and snatch my hair, eager to yank it out. Chris will pay for this, locking me inside his invention without asking. I scream and my voice trembles. Embarrassing. I howl again and with more conviction.

Nobody is listening to a word I say. It's like Kyle's Sabelspoort—'A thick wall with pricked ears smothers my now stifled cries.' If Kyle has been underground, how did he avoid going mental from being forced to play a game without being explained the rules? When I tell someone after I get out, I doubt anyone would believe me. The situation is too unreal to take seriously. I keep screaming as it liberates my heart until I end up laughing.

I pick a berry from a shrub, sit down to rub my dirty feet and spit out the fruit. It's too sour for my liking.

Charlene thinks Chris's behaviour is selfish. Maybe she's right, but he's a genius, and this wood tower is a perfect example of his accomplishment, even though it fails to make sense. I pinch my arm, experience the pain and state I'm awake and present. With Chris gone, I'm alone, but then it hits me. Before I left, he told me I need to grow up. I guess he means I should stop relying on others, so the only choice I have now is to find out for myself.

There are many daisies, and I pluck one from its verdant leaf cradle, make an incision in the stem with my thumbnail and plucking another daisy, I pass it through the cut. I repeat the steps until I create a daisy chain, which I put around my ankle. It makes me beautiful and eliminates the urge to clean my feet.

When I get up to dance, I see something shimmering in the

shrubs. A feather is lying atop a bamboo panpipe. I lift the wooden instrument to my lips, and as I blow it softly, I dance around, calmed by the delicate sound.

Lying on a bed of grass, I stare up at a blue sky and admire the surrounding wonder—braided green growth, star, heart and globe-like flowers, and one species has orange Mohawks. Now I'm quiet again, the tropical birds screech their songs, and the common ones chat. Wood is perseverance, balanced and optimistic. A fresh spring breeze sweeps my cheeks, and I flit the feather across my face—oh so light before I roll over on my tummy. Leaning on my elbows, I play the panpipe again and spill the notes into the Elysian landscape until, satiated with watching the grass grow, I'm compelled to climb the wood tower.

Entwined trunks and lianas give me handholds. I lift up my skirt over my thighs, tuck its length into my waistband to secure it, and as I ascend, my body elongates. I stretch my leg and insert my foot between branches on the other wall. Finding accommodating footholds, I clamber the tree-covered walls, keeping my eye on the sky.

I want to scan the horizon, the rooftops and the air, hoping to find clues to the world I currently occupy, and bearings on what dimension I'm in. Although the clearing below my feet has already been reduced to a tiny patch of green like a stamp, the wood tower continues to rise higher. I feel like Jack climbing an infinite beanstalk.

The strain on my muscles is increasing. I'm ready to leave the sky for what it is—heavenly, blinding, and out of reach. I grab hold of a liana and glide, lose my grip and fall the last few metres, but I jump up, impatient to get out. Annoyed, I rub the torch clean on my wrinkled skirt and shine a light on the path that leads to a now open exit.

In the tunnel, I retrace my steps from the wood tower, and after walking underground for 250 metres, I find a metal door that opens at the lightest of pressure.

This chamber is shaped like a pyramid and decorated like a romantic parlour. Scarlet curtains are draped from the ridge of the roof and are caught back at the wall above me, unreachable. Neon illuminates the floor. On a table, there's a cornucopia of different fruits, a bowl of almonds and candles are burning. I eat a handful of the bitter nuts.

The square base of the pyramid is cast in shadows, and I cruise the periphery, touching the surface of its angular walls, rough as sanding paper, in search of another exit. Convinced there's at least one way out, I look around again. Torches hang at various intervals and flare without staining the wall. A tea light is burning, and incense oil permeates the chamber. The intoxicating smell makes my knees go soft.

I'm drawn to the centre where the converging walls peak. A blinding light floods down, and I sit on the throne it highlights. The fire pyramid is hot as summer. Opposite the table is a bonfire where capricious flames are dancing, casting seductive glances on the silk curtains above. They're constantly changing form and increasing in intensity. I am hypnotised.

What the tub experience hinted at, is that although the past has shaped me, I need to let go of the grip it has on me. It's there to call on if needed, rather than a burden to which I pay slavish service. However, I'm angry with Chris for his behaviour and for dragging me into this subterranean world where, as I inspect my digital watch, something peculiar is going on as time has stopped.

How can I separate my feelings for him from what he's showing me—the interstice between past, present and future? Chris is responsible for creating the water wave, the wood tower, and the fire pyramid, or so I think, and he's allowing me access to things I fail to comprehend.

I'm torn between resentment and gratitude. I shake no. Fire. Fire. I keep repeating the word until the only focus is fire. The

meditational qualities of fire bring the whirlwind in my brain to rest. A blissful sensation of satisfaction overcomes me. The anger I've been accumulating in the wood tower is seeping out and sliding off my shoulders and falling into a small pool at my feet where any negativity is absorbed.

However, the wood tower gave me hope too, demonstrating the gorgeous growth of nature. I'm aware when I put my heart in it, I can reach the sky and when I need what I want it materializes.

Playfully, I move my leg back and forth enjoying the comfortable touch of carpet scraping my soles. I sigh and take off my blazer. I'm thirsty.

The languor feels like acceptance now I know Chris is gone forever. I can only count on me. I must rely on my power and trust my strength.

The abundance of heat, light and fire puts me at ease, although thoughts about why and how keep returning. I realise that those thinking patterns are quick to nourish my aggressiveness, but I prefer to replace those brain waves with positives. I accept the fire pyramid is a place where I can enjoy life.

In a corner, I notice a queen size bed with a glass of steaming hot water on a bedside table. I get up and put the cup to my lips but burn my tongue sipping tea.

The bed cover is as soft as a kangaroo's pelt, and I slump among the pillows. I want to experience passion again. If only Chris would be here, we could have sex. I imagine him kissing me behind my ears, on my neck and caressing every part of my body. He'll tease me, as he circles his tongue and fingers closer to where I want to feel him most until I surrender and pull him into me. Love is universal, orgasmic and overwhelming. I withdraw my hand and hot liquid splashes from the glass and scalds my leg.

Wiping off the drops, I walk over to a bookcase at the southern wall. It's reassuring to touch the spines with hard to decipher

letters and unilluminating titles that stare at me like a Cyrillic encyclopaedia.

I wonder what Kyle would make of these cryptic messages. What books does he read?

I pick a book from a shelf. It has a sword on the cover, and as I wipe the dust from it, more details emerge like a brass rubbing. After I put it beside a vase with dried roses which rests on a small triangular table, I pull up a chair and turn to an arbitrary page.

There's an image with a text below—'Your eye will open and spirit sees all.' It's the sentence that Kyle has written on his postcard of the Rhine Bridge. The image shows a man among green pastures, with a church and scattered farms in the background but is set in the Middle Ages when the river has yet to be rerouted, and Arnhem is yet to become a city.

I close the book but keep my index finger between the pages. My heart is racing. Kyle is here, depicted in an illustration predating 1989 by centuries.

I'd love to enter a state of consciousness where I could cross time and travel simultaneously through past and future. If one comprises all there is, and it's a part of me like they say, I should be able to visit a reality that goes beyond the boundaries of physical structure as we know it. When I open the book again, the picture with Kyle is still there, and I slam it shut. I can transform thoughts into matter although different from what I expect.

Dancing through the room, I spot two ropes hanging from the nook. I climb one, annoyed that I chose today of all days to wear a tight skirt, but use the nine notches as handholds and then apply my body's momentum to swing from left to right. From my sinecure in the roof, I see the fire pyramid where below me a controllable fire burns and food and books are abundant. The light is casting shadows of me onto the walls. With the lack of an audience, I perform on the trapeze for my enjoyment. Fire is warm, passionate,

and motivating. After playing around for a while, I jump to the ground and notice I've lost my daisy ankle bracelet. I grab my blazer from the throne and with a push, the door sways open, offering an escape to the real world.

## IX

I'm stupefied as though I've accelerated through space and met a brick wall. My legs are shaking. A trolley bus swooshes past while a cool northern wind cuts through my soul. There's a kick to the back of my knee joints, and I almost fall into the road. Somebody is guffawing, and I turn to face Izzy, but her laughter dies off immediately.

'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Maybe I have.'

'Where are your shoes?' She holds on to a bicycle with laden panniers.

'Chris ... from back home ... I saw him ... over there.' I point to the statue before I pat my skirt to smooth the creases and brush off the dirt while I ignore my bare feet.

'Wasn't it someone who looked like him?'

Her tone is emphatic, and she's right, it's impossible he has been here. 'What happened ... is extraordinary and difficult to explain.'

Chris has been teleported and emerged like a hologram in an emotion-evoking subterranean chamber with a view of the sky. In both the wood tower and fire pyramid, I made things happen moments after thinking them, but I have trouble recollecting how I got in or out.

I listen to my rumbling stomach as the biscuits and cake have long ago been digested. 'I need to eat.'

A group of youngsters pass by, and I gawk at the deer once more before following Izzy's finger to an Apollo sign on the right. Her nails are metallic green today. She escorts me to a fish and chip shop where she rests her bicycle against a wall. They only serve chips and a variety of snacks. We order and pay at the counter before we sit, and I hide my naked feet under the bench.

'Did you ever have somebody from your past suddenly reappear in your life?' I say.

Izzy tilts her head to the side and sighs. 'Wouldn't I've liked to turn back time and prevent a disaster from happening?'

I stare at her, but she waves off the remark by burping loudly, attracting a few indignant glances. She picks up our order when it's called out. I start with the soufflé while she digs into her chips with mayonnaise. The melted cheese inside the crispy crust tastes delicious.

'Weren't you thinking of Chris before he appeared?'

'I was thinking of Kyle and his postcards.'

Kyle is right about finding adventure, underground of all places, and while the water wave induces fear but stamina as well, the wood tower evokes anger, activity and hope, and the fire pyramid arouses joy.

Life is evolving through its cycles like an infinite learning curve. The next generations will continue where we left off as life spirals upwards forever, like a chart with ups and downs on the rising line of progression.

Izzy bites into her *bereklaauw* dish of meatball with onion and peanut sauce. A clot oozes from the corner of her mouth, and a gecko's tongue flicks out, pulling it back from imminent disaster. I taste the recommended *kroket* and start on my chips with tomato sauce while she alternates mouthfuls of chips with pieces of saucy meat.

'Will you help me with the poster pasting tonight?' Izzy says.

‘Sure.’ I need a distraction.

She gets up and hurries over to her bicycle. A boy with spiky hair comes in, wearing a sweater over a white collar and a pair of loafers under his jeans. He stands in front of a vending machine, puts a few coins into a slot and opens a tiny glass window where pre-fried food under heat lamps is waiting. He pulls out a *frikandel*, stuffs a large part in his mouth and walks off chewing at the remainder. Izzy returns with a poster that says ‘Boycott Apartheid’ and has a shell logo in between words.

‘I thought you were posting concert posters?’ I smirk.

‘Nothing happening at our place this week, but Sanitary Towel is still playing tomorrow at The Travelling Horse.’

She has a smile on her lips. ‘Don’t you have a little colour again? Feeling better?’

I’m touched by her concern and tears well up. It started with the tub ordeal and Chris showing up here means he has made a lot of progress in developing his invention over the years. But even if he’s involved with decking out the chambers, it’s hard to believe he could have built the tunnel too. It’s likely it already existed, and if there are more, I’d love to map them all.

With a quick sweep of my hand, I dry my foggy eyes and eat a last bite of *kroket*. Izzy religiously licks her finger with a pentagram ring on it, swabbing up the remaining crusty fragments of potato and fat.

‘What an astonishing experience. Yes, I’m much better, thanks.’ I rub my satisfied tummy.

‘I had sixty of them,’ Izzy says and points to the poster, ‘but I’ve already been to the suburbs around the centre.’

‘Time for some action.’ How many human beings will notice the message and how many will follow the instructions?

Izzy drops her rubbish in the bin, and I toss my plastic containers in with a lob. She pushes the bicycle by hand. The

pavement is moist and raw under my shoeless feet, and I detect every change in structure. I'm grounded to earth although I feel awkward for exposing my bare feet.

'Ouch!' I rub my foot along my calf to dislodge a piece of gravel, which falls to the ground. I catch sight of a shoe shop that's about to close, but Izzy suggests we check out the statue first. We turn around, and I ignore the glances directed at me as we walk to Willemsplein, where she parks the bicycle against a shop window of a tobacconist before we cross the street.

'Isn't this where you had your fit?'

Circling the sculpture and ignoring her remark, I search for a lever that unlocks a secret door, and then I scream for joy, 'found them!'

A pair of black ballerinas is lying in the grass with the pantyhose tucked inside one of them. I lean against the statue, valiantly trying to wipe the dirt from my feet, but they're still filthy.

'That makes sense,' Izzy says.

I doubt that. I'm delving into Kyle's city, and I've visited seven out of the nine locations pictured on his postcards. Nine is a fascinating number as it's the last of the single digits and there are nine squares in a magic square. However, finding Kyle turns out to be more difficult than I expected. Thanks to his cards, I stumble upon these underground rooms, and it convinces me to continue my quest.

When they're related to the five elements of water, wood, fire, earth and metal that my grandmother tells me about, there will be two more chambers to discover. However, it fails to explain what Kyle, Chris and Helen have in common, other than frequently occupying my brain space.

Maybe Izzy is right—I'm crazy, but at least with my pantyhose and shoes back on, I feel normal.

The shops are now closed, and it's raining. From a pannier

on her bicycle, she takes a brush and a bucket filled with a thick paste made of water, wallpaper glue and sugar for extra stickiness, she explains and hands me the roll of posters. There are fewer earthlings on the streets.

‘There.’

Izzy points to a household goods store on a corner across from my office. She brushes the goo onto the entrance pillar and asks me to stick on a poster. As I pull one from the roll, it falls to the ground. She casts a glance over her shoulder, picks it up and slaps it on and looks back once more before she takes the bucket, tucks the roll under her arm and turns to saunter off west with me trailing behind.

There’s a square with unoccupied terrace seating outside of centuries-old brick warehouses, but indoors, the cafés and bars are bustling. In front of an art house, taking up the middle of the square, a stage is being erected.

‘Are all punks atheists?’ I’m thinking of what Daphne claims.

‘You can’t tell by looking at people if they believe. I’m not. If God’s existence can’t be proven, does it mean he doesn’t exist?’

‘Is it proven that science can prove everything?’

All the proof I need is to experience it myself or feel in my heart it’s true. Maybe humans are too insecure to trust their energetic source and depend on an external one like science or God to tell them what to think.

On the right wall of the art house, I paste my first poster and ask Izzy to take a picture of me while I pose pulling a funny face. Every café caters to their specialist clientele and judging by the customers’ garb the venue opposite attracts the more artistic mortals in town.

‘My dad and I often discussed God’s existence,’ Izzy says. ‘Our family is religious, but I hate the strict rules and started asking questions. Many things are unfair. Luckily, I don’t have older brothers to tell me to shut up.’

‘What’s your faith?’ I wonder how many religions there are to

choose from and although I believe in architecture, I doubt it's a religion.

'I grew up in a Reformed Church family.'

'I'm ignorant in these matters.' I guess that a child accepts whatever its parents teach.

'There are five big religions,' Izzy says, 'Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. The first three are monotheistic. They trust there's one God, and a heaven and a hell.'

I nod, but the ones I've heard of like Baptist and Anglican have fallen off her list. A walkway leads past bars with enclosed heated terraces before she turns left towards a downward sloping street.

'Christianity springs from Judaism and Islam evolved from them both,' Izzy explains. 'They're Abrahamic religions that share the Old Testament from where they took their beliefs while each has a holy book.'

'A book is just words on paper,' I say. 'An author with aspirations to inspire puts it together, but readers have their personal interpretation as they relate the words to their own life. A book functions as a guideline, a starting point from where to take things further, and is never a rule to live by. It's like asking to explain a poem. To state it only has one explanation is limiting its meaning. Who dares to claim he knows the truth?'

My grandparents give me a children's Bible for my fifth birthday. They read out stories, and the drawings entertain me, but I fail to understand the concept of religion. Another present when I turn seven is a Biblical picture book by Gustave Doré, with black and white wood engravings, printed like a fingerprint. I love the craftsmanship, but the depictions are violent, sad and so depressing that it takes me further away from, rather than closer to religion. 'David's flight' is the only engraving I enjoy as it's romantic. A girl is helping her boyfriend escape off a balcony via sheets that are tied together, instead of letting her hair down like Rapunzel.

‘Christianity lasted as a movement for a thousand years before it split into a Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox part,’ Izzy continues. ‘Five hundred years later, Protestantism sprouted from the Roman Catholic Church, from which my parents’ creed evolved.’

Religion is a forest where t-tree, eucalypt, beech, banksia and pine each represent a faith, and every kind of tree has its species but from every stem, branches sprout and from its twigs grow leaves. Although unique, they all feed on the same earth and get replenished by the same heaven.

‘Why does humankind assume we’re divided?’ I say. ‘It’s a superficial division as we share the same roots and long for the same universal shower.’

Down the slope, there’s a shiny tin cinema where Izzy slaps on another poster near its entrance while constantly looking around. The pedestrian intersection is deserted, and the only person coming our way has his head tucked in, and shoulders pulled up high. When we turn southeast, the spire of the church becomes visible.

‘Do you know the song “Imitation of Christ” by the Psychedelic Furs?’ I say.

‘Isn’t it about how you try to live your life like Jesus?’

‘It’s a grim song, saying we’ll end up on the cross as life will kill us one way or another.’ I appreciate a different outcome is possible, but by all means, music helps to wash off the miserable state of the world despite the lyrics describing its wickedness.

We’re working as a team and put boycott posters to pillars, walls and small electrical enclosures. Izzy spurts through the alley to the top end of Kerkplein—the best spot to admire the church tower in full glory.

‘What’s your conviction?’ Izzy wants to know.

‘I believe in love.’

As though summoned, Bossy sticks out her snout.

‘Aren’t you a hopeless romantic?’ She pets Bossy’s tiny head.

‘I also believe in music and making the most out of life.’ I skip across the square.

‘Love your neighbour like you love yourself.’ Izzy laughs and runs past me.

‘Love yourself like your neighbour loves you.’ I run after her, and when I catch up, I drop the bucket, pivot and squirm my arms over my shoulders while making kissing sounds.

‘Love,’ I yell, ‘I’m the Goddess of love.’ Tiptoeing, I dance around her.

‘Aren’t you full of it? There’s no love for dissidents in my town.’ She picks up the bucket and strides into Koningstraat.

‘Lighten up, you’re here now, being a punk,’ I say giggling.

‘I am who I am, and I hate the stupid rules from religious neighbours and the government.’

She slaps another notice on the library with more vigour. A strand of Izzy’s Mohawk, heavy from the continuing drizzle, has flopped on its side. In the reflection of a window, I notice my hair has started to curl.

‘Are you enticing toddlers into a boycott?’ I point to the poster at knee level.

She pouts her lips and squeezes her eyes. ‘Your turn to paste the next.’

Izzy drops the bucket and posters and runs towards the junction of five. In front of the leather shop, she waits and a few storeys up, there’s a silhouette of a resident. They’re standing there, isolated yet connected in composition like an Edward Hopper painting but before I can take a picture, the spell has been broken.

To the north at the end of the street, three bars huddle close. The last place is called The Green Dragon. It has a round lead-glass window in the middle, and the wall to its right is covered with posters, most of them flaking off. We have the poster pasting down to a fine art of grab and slap, and we stick another one among them.

It's still raining, and turning west, past the statue of the trumpeting horseman, we reach the phoenix pond. We shelter under the roof of a rectangular piazza that resembles a set of outward facing cocktail umbrellas where Izzy rolls a cigarette. Defying the weather, albeit from our sanctuary where we're alone, the city is growing on me and by being present, it feels more like home.

'How do you create the posters?'

'This one is easy, but most stencils start with a political cartoon. The texts are put on another piece of paper, and with cutting and pasting, it's collided together, and the result gets copied. Luckily, I can use the Saro,' she says blowing smoke in my direction, and as I frown, she adds, 'our office, and tomorrow I'll stick up posters at the tertiary schools.'

'Business school too?' I could do that for her.

'With those capitalists? No way!'

'Why?' She forgets I'll be studying there.

'Isn't it obvious that those people support the current system? The opposite of what we want to achieve.'

'We?' She sounds like her parents, excluding others as they have a different belief.

'Yeah, us squatters, we think about how society should be organised, and we're not blind to the government's shortcomings but the masses are.'

Everybody thinks about those things every now and then and thinking is the one thing we're incapable of shutting off. How do I stop thinking? The more I want to avoid thinking, the more I keep thinking. I keep thinking of thinking. Thinking is noisy, time-consuming and distracting. I'm stuck in a thinking loop and shrug to dismiss my thoughts on thinking.

'You want to share your ideas,' I say. 'When you meet them, you could explain your views and listen to what they have to say. It's called a discussion.'

‘I don’t want to hang out with a bunch of posh brats.’

‘You could knock the cash from the moneybags.’

‘I want nothing from them.’

‘I’m shocked.’ I lost my wish to suggest I paste a poster for her there, and resolve to stop buying her drinks.

Izzy is willing to cooperate but only with like-minded humans, and it sounds like she’s either part of a private club or a sect. The ultimate freedom is being accepted without the obligation to conform to rules, dress code and a particular way of reasoning. It’s absurd to avoid fellow human beings as one can always be regarded as a dissident by the other.

When discussions about politics or religion escalate, the focus should be shifted. Move it up a level, from pinpointing differences to claiming similarities, and touching down on common ground. If it’s impossible to rise above the pitfalls that divide humankind, what’s the point of staying on earth? The idea makes me smile, and my anger disperses. I laugh out loud, and Izzy looks suspiciously at me.

‘I’m not going to post anything there,’ she says.

The wound on her forehead heals slowly. A vague rumbling of thunder drifts in from the northwest, and we sit in silence for a while before she counts the remaining posters, noting there’s still some work left to do.

After we pick up Izzy’s bicycle from the corner of Jansstraat, we cross Willemsplein and head to the rail bridge opposite which runs overhead the main traffic artery. We stick a poster on an electrical box next to the Vesta building on the right. There’s a flashing Station sign under the arch of the bridge on the left. I’ve seen it before, and if it’s a bar, it extends deep into the foundation pillar.

‘What place is that?’ I say.

Izzy gazes past me and ducks her Mohawk towards a mansion on its left with bicycles parked on the pavement.

‘It’s a youth centre and musical venue named The White Tiger.’

I shake no in disbelief, but she has already wandered off and parks the bicycle under the bridge. She hands me another poster before she grabs the brush and bucket. Two cyclists with baskets perched up the front of the handlebars pass us by, and a speeding car is heading in our direction. Izzy notices it and drops everything.

‘Run!’ she shrieks as her voice echoes, and she hops on the bicycle and peddles north. I hear squealing brakes as the car slams to a halt.

‘SOG!’ Izzy screams over her shoulder, ‘Run!’

The tone is like announcing a shark attack, and I run for my life in the opposite direction once again lifting my skirt up high to give my legs space to move. I’m baffled by what SOG means and why two men jumping from the dark car pursue us, but I’m running.

As I duck in front of oncoming traffic, horns are honking, and I escape a near hit with a bus. Ballerina shoes sure beat thongs although I wish I was wearing sneakers. Relieved, I notice the pursuer is being held up by traffic, and I pull up a sliding shoulder strap. The weight sloshes around on my back, but at least I have my arms and hands free. I need a crowd where I can disappear.

I race towards the phoenix pond and trying to avoid a pedestrian, I bump my shin against a concrete bench but ignore the pain and keep running. My heart is pounding and my breathing changes to panting. It’s easy to dodge pedestrians when they have their backs to me, but trickier when they see me coming as they jerk to the false flank, and I must veer further to get past them. I mumble apologies. Dodging side mirrors, I race across the car park, towards the trumpeting horseman as I’m still being chased.

The Green Dragon is on the corner, wedged between two streets like a piece of pie, and I sprint over there, taking even bigger leaps. I’ll be safe in a few more steps, so I relax for a second to lengthen my mini skirt and take a deep breath before going in, certain I’ve shaken

off my stalker.

When I push open the door, someone pulls me hard by my ponytail, puts coarse fingers on my neck and hisses into my ear, 'Posting is a crime.'

Shaking, I grab hold of the doorpost, but I lose my grip as he yanks my hand away. 'Let me go!'

While I try feverishly to squirm loose, he turns my arm to my back and pushes it upward. I'm screaming in pain and three blokes rush outside and surround us.

'Leave the girl alone,' one says.

'No hitting women, you bully,' says another.

The hold on my wrist weakens but he pants in my ear, 'you'll get off with a warning this time, but I never want to see you near those punks again.'

I nearly puke smelling his garlic breath. I wrench free from a stocky, thick-necked dude and stumble inside where a bartender hands me a glass of water I gulp down, hoping to calm my nerves, and he's quick to refill my glass. My cheeks are flaming, my wrist is burning, and I sense the pulsating underlying tissue of my shin.

My saviours gather around to make sure I'm okay. Still shaking, I sit on a bar stool and bite my lip to avoid collapsing. When the only girl in the bar puts a hand on my shoulder, I start crying.

'What's SOG?' My lips are trembling, and tears roll down my cheeks.

'Official police thug squad,' a guy says.

'Official? Attack first, ask questions later?' I say.

'Special Operations Group,' the girl says.

'Don't let it get to you. They're a bunch of violent morons you better avoid,' says another bloke.

'The idea is they keep order, but their methods are rather doubtful,' someone says.

'They're very forceful.'

Although I catch bits of their conversation, I'm unsure who's saying what. They take turns explaining that they're bastards, either basing their stories on hearsay or personal experience.

All I manage is to repeat the words 'Better Than Them' of the New Model Army song that's being played. It's about how earthlings in groups dwell on being different, and while claiming to be much cooler, they crush others, feed hatred and jealousy, and build walls rather than reach out. They pride themselves on being better than them. Divided instead of united.

'How come they were after you?' the girl says.

'Apparently pasting posters is illegal, or at least in that spot.'

'You walked around putting up posters dressed like that? That's a bloody good disguise,' she says.

A discussion starts on if it's legal, but they unanimously agree that SOG is vermin. I welcome their sympathy, and the drama is becoming the buzz in the bar that is smaller than a modest living room, but it fails to uplift my mood.

I recall getting into an argument with a bully at secondary school. He's throwing water on passing students. When I ask him to stop, he refuses, and we scream at each other. Sensation seeking students have gathered around and are watching the gladiators fight. I put his school bag into a bin, but he continues, and I punch him. Later that day, a cheeky seventh grader walks up and honoured by her attention, I explain what happened. Since then, she always casts me an admiring glance.

By punching a bully, I change from a victim into an admirable defender. Here, I'm showered with praise for committing an offence and being a victim of scumbags. Both times, I come out a winner. Would the roles have been reversed if the bully's mates pointed out I lacked words to handle the situation because I used my fists and therefore I'm the weaker one? Possibly. Would the police have earned my respect if they pointed out I broke the law

without using violence? Certainly.

My news value is fading, and mortals are talking again about more important matters. It's horrifying to think of pasting posters ever again. I nod a *thank you* to my rescuers as I leave for fresh air.

It's raining, and while the sky is preparing for nightfall, I make my way back to the rail bridge, but Izzy is gone. The Station sign is still flashing, so I cross the road. A guy cloaked in shadows squeezes past when I push open the heavy door of a square café. Except for a bartender in his twenties with stubbled jaws and fleshy cheeks, the place is empty.

'Have you seen Izzy?' I say.

'That's not what you're here for,' he says raising his thick eyebrows. Black chest hair crawls out from a frayed cotton tank top, and he's polishing glasses with a clean towel. It's warm and humid like an Indian summer.

'Why am I here?'

'Looks like you need a drink.'

'I'd love one.'

While he pours a drink, I walk past a few wooden tables and up to a bench at the window's ledge. A bicycle and footpath before a wide pillar block motorized traffic from sight. As I crane my neck, I glimpse the deer statue but am unable to see the mighty church. I step outside to peek in, but all I see is a window covered by blinds. The bartender frowns again when I sit at the bar, but a smile pops up around the corners of his lips.

'Station is a good hideout,' he says.

'Now you tell me.'

He shakes his head like a father to a child who still fails to understand after a thorough explanation and puts a porcelain cup in front of me. A ceramic stove against the wall is radiating heat. My muscles are relaxing, and as I rotate my neck, I hear it crunching out the tension.

I think of the lack of customers. ‘Popular among the lonesome.’

The moment I say it, three futuristic looking boys stroll in, dressed in similar outfits although the cuts show minor variations in details. Their outrageous haircuts make Izzy’s Mohawk appear neat. Two of them saunter over to the panorama seat while the third loiters ordering lemonades. The teenagers are too young to be Kyle and too young to be allowed entry. A tanned hairy hand places the cups on the bar. The boy picks them up, chuckles when he looks at me and saunters over to his mates.

‘There’s too much metal here, Puigi, we need fire,’ he says.

Metal and fire. Do they think an excess of metal can be curbed by a town full of gingers? However, these teenagers with their yellow, purple, and green dyed hair have crossed my path before, but it’s a first they’ve come close. But Puigi ... is the name Chris mentions in the wood tower, and I’m puzzled by ... The deafening sound of a train thundering over the tracks above interrupts my thoughts and shakes the bottles and glasses like an earthquake. Rods attached to the shelves prevent the contents from sliding off.

‘Where are you boys from?’ I yell.

‘They’re not supposed to talk to you.’ Puigi squints his dark mischievous eyes.

The boys giggle like chooks in a henhouse.

‘Are you their keeper?’

‘You don’t yet understand.’ He flips the tea towel over his shoulder.

‘Feel free to explain.’

‘It’s your journey, for you to discover.’ Puigi folds his arms in front of his chest.

‘I came here looking for Kyle, and I still am, but he’s bloody hard to find. Then Chris shows up and complicates things by disappearing again. There are Phoenix and Tortoise offering words of wisdom, and these teens keep popping up as if they’re stalking

me. Finally, you run a venue that only I'm able to see and somehow you're supposed to keep me safe. I'd say I discovered a lot, and now I want to know what it means.' I put the full weight of my arms on the bar while curving my spine forward as I scan his face for clues.

'Maybe you will.' Puigi gives me an inscrutable stare and then nods and smiles while he puts a finger to his lips.

I pull back, annoyed with his useless answer and exhausted by the idea I must deduce everything myself, I look around the square box. The ochre walls are decorated with woven fabrics, mosaics and wooden objects, and earthenware jars, plates and vases. A soft yellow rug covers most of the tiles. It's a safe and happy place. I take a draught of the refreshing lemonade that tastes sweet but has an unfamiliar flavour.

'How many years has this bar been here?'

'It's the oldest portal in town, but you may find its counterparts all over the world.' Puigi grins.

'I guess so long as they serve drinks.' I'm pleased to hear he's capable of answering at least one question directly.

I'm shaken and stirred by events like putting a white-knotted T-shirt into a hydro-extractor while adding dye and overwhelmed by the resulting colours in patterns that tickle my imagination.

Puigi wiggles his nostrils. 'Time is an illusion, and therefore Station exists now, but in the past and in the future too.'

WEDNESDAY

## X

The alarm is reverberating through to my subconsciousness, aware before I wake up and alerting me to the day ahead that's already here again. I lie curled up in bed and stare at my face floating above me. It's a weird perception but soothing at the same time. The next moment I hover a metre and a half above in the air and look down at my sleepy face.

Rubbing my eyes, I wonder how long before this dream will fade. I put on underwear, and when I open the curtains, a bird picking breadcrumbs flies off the balcony. It's heavily overcast. The world re-emerges as I left it yesterday, although the drooping tulips need water.

Bleak morning light falls onto the unfinished letter to Charlene. It spurs me on to make a collect call to my mum, and I pick up the phone to dial before I extract the coil to its limit and sit against the wall beside the door in my room.

Mum's surprised when I thank her for the letters but says she only wrote one and is happy to wait for a written reply. Although the name Oscar is new to her, she informs me that her mother-in-law is secretive about her past and always reprimands persons for prying, and that includes my dad.

Maybe Helen and Oscar kept corresponding over the years. It's the only way for her to be involved, however remotely, with her daughter. Since she was born during the war, she'd be in her forties

now. Old enough to have overcome the antipathy to her relinquishing mother, if she ever had any because she was a baby when her mother left. I find it hard to imagine how I'd feel if my mum abandoned me, but upset is an understatement. I wonder what her daughter's name is and what she's like.

I drape a yellow jumper and black jeans over the chair like a debutante's ball dress and replace the white shoelaces of my black sneakers with fluorescent yellow ones. Then I head for the shower.

The day Helen finishes writing the aerogramme, I help her prepare afternoon tea following the English traditions of my grandfather. She removes the crusts from the sliced bread and butters it. I add combinations of cheese, cucumber, meat and tomato onto the prone face, placing the top slice like a sheet over the filling, pressing slightly to stop it spilling out. She then cuts the bread diagonally twice, into neat, bite-size triangles and places the sandwiches on her fine bone porcelain plates as though expecting royalty.

We eat on the veranda, sheltered from the sun and drink Oolong tea all the way from China. Helen is quiet. Tiny white sails are visible on the smooth surface near the horizon, although the boats are immobile as on a seascape painting. My grandpa has put seeds, nuts and carrots on a platter on the wooden handrail, and a rosella lands and sidles over. My grandma waves her arms to shoo it off, but the bird ignores her. We laugh. When I cross my legs, she points with one finger first and then two before spreading them.

'I'm sewing knee protectors for skateboarding,' I say.

I uncross my legs and sit back in the director's chair. Taking tiny bites from a triangle, I hold my plate underneath to catch the crumbs. I chew and swallow the food before I explain how I wrap foam padding from a packing box in blue cloth and sew it together, adding ribbons to tie around my knee. She nods, sips her tea and peers out to the bay where the sailboats are moving ever so slowly.

Sometimes, she tells me stories of her youth, of growing up overseas, and how she longed to get away from a small village existence, but today she's preoccupied. I worry Helen is upset because of my questions about Kyle and the lack of activity makes me restless, so I finish the last morsels of my sandwich and ask my grandma for the aerogramme. After she finally finishes her tea, I follow her to the secretaire where she puts the envelope in my hands, and I run off to the mailbox with the precious letter addressed to K Kambier burning in my hands.

After the shower, I continue writing to Charlene although I can only superficially share what she's unable to experience as it's impossible to send sound, smell, taste and touch across. She must make do with words that feed the eye. I write page after page but toss most of them after crossing out the incoherent parts. I leave the letter in its expectant state, bundle up and go shopping for fun.

I tuck my head in like a tortoise as I head west. Cold air brushes my face, and the breath that leaves my mouth condenses like blowing clouds of smoke into the sky. The pavement is caked with chewing gum and littered with cigarette butts. Bins are everywhere, but the lack of pride in keeping public spaces immaculate is in sharp contrast with the general orderliness of this country as if polluting your environment is the only way to rebel.

I recall a visit to Helen when I'm twelve. She rolls out two mats on the deck and gestures me to lie down. In the cotton candy clouds, I detect a giant who's trying to catch a winged horse with his big hands, but the wind disperses the formation and saves the noble creature from captivity. My grandma stretches her long legs and puts her arms alongside her torso. Putting my head in line with hers, I do the same and smell the fresh mint of her 4711 Eau de Cologne.

'Inhale deep for energy to keep. Hold tight to feel all right. Exhale long to make me strong. Breathing slow is the way to go,'

my grandmother says with a melodic voice like a continuous wave washing ashore and retreating to sea.

I daydream of drifting among the clouds and hopping from one onto the next before I close my eyes and fantasize my body to be made of little cotton balls. I hear her breathing softly.

As I focus on inhaling, I imagine Charlene next to me. She'd want to outsmart me by holding her breath longer, so I hold mine for as long as possible, and I see us gasping for air like washed out surfers and spluttering with laughter afterwards.

When my brain is about to explode, I sneeze out the air and have to focus anew on slowing my breathing. Helen's eyes are closed, but a blissful smile rests on her lips. At first, my thoughts are whirling like an autumn storm before they slowly settle. My chest is rising and falling. My toes tingle and then my feet, and then the thrilling sensation crawls from my legs up to my tummy, up to my heart, and to the top of my head. Everything becomes quiet.

After what feels like an eternity, I open my eyes and sit up. Helen radiates a golden glow, and her luscious garden looks more vibrant than ever.

'Opposites need each other,' she says, 'because they're different levels of the same.'

I think of her and grumpy old granddad.

'Life's energy is called the one. We need it to live,' my grandmother says. 'One consists of two natural forces—yin and yang. They expand and contract as the cycles of life progress like winter and summer, night and day, the moon and the sun. These contradictory powers of yang and yin carry a part of the other within them. There's yin present during the day in the form of shadows. At night, there's yang present in the form of light, from the moon, the stars, or a lamppost. This connected energy of yin and yang is forever part of the whole—the one.'

Like the North and South poles or Kyle and me.

Helen points to the north and gets up. ‘The sun shines brightest at noon when it’s at its highest point, but its intensity fades with the passing of the afternoon and loses its strength when it changes to twilight before it disappears with the onset of the night when the moon appears. You can discover yin and yang everywhere around you.’

I think of how a jacaranda blossoms in late spring and then its purple flowers carpet the lawn before it changes into green foliage over the yang-ness of summer while losing its leaves in autumn and sleeping during the yin-ness of winter.

So in every year, spring starts with increasing yang which peaks in summer before declining in autumn and yin rises to its climax in winter. However, regardless of the season, there’s a yin-yang cycle every day too. Just how many natural cycles occur? It’s summer now, but late afternoon, so yang is declining, and yin is arising. The night is yin, so sleeping must be too. What about a nap in the afternoon?

Helen comes back with two glasses of water, and I join her at the table.

‘What about this chair?’

‘It’s hardly a natural force.’ She laughs. ‘A chair is an object, and it’s matter. The opposite of matter is energy, and the universe consists of matter and energy.’

‘Is a chair the opposite of a table?’

‘A table is useful without a chair, but to sit at the table, you need a chair. How beneficial something is, depends on what your needs are. There are many recurring cycles in nature, and they influence every sentient being. Life’s energy, with its yin and yang polarities, consists of five changing phases related to an element.’

After I down the water, I burp loudly. I glance at Helen, expecting to be scolded, but she ignores my breach of protocol.

‘These five phases or elements,’ my grandmother says, ‘are fire,

earth, metal, water and wood. In this order, each element gives birth to the next and in reverse, it weakens the previous element, but they can control each other too. Fire controls metal which controls wood, which controls earth, which controls water, which controls fire. Each element has an equivalent energy, a specific form, and corresponding colours and qualities. It belongs to one or two of the eight wind directions. Every person is influenced by life's energy, and thus by the five elements, yin and yang, and the recurring cycles as explained by Chinese metaphysics.'

I nod, but Helen must notice the confusion on my face.

'A wooden table is made from a tree,' she continues. 'A seed is planted in the earth, and to grow it needs water. As the wood grows bigger, its roots break up the earth, and when the tree is fully grown, the wood is chopped with an axe forged from metal and then dried in a kiln using fire.'

I think of the raging fires in the grasslands in the west that destroyed houses, cattle and many acres of land in half a day. Four mortals die, and for days, the smell of smoke, ash and despair hangs around in the air like a choking blanket.

'With a bushfire, there's so much fire that the wood doesn't dry but burns. Fire turns it into ashes.'

'It returns to being earth,' I yell elated.

'Nails are required to create a table out of planks of wood,' Helen says. 'They're made from metal, mined from the earth. Fire melts and shapes the metal that's cooled with water. Too much of one element can destroy another, for example, sand in water makes it undrinkable. An element can also slow down the other, such as earth smothering a fire. When used in the right quantities, one element can support another, for instance, water supports flowers, belonging to the wood element, to grow.'

At a Musis Sacrum bus stop, a female teacher is keeping a group of children without a uniform on the platform as a white ambu-

lance, like a panel-van with a red stripe on the side, speeds past. Its penetrating siren, always a sign of a person suffering, makes me feel sad, and I wonder what happened to Izzy.

To escape the fierce wind that brings with it a chill factor that equates to North Pole temperatures, I hurry over to V&D where, in the jewellery section, I browse in vain for a suitable surf necklace for Charlene.

Hers broke while kneeling-down to show me how her dog offers her paw, but it hooks through the chain instead and snaps. It's unlike Charlene to collect the flat rounded beads after they roll off in all directions and then patiently thread them up in the correct colour pattern again like I would.

Something similar happens when Helen gives me a silver necklace for my eleventh birthday with a moonstone pendulum that hangs off the chain. I wear it every day. Whenever I'm in doubt, I cup the lucky charm as though the power of the stone can bring me clarity over the choices at hand. When only a few months later, it hooks onto a shrubby branch at the beach, breaks and disappears into the loose sand, I cry. I spend hours searching for the necklace. In tears, I confide to Mum that I lost my energy, and she replies it's silly to wear any jewellery while playing outdoors. Eventually, I sum up the courage to tell my grandma, and she says the time it served me has passed and that someone who needs its powers more than I do will find the gem. It's a comforting thought.

Carnival tunes reach my eardrum, and the sound comes from a trailer-mounted instrument in the main shopping street. It has an abundant pastel coloured baroque-like facade where one of three figurines moves its little arm to the tune in front of the organ pipes. A man in his forties is shaking a tiny metal tray like maracas in time with the sharp keys.

'What's this?'

‘A street organ,’ the organ grinder says and leads me round to an open wooden cupboard where a wheel is turning itself. ‘There’s a stack of perforated cards with notes on it that are fed through a command box.’

It looks like the paper feed of an inkjet printer.

‘The pipes are closed off,’ he explains, ‘but the wheel turns a bellow below and blows up the air, so when the wind flows through an opening in the card and into the pipe, music floods out. In the old days, my dad used to turn the crank himself. Rather heavy doing that all day long. Now it’s belt drive operated. We’re here every Wednesday.’

I thank the man and add a coin to his collection. Earthlings in the street pay little attention to each other, except for stepping politely aside or around any laggard pedestrian on their path. Heading north into Jansstraat, I enter Hijman Boekhandel and when I leave the bookshop, I’m surprised to see a familiar face coming my way.

‘Hey Skipper, stocking up on provisions?’ I point to his bulky backpack that’s hanging from his shoulder.

‘Spoiling yourself?’ He points at my shopping bags.

‘Will you take me to a café on the big square, one that has a fireplace?’

Scott freezes as if it’s an indecent proposal.

‘My shout.’

His pricked up ears lift his height by a centimetre or two. ‘You behave like a tourist. Some places you better avoid. The best ones you’ll find off the beaten track.’

‘Please?’

‘Okay then, if you insist.’ He has a naughty glance in his eyes, winks and raises his hand like a white flag in surrender.

Turning west at the second street, I admire a series of gorgeous redheads on display at Rens Plaschek Fotograaf before we reach

Korenmarkt and enter Le Grand Café, which has a heated terrace. It's modern, has a black and white tiled floor and pastel green walls, and I choose a table near the fireplace before I browse through the menu.

'Do you know this square is a hangout place for students and kids?' Scott says.

'It's a perfect spot. When did you stop being young?'

A waitress comes over, and I order a hot chocolate, a beer and a salami and pickle bread roll. Scott declines an offer to eat.

'I hate masses, cattle markets, simple entertainment and thoughtlessness,' he says.

He sounds like Chris. Two months after I meet him, he invites me to an AC/DC concert in the city and suggests I book a room with a view for the night. I'm stoked he has tickets, and I spend an afternoon calling hotels listed in the yellow pages, trying to find the best deal. We end up staying at The Victoria right in the CBD, as it has everything we need plus classic service.

Chris peeks out of the window but refuses to open it, complaining he dislikes being poisoned by exhaust fumes and repeatedly stating he longs for a view of the river Yarra. I slump onto the bed like a bereaved wife and bite hard on my lips to refrain from crying. He stays silent for a long time, and it makes me feel even worse.

Ultimately, I compose myself and put my arms around his waist. I apologize and suggest we take pleasure in our big day out. He nods, takes his clothes off and asks me to do the same as he slips into bed. I prefer to explore the city but do as he wants. He kisses me, and I kiss him back, but my heart is stone cold. Absentminded I go through the motions of making out with him like an automaton. It boosts his spirits, and I'm happy when we finally hit the streets.

Earthlings in suits wait in hordes for the traffic lights before they march off to find public transport or their car that'll carry them home to the suburbs. The CBD's grid layout makes it easy

and tricky, so I make a mental note of the names of the side streets and establish Melbourne is aligned on the inter-cardinals. In Little Bourke St, in a well-lit space, we eat dim sims with noodles, stabbing with our chopsticks at the yummy food. Afterwards, we catch up with Chris's mates and together we walk among the herds that flock to the Tennis Centre for the AccaDacca concert.

Before we enter the arena, we agree to meet on the left side of the stage should we lose each other. I hold his hand while he follows his mates and we squeeze through the mob in the fast filling pits.

The expectant exuberant atmosphere excites me, and when the band starts playing, it's packed. When they launch into 'Whole Lotta Rosie', everybody goes wild. I shake yes like a Bulgarian and rock my body along as I watch the stage, feeling extremely alive. I miss Bon, but Brian is still awesome. Suddenly, I realise I'm alone like Rémi *Sans Famille*. Chris, beside me moments ago, is gone and so are his mates. I focus on AC/DC, hoping he'll come back soon but two songs later, I'm still alone. I'm sure I'd have felt a tug on my arm as if to say we're moving, and I keep glancing around for him until I remember our agreed meeting point. As I push past the fans, I scan the crowd for familiar faces. It's all I can do. I listen to the music and want to enjoy the live-act, but the thrill is bleeding out. The band is missing the radiance it had before and while I continue casting glances, sullenly rocking back and forth, my mood darkens and a tear rolls down my cheek. Although among thousands of human beings, I feel bloody lonely. There are more tears as my lips sync with the lyrics, I think of Mum and mumble I'm on a 'Highway to Hell.'

After the concert has finished, I still stand in the spot we agreed to meet, waiting for him. The crowd is dispersing, and the roadies pack away the instruments and clear the stage when a security guard ushers me to the exit. Desolate, I return to the hotel room where I find Chris and his mates having a party. I'm screaming and

cursing him ... and he's looking at me, like an innocent puppy.

There's a kick against my sore leg, and I jolt back from my thoughts as the waitress serves our order. Scott is pulling funny faces that make me laugh, and now he has my attention, tells me how through his odd jobs he got inside information on this town. After eating the most, I spoon the rest of the whipped cream through the cooling hot chocolate that's sweet but tastes different from the lemonade Puigi gave me.

'Have you ever been to Station?' I say.

'It's convenient, but I seldom use public transport.'

'Do you know of any other secret places?' I wonder if Station recently opened its doors to the public.

'They wish I didn't know of any of them, but I do, even if they publicly deny their existence.' Scott grins.

'Underground ones?' I say with a mouthful of bread still to be chewed.

'Some buildings conceal their purpose. You can't tell where the bank vaults are.' He drifts off in thought as if planning a robbery and this time, I kick his shin.

Scott continues, 'there's a nuclear bunker below a playground in Klarendal. A communications centre of sorts, built in the late seventies. The only activity I've ever noticed is a PTT van on the weekend. Could be just maintenance. The council should have more information, but I doubt they'll disclose any.'

Kyle's eighth card pictures the city council and refers to the network of the future. Maybe there's a tunnel between both government facilities, but when they control it, entry is probably prohibited.

'At another location, you can access the cellars under a block of fourteenth-century buildings in Rijnstraat from the stores above.'

I smile, as that should make getting into the labyrinth easier. Scott tickles his nose and peers at me. He has coarse pores and

congested little black dots in need of a squeeze. I look away when I take another bite of the poppy seed roll.

‘There used to be pedestrian tunnels below Willemsplein,’ Scott says. ‘They were built after the Second World War but closed less than two decades later, although they function as a bomb shelter for a few hundred citizens.’

‘I’ve been inside,’ I yell elated, assuming I ended up in one of them from where I discovered the wood tower and fire pyramid.

‘Sure, and I’m a Russian spy.’ He winks and clicks his tongue.

‘Believe what you want, communist, but it was cool being there.’ Alone instead of huddled together in fear of a nuclear attack.

When a shelter is needed, what’s the door policy of the bunker—first come first served or suit and tie only? Although everybody is human and strangers are just friends I have yet to meet, I’ll prefer to hide there with my friends, family and maybe neighbours, but it means I’ll have to exclude other persons. The idea makes my stomach churn.

Scott takes a draught of beer before he wets his lips and his eyes flicker. ‘You’d be interested to know there’s a rumour that PP has made use of a network of tunnels, starting at the Imbosch in Veluwezoom National Park. Find out where you can enter the grid and hope you’ll not get lost ... stay a while ... stay forever.’ He keeps a straight face as he finishes his beer.

‘You’re having me on,’ I say as I take the last gulp of cold chocolate and wipe off my fingers with a napkin. It’s awesome but frightening that through thought alone, I drift off to strange places where everything feels real and time stands still like acting inside a paused video. There must be a simpler explanation. I need to discover an access point to the underground labyrinth.

‘Seriously, let me know when you get in, I’ll come along.’ Scott cracks up laughing and winks again.

I question if I’d want to confide in him. I wave it off. The wait-

ress hurries over, and I pay for our lunch. Once outside, it starts raining and customers leave the terrace seating and seek cover indoors while the stage builders press on. He points south and says to walk straight ahead and turn right at the junction for Rijnstraat before waving goodbye and walking off eastwards. There are more cafés and restaurants in the alley and its side streets, eagerly waiting for the sun to set.

The far end of the main shopping street is the location of the former west gate Rijnpoort. On the right is the tin cinema, a cubist building covered with large sheets of shiny metal. The buildings next to it follow the line of where the city wall used to be, and behind it, the ring road continues.

As I saunter downhill along a flyover towards the riverbank and bridge crossing in the south, I'm attracted by blue and white waves, like squeezed fluoride toothpaste. With the grit on the surface, it's too rough for skateboarding, and the swell is the same everywhere. The waves are constructed from bricks, laid width- and length-wise on top of small, rolling hill-shaped soil, and I run them up and down.

Surrounded by the roads is a fountain that has yet to be turned on, but I imagine the waves decked out with grass, and cherry, apple and pear trees. A secluded green oasis, inviting one to enjoy a sunny afternoon while savouring the city's fruits and watching the sky or lying back listening to the monotone sounds of bypassing traffic. It's where the medieval harbour used to be.

Rain pours down with an increased intensity, and the sun has still to prove it can shine for any sustained period. Kyle's postcard from 1984 pictures this sculpture and his text reads—'Unique vibrations fill the room. The spirit feels the invisible waves.' He's being cryptic as usual, and I've had enough of his mysterious riddles and question if I should keep asking around for Kyle since

it's ever more frustrating that he's unknown. When I run back across the street, a car brakes, and honks. Startled, I slow my pace and head for the safety of the pedestrian area.

Angry, I kick against a bin. Although I let Kyle lure me here, I blame myself for being an outsider and for being alone in this stupid tiny country with its ugly dirty streets, in this tiny shitty town. I shelter under the overhang of the tin cinema opposite a historic redbrick mansion with many decorative features. I fiddle with the compass but I already know I sit west of the church, and I take out my harmonica to play a blues tune. As I merge with the music, my mood brightens. There's a chance I'm right, that there's something here to discover for me after all.

Few mortals are around. Charmed by the architecture of the warehouses in Rijnstraat, which date back to before the settlement of Australia, I press on with my mission to find truth in Scott's claims despite the weather. When I ask inside a tobacco store for directions to the underground labyrinth, I get a puzzled look. In a bag & luggage shop I find a descending staircase but when a girl asks me if she can be of help, I stutter, incapable of explaining I want to search her cellar for a secret entry, so I leave, embarrassed.

However, a narrow door in the row of old warehouses looks out of place. When I push, it opens, and I step into a short alley that leads to a tiny paved backyard. It's deserted. I hesitate when a flight of three brick steps, west of the door, descends to another entrance but then I thrust against the wood and walk into an underground hallway. Daylight pours in from a small opening at street level, located high to my right. The floor, walls and ceiling are made of brick, and as I shuffle further west, a positive vibration invites me to open the third door.

I enter an elliptical room with a smooth surface, and it shimmers like silver coins in a treasure chest. On the wall to my left in the cocoon-shaped chamber hang half a dozen mirrors. They're

bronze framed, some oval and others round. Opposite, there are seven more in varying sizes.

The nearest mirror reflects me as rather pale. When I raise my hands overhead, my bare skin becomes visible like Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's sculptor's model. In shock, I drop my arms, relieved to see my naked image covered with paint, sensual but less revealing. I pirouette around and admire my whitened body shape before I come closer, smiling. It instantly puts colour on my cheeks.

When I shift my focus away, I notice a white chair behind me in the middle of the room. As my mouth falls open and my shoulders droop, the mirror and the one opposite immediately depict me as an infinitely iterated hunchback. At once, I summon a smile. As I straighten my back, I watch the athletic girl in the mirror, and then I bend over, touch the floor with my left hand before I lift my right foot and stretch the other arm up into a half moon yoga position. When I extend my left arm forward and grab the ankle of my lifted leg in a standing bow pose, it shows me more graciously than ever. I play in front of the mirrors for a while. The enhancing reflection builds up my confidence, and I master the different poses to perfection.

Suddenly, golden sculptures manifest and imitate my posture as they surround the glistening throne. When the copycats make way, I twirl to the materialized table and run the mallet around the rim of a singing bowl. It produces a frequency that intensifies in sound, vibrating at a pleasant pitch before gentle musical notes fill the space that put me into a calming trance. I want to dance like a prima ballerina before my adoring fans, so I slide the table and chair to the side and whirl to the centre of the floor. The glass plates with their shiny dark backgrounds show a sparkling spectacle of sculpted women, supporting my moves like a well-choreographed, step perfect corps de ballet, and when I change my manoeuvres to more contemporary dance, they do too.

When the visual echo of me becomes overwhelming, I sit down, somewhat thirsty. I need to regain my composure. The air is dry, like autumn in Shepparton. I eat fried peppers from a bowl, and they cause my nose to run. As I taste the spicy tomato juice, it creates an inner sensation, stimulating circulation, opening up my lungs and pushing energy upwards.

I get my harmonica out, and as soon as I play, a stage appears with electric guitars and brass instruments with golden records affixed to the wall behind. Astonished, I stop but then the stage vanishes. When I blow the mouthpiece again, it reappears, and I climb on. A spotlight tracks my every move. The musical instruments have returned and are played by a group of silver sculptures like living statues. I play an upbeat folk song and accompanied by the big band, I perform for an audience of golden girls that dance to the beat.

After finishing the first song, I produce another melody, conducting the loyal musicians the best way I can, till at some point they take over. In amazement, I listen and watch them work in impeccable harmony, their numbers amplified by the mirrors. A crowd fills up the room as if I'm entertaining in a sold-out stadium, and I feel like a rock star. I laugh out loud when the tunes booming through the metal space change to Heavy Metal and start head-banging. Improvising with the tin sandwich, I perform songs from different genres while the sculptures imitate my crazy movements. I interact with them and the musicians on stage until I'm exhausted.

When the music stops, I high five the living statues on and off the stage, and the silver and golden sculptures disappear. Everything is gone save the mirrors and the chair. Ecstatic, I do a short run in place, quick and fast as the Red Queen's race before I sit down on the throne. I've found the metal space, and this time it's easy to explain how I got into a chamber. Metal is dry, cooperative and disciplined. It's been fun performing with the loyal figures, and

it sure beats being alone, but I need to find humans to work with collectively.

I grab my canvas sack and shopping bags and leave the same way I came while my watch tells me only minutes have ticked by. I walk home pondering the meaning of the surreal events in this strange city. Life is a puzzle—once you piece it together, there's either a part missing or a new riddle waiting to be solved.

## XI

I'm dressed for a night out and find The Travelling Horse tucked away in a downward sloping street near station Arnhem where I pay ten guilders for a stamp on my hand. As I enter the black-painted venue, my eyes need time to adjust, and I linger at the head of the bar as it gives me an overview of the space.

Numbers swell as lots of good-looking earthlings are interested in watching the band. Long hair stopped being an indicator of gender and hair has been spiked with gel or hairspray while most ears are pierced. There are many army boots, leather jackets with buttons, stickers, studs and anarchy signs, and the keffiyeh scarf with a black and white checked pattern is popular too but the bomber jacket less so.

I have yet to spy Izzy or Lukas among the tall audience. I fit in a little and boys are smiling at me. When they keep staring, I avert my eyes to the contents of my glass before staring at the cute guys rearranging instruments on stage, and my thoughts drift to my homeland.

It's cold in the High Country in August when the mercury falls below zero, and the mountains are covered with a white blanket. Chris stokes up a fire in the hut, a ruin of wood and tin sheets where the wind has free play.

I plough back and forth with swag and camping gear through the knee-deep snow where frozen water vapour sneaks into my clothes

and melts. Light is disappearing fast behind the ridge, and silhouetted tree trunks surround me like a silent army.

Shivering, I hurry to warm by the fire where Chris is roasting meat on a twig. He ushers me to make the bed and undress, away from the reach of the flames while the wind is blowing through the shed.

I put the string zippered sleeping bags on the mattress inside the king-size swag and take off my damp sportswear. My fingers are numb, so it takes a while before I curl up like a foetus and rub myself dry, longing for his body. Over the noise of my chattering teeth, I hear him call out that the food is ready. Chris dangles the meat in my direction. It falls a metre short, but he refuses to come any closer. With the sleeping bags draped around me, I shuffle towards the fire.

‘Out!’ he yells.

I notice I’m dragging the fabric over the damp soil, and wet stains are spreading over the thin material, so I throw them onto the swag. Close to the blaze, the heat is painfully agreeable, but I continue shaking.

He has chewed off his bit, and I accept what’s left for dinner. As I munch, his fingers find the heat inside me where impetuously, he rummages around, and I try hard to keep my balance as I’m still jerking involuntarily. I swallow the last bit of food while Chris moves a warm and sticky hand up my body and squeezes my breast.

He’s standing behind me, sheltering my back from the cold, but the metal zipper of his down jacket is rubbing against my bum, so I place my bare feet on his sheepskin boots and try to soak up more heat from the fire. He holds me tight while he kisses my neck and my ear, but it causes more trembling. As he puts a finger between my teeth, I bite hard enough to hurt him a little while it eases my jaw, and I relax. He’s caressing my body, and when his lips are kissing my shoulder, his fingertips slide to my lower belly. I scream

as an ember burns my leg.

Maintaining a delicate balance on his boots, I turn around to take off his coat before I put it over my back. Suddenly, he yanks his feet away from underneath mine and pulls my ponytail backwards. The jacket slides off as I land on my feet, and I feel the pressure of his lips on my mouth. I let him whisk his tongue around mine before I suck and bite it softly. The kissing lasts, and I turn to face him, hanging onto his lips while I catch his gaze in which the flames are mirrored. I crawl with my hands under his sweater before I push it up so I can warm my chest against his hot torso. He's getting impatient and fumbles with his zipper, but I shake no.

I take off his sweatshirt and toss it to the floor where I use it as a rug before I kneel to remove his footwear. I grab his pants and undies, slide them down all at once while I pull myself up clutching his knob. Then I plant a foot on the stripped-off pants between his legs and hold them down as he steps out. When I bend over to throw them aside, he grabs me from behind, slides in and pushes my neck forward. Annoyed by the cold fingers squeezing my neck, I turn around.

'A metamorphosis, I didn't recognise you.' Izzy whistles as she checks out my leather jacket.

'Izzy. How are you? Are you okay? What happened last night?'

'Wasn't that a narrow escape?' She blows up smoke. 'I cycled along the rail line as the other roads go uphill, and I pedalled like hell, putting a fair distance between me and the guy on foot. But then the fucking car came screeching around the corner. Then they lost some time when the bloke got back in the car. Anyway, I rode into a side street, ditched the bike and ran through alleys and back lanes and hid in a backyard somewhere. Would you believe they trashed my bike? Adam went to pick it up later. The front wheel is twisted. Fricking bastards.'

'I'm glad you avoided a headlock.' I take a draught of beer.

‘What?’

‘He got me, right outside The Green Dragon, and he pulled my hair and hurt my arm. Luckily, three blokes rushed out, and they surrounded him till he backed off. Inside, I was safe. They were very caring, but I was in shock. Nasty.’ I bend forward to rub my still sore shin.

‘I hate them,’ Izzy says.

‘I guess what we were doing was illegal.’

‘No, it’s not, and it isn’t necessary to physically assault you, or trash my bike.’

‘We ran away. Maybe they’d have been nicer if we stayed and talked to them.’

‘No fucking way. These guys can’t communicate, they only abuse people. We made them sweat and pissed them off at the same time. It serves them right.’ She takes a deep breath. ‘Ben has fixed my bike, so I’m not out of action anymore, so don’t you want to come poster pasting with me again?’

I fervently shake no as I have enough on my plate, and put my wrist against my forehead and say in a pompous voice, ‘I’m incapable of handling that kind of excitement too often.’

Izzy laughs at my Daphne imitation.

‘How did you get that scar?’ Her skin is forming a crust in the middle of her forehead.

‘I cut myself when the hose came loose.’

‘What? How?’ I step aside for the alternative youngsters that squeeze past to order at the bar.

‘Never mind.’

There’s more to the story than she’s willing to tell but I’m happy to change the subject. ‘Loads of people want to boycott Shell.’

Izzy chokes on her beer and slams down the pot. ‘Huh?’

Her eyes are wide open. I point to a guy who has Boycott Shell chalked on the rear of his jacket. She sighs of relief.

‘I told you.’ She wipes off the dripping liquid with the back of her hand. ‘They’re supporting apartheid in South Africa.’

I circle the rim of my glass with my fingertips. ‘Do they embrace racial segregation as a government policy?’

‘They don’t care either way, they only want to make money.’

‘At what cost?’

‘Precisely. It’s wrong to discriminate or exploit people. They have the power to quit supplying oil, forcing the government to change.’

‘But if they stop deliveries, another company steps in.’

‘That’s not the right attitude. You can’t have greed take over. What will the world look like then?’

I gulp more beer and guess there will be exploitation of workers with silly rules, long working hours, underpayment and unequal rights. A dictatorship instead of a democracy, and I reckon nature will be destroyed too.

‘Don’t you want a world where people come first?’ Izzy smiles as she picks up her glass. ‘If not, many people will lose out.’

Her fingernails are polished black. I nod and suspect when business interests predominate, there will be slavery, however subtle, but still slavery. It’s ridiculous that others can and should rule us. We need to let it go.

‘When a company or government doesn’t do what it should, activists act.’ Izzy bangs the glass on the bar. ‘We’ll make them see sense, hence the boycott.’

She sounds like Lukas. I deduce it’s a great idea to want to enforce universal values as all human beings will be protected. However, it only becomes a reality when humankind understands that there’s a need for a human approach to life. We have to choose conscience over money as using violence always hurts individuals.

‘We’re doing our bit by boycotting them in sports,’ I say. ‘It’ll be a while before another rugby or cricket tour to or from South Africa.’

Earthlings gather in front of the stage. Four boys my age take to their instruments. The handsome drummer is ruffling his drums when a cross-eyed bass player joins in, and loud noise fills the room.

‘It always works,’ Izzy yells. ‘If you hate what a company is doing, stop buying their products! As simple as that.’

She pushes me towards the stage where a skinny singer ejaculates semi-comprehensible lyrics, and a pimple-faced guitarist goes wild. Blokes start pogoing while the guys at the front hold one hand to the floor speakers and headbang to the music.

It’s useless trying to get any closer as the shoving thrusts us back, so we shuffle to the side. It has more space for dancing while we have a great view of the band and the crowd in front of the stage.

The exuberant atmosphere that accompanies live music has a titillating effect on me. I love being together in the same space without talking but listening, and I feel at home in this dark anonymity where the harsh cruelty of the day is hidden from the eye.

Lukas is the first man to take off his shirt. There’s one girl among the mob of men, and I wonder what happens if she undresses too. While I rock along to the beat, I wonder if any of the bare chests, shiny with sweat, and jumping up and down like a pogo stick, could belong to Kyle. As the boys throw their body weight around, the girl is quick to leave the mosh pit.

I dismiss the idea that Kyle is among them and focus on watching the band, especially the drummer. However, Kyle’s official existence is dubious. Maybe the town Helen grew up in will provide clues on the mysterious postcard writer and where he might be now. I turn to Izzy.

‘Maybe Kyle is a squatter. Are they registered at the city council?’

‘Only if they want to collect the dole,’ Izzy shouts in my ear. ‘Are you sure you have the correct surname?’

When I shrug, she leans into me. ‘Those postcards, he only signs them with Kyle,’ she says, showing a well-functioning memory.

‘Yeah,’ I shout back, drawing out the image of the aerogramme from my mind, ‘the letter I posted for Helen says K Kambier.’

The lean drummer plays an impressive solo.

‘Did you ever see any letters that your grandmother received,’ Izzy says loudly, finishing her sentence in the sudden silence after a song, ‘from Kyle?’

Everybody hears Kyle’s name pronounced and they turn to look at her. In vain, I wait for someone to step forward. The band plays on. I cup my hand around my mouth and Izzy’s ear, hoping she can hear me when I talk in a normal voice.

‘Only postcards.’

The drummer is shaking his head like an animal and strands of long red hair obscure his face. After every song, he pushes them back, and as he wipes off the sweat, his male features become visible again.

‘But you’re not sure?’ Izzy frowns.

Each year, a different postcard sits on the shelf of Helen’s desk. If she has any letters from Kyle, she keeps them elsewhere. I’ve always assumed that Kyle’s surname is Kambier as it said so on the aerogramme, but if my grandma has more pen pals, K Kambier might be someone else altogether.

‘Don’t you usually get a reply after sending a letter? She must have, only you don’t know it. Like you don’t even know if K Kambier is a man or a woman. Can’t you ask her? A first name is not enough.’

It means Kyle lacks a surname but could explain why I drew blanks everywhere. I wonder who Kyle is and what he is to Helen. Even though my grandma keeps her past assiduously buried, she gave me the postcards so she must want me to find him.

‘Do you remember the address on the letter?’

‘Of course, it’s a nearby village.’

‘It’s time for a visit then,’ Izzy says. ‘You’re not doing anything this Friday? We’ll go on the moped.’

Elated, I nod, and as she's whisked away by Adam, I throw my head back and my hands in the air. There's a good reason I came to this town, to this venue and now I've found a friend willing to help. Kyle is within reach again.

'No one to share your joy with?' says a boy with red sideburns.

He's wearing a black and white checked shirt on top of his jeans and dark boots.

'I'm sure you're about to change that. Let's dance!'

I rock again to the hardcore beat of the band. He throws up his arms and moves his skinny body around like Pinocchio.

'New here?' he yells.

'Is it that obvious?'

'Us volunteers know when a unique female beauty shows up.'

'Is there a similar interest in the male studs?' I smile.

'You better ask the girls, I have no idea.'

'Did you flip a coin to decide who could say hello to the alien?'

He laughs. 'Sure. I wanted to be the first, so I created a diversion backstage.'

While he unbuttons his shirt, he tells me of an awesome Alien Sex Fiend concert at Simplon and shows me the band's T-shirt. I nod, but I have yet to discover their music and when I ask him, he has yet to discover Paul Kelly. However, he has heard of INXS. We take turns listing band names until we find we have New Model Army in common. When I tell him I have a copy of a bootleg cassette that my best friend got from her sister who got it from a friend of a friend at their London concert, he says he wants to copy it and offers to buy me a drink. The band is playing fast and loud, and the crowd goes crazy. My best friend would love this place.

A few days before my departure, Charlene and I drive up to Arthurs Seat. We stop at an elevation to take in the view of the Peninsula and bay. We ought to be at my goodbye party, but we agree it's more memorable when we sneak away together one last

time. She hands me a small package I can open once on board the plane. However, the gift I can unwrap is a globe keychain with two dots that mark where I'll be and where she'll stay. I get two beers out of the esky, and we each crack a can, clanging them in a toast and a promise to meet again before I hand her the keys to my panel-van. In silence, we stare straight ahead. Below lies my past, and I can trace back every step of my childhood to the surroundings of this peninsula paradise. Happy events flash before my eyes, like replays of TV episodes captured on my parents' Beta-max.

The boy returns with a beer and a cola.

'I prefer beer.'

'But I like cola. I'm still trying to flush out the rust in the pipe. No redhead kids for me.'

I frown but refrain from asking him to elaborate. Moisture is dripping from the ceiling. When the drummer throws his sticks up in the air, it's the end of the gig, and Sanitary Towel leaves the spotlights while their fans roar and whistle loudly.

'Let's celebrate your arrival,' the boy says, still standing by my side.

'I'll celebrate when I've found Kyle.'

He looks disappointed. 'Let's go outside for some fresh air.'

I know straight away he wants to get into my pants. It's what Charlene's sister explains when we're fifteen, and a guy in the Espy suggests the same. Although fooling around could be fun, I doubt he's as good a kisser as Chris. Besides, I'd be thinking of him all the time afterwards and there's only limited space available in my head.

When I tell Charlene that Chris declines an invitation from her and Ned, she's outraged that a twenty-nine-year-old man wants to keep our relationship a secret. She claims he's exploiting me by making me pay for the food and booze I bring him, and turning me into a liar since I tell my parents I always stay at Charlene and

Ned's. I hate to admit I end up paying for the hotel bill too.

However, I still love Chris. Tears well up as he's forever infiltrating my mind, but I need to protect myself from more suffering. Considering I'm allowing these thoughts to exist, I choose what to do with them. I've experienced butterflies in my belly once and whether they're still there, or new caterpillars are waiting to break free from their cocoons, I'm sure they will flutter again, but for now, they're silent and bide their time.

Lukas waves at me from the bar and I wave back. The boy is still talking, and I catch the last bit of what he says. It makes me laugh, but his looks are insufficient to charm me any further.

'See you around.'

I wipe a tear from my eye and walk away in search of a bathroom. Although I feel guilty for ending our conversation so abruptly, trying to explain what goes on in my mind is a bad idea, worse, it's impossible.

When I come back from the ladies, there's an uproar. I flee to Izzy, who says she has lost track of Adam and Lukas. Persons are rushing outside, but we hang near the stage, a fair distance from where the brawl is taking place. Males are shouting, and tatters of a violent altercation drift through the air, as two guys interfere, either fighting too or trying to break it up while pushing the culprits towards the exit.

A girl breaks away from her group and marches outside like a sergeant. The heels of her cowboy boots are click-clacking as she struts over the floor. Curious rats follow suit, and few humans are left indoors. Although they try to preserve the previously cheerful atmosphere, the brawl has broken the spell. As the beer suddenly tastes bitter, I leave it on the edge of the stage and ask for a glass of water at the bar.

'I'm staying here,' I say to Izzy when I return, more to confirm my gut feeling than to convince her to do the same as most persons

are addicted to witness other persons' dramas. 'How about you?'

A volunteer sweeps the shattered glasses and scattered broken bottles into a pile while another holds open a plastic bag before he curses at the blood that trickles from his hand.

'Fucking skinheads!' Izzy exclaims. 'Aren't they keen on causing trouble, expecting everyone to watch them roar?'

She takes a draught of beer, and I drink water while we nod in mutual understanding. The muffled noise of men shouting outside is audible, and it reminds me of what happened last night.

'It's a bloody man's world,' I say, 'where man is the only human creature that takes pleasure in keeping the primitive urge for physical fights alive. They pride themselves in resolving matters violently rather than with words, and I'm sure that men exist who prefer to delegate the job to their soldiers instead of using their own fists.'

'Don't you reckon a few guys are stirring them up, while others try to calm them?' Izzy says.

'Disaster tourists,' I say.

'Or rioters.'

'And fighters.' I wonder where Lukas is and hope he's smarter than that.

'The talk of the town.' Izzy raises her glass. 'To the chicks who take pride in the honours bestowed upon them by their alpha male battle survivors.'

'To finding a man who has risen beyond primitive behaviour.'

We cheer and empty our drinks before going outside, pushing our way through the crowd that surrounds the fighters.

## XII

In need of a replacement beacon as the Southern Cross is stuck in the Southern Hemisphere, I search the sky at Willemsplein for the Big Dipper, Helen's favourite asterism of seven stars. The constellation is part of Ursa Major and hidden behind thick clouds. It's only visible in the Northern Hemisphere and resembles a Chinese spoon. My grandmother says to draw a fictional line up from the two outer stars of the bowl that'll point to Polaris and from there, to trace a straight line to earth to find north. The Big Dipper functions as an astrological clock too, rotating around the pole star every twenty-four hours. I sigh. In absence of a clear sky, I turn the ring on the compass to match the arrow and locate north.

'Do you know you can tell the seasons from spring to winter by looking at the Big Dipper as it moves through the sky from east to south to west and north?' I say.

'Let the night be surrounded by darkness.' Izzy swiftly swings around and kicks against a lamppost causing its light to flicker before it extinguishes, and she laughs. 'That trick still works. One less polluting unit.'

Screaming sirens and blue flashing lights break through the relative silence of the quiet hours as they converge toward station Arnhem.

'The paramedics are awfully late,' she says.

When we turn left towards the youth centre, she wants to know

where we're going. I point to the flashing neon light of Station and walk in, but she stays outside. I smile and wave at Puigi, who shakes his head, and as I leave, I find Izzy standing on the pavement with her mouth wide open.

'Are you coming or what?'

'How did you do that?'

'Do what? Come on, inside it's warm.'

'Sky, it's a wall! You walked through a wall, disappeared and came back out.'

'I did?'

She's unable to see Station like Lukas, Scott and Daphne, but she's a witness to my disappearance, which proves I'm sane. I suspect that Station and the underground labyrinth are connected and that Izzy can come in if she'll take my hand. Will she be up for an adventure? Before I can ask, the sign and door are fading, and I'm staring at a blank wall, just like her.

'Fucking Sky, you're scaring me.' Izzy stares at me in disbelief, frozen to the spot and her face is whiter than an albino's.

'You'll be right.' I start walking, hoping she'll follow while I think of what to say or do to justify things without freaking her out. 'I'm delusional, too much to drink.'

I escort her towards the deer and hum 'Just an Illusion'. She stays silent. Maybe she fails to recognize the song, but I must avoid giving her time to think.

'Let's go. Take me to the nearest bar. I want to check it out. You know the way. What's it called? Where is it?'

'The Green Dragon isn't far away,' she says. 'Adam will be there.'

I hope Lukas is too. 'We definitely need a drink. Let's have some fun.'

I sing loudly, and now Izzy joins me. Our voices swell and grow louder until we're roaring 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun.' Singing at the top of our lungs, we pass the deer, the phoenix pond and

the trumpeting horseman before entering the tiny art deco bar that's packed to the rafters. At the bar on the long end of the pie-shaped building, I order drinks and search in vain for Lukas. Izzy is standing next to Adam, and he's talking to a guy behind me.

'He took a beating,' the guy says.

'Who?' Adam says.

'The biggest prick in town! He's always teasing, panting in my face and provoking me, only to get a reaction. He was unlucky. There were three of us. He should have changed his tune by now.'

As they clink glasses, I glimpse a discolouration on the guy's knuckles. It's unfair, three against one.

'Is he alive?' Adam says.

'He made gurgling noises when we left, so, unfortunately, yes.'

'As if you want to be charged with manslaughter,' Adam says.

'He deserved it.'

They're hollering, and Adam gets offered another drink while he's only halfway through his previous beer.

I recall a party of one of Ned's mates in a house in the dunes where Charlene and I are the only girls. We're having a good time chit chatting and laughing. Later that night, a guy shows up, bringing along his new girlfriend, but she barely speaks the language. When she assumes I say something nasty about her, she slaps me in the face. I lash back, hitting her full on the cheekbone with my fist. She's hysterical and jumps at me, but I'm one head taller, so I grab her, and as she weighs next to nothing, she flies across the deck. The damage is minimal, a few fallen chairs, glasses and spilt snacks. She's set on revenge, but her boyfriend steps in and drags her away, apologizing on her behalf. The day after, it's the talk of the town and mortals compliment me on my aggressive behaviour, telling me of her swollen cheek and bruised lip, but I feel awkward and shy away.

It's a contradictory feeling, receiving pats on the back from total

strangers and being the centre of attention for using violence, even if it was in self-defence. It's bewildering I impress persons for the wrong reasons. Why is it that when I use violence, it results in a status upgrade as long as mortals think the cause is just? I've had enough, so I finish my beer, say bye to Izzy and walk home.

When trolley bus number nine arrives at Musis Sacrum, I hop on. The friendly bus driver asks where I'm going and when I shrug, he stamps the second line of my *strippenkaart*\*. The long sturdy paper has fifteen parts that can be stamped and folds easily between sections. I play with it before putting it folded in three in my back pocket.

A woman with a wrinkled face sits opposite me. She has multiple crinkles on her forehead, around her eyes, nose and mouth, and on her cheeks, like contour lines mapping her face, and although she might look older than she is, her eyes are bright. She's a rare fragile beauty. At the next stop, a chair becomes available, and she changes seats, turning her back to me.

The bus passes Velperpoort where the tracks run off parallel into infinity, according to Kyle. Maybe he's a family friend or the son or grandson of one of Helen's friends. Age wise, she could be his grandma too. He probably stopped sending cards because he left the city, or has outgrown his teenage affection for her and is too busy living his own life.

The trolley drives past the HEAO business school and then turns uphill, past a soccer stadium and a park opposite while heading further northeast. This far away from the centre, passengers only get off. I've long missed my stop but love being driven into unfamiliar surroundings and stay seated.

Helen is the key to revealing Kyle's mystery. She was born in August in 1920 in Helderdonk. I remember that she was raised in a Protestant family, but after the war, she emigrated to Australia with my granddad, a pious and moody man. My grandmother

whispered once that the church is an illegitimate child of religion as it's man-made and renounces the basic principles of universal love. She insists I use my brain and follow my heart.

I smile at my reflection in the window, half expecting an orchestra to appear before focusing on the outdoor surroundings again. The homes we pass have closed their eyes. Climbing further still, a picturesque market square with brick houses with red rooftops has one building with a gateway below like a castle entry. At the end of the line, I'm the only passenger left. At the bus stop, I study the map and walk southeast into unknown territory.

On top of a hill, there's a park overlooking the city. Breaking through the clouds is the moon, captured in a radiant glow. The moon first illuminates Helen's night before it diligently and reliably brightens mine. However, I'm baffled. I left after a full moon, so it must be waning, but it looks like it's waxing. As I sit on a ledge at a stone plateau and admire the city lights, I realise that the moon shows itself reversed in the Northern Hemisphere.

## THURSDAY

## XIII

Opening the curtains, I'm thrilled to see stretches of blue sky like streaks of paint added to a blank canvas. The apartment comes alive with the *Monstera deliciosa* plant that now sits in a pot on the windowsill. Charlene's letter lies in front of me, and I hold my pen poised in hope of thoughts flowing onto the page, but I'm restless.

I take off the AC/DC button, a painful reminder of Chris, from the curled flap of my denim jacket but leave the smiley on as it's a bit harsh to pin holes into the brand-new leather. I don the black one, gambol down the stairs and unlock the bicycle.

After I turn right at Velperpoort, I pass semi-detached villas before I cross the street towards the wooden doors of the HEAO building. A buzz comes from the end of a wainscoted hallway where in the canteen, every seat and table is occupied. Girls are casually dressed in jeans, colourful wafer-thin scarves and sagging boots but most of the male office clerks in the making are identically attired in suits and ties and have their attaché briefcases positioned beside their chairs. One freshly shaven boy opens his and takes a sandwich from a plastic lunch bag. As he eats, crumbs fall on his jacket. While eyeing the students, I notice Daphne waving.

'Kyle,' I yell out and wave back.

Only a few students look up. I walk through the crowd, side-stepping bags and briefcases. She introduces me to handsome Nick

who shakes his rusty tuft to the side and smooths it over with his bleak hand and by the way he looks at Daphne I suspect him to be her admirer. His suited up mate, a boy, shyly nods.

‘Fanatic,’ she says, ‘if you so desperately want to belong here, you should join me at the society tonight. Or do you want to follow lectures straight away?’

The boys laugh.

‘Just checking who’s listed as a student.’ I wink at her. ‘Afterwards, I’ll enjoy my freedom. Anyone coming to the park with me?’

They deny a chance to wag school. All at once, bags and briefcases are picked up, plastic cups emptied, and chairs reshuffled as students are lured back to the lecture rooms like rats by the pipe of the Pied Piper. I find administration in a wing of the main building where I’m registered but where Kyle is unknown. Outside, cigarette butts are scattered around like silent witnesses to the sham of orderliness displayed by the future bank managers and company directors.

On my right, just before Velperpoort, there’s a coffee café, so I pedal up the slope to a parallel street where I attach the bicycle to a pole left of the entrance. A Kawasaki motorbike is parked in front of the window.

Inside, I’m treated to a pungent smell and whiffs of blue smoke that float through the air while a dog lying at the back door lifts an indolent eyebrow. The space resembles a living room, with couches, coffee table, and pot plants on the windowsill. A T-shirt on the wall claims ‘The pope’s dope is the best to smoke’, and two boys pale as Casper are slouching on a sofa.

I order a coffee at a counter on the right and take a seat at one of the bar stools while I drape my jacket over the next one. A girl with red dyed dreadlocks, a string necklace with aventurine and a green cardigan puts a plastic cup before me and pours the ready-made coffee from a glass carafe. She smiles and slides a box with

sugar cubes and a pot of milk powder my way. I get a plastic stirrer from another cup and add milk, mixing it to the required taste by judging the shade of creamy brown. The cheap supplies make it feel like indoor camping. A girl is sitting on top of a leather jacket draped over a stool at the far end, and a helmet rests on the white painted counter.

‘First time?’ says the girl with the dreads.

I nod. ‘I felt like a coffee, the canteen was closing, and I thought I’d check it out.’

The girls glance at each other and burst out in laughter. I wonder what’s so funny.

‘Darling, this is a coffeeshop.’

The coffee has a rich aroma and is zesty, pleasing my taste buds. ‘Great coffee!’

They laugh even louder. ‘Darling, we sell soft drugs here.’

In shock, I almost fall off my stool.

‘No need for that, it’s all legit.’

I stare at her. She shakes her head, introduces herself as Pam and the girl with long red hair and a fringe as Gemma.

Pam clears her throat. ‘Don’t they have dope where you’re from?’

‘There are people who smoke. When you have contacts, you can get the stuff, but how it works is a mystery.’

‘There’s no secrecy here.’ Gemma smiles. ‘People smoke cannabis anyway, and alcohol and cigarettes are hard drugs and more addictive than marijuana.’

‘Here you buy weed or hashish by the gram.’ Pam waves a hand in the air, a fake ruby ring protruding over two fingers. ‘So long as they don’t catch you with more than three grams in your pocket, you’re free to go.’

I nod but prefer to avoid getting addicted. ‘Do you know Kyle?’

‘You mean the fat guy with the tattoos?’ Gemma says.

I almost fall from my seat again. After all those denials, I gave

up on receiving a positive reply. My heart is racing. The description of the guy differs from what I expect, but still.

‘He’s twenty-five.’

‘No,’ Pam says to Gemma and coughs, ‘you mean Karl.’

They both nod and I’m none the wiser, but their curiosity is piqued, and I tell them about Kyle and my grandmother.

‘What’s Helen like?’ Gemma says and pushes her glasses up.

‘She’s my granny. I love her.’

‘Are you the only one who admires her?’

‘Many people love her work in certain circles.’

‘What does she do?’

‘Helen is an artist, and she paints native flowering plants. She’s good.’

‘That’s your answer,’ Gemma says.

‘Huh?’

‘Kyle is a fan of your grandmother’s artwork, and by sending her cryptic postcards, he’s trying to appeal to her creativity, showing his own.’

‘How does he know when it’s her birthday?’

‘Is it a secret? A true fan knows,’ Gemma says.

They promise that if they find him, they’ll tell me and I’m pleased that the group of humans on the lookout for Kyle is expanding.

‘If you want to find Kyle, you should come to my party tomorrow, at the monastery,’ Pam says.

I frown. Are they aware she’s selling drugs? Are they helping her to kick the habit?

‘What kind of party is that?’

‘Relax! It’s where the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart used to live, and after they left fifteen years ago, Italian and Spanish guest workers moved in before it became vacant. It’s a beautiful building, and it’s a waste to let it deteriorate, so it was squatted four years ago.’

‘Should I dress as a priest or a nun?’ I say.

‘The fancy dress party is later this summer. But you mean brother. Priests conduct holy mass. It housed brothers from a religious order, they studied theology and could be ordained a priest if they wanted to perform the rights of the church.’

‘My brother didn’t, neither did yours,’ Gemma says. ‘Do you have to bring up your silly school assignment again?’

‘Is it my fault the teacher thought it was a great idea to research emancipation within religion?’ Pam laughs. ‘It was meant as a joke, but I ended up spending hours in the library trying to make sense of worshipping.’

Pam sneezes and addresses Gemma. ‘What do you know about the history of *your* house?’

‘It’s a roof over my head. That’s enough. Who’s into religion these days, anyway?’ Gemma says.

Pam turns to me. ‘I don’t reckon going to church has gone out of fashion yet, but what people should worship is nature, and they’ve forgotten that.’

‘That sounds about right,’ I say.

‘What’s referred to as God,’ Pam says and cups the gem on her necklace, ‘he, she or however you want to call that entity, is the same for everyone. It’s the human explanation for what’s beyond mankind’s comprehension. Each story has its audience.’

‘If you’re a believer that is,’ Gemma says. ‘There’s no greater divider of humankind than religion. Each church, or any movement, wants you to dance to the tune of its leader but not everybody has the same taste in music or the same style of dancing.’

‘Why hate people who have different tastes?’ I say.

‘Because we think we own the truth.’ Pam sneezes. ‘That’s our arrogance. It’s our lame ego that convinces us we’re so right that we have the urge to impose our ideas on others, forcefully if need be but it’s old-fashioned as we sleep under the same sky and work

under the same sun.'

'But sadly, still happening everywhere,' Gemma says and stubs out her cigarette in an old Bakelite ashtray. She struts in her black boots to the windowsill. She admires a mother-in-law's tongue for a moment, bows in front of the red-eyed boys and sways like a stunt pilot in an air show through the shop before taking her seat again.

Pam takes a long cigarette paper from a pack and rips a rectangular piece off the carton. 'The worst is that they brainwash you to accept the most popular ideas. Just follow the masses. I prefer to think for myself and trust my gut feeling!'

'You're sensitive all right,' Gemma says to Pam. 'You knew trouble was on its way when you walked home last night.'

A guy comes in, walks straight up to the counter and asks Pam for a gram of *Red Lebanon*. She rummages through a drawer, gets a block of stuff out and cuts off a piece. She puts it on a scale, breaks off more and then wraps it in aluminium foil before putting the stuff on the counter. He hands her twelve guilders and is gone.

'I heard a car coming my way,' Pam says, unfazed by the customer's interruption. 'It slowed right down as it came nearer.'

She bends the carton back and forth before she rolls it into a tip she positions at the end of the paper. 'It gave me the jitters. Straight away, I rewound the movies I had seen and imagined how I'd either fight the driver off or run. When the car drove next to me in pace with my footsteps, a group of blustering blokes called out nonsense. I ignored them, and luckily they got bored and drove off.'

Pam takes a tuft tobacco from her pouch and spreads it along lengthwise. After she softens the hashish with a lit lighter, she breaks off a piece before rolling it between index finger and thumb and then puts a string of resin onto the tobacco. She repeats the steps until most of the tobacco is covered with drugs before she rolls it tightly and seals it off, licking the sticky edge of the paper. After she changes the CD and reggae music fills the room, she lights

her joint.

‘Those dudes were fooling around,’ I say. ‘It would have been innocent.’

‘So it should be,’ Gemma says, ‘it’s called a public space for a reason. It belongs to us, so everyone has the right to walk the streets, wherever and whenever!’

‘Whatever you do, when you can still sleep at night and face yourself in the morning, you’ll be right,’ I say.

‘I’ve never tried that,’ Gemma says, ‘standing in front of a mirror and looking into my eyes for five minutes.’

‘The bathroom has a mirror,’ Pam says.

Gemma slides off her stool, hitches up her black pants and heads for the bathroom ready to ‘Stir It Up’ as the next reggae song suggests.

‘I might just come to your party.’

Pam smiles, explains how to get there and sneezes again like she has hay fever. ‘Do you want to buy *nederwiet*?’

I shake no and swallow the last bit of coffee.

‘Or try a spliff?’ She offers me the joint. ‘Cannabis helps relax your thoughts.’

Certainly, it takes more than one joint to become an addict? I accept the long cigarette like a peace pipe. I inhale deeply and feel how my lungs suck in the heat, leaving a burning sensation behind, and I hold my breath for a second or two. I suppress the urge to gag and squeeze the smoke out through my mouth. On my third drag, I gag. Pam is quick to hand me a cup of water, which I gulp down.

‘To each their own,’ I sputter. ‘I only wanted a cup of coffee.’

We’re still laughing when Gemma returns.

‘There you are, darling,’ Pam says.

‘It’s intense to stare into my eyes! There’s a thick blue line around the circle of my eye and in the middle, a deep black hole surrounded by little lines, like sun spikes in an ocean of blue. If I

didn't know any better, I'd say I got high. At first, I couldn't even look at myself for more than a minute, and I had to force myself to keep my eyes open. Now, I know why. Gosh, I'm beautiful.'

'Maybe you shouldn't have taken off your glasses,' Pam says.

We laugh again, and Gemma gives Pam the finger before she takes a deck of cards from her jacket and shuffles them.

'Indulge me,' she says with a smile and asks me to think of a personal question that needs answering.

I close my eyes for a moment and wonder if it's because of Kyle I had to leave home or if there's another reason. That's already two questions, and before my thoughts conjure up any more, I nod to her to continue. I hear Pam coughing while she continues to cut and weigh up cannabis.

'Pick a card, but use your left hand,' Gemma says.

My hand wavers over the fan of cards displayed on the counter, and I pull out one, keeping the card to my chest. She might guess the suit and number like the magician The Great Levante, but how can a card reveal why I left?

'Put it down face up before you pick another card.'

As I oblige four more times, I fetch my stool and notice the primary coloured cards depict persons, swords, coins, and trophies. The five cards are arranged like a diamond as per her suggestion.

'These tarot cards offer a snapshot of your current state of mind and explain what you're going through right now as you connect to your Higher Self,' Gemma says, her eyes focused on mine.

'The first card shows you want to prove yourself to the world and this works well in cooperation with others. The second tells that you'll find the secrets of your future in how you go about your daily routine, so make sure you enjoy every little task you do. The next one explains that you keep looking back over your shoulder, but with your thinking, you've created your worries. Let go of your inhibitions. To grow as a person, you have to withdraw from emo-

tional entanglements and start over again. You're capable of much more than you're aware of. Improve your self-esteem. Pay attention to how you feel as there's romance in the air.'

She has addressed all the cards, and the message resonates, so I giggle uneasily.

'Does it make sense?' Gemma says, and her smile shows dimples in her cheek and her eyes twinkle. 'You moved here to develop your potential, and it is ... spring.'

'Don't worry about it too much,' Pam says, pouring what's left of the coffee into her mug and filling the machine up for another round. 'It's something Gemma likes to do. Funny though, she's often right.'

'Take from the cards what you want,' Gemma says. 'The next time you consult them there might be other questions on your mind.'

'How much?' I say as I point to the empty cup and put on my jacket.

'On the house, darling,' Pam says. 'If you ever need stuff, you'll find us here.'

I say goodbye and notice the hemp leaves on the shop window when I unlock the bicycle. It's indeed a matter of interpreting what the cards mean. However, will I ever be able to reveal what Kyle's intentions were or can I only reflect on what I conjure up with my brain?

After I cycle northwest and uphill past a windmill in a neighbourhood with blue-collar workers' homes, I reach a fenced off recreational area where the nuclear bunker is located. There's a swing in the playground that's wide enough to fit my bum. As I push off, the rhythmic movement takes me back to the ocean.

The sun has just risen when I back my panel-van into a deserted carpark and pull out the surfboards. Charlene puts on a full wetsuit over her bikini and chucks her clothes in the car, and I do the same

but neatly fold mine. I lock up and hide the key.

As the earth awakes, we walk to the top of the dune with a surfboard under our arm. The early morning's grey veil is lifted by an intensifying brightness, and I scan the ocean for waves past the surfacing rocks on the right while I listen to the rising and breaking of the swell at Gem Rock Bay. Minutes pass. The shimmering turquoise water of Bass Strait surging into a U-shaped inlet between two limestone rock faces is so inviting.

I jog to the shoreline and stretch to loosen my muscles before I clutch a bit of sand, straighten my arm and open my palm. The wind is blowing offshore.

Charlene is already navigating to the onset of waves. I zip up my wetsuit and tie a leg rope to my ankle before I drop the plank in the surf and firmly hold the top end. With my body atop and my feet in the water like an outboard propeller, I use the rip to paddle after her past a treacherous cliff on my left and further out to sea. By the time I reach her, I'm warm from the exercise. Sitting afloat with the board between our legs, we face the horizon to the southwest. I stare into the distance.

'It's over,' I say.

'What?'

'I broke up with him.'

'When?'

'Last week.'

Charlene rolls her eyes. 'Now you tell me.'

He has made me suffer and I've put up with too much of his crappy behaviour for too long. It hurts he leaves it up to me to break up, and it hurts how he accepts it, lacking any emotion and saying he went along for the ride while it lasted and that I'm better off without him. Love is like a heroin addiction as it stings, is intoxicating and life draining. It's been a complete waste of time.

'I wanted to get my thoughts together, being at sea helps,' I say,

finally able to speak about the breakup. I've cried myself to sleep every night since.

'Why?'

A wave sweeps up the board, it passes beneath and rolls to the beach.

'You know why. You've been saying it all along.'

'That he's an egocentric bastard who doesn't give a toss about you and a lazy bugger who's happy so long as he can make you jump to fulfil his every need, whenever it suits him?'

Ouch. 'You take care of Ned too.'

'Not like that! We're not a dead end. You guys were different from the start. He makes you do the work, makes you pay for it and nags when it's not to his liking, no matter how much effort you put into it. He's a spoilt little brat. You should blame his mummy.'

'He has his charm, and there was a connection.' It's part of something bigger, the connection with him, the location and the mysterious invention in the attic.

A great set of waves is coming our way.

'Honestly, you did throw yourself at him.'

'Of course, you have to rub it in!' I yell.

Charlene notices the break too. 'What triggered it?'

'What do you mean?' I'm turning my board around, and she does the same.

'I knew he was no good for you, but you didn't listen, so what happened?' She waves her hand. 'All yours.'

That's a first. I start paddling. It has everything to do with timing.

'He lost me,' I shout over my shoulder. Alternating right arm, left arm, I power through the water, and I'm gaining speed. When I sense the tip of a slight push, I jump on.

'This is what fun does to you,' I shriek like a rooster. While my surroundings blur, I focus on riding the surf to shore. I'm laughing,

as I'm free. The ocean dictates my moves, and I dare to play with her, the mighty abyss that can pick me up and throw me down, a force stronger than that of any man, the ocean I love, and today, it loves me back.

When at lunchtime, a group of kids enter the playground, I swing one more time and jump off at the highest point. spurts of high pitched shrieks alternate with laughter as the kids roam around letting off steam like spouting southern right whales.

As I stroll over the lawn, I suspect a concrete block with a low fence around the part that faces the street is the nuclear bunker, but the door is closed. I wonder how many rooms are beneath and where the tunnel starts that leads into town. Then I open the compass, check my watch and clutch the crystal, but magic refuses to happen. In another effort, I slant my eyes, focus my brainpower, put my hand to my heart and will the gateway to open, but the result is the same.

Disappointed, I take my bicycle and continue cycling northwest through a wealthier suburb. I'm keen to visit Belvedere tower in Sonsbeek Park. It's the last location to see and pictured on Kyle's seventh postcard. Slung low over the handlebars and exerting pressure on my legs, I keep pushing the paddles, annoyed with the lack of gears. Once again, intrusive thoughts of Chris are playing havoc with me.

Chris and I are in a quarry collecting rocks for his backyard, using a winch on his car to get the handpicked boulders on the trailer. Exhausted, I rest on a flat rock and wipe off the ants that run around. The water I sip tastes salty in combination with the sweat that's rolling off my upper lip. An ant crawls up my thigh. I push down the tip of my index finger and flick the remains away.

'Why do you kill ants?' Chris says.

'I want to sit here, and they're in my way,' I say, pointing to the insects that are again mounting my leg, so I catapult another one

through the air. Chris's eyes line up like horizontal crenels. When he speaks, his voice is hostile like a police officer exercising authority.

'Find a different spot!'

'Does it matter? They're only ants.'

He crosses his arms as he stands before me, while his mouth is pulled down by earth's gravity.

'You ... Are ... Stupid.'

Like spit, his words hit me, and I turn my head away as I hate him to see me cry.

When I reach Sonsbeek Park, I'm sweaty, and the exercise has left me breathless. With one swift move, I push down the lever of the lock underneath the saddle, and as a hollow metal pin goes through the wheel spokes, it closes off the circle like a Creole earring, and the tiny key pops out. I sip water before locking the bicycle's chain through the wheel and around a public bicycle stand. Two small lodges that mark the entrance, stand guard like footmen, and I follow the path till I find a bench to sit on.

My mood easily swings from upbeat to downbeat, and my thinking willingly assists in this process. As if I want to dwell on being in a state of misery. I keep churning my thoughts around like a concrete mixer, and as I allow the suffering to stick, it hardens and hangs like a millstone around my neck. I doubt that being in love is as great as earthlings make it out to be. It's a temporarily feeling of ultimate happiness, which, come to think of it, coincides with a lot of deliberating and analysing. Every day, it occupies my brain space. When love blossoms, it's wonderful, but then it becomes frustrating and then it's over, like a tilted pinball machine and as the excitement comes to a rumbling halt, it leaves a sickening feeling in my stomach.

In the weeks that follow the breakup, I often awake during the empty hours of the night and seek comfort from the stars, but the vacuum inside remains sealed for the time being. Tired of troubled

dreams, I find shelter in my room and cherish the weight of the burden he's within my heart. I spend days listening to my favourite song over and over, dwelling on lost love as I fall deeper and deeper into the pits till the point where it's impossible to sink any lower, and I believe it to be true that 'I Never Had No One Ever'.

What Chris and I had is gone, and I have to accept the relationship for what it was—an experiment of love with so many shortcomings I prefer to live without. I've made a deliberate choice to escape, and I justified my departure in many ways but what I experience here constantly reminds me of him. I want to fast-forward the tape of my life to when the agony has vanished. The emptiness is still present, but rather than a happy version, it's the absorbing engulfing kind that droops my shoulders and pulls me down. I'm suffering from an undefined pain that seeps through my being and undermines my foundation, invisible but devastating.

This negative spiral results in breaking down any self-esteem I have left. I have an urge to fail so I can confirm my unworthiness for it's what I deserve, to evaporate in the void as a punishment for being a miserable person. I'm a creature, captured in a chain of thought impossible to escape, and I'm forced by society to succumb to suffering. The battle to fight this limitation is too demanding. It has been preached for centuries that the ease of sharing sorrow is a reason to abide by the anguish, but I can only blame myself for this self-inflicted heartbreaking pain.

My soul is heavily overcast. I dip my chin into my scarf and finger its frills. The weather, which tries hard to improve my mood by showing a blue sky and casting shades of flowering trees onto the lawn, can hardly be held responsible for causing this numb feeling.

Suddenly, something pleasantly warm is stroking my ankle. I crane my neck and notice a marmalade cat with a white bib. It brushes my leg again, meows and then jumps onto my lap. I watch it stretching its paws and endure the clawing of its nails on my

jeans before the cat curls up purring. As I caress the gorgeous, soft creature, my eyes fill with tears.

It's been five months since our breakup, but I still miss Chris and long for his broad shoulders. I'm quietly sobbing because it's useless to hang onto something once it's gone and unbearable to listen to the same song for another minute. The self-pity has served its purpose, and I should cherish our joyous moments together and view our relationship as an opportunity to learn something. I resolve to do better next time.

I'm crying louder, aware that I've taken steps to rise above my loss, but I need to get rid of the pile of bricks at the bottom of my stomach. The only solution is to grab hold of myself. I feel how the deadweight inside is gradually grinding down. Under loud eviscerating sobs, shoulder convulsions and a downpour of tears, I puke out a malignant tumour like a fur-ball from a cat. The liberating scream that follows comes from so deep as if I'm Tarzan of the jungle.

Dazed, I sit there. The cat has shot off my lap. As the tears dry and my pain softens to an occasional hiccup, I refuse to suffer any longer and wipe my face.

At a large enclosure where a caged Bambi sniffs my fingers, I try to count the white dots while the herd glances our way before turning their attention back to the grass. Walking northwest there's a dog retrieving a ball for its owner, who throws it away again. It lands at my feet. I pick up the slimy ball and throw it across a pond, leaving behind a barking dog and perplexed owner.

I leave the path. Trailing higher into an old beech forest I stride through mushy leaves and undergrowth, and after I pass an oval grass clearing, I discover Belvedere tower. It's located north of the church.

The cryptic message on Kyle's postcard reads—'Latent past is

buried in the woods among the trees.’ As the park covers at least a hundred acres, it’ll be hard to find a buried chest. Could the past fit into a box? However, the best way to hide a secret is to keep your mouth shut. If Kyle means it as a symbol, he must refer to something stored in a person’s memory where it leads a life of its own. The past weighs heavier on the heart the longer it stays hidden in darkness because it’s eating away at the soul. Could reliving a hidden event once more offer a chance to give it a place to rest peacefully as it’s bathed in light and light always takes the edge of worries?

Kyle either knows about Helen’s daughter too or of another secret. Maybe she’s a criminal, fleeing the past and as an immigrant, she rises to the challenge, adapts to new surroundings and builds up a decent existence with a promising future.

Still, Australia is a country where women marry to avoid being at the mercy of men, but married women condescend women failing to put on the golden straitjacket. To support a virtuous ideal is impassively forced upon women by the gendered society in which we live. Helen keeps piercing eyes and pointing fingers at a fair distance, but the ghost of the past haunts her. Poor Helen.

The square tower is made of bricks with carved cornerstones and has an arch-shaped door on every wall below a small ledge. There are a few windows higher up that decrease in size as the tower rises thirty meters up to the sky. One door is unlocked, and a steep winding staircase of 140 steps leads onto a lookout with an amazing view of the city with the river to the south and the embracing green hills to the north.

I’d love to rise above the daily affairs to a place where time is irrelevant, and I can experience being. I stretch my arms and reach for the sky as sunlight warms my face. My fingertips fuse with the universal energy to form one entity. I’m growing while everything else is shrinking. My feet increase to the size of the platform. It’s

only a small step from the tower to the ground, like a titan's leap. I have a foot still in the park and the other is already in town but my footprint is light and flexible and whatever I tread on remains unaffected. As I grow taller, street life shrinks fast and forms a miniature city with main roads and waterways as arteries of a pulsing heart until all human movement becomes invisible.

I'm floating above the clouds and become aware of how my body is swaying as I experience air streams and the intensity of the earth's magnetic field. I spin the globe below my feet around twice like a circus-balancing act but stop twisting when I discover my homeland. There's a cord attached to my navel, so I jump up from the ball and the thread stretches out. The earth recedes to less than a thumbnail, and I'm flying higher and higher through a phenomenal cosmos. The planet with its blue oceans, brown landmasses, white clouds and snowy mountains appears fragile. I'm humbled by a sense of nothingness and realise I'm just a microorganism, taking up a minuscule place in the universe.

Hovering through the galaxy, I experience the perfection of things—a sense of pure love that goes beyond the boundaries of family, friends and sexual relationships. It seems to hint at a beautiful future that can be achieved if humanity is prepared to unanimously choose happiness and embrace love. I feel connected again.

Swiftly, the revelation is dispelled, and I'm pulled back to the top of Belvedere tower like an elastic cord recoiling, and reality returns. In the distance flies a small plane and cars cross the bridge over the shimmering surface of the winding river. A dog barks.

When I turn around to walk down the staircase, I see a jungle of trees and shrubs below with a tiny green clearing in the middle that reminds me of the wood tower. I grab hold of a liana and descend, abseiling like a mountain climber. When I find the door, I'm amazed to discover it opens onto the park where life is exactly

as I left it.

I skip through the forest, dodging trees and pet owners and unlock my bike and cycle home. It's downhill all the way. With my stomach cleansed of malignancies and my mind inspired by heaven, my energy levels have increased.

## XIV

It's too late to clean the stain of Daphne's coffee spill near the northern wall, and I consider it to be a souvenir of our first meeting. We're born in the same Chinese year, and she's a West group person like me. In our case, north is the worst direction. Spending time in the worst location and facing the worst direction causes total calamity.

I recall the bruise on my arm when I fly off Helen's piano stool while facing southeast. It's another of my unfavourable directions, called five ghosts, and interferes with heeding advice. The positioning of the desk in the south, my negative direction referred to as six killings, guaranteed me getting hurt. A week later, my desk has been moved to the southwest location of the studio and is also facing southwest, my favourable spiritual direction, so I spend many joyful afternoons studying crystals.

I sit on the carpet in my room facing the balcony door in the southwest. I have Kyle's nine postcards beside me and am keen to make sense of his riddle.

Every city needs an urban marker, and as the church is at the heart of Kyle's cards, I put it in front of me. I check on the map where the other eight locations are in relation to the church and place the Belvedere postcard to the north above the card in the middle. Sabelspoort goes below to the south. The city council belongs in the east on the right. I put the blue waves near Rijnpoort opposite in

the west. The river quay is placed southwest. I position the bridge over the Rhine in the southeast. Willemsplein in front of St Janspoort comes in the northwest. Velperpoort is set in the northeast. Now I've created a tic-tac-toe square that covers the eight directions of the compass with the phallus symbol in the centre.

When I draw the former city wall onto the city map, it forms the shape of a slightly left-tilted human heart where the city gates resemble the start of the arteries that transport blood right into the centre. I walk around the puzzle like a professor with one arm folded in front of my chest while I tap my index finger on my upper lip.

Suddenly inspired, I take my pencil case and tear nine sheets from the notebook and place them alongside each postcard. On the sheet in the north, I write 7, as it's the seventh card and the year it was sent, 1985, and Kyle's words—'Latent past is buried in the woods among the trees.' I scribble a few questions below. Is it a solution, burying the past? I wonder why he buries it here. I circle the word solution.

The postcard in the south is the fifth card, it dates back to 1983, and the text says—'A thick wall with pricked ears smothers my now stifled cries.' Kyle is twenty at the time and a year older than I am now. Maybe he's depressed. Is every young adult suffering depression? I underline the word depressed.

The fourth card in the northwest, from 1982, shows Willemsplein. I copy his words—'Adventurous circles keep me from transcending earth.' Maybe he's confused. I know I was when I saw Chris in a subterranean world. I wonder what Kyle is confused about. Does he mean he changes the groups he hangs around with frequently? Is he referring to the underground labyrinth? I put an exclamation mark next to confused.

As I write the information on the remaining sheets, adding doodles and circling words as something leaps out at me, I wonder what the connection is. After a while, I draw the numbers one to

nine in my notebook and add the words I've marked beside them. Studying the random collection, in the order in which Helen received Kyle's cards, from 1979 to 1987, I finally understand. Why do I only notice it now?

There's a thudding of heavy steps going up the staircase, and I rush out. I want to meet my upstairs neighbours, even when Daphne says the two boys keep to themselves. When I'm halfway up, I hear a door slam close and a key turning a lock, so I descend and put the kettle on instead.

When I sit down again with a cup of herbal tea, I look over my notes. Kyle loves Helen but gets frustrated with the situation. He accepts she's Down Under while he's here, although the separation confuses and then depresses him, he eventually awakens and sees the solution, and feels there's still a connection and sees the light.

Elated, I yell out, place the cup safely on the table and jump around with joy. The postcards describe Kyle's mental state at the time of writing and show how his mood regarding Helen has changed over the years. I keep nodding and smiling and dance around the magic square with the nine cards like I'm at a corroboree\*. Then Daphne in her suede coat and with her leather bag slung over her shoulder rushes in, frowning.

'I'm good.' I smile and wonder if Kyle's description of growing up from a teenager to a young adult applies to me too.

She casts a glance at my widespread puzzle. 'Does it fit into your theory of chaos?'

'Kyle is showing me something.'

Daphne studies the arrangement and hovers a pearl polished nail over the postcards. 'Shit, I never noticed those places before, except for the church, Velperpoort and Willemsplein.'

'He's talking about the nine stages of growing up!'

'Sky, the cards are addressed to your grandmother.' She grins. 'She's an adult, an old one.'

I refuse to be disappointed and reckon he informs Helen then about what's going on in his life. Daphne follows my finger as I count the postcards from one to nine, from Love to Frustration, to Acceptance, to Confusion, to Depression, to Awakening, to Solution, to Connection, and to Enlightenment. It's pointing erratically from one direction to another, crisscrossing the nine squares on the floor.

'He's all over the place. There's no logic in it,' she says.

'Arnhem is a magical city. Kyle has inspired me to come here, and I'm glad I did. You could be right. There must be a reason for this specific order. I have to find out.'

'Do you want to come grocery shopping?' she says.

I'm excited about my discovery, and if there's another explanation, I want to figure out what the story is behind Kyle's postcards, but I need groceries too. 'I have all the time in the world.'

Confident the puzzle will still be here when I return, I put on my sneakers and grab my leather jacket. I glance over my shoulder at the precious cards and lock the door before rushing after her.

'Love your jacket, going for the Izzy look?' she says.

It's the first time it's been dry all day.

'I needed something warmer.' I smile. 'Do you think it's possible that Kyle is revealing a pattern in life, which can be used once I decipher it?'

'You're reading too much into it. He's a man. Whenever he thought of your grandma's birthday, he picked a random card from the shop and wrote on it whatever sprang to mind.'

Normally, you'd buy a birthday card, but he specifically chose postcards of the city. Does he want her to come back? His scribbles lack impulsiveness too, he must have given what he wrote a great deal of thought.

I'm aware words have a meaning, and some have more than one, while different explanations carry various intentions and are

contradictory. The way a word is pronounced can twist it—sarcastic, ironic or humorous, and the passing of time can shift the temporal axis. Language is captured in words and usually, they're clear and understandable.

However, words are often abused when they only reflect intention. Asking 'How are you?' requests information on the person's well-being, but mostly is an empty phrase of politeness that always demands the same answer—'good'. Mortals dislike being confronted with other persons' sorrows, especially at a cash register. 'See you'—when it's meant as a goodbye. 'I promise'—followed by missed appointments and broken promises. A statement like 'life's shit' fails to explain if someone lost his job or merely got annoyed when the door slammed in his face, or because I forgot to say thank you. Until mind reading becomes a useful technique or the latest fashion, how do I know where I stand when words are being abused?

The key to understanding Kyle must be in the words he chose and the sentences he has written. I'm sure the pictures on the postcards serve a purpose too.

'His postcards always arrived before her birthday,' I say.

'Okay, so he remembers in time. But you said he was fifteen when he sent the first card?'

'Yes?'

'Do you think a teenage boy can come up with an elaborate plan, knowing beforehand what cards to buy and what to write and then sending them one by one, year after year? Shit, that makes him sound rather creepy,' Daphne says.

We turn left into the last street before Velperpoort. I glance right to where each prostitute stands behind a red-light window in a row of shopfronts like animals in a zoo.

'What about the underground rooms in town?' I say.

'Basements or wine cellars?'

'There's a network of tunnels that leads to various chambers.'

‘Did you fall in?’

‘It started when I met my ex-boyfriend on Tuesday.’ Although, I visited the water wave where Helen was the day before.

‘How long is he here for?’

‘I literally ran into him and next thing I know, I wake up in complete darkness. On my way out, I discovered a green room and the second was red and hot.’

‘Shit, you’ve been to hell and back.’ She sniggers, enjoying her joke and her ginger curls bounce up and down. ‘Makes me wonder what life you’ve lived. Did you bump your head on something?’

‘Chris is working on a science project and testing it on me here although physically he’s still back home.’ Did I tell her?

I recall a world map hanging on a wall behind the door of his office. It’s usually out of sight, and I’ve briefly seen it once. It has pins in it in various locations, and I wonder if one of them was here.

‘Does he want you back?’ Daphne says.

‘He has disappeared,’ I say, the untouchable, talking image of him and shake my head.

It reminds me of a dream where I walk the elevator and gain access to each level, but Chris remains at large.

‘If he’s here for a holiday, he’d have gone to your house and told you where he’s staying.’

‘I know, that’s the crazy part, but he was here.’ I stop to face her.

‘Piss off,’ Daphne says, clawing hands at a junkie who’s hanging about a red Jawa motorbike parked on the sidewalk.

He grunts and shuffles away.

She warily shakes her head. ‘You have a vivid imagination.’

I do. However, it’s more real than a fantasy.

A girl dressed in black-and-red leathers opens a door holding an open face helmet. We step aside as she strides up to the bike before continuing to the supermarket at the end of the street.

‘I spent like forever in those rooms, although time stood still.

By thinking stuff, I made things happen. It's a physical world of its own but also ... like floating around in a new consciousness. Yesterday, I found the metal space.'

Encouragingly, Daphne nods. 'Can you show me those places?'

'Maybe,' I say and hold out my wrist. 'If you push the right buttons.'

While she fiddles with my watch and we wait for a few seconds, I realise it's the compass that my grandmother gave my dad who then gave it to me that unlocks access to the chambers. Helen calls it an astrolabe, and that sounds more magical than an army compass or a digital watch.

'Okay, I'm uncertain how it exactly works and how I can get back in three of the chambers, but I can get into the fourth.'

'How many rooms are there?'

'I've been to the water wave, wood tower, fire pyramid and metal space. I think there must be at least five of them, but I still need to find the earth chamber.'

Perhaps I should have stayed below ground to search for the connecting tunnels to the other rooms and investigate how to get in and out. They represent the five elements, each one creating a different experience from the other, but what have I learned from that? Of course, there's Station too, the mysterious bar that's invisible to the others.

'It's just ... difficult to explain. Do I sound insane?'

'Shit, do you really expect an answer?'

'Hmm.'

'Whatever reason brought you here, I'm sure you'll make a great housemate, but what you're telling me is highly improbable and very implausible.'

'Maybe I had a fit.' It's what Izzy thinks.

'There's medication for that.'

'I hate taking pharmaceuticals,' I say, reminded of the lyrics

to 'President Gas' by The Psychedelic Furs, about governments keeping its citizens under narcosis, so they obey. 'And I am sane.'

It's crowded in the little supermarket. They have whole grain and rye bread, lots of cheese, a huge variety of sweet bread toppings and loads of different chips.

'Shit, you should focus on finding Kyle,' Daphne says.

That's what I've been doing, but in search of Kyle, I met Phoenix and Tortoise and came across the chambers and Station. It's logical they should be connected. I must deduce what I can from his postcards.

'I could cook a roast tonight. Where do I find the sweet potato and pumpkin?' I say.

'I'll show you how to make chilli con carne, it's easy. For foreign food, you best try the Turkish shop next door, but pumpkin is out of season.'

'But it's April!' I say until I realise it's spring instead of autumn.

We shuffle through the aisles and fill up our baskets before we wait in line at a cash register.

'Did you know the local service station got vandalised last weekend?' Daphne says. 'Shit, a guy from school got there in the nick of time and found the petrol hoses slashed. He had to walk twenty minutes to the nearest petrol station to fill up a jerry can, walk back, and drive all the way out again to fill up the car properly. What a waste of time.'

'Why do they do that?' I say.

'Because they're stupid! They lack respect for other people's property. I hope the police arrests whoever's responsible.'

After unpacking the groceries in the kitchen, I prepare another cup of tea, keen to return to my project. 'That's the Way Love Is' emerges from the radio in Daphne's room where she's studying loads of books and preparing for exams. I take my cup, slide the pot plant to the spot where the rays of late afternoon sun hit

the window and sit on the carpet facing northeast this time. I have so much fun with a bunch of old postcards that show the jewels of this town, and I'm delighted I have three more months before my studies start.

Kyle must have obscured another message in the bigger picture, and I need to unravel his conundrum, but I wonder how he could have known his moods in advance.

My moods come and go, and being aware of my moods is one thing, but so explicitly? In hindsight, I can review the state of my mind over the years, but when I'm in a specific mood, it's who I am at the moment. At least I've discovered Kyle has grown up and is doing fine now. I laugh. I absolutely want to find him.

Lying down, I notice a dark splotch in the corner above the door where the paint is peeling. I long for a ceiling window with a permanent view of the forever changing sky. When I sit up, I feel my stomach muscles stretch, so I repeat the movement a few times and turn it into an abs exercise before paying attention to the cryptic mystery in front of me.

The trinity of heaven, man and earth, as my grandmother says, is here in the shape of the church, Kyle and the city. Helen has opened my eyes to an energetic world, something that sadly falls outside a school's curriculum. She explains that God, as envisaged by the interpretation of the churches, is a limiting man-made concept as it excludes others for failing to believe the same. Ask yourself, she says, how can God be narrow-minded? The answer lies in the abuse of words written by men with false claims as God is beyond limitations, and she states that there's a goddess present in every woman.

When I follow her line of reasoning and combine it with my ideas, I have to rely on universal principles that suggest we evolved from the same energy source. It's hard to understand why we allow religion to cause a rift between us. We're human. Regardless of how we explain our mystic roots, the focus should always be on similari-

ties instead of the differences because our bodies function the same and our brains have comparable capacities.

Our body is just a shell, and the fixation on what it looks like is distracting from what's at the core of our being. There's a common source of strength we should draw from. When we use this power for personal development, we'll master understanding the human character.

There must be a collective consciousness that together with the mundane consciousness and subconsciousness interacts as a trinity. It's present in my being as an invisible universal force from which I must derive strength. I'm the power as I am. I am one with everyone and everything that lives on this earth and in the universe.

I'm aware I need to let go of my limitations, in part a result of the blueprint of my personality, while the other part is caused by how society has taught me to think. One thing I've learned is to stop assuming. Every expectation and every assumption I concoct with my brain. They sprout from personal experiences. Subsequently, I impose the figments of my imagination on others even though they're unaware of my thoughts. Then when others fail to meet my expectations, I'm disappointed or worse because my assumptions were wrong.

It's happened with Chris, and I catch myself doing the same with Kyle. Running scenarios in my mind, analysing events and calculating outcomes, confident I can predict life, but I always fail. What else should I improve in my structured thinking patterns?

I'm my own biggest experiment, and I can change how I think. I'm able to change my negativities, worries and fear of other persons' opinions into constructive thoughts as long as I reinforce positive thinking and instantly dismiss bad thoughts. Then my old thought patterns will change into new positive ones, and I'll grow as a person.

I close my eyes for a moment, take a deep breath and slowly

exhale and become aware of my expanding and contracting abdominal wall. When I open my eyes, I direct my thoughts to solve Kyle's riddle and list chronologically per year the wind directions next to his mysterious sentences.

- (SW) Infinite life flows like water, from the mountains to the sea.
- (C) Contemplate the yoke of misery. A pile of laid bricks that can fall apart.
- (NE) See the tracks run off parallel into infinity.
- (NW) Adventurous circles keep me from transcending earth.
- (S) A thick wall with pricked ears smothers my now stifled cries.
- (W) Unique vibrations fill the room. The spirit feels the invisible waves.
- (N) Latent past is buried in the woods among the trees.
- (E) The network of the future is located underground.
- (SE) Your eye will open and spirit sees all.

The words Kyle uses—life, contemplation, infinity, transcending, now, vibrations, past, future, and spirit, show he's a spiritual person wondering about life and its meaning. The longer I think about it, the better I like Kyle, even if he has unknowingly written down his emotions. He may sound unlike the average teenager, but then again, we're all trying to discover *our* unique role in the universe and find *our* purpose in life.

As I redraw the capitals of the nine sentences, I wonder why there would be a different order than chronological. I draw the two vertical and horizontal lines that form the tic-tac-toe grid before I put the capital C from the text on the card of the church in the centre and add the remaining eight letters to the corresponding wind directions. From left to right and top to bottom it reads—

A-L-S, U-C-T and I-A-Y. I write the nine letters on a blank sheet and cut them into separate pieces. I'll have a play with them later as I want to clear my mind through exercise. The moment I invert myself in a headstand, Daphne walks in.

'Acrobatic,' she says.

I remember my surprise seeing my grandmother standing on her head with her legs upright in the air and figure my expression then, therefore, matches Daphne's now. I roll down and draw my legs into the half lotus and look at her.

'It's meditative, healthy and relaxing.'

'Shit, you're weird.'

'That's me, Sky, the Australian Alien.' I bow, jump up and roll my head around the axis of my neck. 'Now it's your turn.'

She casts me a thoughtful glance.

'Then I'll help you with dinner,' I say. 'It's good for the flow, but are you agile enough?'

'Show me,' she says and accepts the challenge like a professional athlete, kicks off her pink house slippers and tucks in her shirt.

I explain she has to plant her head firmly on the carpet and put her lower arms like a triangle around her skull while interlocking her fingers. Then she has to push up her feet so her knees nearly touch her abdomen before she can slowly raise her legs. I guide them from falling sideways. As I watch her well-shaped bum, the pastel blue shirt falls following the laws of gravity, and I peek at her lace bra. After a few tries, she stands on her head by herself, lasting a full twenty seconds.

'I don't see how this exercise is relaxing, my head is about to burst,' Daphne says, to which I add 'that happens too.'

In the kitchen, she dons a pink apron like a master chef, takes what she needs from the fridge and asks me to cut the vegetables. She opens a jar of brown beans into a pan and lights the gas, turning the knob to low before she pours oil into a frying pan, fries garlic,

onions and then the minced meat. Leek and mushrooms lie in pieces on a cutting board, and I open a tin of concentrated tomato paste. She adds spices and before long, she holds a wooden spoon to my lips to taste.

‘Spicy.’ I open the faucet, fill a glass with water and gulp it down.

‘Sorry, I slipped with the peppers,’ she says, ‘eat some yoghurt.’

The balcony door is closed to avoid the cold, but a small window atop is ajar to allow the cooking vapours to escape. The gardens are deserted.

‘You have tomato paste on your cheek,’ I say.

She wipes it off and looks at me. I shake no. She takes a tea towel to clean her face. When she drains the beans, one rolls into the sink.

‘Shit, it’s been a crazy day. Assignments were due, but half the class wasn’t ready, and now everybody has an extension until tomorrow.’ Angrily, she shakes the beans onto the meat and vegetable mix in the frying pan and stirs feverishly.

‘Did you hand it in?’ I say.

‘What do you think? That’s why there’s a deadline, the idea is to meet it, not miss it.’ A drop of sweat rolls onto her eyebrow, and she brushes it off. ‘All we had to do was apply Keynes’ theory of employment based on aggregate demand to our own example.’

I frown and shrug.

‘How demand and supply have an influence on employment and how the government should stimulate the economy to create equilibrium. I based mine on the demand for housing.’

‘Does that include squatters?’

‘Shit, it’s impossible to fit those radicals as a variable into an economic equation,’ she says and inclines her head towards the drawer. ‘Grab the cutlery and plates will you?’

Her desk is cluttered with books and papers I carefully put aside before finding the placemats on a shelf below, and I set the table, light the candles and pour two glasses of water. Daphne puts the

pan on a coaster and walks back for a serving spoon. When I taste the food, I hurry to the kitchen to fill a jug with water.

‘Guess what I heard on the radio Monday night?’ she says when I return.

‘What?’

She’s chewing a mouthful of chilli con carne but flicks her head backwards. ‘Guess.’

I frown and shrug again. ‘A song you like?’

I take a bite, followed rapidly by a draught of water but I still get a runny nose.

‘A radio show called Candlelight.’

‘You love romantic music?’ What’s she getting at?

‘Jan van Veen recites poems from listeners. There was a poem from Kyle.’

I gasp. He’s here!

‘The poem was addressed to a girl,’ Daphne says, ‘I had a cassette in the stereo, so I taped it.’ She puts down her cutlery and hurries over to rewind the cassette.

I’ve found Kyle! They’ll have his details at the radio studio. After dreaming for ten years and searching for five days, he’s within reach. It has paid off to come here. In great anticipation I listen when a sensual baritone recites ‘A lonely road ahead, I have to go on, looming with danger, I long for you, treacherous but seductive, I cherish you, our hunted souls, together...’ The squeaky tape cuts off.

My fork clanks against the plate, my mouth falls open, and my mind is whirling. Kyle is a romantic and has moved on from cryptic sentences to writing poetry.

‘It went on and on. Such a shame it’s only half recorded,’ she says. ‘Funny, isn’t it?’

I’m lost for words thinking it’s from Kyle. The poem could be for his girlfriend or wife but sounds ominous and if Helen has told him

it could be directed at me.

Daphne leans forward, chin cupped in her left hand while the other is on the table with the fingers curled towards the palm, hiding her nails. ‘Got ya!’ she yells gleefully, springing upright and clapping her hands together like a twelve-year-old girl.

‘Shit, Daphne.’ Would she do that? ‘You mean it’s fake?’

‘What are the chances, really?’ she says, and the corners of her lips curl up. ‘You better put your feet firmly on the ground again. Thank Kyle for getting you here, but you need to live your own life!’

It hurts she’s taking the piss, but I guess I should let the pain slide off my shoulders. ‘Get stuffed!’ I yell.

‘Relax. It’s a joke.’

‘Where’s the washing machine?’ I stand up.

‘See the fun of it.’ Daphne stares at me still immersed in her subterfuge and the pleasure she derives from her prank. ‘It’s just a recording, it only lasted a few minutes.’

‘Where—Is—It?’

‘In the basement.’

‘I have to put on the washing.’

‘What? Now?’

‘I’ve finished eating.’

I storm off to my room and figure I might as well put a load on. My black skirt is dirty and hanging my jumpers and T-shirts by the window to have them aired and buffeted by the perpetual breeze is insufficient to get rid of the smell of smoke. I grab the black and coloured bits and pieces and rush down the stairs. Confronted with only a front door, I wonder where the access to the basement is. Bloody hell! I must ask Daphne. Later. It can wait. I run upstairs, slam the door shut and throw down my washing. The cut-out letters whirl into the air before they settle on the floor. Suddenly, I realise it’s spelt out, right in front of me, in one word—CAUSALITY, Kyle is talking about causality!

## XV

When I thank my housemate for providing me with the solution, albeit indirectly, she accepts it as an apology, and we go out at dusk. It's partially clouded.

The sky is directional and inviting but unfathomable. I detect the Big Dipper, and its handle is roughly pointing east proving it's spring and when pointing south, it'll finally be summer. Following the outward stars of the bowl up, I trace the Pole Star, confirming north is located behind the school premises.

At the student society, a shack to the left of the main building, two men dressed in pinstripe suits are standing at the door. They're wearing matching ties like groomsmen but without boutonnieres.

I remember Charlene and me ogling two handsome soldiers, but when we meet them off duty their taste in civilian clothes is a complete turn-off.

A plump guy points a finger at my chest and says, 'we don't know you yet, foetus.'

'Likewise,' I say and introduce myself to them.

Daphne shows her membership card. 'She'll be joining us after summer, so behave. You don't want her to move back overseas.'

'Aha, a freshman.' The smug boys grin and click their heels together and bow low. 'Welcome.'

I nod to the funny boys and follow Daphne inside.

'Never mind them,' she says. 'They're members of the Templar

fraternity, and most of them live in a shared mansion around the corner. There's another frat house close to where we live.'

Of course, everything here is within walking distance.

In an alcove to the left is the cloakroom where we hand over our jackets to a guy wearing a replica suit and tie. We put the tokens into our pockets.

'Any all-girls frat groups?' I say.

We walk back past the entrance and turn left through a set of open wooden doors.

'There are a few sororities, they probably share a house somewhere, but a more relaxed version is a year club. After orientation week you form a group, decide on a name, ours is Ni Hao, and then you make up your own rules. It's a good way of getting to know people. We usually go out for dinner. No dress code either, baggy home-made paisley pants really don't do it for me.' She directs her head to two girls standing opposite, next to the DJ, and I see what she means.

The rectangular building is painted black and has a low ceiling. On the right is a dance floor with a disco globe and coloured stage lights. The bar on the left is accessible from every side and lit by spotlights hanging from the shelves above.

'Watch out for the horny frat boys though, especially the freshers. They desperately want to lose their virginity. Shit, a guy from my class isn't bothered by the fact he has a girlfriend at home.'

Two boys walk past and smirk like the label fits. Daphne walks up to the bar to order beers while I hang back near the door.

Happy chatter from clubs of girls and groups of boys fills the room. Girls are dancing to pop music on the dance floor. The students look more like civilized citizens than the earthlings I've seen in the bars in town. It's humid and smells of beer and cigarette smoke, and a drop of condensation plops onto my face. A stud in a suit with lots of freckles and designer stubble has a Nikon around

his neck and is talking to a Templar with neatly combed hair. He cuts the conversation short and walks up to me. The photographer fades into the crowd. I shake Mr Templar's hand, and he introduces himself as the president of the student society.

'It's an honour to meet an international student,' he says and unashamedly checks me out before he throws his cigarette butt to the floor and smothers it with the toe of his polished, laced shoe. 'Where are you from?'

Although there's something awkward about his features, his demeanour commands respect like a boot camp officer. 'Same place as you.'

He blinks and pulls his head back.

'My mother's womb.' I smile.

He laughs effusively like a talk show host. 'No denying that.'

'Do you organise orientation week?'

'Initiation.' He taps his nostril. 'You'll be okay, so long as you obey the instructions.'

It sounds sinister. 'What else are you up to?'

'Besides enjoying earthly pleasures? Exams are coming up, so there's enough studying to be done. Fortunately, I can still postpone working for a while, there's plenty of time for that as I'm not sixty-five yet. Student life is pretty good and besides,' he says and winks, 'I get to meet people from everywhere.'

'What will you do when you graduate?' I say.

'Drinking and scoring,' a boy in a blazer shouts.

It's an honest reflection of the abundance of testosterone here. A blackboard behind the bar signals that beers cost only one guilder, of course, they're cocky.

'Final exams are next year. After that, I'll apply for a traineeship to get work experience, but one day I'll run a company.'

'Doing what?'

'Calling the shots,' he says like a bombastic ringmaster.

‘Why?’

‘The more I earn, the more freedom I have and the more luxury I enjoy. Besides, it’ll be an honour to lead a company and expand it, by being the best in its field.’

‘Are you cut out for that?’

‘Naturally! Anything is possible when you want it.’

‘What about starting a company?’

‘I’d have to find a gap in the market and start from scratch, could be tricky.’ He takes a pack from his pocket, elegantly taps it against his finger and pulls out a cigarette with his lips before he offers me one too.

‘Screw tops on bottles of beer?’ I suggest, declining his offer.

After he lights his cigarette with a Zippo, he tilts his head. ‘A simple finger twist to open, that’s not a bad idea. I better avoid starting a business that sells bottle openers.’

Daphne is beckoning me, and I hold up my palm. ‘Drive Thru Bottle Shop?’

‘What’s that?’

‘A shop where you drive in, order the booze and pay for it from behind the wheel, after which they put it in the car for you, and you drive off. Beer, wine or top shelf, as much as you want and chilled is an option too.’

‘You sure know how to cater for your addiction.’ He laughs. ‘May I buy you a drink?’

‘Thanks, but my friend has bought me one. Hooroo.’

I head over to Daphne and fall in line behind two boys that are following a just arrived group of girls. They’re making hand gestures behind their backs.

‘Look, there’s another,’ one of them says.

I lean over their shoulders and ask what it means. He pushes both index fingers and thumbs together like a diamond and groans while the other sniggers.

‘When you see through, it means she’s slim enough.’

‘The diamond shaped opening between her bum and upper legs,’ says the other.

When I get to Daphne, I can hear them yell, ‘You have one too.’

I turn around and get their thumbs up. I’m flattered.

‘You took your time,’ she says.

‘I’m getting acquainted,’ I say. ‘Hang on, I forgot something.’

I rush back to Mr Templar. Although Kyle is off the list, I understand students from other schools visit this society every now and then.

‘Do you know Kyle?’

‘No, sorry.’

My hope of finding Kyle is again torpedoed. He travels through town like a phantom, and I thought it would be easy to find him. I can forever search for Kyle. However, giving up feels wrong, and there’s the pleasing prospect of a visit to the other societies. When I return, Daphne is listening to a conversation between two boys, and she hands me a stingy drafted beer.

‘Thanks to history, we are where we are,’ says a stocky boy with a lot of grease in his auburn hair that keeps every single strand in place. ‘It doesn’t hurt to look at how we evolved.’

‘Why bring history into the equation?’ an athletic boy says. ‘It’s about what you do now and what your plans are. When you keep looking back, you’re wasting your time. You should focus on the future.’

‘Right, you can learn enough from history,’ the stocky boy says.

‘That’s what historians, scientists and depressive people can occupy themselves with. Hankering after the good old days is exhausting and talking doesn’t change the past or the present. You want to improve your future, don’t you?’ The athletic boy raises his red bushy eyebrows and looks at me for an affirmative answer.

‘I’ll be living my future,’ I say and wipe off a drop of water on

my nose, 'let's see what I'll make of that while I learn and have fun.'

Daphne and I clink glasses, the boys join in and then she introduces her stocky classmate Marco and his athletic friend George. She whispers they're country boys and that Marco wants to be an accountant so he can tend to his father's chicken farm and the businesses of the other farmers, while George is in line to take over the family hardware store.

'Are people here passionate about the past?' I say.

'They're afraid of change, and that's why they insist on preserving the derelict buildings and maintaining old institutions,' George says.

'Imagine a school trip where you have to choose between a visit to Anne Frank's house or the Omniversum,' Daphne says. 'One is about a teenager locked up in an attic during the war and the other is a visit to a relaxed domed cinema where you lie down watching the stars and planets as part of the universe. Shit, the majority chose the first.'

'We're stuck with systems implemented a long time ago,' George says. 'When we refuse to shelve them, it's impossible to come up with something more suitable for the future.'

'Right, those systems were well chosen,' Marco says. 'They helped shape human progress from the start of the industrial age to where we're now.'

'Just because our system is operational,' George says, 'people think we have to develop it, but its flaws are showing. It's stupid to continue expanding a design when its premise is wrong because no matter how much you add to the wrongs, it can never function right. The only way is to ditch the faulty system and start anew.'

'You can't ignore the past,' Daphne says while rolling a fag. 'You need to learn from your mistakes and avoid repeating them in that new system of yours.'

Many earthlings are smoking cigarettes. They might be rich or

occasional smokers, which suggests Daphne is an addict, like Izzy. The volume of the pop music has increased a notch, and we huddle closer to hear each other.

‘Definitely,’ George says, ‘and holding on to the past will prevent us from moving forward.’

‘How come?’ I say.

‘I already see fierce competition in the do-it-yourself market with its franchise formulas. They’re relentless in the way they do business. It’s about making money, instead of working together. Someone has to step up, or it’ll kill independent family businesses like ours.’

‘What you’re saying is that you want to stop progress by clinging on to what you have now,’ Daphne says. ‘So you’re afraid of change yourself.’

‘No, it’s just the wrong kind of advancement,’ George says. ‘The focus should be on service to customers, and building a stronger community rather than on economies of scale and making money.’

‘Shit, even when scaling up means lower prices for consumers?’

‘It’s just wrong to rob people of their livelihood.’

‘It’s wrong to overcharge,’ she says. ‘Maybe you should grow your family business and turn it into an international company.’

It’s crowded and warm, and drops of water cling to the black ceiling until gravity uses the drops to target innocent students. They’re dressed casually but for the frat boys and sorority girls who conform to their chosen uniform.

‘You must be future conscious,’ I say to George.

‘Shit, what do you mean by that?’ Daphne says.

‘Being aware of the necessity of long-term planning instead of focusing on short-term gains.’

‘Like the communists?’ Marco says.

‘No, like a sensible human being,’ I say.

‘*Carpe diem*,’ Daphne says, ‘and after me, the deluge.’ She and

Marco chuckle and cheer in agreement. George shakes his head and turns around to the bar to order more beers.

‘Right,’ Marco says, ‘but those kids didn’t care which venue they went to on their school trip. It was a choice between visiting the capital and going to The Hague where the government is seated. They chose Amsterdam.’

‘Some people are actively trying to change society,’ I say.

‘It’s what everybody does, just trying to make life better and more effective,’ George says, turning his head our way for a moment.

Daphne waves her unlit cigarette in my face and Marco quickly offers a light.

‘I know who you’re thinking of,’ Daphne says, ‘but they use violence to get what they want.’

‘So do governments,’ George says and hands us a round of freshly poured beers.

‘Who are you talking about?’ Marco says.

‘Punks,’ Daphne says, facing him. ‘Those squatters who refuse to leave, even when there’s an eviction order. They make the headlines all the time. Shit, military police are deployed to get them out.’

‘Right, they give too much attention to those disobedient citizens, and they use our tax money to evict them.’

I wonder how much tax students have to pay?

‘They’ve been freeloading long enough,’ Daphne says. ‘The least they can do is leave without making a fuss.’

Marco and Daphne clink their glasses in agreement again.

‘The squatters pay for electricity and water and make the place liveable again,’ I say. ‘The owners let their vacant properties deteriorate, and if the squatters are evicted, they still refuse tenants and maintenance as they speculate on a future rise in real estate prices. There’s a serious lack of housing, and the squatters have focused media attention on the problem.’

‘Shit, you had no trouble finding a roof over your head, and

neither did I,' Daphne says. 'You've found a job too. When you're productive, you'll get by in this society, so you study or work. They refuse to do either, maybe because they don't want to, or because they look like trash and nobody wants to hire them. The punks only make plans to revolt against society. They kick against the establishment and make a mess of things.'

She's right, getting a job means looking the part but other humans work for free too, like house mums and volunteers and they're still productive. The music venues in town survive thanks to volunteers.

'Right, imagine a punk selling you insurance,' Marco says and laughs.

'Selling home insurance, including a special clause about squatters,' George adds and bursts out laughing.

I'm laughing too.

'Shit, then they'd wonder why they don't become salesperson of the month,' Daphne says.

'Why are we talking about them?' Marco says. 'It's not as if they'll bother us here.'

I think Izzy will agree as it's the last place she'd want to be.

'The government sets the rules we have to abide by,' Marco says.

'What's good for one person might be bad for another, so how does the government decide the best policy?' I say.

I recall that the punks want to replace democracy with a cooperative system based on consensus where everyone is equal.

'Right, it's better that knowledgeable people impose something that's good for us. An addict is better off without drugs, so they should interfere,' Marco says.

'They?' I say.

'The government can measure what the negative effects are and take pre-emptive action. They should lock the addicts on an island, put a fence around them and throw away the key.'

'Do you have the Flevopolder in mind?' George says.

‘Excuse me? What good will that do?’ I say.

‘Shit, it’ll stop the burglaries and stealing of car radios and bicycles,’ Daphne says.

‘The government lacks authority to interfere with autonomy!’ I say. ‘You’d better ask where the drugs are coming from? Who makes money from it? Why do people use drugs? Are they unhappy? Once you understand the reasons behind it, you can take appropriate action. Locking away the undesirable outcome fails to take away the causes, and the problem will continue to exist. It’s palliative rather than a structural solution. You’d better be careful, they could send you there.’

‘No way, I’m not causing a nuisance,’ Marco says.

‘With your smoking?’ I say. ‘Maybe it’s tolerated here and now, but non-smokers might have a different opinion, and before long, you’re suddenly part of a group that has to be locked up or worse, eliminated. It’s better for your health, as you say.’

‘I’ll stay well away from politics,’ George says. ‘Whatever you do with your life is your business.’

‘Thank you,’ I say.

‘Right,’ Marco says.

‘Relight My Fire,’ Daphne screams and pulls me to the dance floor.

We’re going crazy and continue to dance to the next song and the one afterwards, but there’s a limit to what a DJ can get away with. Hot and sweaty, we return to the bar in need of a drink. The bartender, a guy in a striped suit and a tie that matches the others, serves us with a smile. We gulp half of the beer before we catch enough breath to speak to each other again. As we head back to the boys, we find them in a serious conversation.

‘She’s sweet,’ Marco says, ‘but she doesn’t understand I want my freedom too, and it’s her choice not to move here. I often catch up with her during lunch breaks, and I’m happy to see her on the

weekends.'

'She's just keen to plan your future,' George says, 'and she's happy being around people she has known all her life. The city can be an ugly place. She just fears it might corrupt you.'

'Temporarily maybe,' Marco says. 'I love her, and I want to start a family with her, but there are so many things I want to try out first.'

'As long as she takes care of the kids while you have your career, you're okay,' George says.

'Right, she's smart and thank God she's not a feminist who refuses to cook me dinner and wants equal rights, or worse tries to reverse traditional roles.'

Daphne rolls her eyes, elbows me and turns away from the boys.

'Do you reckon Kyle might still show up?' I say.

'Idiot!' She shakes her curls. 'He doesn't want to be here if he's twenty-five. If he's still hanging about, then he has totally flunked school. Gross!'

Daphne waggles her head and seems to vomit. She wipes moisture from her neck and flicks the drops of her hand.

'What happened?' I say.

She points with her thumb. 'Someone threw beer over my back.'

A group of boys is jumping around to the music, arms placed on shoulders while heaving glasses in the air. Beer drips over the edges and falls onto the floor.

'By accident or on purpose?'

'Does it matter? Shit, I'm still wet. Let's go.' Resolutely, she empties her glass, puts it on the bar, grabs her tobacco pouch and marches through the crowd to the cloakroom. I follow.

'Sometimes, I wonder why these kids were allowed to leave the parental home,' she says. 'They can't take care of themselves. That's what you get with those mums that don't teach their kids housekeeping. In ten years' time, they'll still be dropping their dirty laundry off for mum to wash, or they'll have her come over to clean

up. This reckless behaviour is annoying, and it shows a total lack of respect.'

'You mean they're drunk,' I say.

We both shrug in our coats.

'Shit, that's never an excuse. They're arrogant and so convinced that they'll rule the world, and you can tell they'll have no scruples. Look at them, dressed in their cheap suits, although they haven't worked a day in their life yet.' She points an aggressive finger at a guy at the door and says, 'don't say a word,' and he closes his mouth.

The stars are out, and the cold wind cools my flushed cheeks. Daphne is still taken aback like a loser in an unfair game. We head back in silence, but I just have to break the spell and say, 'Relax, see the fun of it, it's just innocent brawling, it only lasted a few minutes.'

FRIDAY

## XVI

It's Friday morning, and I cycle past the flashing lights of Station and turn left into a posh hilly suburb behind station Arnhem to inspect a mansion that refuses to sell.

Tortoise says the landscape influences humans. Helen says the five elements do too, and they have a specific form. When I look at the roofline of a house, I can recognise its shape—triangular, square, rectangular, oval or irregular.

Mansions with balconies adorn one side of the street. Their gabled roofs with orange tiles express fire. However, the homes opposite have pointy facades and dormer windows, and as they're erratic like a wave, they represent water. The residents of the fire dwellings are influenced by the water element opposite and vice versa. The impact depends on how well the fire and/or water elements suit these humans.

In contrast, the buildings in Steenstraat resemble blocks and residents on both sides are influenced by the earth element. The church though has a rectangular tower with a spire and is thus a combination of wood and fire. As the Green Dragon's oval facade attracts more attention than the roofline, it's considered metal.

I share the sloping cobblestoned street with motor vehicles and wish I could change to a lower gear. It's sunny, and spring has vegetation spurting into a growing frenzy. There are white and pink flowering chestnuts at a triangular shaped nature strip, and when I

stop to check the map, I notice I'm already at my destination.

After I park the bicycle against a low fence, I step back to examine the building from a distance. The mansion faces the street but is situated on a corner where another street runs downhill. My compass shows it faces southwest and the other side faces northwest. The building will always suit a West group person best. The staggered walls have a small tower on top, and a shrub grows as high as the second floor, covering wall and windows with greenery. It obscures the entrance.

My grandmother explains that the eight directions are called *Ba Zhai* in Pinyin. There are four beneficial directions to choose from. They relate to four aspects of life. She says to calculate a personal number based on gender and date of birth. Each number is associated with one of the five elements and a wind direction and belongs to either the East or West group. The personal number dictates what the four good directions are and they're different for each number. I always use one of these to either focus on my career, health, relationships or spirituality. Helen suggests I test the effects they have on me as I need to understand how the five elements interact.

I take notes, check the map for the last address and cycle downhill around the tip of Sonsbeek Park into a neighbourhood with Jugendstil buildings. I park my bicycle against a hedge, walk up to the house for sale and peep through the bay windows into an empty living room. Three steps lead to a small door with a knocker, but I turn my back to it and take a compass reading. Only now I notice the mansion faces a T-junction, so if a car on the road ahead fails to stop, it'll end up in the hallway.

I cycle west along a parallel street north of the rail line to the rail bridge and pass a shadow of a man when I walk into Station.

'Hello Puigi, how are you today? What's happening?'

'All those questions. We all need answers.'

‘We sure do.’

I order a drink and sit at the bar. Puigi is looking busy, mumbling and throwing his arms around like The Swedish Chef in *The Muppet Show*, but I’m the only customer.

‘Who was that person leaving?’

He squints his deep-set eyes and purses his full lips.

‘Just being curious.’ I smile.

‘That’s not relevant yet. You’ll meet him when necessary. Keep in mind it only takes five people to effect change.’

‘Must be bad for business when it’s this quiet,’ I say, already accustomed to his elusive replies.

‘But it’s not.’

I’m unsure what to make of him and his imaginary customers.

When a train rumbles overhead and shakes up the place like an earthquake, I hold on to my earthenware jar till the vibrations stop. After I sip from the sweet liquid, a sudden urge spurs me on, and I head for the toilet.

As I trip over the doorstep, the compass butts against the wall, and I grab the pull-chain flush to steady myself. A quick inspection shows the astrolabe is intact before I notice another door on the right. The thought of someone opening it and catching me with my pants down makes me lock it too. I listen to the soothing sound of my waterfall. With the relief of an empty bladder, my curiosity returns, so I turn the key and open the second door.

As I descend the stairs, blinded by the yellow light and using my hand as a filter, I examine the surface around my feet. It’s pavers at first, but as I shuffle forward, they’re covered in a thin layer of soil before turning into loose and dry grains of sand. I dig into it with the point of my sneaker half expecting to find concrete a few centimetres underneath. Curious, I kneel and dig a hole like a cat, digging up cooler and coarser sand. When at arm’s depth, I give up, satisfied that whatever it is, it either qualifies as a beach or a desert.

My eyes have adjusted to the bright light and slightly fatigued by the spontaneous exercise, I drop my bag and sit down. I'm in a room that's shaped like a box and deduce it must be the fifth chamber, earth. The ceiling is bright yellow like the sun, and the walls portray sand dunes in earth tones and on the wall opposite like a *trompe-l'oeil* is a city cut into the rock like Petra.

The atmosphere is warm like an Indian summer. Earth is moist, cheerful and safe. I take off my shoes and socks so I can comb through the sand with my toes. I wonder where the pirate's map is with a dotted trail that leads to the treasure, like the end of the rainbow indicates the pot of gold.

This earth box is a vast space like a desert that stretches out for kilometres, but it must be an optical illusion. It's tempting to go exploring, but after taking a few steps, rationality takes over. Although each chamber serves a specific purpose, it's also weird to accept I should simply sit down and immerse in my emotions.

I get a pen, hold it in my mouth and measure with my index finger and thumb the size of the entrance in the rock wall in the distance, and mark it on the other index finger. Then I sprint forward, and after running a good hundred metres, I measure again. Just to be sure I run another fifty metres but it proves unreachable. Strangely enough, there's a fair distance between my bag and me. While I trot back, I try to deduce how it's possible I can leg a considerable distance but fail to reach the other side, or in case of the wood tower the sky. A logical explanation is missing.

There's a chest next to my belongings, and I pull out a woven blanket, a terracotta jug and some tropical fruits. Leaning against the chest, I break open a mango, bite into the sweetness and devour the fruit. Juice drips from my mouth. After wiping my chin and licking the luscious fluid from the back of my hand, I rub the moist residue on my jeans.

The humidity is like a steam bath, and I feel relaxed. I check my

compass and notice I'm facing southwest, my spiritual direction. My thoughts float to the process of thinking itself, and I ponder if the effects of the eight wind directions, both positive and negative, apply to my thinking too.

I know my thoughts drift off in various directions and evoke different emotions. I can imagine the worst when waiting for Charlene to arrive or when she stays under water after a washout for longer than I expect. She could be hit by a car or suffer reef cuts or a shark attack. In need of rescue, she's driven in an ambulance to the hospital where nurses do their ultimate best to keep her alive, but she's paralysed for life.

Once caught in such a thought spiral, I paint the most horrible pictures. It's a chain of thoughts where everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. It's a total catastrophe.

Does this way of thinking happen when I face my worst direction? If so, do I face this bad direction at the moment a bad thought occurs or after I've spent a lot of time facing that way?

It frustrates me when things fail to go my way, like waiting in line for the wrong cash register or missing a train connection or someone cutting me off in traffic. I kick against bins and snap at persons for hindering me. Later, when I recall these situations as I sometimes do, I mull over these annoying events again, adding what I should have done like ramming into the car that cut me off, demolishing the train station and cursing the persons in front of me. It's a mood that changes me into a hothead while it fails to resolve anything. It's killing me.

Sometimes, I'm moping because I'm jealous of a popular girl at school or a kid with a Pac-Man handheld, or because the girls go to a party and forget to invite me. Whatever Charlene, Helen or my parents say to dispel my mood, I refuse to listen to any advice from anyone. I pride myself on being able to sulk for a long period, and I love to bicker and take great pleasure in gossiping, anything to make

me feel better at other persons' expense. I'm like a ghost of my previous self.

It happens too I'm so nervous about my exams, I'm certain I've failed. I worry I'll never find a loving boyfriend, a meal I cook will be tasteless, and I get fined or fired. I'm afraid that I'll say the wrong thing, everybody is staring at my moles and mortals dislike me. Basically, I doubt everything. Everything occurs like a minor mishap.

The biggest danger of these thoughts that make me feel powerless, incapable, miserable and unworthy is that they become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I continue to bring myself down, I'll live a life that matches my pessimistic expectations, and I'll end up with more bad shit happening. The only thing I can then rejoice about is the idea I'm right, that my life is a pathetic existence where my boyfriend dumps me, and everybody hates me.

When facing an unsuitable direction sets a bad chain of thoughts in motion, then the longer I face it, the longer I'm stuck in a negative head spin, which will make it even harder to escape from this trap. When I use a good direction, it's easier to avoid tapping into these pessimistic thoughts. Especially when asleep, I want to have peace and quiet in my mind, so I wake up revived.

Thirsty, I lift the jar to my lips and take a long draught of coconut juice, but it's too cold. Suddenly, there's a cramp in my stomach, although I doubt I'll be suffering from the spleen. I take another sip, flush it around to warm it up and wonder how the four favourable directions regarding spirituality, relationships, health, and career influence my thinking.

Sometimes, I'm thrilled like a kid to watch a bird, insects or a blossoming flower. I adore nature's beauty and appreciate being alive in a wonderful world. At other times, I reminisce about the adventures I experienced with Charlene or anticipate hanging out with friends. It happens too that I'm more conscious of what

I put in my mouth or get started on the task at hand as I enjoy the necessity of things that need to be done, meanwhile creating plans and organising my to-do lists.

When we ban bad thoughts from our lives forever, what will the world look like then? Everybody has a voice, and everybody's opinion needs to be heard. Putting our sentiments out in the open is the way to learn what's on people's minds and in their hearts. Although arguments will get heated, everything can be resolved when we decide to always find the common ground again and cooperate to accommodate.

After I search the chest in vain for a treasure map, I realise the biggest treasures are the intangible discoveries that teach me more about life, and that material goods only serve as a short-lived souvenir.

In the magic square of Kyle's nine postcards, the word causality is spelt from the centre of the grid to northwest, west, northeast, south, north, southwest, east and southeast but what's the reason for this specific order? At least Kyle has given me his vision of causality—Love, Frustration, Acceptance, Confusion, Depression, Awakening, Solution, Connection and Enlightenment. I wonder if these nine steps of growing up are applicable to my life too.

I remember falling in love with Chris, just like that. It made life more beautiful than ever. Although he dictated when we'd go surfing, go into town or hang about at his place, I set aside my frustrations. I liked being in love so much that I accepted his behaviour and enjoyed every opportunity to be with him. However, talking to Charlene about relationships made me question everything. I wondered what's fair and how much I should give up. When is love, true love? It was terribly confusing. Chris's refusal to meet my friends and my parents depressed me. I tried to juggle the situation and please everyone, but I was walking on hot charcoal, and it drained my energy. When he left me behind at the

AC/DC concert, something snapped. I woke up to the idea I'm better off without him, but it took months before I convinced myself that breaking up was the only solution. It broke my heart to cut our connection, but it was a huge relief. Finally, I can acknowledge that my first love has played an important role in my life but that was just what it was, a role to perform during a certain period of time because I needed to learn.

Exhausted from thinking, I leave the earth box and head back to the bar where Puigi is awaiting me with a big smile.

'Thanks, Puigi!' I finish my lemonade. 'Are you coming outside with me?'

'My place is here. I'm locked in space but traversing time.'

'Of course Puigi, of course.'

Less than fifteen minutes have passed since I entered Station, and I have half an hour before I meet up with Izzy. Because I want to decorate the walls of my apartment with physical proof that emphasizes the reality of a dream come true, I head for the photo shop, located on the street opposite V&D. It has a large display of cameras and lenses.

A man with a long red moustache explains that it'll take a week before I can collect the printed photos. While the bell announces another customer, my patience is being tested as I have trouble locating the roll of film in my usually tidy bag.

'Do you know developing film at the department store is done within half an hour?' a familiar voice says. 'It's faster and cheaper.'

I shake no, embarrassed by this blatant rudeness while I watch the proprietor nodding sadly. I pivot and face a grinning Scott.

'Why are you here?' I snap.

'I saw you go in.' He shrugs while his smile is replaced by a crest-fallen look.

I shrug too and turn my attention to the owner who stands in front of a wall with framed certificates and beautiful photos of to

die for locations.

‘Then just a new ISO 200 colour 24 exposures please.’

‘The film is cheaper there too,’ he says.

‘What do you want, Scott?’

I want to punch him, but he’s keeping his distance, shuffling around near the entrance. He hesitates, and I turn my back on him.

‘Mister is right,’ the owner says and nods at him, ‘but we offer the best quality prints with realistic colours, and we deliver service to the highest standards.’

I smile at Scott, who acknowledges it before I turn my head back once more. The owner gets two rolls of different brands from the rack behind and places them on the counter.

‘Thought I could walk you up there,’ Scott says.

I ignore him. As if I need a babysitter.

‘Always check the prints and only pay for photos you approve of,’ the owner says, as he draws his shoulders backwards, purses his lips and crosses his arms.

I’d love to opt for quality and get the best rather than only focus on price, but I love the weight of the remaining coins in my wallet and the promise of speedy processing too. However, if that’s how every mortal feels, impatience and stinginess could kill a business.

Charlene, a photographer with a great sense of composition and the ability to find the correct angle, would choose the best quality.

The owner twirls one end of his Dali moustache together between his forefinger and thumb and then pulls it up before repeating it on the other side. He picks up his preferred brand of film and punches the amount into the cash register keys.

‘I want to add the development cost too.’

‘You’ll pay for that when you pick up the photos.’ He smiles as he takes the film I finally produce, puts my name on an envelope, inserts the roll and gives me a receipt with a number. ‘Quality

knows a price and not everyone can afford it.'

As I hand him the cash, the bell rings again.

'Boyfriend?' the owner says.

I look over my shoulder, but Scott is gone. 'Just friends.'

'No such thing with men,' he says.

I shrug. 'See you next week.'

As I leave, it rings once more, and I wonder 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'.

The squat where Izzy lives borders on the city centre in the north-east and looks like a run-down hotel. Ground floor windows are boarded up with wooden panes. I ascend the steps to the entrance on the right and ring the bell. There's a large patio in front that adjoins a set back neighbouring hotel with an enormous painting on its wall. It's a collection of frustrations—political cartoons, slogans and a huge rainbow.

After a few minutes, Izzy opens the door, and I enter a café. She leads me through a steel-fortified door into a narrow hallway with white marble flooring and up two flights of stairs.

Back home, we leave our doors unlocked, and it seems odd having to barricade your home. I wonder how that affects her night's rest.

The living room has posters and pictures on its white walls, and red linoleum covers the floor. It leads to an open plan kitchen on the left with the basics—a small fridge, cooktop and countertop with sink, but without cupboards below. The red-painted window frame faces the city. A blackboard lists the occupants' names and has a roster with crosses.

I sit down on one of the school chairs that surround the kitchen table, and Izzy pours water into a Bravilor coffee machine. As I point to a half-full bottle, she explains they have a milkman, that they use raw sugar instead of processed and buy as much healthy

produce as they can. They take turns cooking, so every nine days it's her turn to cook for the group. She adds they don't eat meat, so I deduce it only applies when eating in. Izzy disposes of the old coffee filter, fits a fresh one and while she adds coffee, Adam stumps in.

'Izzy!' he yells.

She follows him into the hallway, and their voices become a mere whisper. The white table only seats eight. However, there's another small table positioned against the wall between the living and the kitchen with two more chairs. I walk around the tidy space and test one of the two fabric couches. It's comfortable. In a corner on a shelf, there's a radio cassette player with a stack of cassettes. As I read the scribbles, I recognise only a few band names but laugh when I pull out one I have too.

'*Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*. Somebody has taste in music,' I say holding up the cassette when Izzy returns.

'Isn't it Lukas's?'

She walks back to the kitchen to check she has turned the machine on before taking a seat. Fresh coffee is dripping into the carafe, slowly increasing in level.

'Do you often get new tenants?' I say and sit opposite her.

'I didn't know you wanted to live here.'

'Just wondering what the requirements are?'

'No capitalists, so not sure if you'd qualify, but someone that agrees with our way of life,' Izzy says and rolls a cigarette.

'Which is?'

'You'd have to contribute to communal living and make sure we can keep on living here. We help others too.'

'As in helping the elderly?'

'More like writing letters to chemical companies and ask them to stop polluting our rivers, and to demand better treatment of RAF detainees in West-Germany who went on a hunger strike. We raised awareness about the murderous regime in El Salvador by placing a

large ad in the newspaper. Didn't you see the painting outside? We collected more than 1,000 signatures and the council agreed that it didn't need to be removed.' Izzy winks and says, 'and poster pasting, if you're ever up for it again! Stuff the pursuing of economic interests, we use our time for matters we agree are important.'

'Do you need to have squatted before?'

'Isn't this like the Spanish Inquisition?' She gets up to fill two mugs with coffee.

'I want to understand.' So I can tell Daphne. That it's like our house, but with more humans, and it's neat and orderly, and has an agreeable atmosphere.

'It helps if you've lived in a squat before, although I hadn't.'

'Does everybody contribute as much?'

'You must mean money-wise?'

She puts two chipped mugs on the table and shoves one in my direction. I nod, and she pours milk and adds sugar to hers.

'We put the social benefits onto one pile. We use it to pay for electricity, water and other charges. The remaining seventy percent is for personal expenses,' Izzy says.

I should discuss a household pot with Daphne, our contribution and how to keep track of our communal purchases. The total could be split in half or itemized per person. What's easiest or fairest? I doubt my parents kept records of what my brother and I ate as a family shares everything.

'You're like a family.' I add milk, stir and taste the coffee.

'Aren't we? We call it income levelling. It has to do with trust. We discuss everything, take each other into account, and if we disagree, we address the issues and talk it through until it's resolved.'

'Like adults.'

'Yep.'

The coffee has a full aroma and tastes great. I should check which brand of beans they use.

‘Do any of you have a job?’ I say.

‘Isn’t that a sensitive subject? When people work, they lack time for discussions and actions. Then they suddenly end up doing their own thing, and it’s not helping the collective, even when they only want to save up for travel, but if they work, they contribute twenty percent of their earnings to the group.’

It’s a system of sorts, but my work and studies will take up a lot of time, it hardly leaves room for the collective. It’ll take years before they’ll achieve the change they want although I’ll give them credit for trying.

‘Are you giving away all our secrets?’ Adam says, pours himself a coffee and sits down next to Izzy.

‘Don’t I know how to keep a secret?’ Izzy winks at him. ‘Besides, Sky wants to live here, doesn’t she need to know how it works?’

I’m just settling in and reluctant to move again. After I deduce what I care most about, can I improve the world along the way?

‘Do you actually want to be a squatter?’ Adam squints his eyes like a non-believer.

‘It’s new to me. I admire that you want to better the world.’ I say.

It puts a smile on his face but seeing Lukas walk in wearing a white T-shirt and well-fitting jeans showing off his muscular body puts one on mine. I start humming ‘Let’s Lynch the Landlord’.

‘Last week, we blocked the Shell laboratories in a protest against apartheid,’ Adam says.

‘Are you just standing there with your banners and signs?’ I say.

‘We block the entrance and get the message across by yelling to stop apartheid.’

‘Stop. Apartheid. Stop. Apartheid,’ I say, and it sounds like a singing telegram. ‘How many people protested?’

‘Hundreds of people came to protest from all over the country. But apparently, a peaceful demonstration is forbidden, and the cops used brutality to break-up the blockade.’

‘If you want to stop apartheid, why are you affirming it?’ I say.

Adam sighs and drops his shoulders while Lukas, slightly amused, sits down at the head of the table. He’s humming the same song.

‘Are you deaf?’ Adam says. ‘We’re against apartheid.’

‘The only word that echoes in the air after you’ve been yelling is apartheid.’ I say. ‘The words stop, not, and against, get lost in the general thrum. Those words add nothing. People only remember what they hear and talk about apartheid while it’s the opposite of what you want to achieve.’

‘We ask the oil company to stop supporting apartheid, they can do that.’

‘What’s the opposite of apartheid?’

‘Togetherness or wholeness,’ Izzy says.

‘Solidarity,’ Lukas says and gladdens me with a cheeky smile.

‘What’s your goal once you get rid of apartheid? It needs to be replaced by what?’

‘Equal rights, obviously,’ Adam says.

‘That’s right,’ I say. ‘You create power when everybody is chanting “Equality! Equality!” or “Solidarity! Solidarity!” The words come from the heart and resonate with the crowd, including the police and the employees.’

‘But if we say what we want, it’s not obvious what we’re against,’ Adam says. ‘Then they don’t know why we’re standing at their doorstep.’

‘Of course they will. When a mob at their front door is calling for equality, they know they’re doing something wrong. Why else are you there? Besides, what’s the purpose of a demonstration if you only yell what you’re against? Then you’re only reinforcing apartheid exists. If you want change, you have to be clear and state what you want. Think about it!’

‘I doubt you ever were at a protest,’ Adam says, empties his mug

and slams it down.

‘Positive slogans are more effective,’ I say. ‘Nobody can deny what you want, it forces people to think, and they’ll ask questions, and before long, you’ve doubled the supporters for your cause. When everybody wants an equal society, it’ll happen!’

‘I’m off,’ Adam says, places the mug on the countertop and kisses Izzy.

‘You’re passionate,’ Lukas says.

I’m blushing and smile wholeheartedly.

‘Still, protesting is the only way to make them listen,’ he says. ‘It’s bizarre how a group of people bound hand and foot to a power hungry company are brainwashed. They’re happy to continue working there and earn their dirty money as if they’ve lost their principles.’

‘You were saying there’s much unemployment in the country,’ I say as I admire his strong ox hands and clean cut nails. ‘It makes sense that people hang onto their jobs.’

‘But that’s what’s wrong. People keep their mouths shut out of fear of losing their job! It’s criminal that big corporations influence governments and force everyone to play by their rules and only theirs while they cheat at every opportunity they get,’ he says.

‘Since when are people thrown in jail for having a different opinion?’ I say. ‘You have freedom of speech here. You live in a democracy instead of a communist society or under a dictatorship. Have you ever considered that the employees speak up and try to change the system from within? Have you ever spoken to them?’

‘Mate, what’s wrong with communism?’ Ben wants to know as he walks up to the counter where he starts buttering a few slices of bread.

‘You expect an answer to that?’ I grunt and roll my eyes.

He turns around, waving a knife in my direction. ‘It may have its flaws but so has the democracy.’

‘Resulting in more liberty and fewer deaths.’

Lukas waves his hand. ‘How does a blue-collar worker know what’s discussed in the boardroom? He’s only doing his job, fulfilling a tiny role as a little cog in a big machine and only when he steps higher up the ladder does he gain insight into the complete business process. By that time he’s indoctrinated with company policy, gained influence and is showered with perks and bonuses. It’s unlikely that he’s keen to give that up for a good cause.’

‘Can’t he be a she?’ Izzy says, but quickly shakes her head, ‘No, women aren’t that stupid.’

‘Why? He or she has a conscience and wants to do the right thing. I would,’ I say and smile at Izzy.

She takes the coffeepot from its plate and tops up our coffees.

‘It’s too late once you’re tangled up in their web.’ Lukas raises a single eyebrow and pouts his evenly shaped lips. ‘People create their world around their job with a house in the suburbs, nearby schools for their children and an annual holiday to relax before going back to work. It’s easy to close your eyes to your responsibility and the responsibility of your company when the pollution and destruction of nature happen abroad. Other people’s children are abused as they’re forced to work instead of receiving an education.’

‘I still reckon if you’d be chanting equality or solidarity outside their offices,’ I say, ‘they might feel strengthened to invoke change too. It makes them think about what’s so unequal you’ve come all the way to tell them that. When you’re so aggressive and negative, it only scares them off.’

‘Ever tried hazelnut spread, mate?’ Ben says and holds a folded slice out for me, ‘try it. Daphne not with you?’

A puff leaves Izzy’s lips.

‘She’s at school and will go home for the weekend.’ I smile and accept the soft bread with his finger indents still on it.

He looks disappointed.

‘Are you certain the system is so bad?’ I say to Lukas. ‘Plenty of people are happy enough. They enjoy their quiet life and make the most of it. Are you aware you belong to a minority? What makes you right?’

I take a bite and am amazed the sticky goo tastes rather nice.

‘That’s just the thing, here the game is played more subtle,’ Lukas says. ‘People don’t know something is wrong like the frog in the boiling pot. You’re the frog.’

I burst out laughing. Daphne is one, and so are they, and now I’m one too.

‘Conform. Obey. Comply. Okay. Abide,’ Izzy chants.

‘Is that your new slogan?’ I say as I’m vigorously moving my tongue around my molars to remove the sticky chocolate spread.

‘COCOA!’ Izzy says. ‘You’re the frog in my hot cocoa. Aren’t they seductive yet dangerous words that will win you over? It sounds better abbreviated than to spell out that people have to adjust to being obedient, follow orders, and accept and submit to slavery!’

‘Mate, slavery has never been abolished, only the whip,’ Ben cracks.

Izzy holds up her mug as to salute his words with a cheer.

‘Any more local catchphrases?’ I say.

‘*Als het recht verkracht wordt, wordt verzet je plicht,*’ Lukas roars, and he and Ben raise their fists while Izzy slams her mug on the table and spills her coffee.

I try to understand how the law is raped. ‘You mean when the law fails to protect its citizens the only choice is civil disobedience?’

‘Yeah!’ they cry out.

‘Mate, we’re being distracted by shit that goes on in the rest of the world,’ Ben says. ‘We forget to ask the questions that need answering.’

‘If you want to improve the world, you have to start where you live,’ Lukas says, ‘it means identifying what’s wrong here and taking proper action. There’s no system that truly functions well

and to think democracy does is plain ignorance. With democracy, power still concentrates at the top, and power corrupts. Let's put a system in place where leaders and decision-makers are always held accountable, and when they fail, they get replaced!

'Keep the peace,' I say.

'It was a peaceful demonstration,' Lukas says, 'but the police used violence.'

'Is that why you ended up with that gash?' I say to Izzy.

'Isn't it a sign of my revolt?' She touches the crust on her forehead.

'The scar could be lasting, did you put Arnica on it?'

'It'll heal.'

'Of course, you're fit, and you'll survive,' I say.

'A healthy society is like a family,' Lukas says, 'where everybody is equal, and the children are protected, but ours is sick as it's a class society with only bosses and slaves.'

'Mate, the current system is unsustainable,' Ben says.

'Even if people start out with good intentions, it's the power they achieve that corrupts.' Lukas is relentless like Newton's law of universal gravitation. 'You're one of the lucky ones, you grew up in the safety of a family in a country that's half decent, and you went to school. It's time to give back to society, so do it for your conscience, or for the future of mankind.'

It makes me think of what Phoenix says about my mission in life. I doubt my purpose is to become an activist like Lukas, but I want to deduce how I can use the underground labyrinth. There must be something to gain for me that benefits others too. What do I want to improve and do I care enough to take action?

'How do you propose to change the tide?' I say.

'Fight in whatever way you can,' Lukas says. 'Be active, write letters to governments, address the issues, and call them out on taking action. Pick a national or international cause, make people

aware and join our discussions. Find out what you care about. You can begin with bar service downstairs. You don't even have to live in this squat. All voluntary though. Come with me, and I'll explain.'

'Let me think about it,' I say. It has to be fun before I'll consider working for free.

Izzy shakes her head at Lukas before she gets up. 'Weren't you keen to find Kyle? Let's go.'

'Thanks for the social chat,' I say and wave at Ben and smile back at Lukas until I feel his glance is making me blush again.

## XVII

Although I live in a troubled world, the welcoming fresh air and sunny sky make life seem perfect right at this moment.

‘Here’s a crash helmet,’ Izzy says.

‘Where’s yours?’

She points to her Mohawk, and I see the problem. While I struggle to close the strap under my chin, she retrieves the moped from between parked bicycles. I kick my head back to slide the wobbly helmet up and study the fat tyres, the oversized seat, sturdy frame and luggage rack. A small engine is mounted above the front wheel of the black Solex.

I grin. ‘Are you a stunt driver?’

She wearily shakes her head. I hand back the open face helmet, and she hangs it on the steering wheel.

‘Suit yourself.’ The moped refuses to start. ‘Stay put.’

Izzy lets it roll downhill while cranking it again until it eventually jolts to life. I secure my scarf and zip up my jacket while fleetingly wondering if Kyle has his driver’s licence. She does a U-turn and then gestures me to get on.

‘I need fuel, but there’s a petrol station around the corner.’

I pull up my knees and hold onto her waist. The Solex bumps from the foot onto the bicycle path. Izzy rides against traffic and ignores the lights before pulling into the petrol station. As I dismount, I sense the journey will be uncomfortable.

‘Keep the engine running,’ I say.

‘Why?’ she says and pulls the moped on its stand.

I point to the brand name.

‘Yeah,’ she sniggers and rubs her forehead, but lets the engine run. ‘They were vandalized last week, but they’ve fixed the hoses.’

‘Do you even know the route to Helderdonk?’ I say.

‘You know, don’t you?’

‘Hmm, it’s at least thirty clicks away. How long will it take with a Solex?’

‘Shouldn’t be more than an hour.’

I’m sure my bum will protest after two hours of exposure to the road’s bumpy surface. ‘Maybe we could catch a train there?’

‘I still need fuel.’

‘Wrong petrol station.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Come on. Remember the bloody posters? After everything you guys have been telling me, about doing the right thing and fighting injustice. You’re boycotting this company, so we must go elsewhere, Izzy.’

‘It’s an emergency,’ she squeaks.

‘Suddenly lost your principles?’

‘There’s another one further uphill,’ she says, ‘different brand, but I don’t think we’ll make it there.’

‘Let’s try.’

Sluggish like a snail, we reach the top of the hill where the engine dies at the traffic lights, a hundred metres before the petrol station.

I remember running out of petrol once while stuck on one of the quieter roads on the Peninsula. Luckily, I quickly hitch a ride to and from the service station. The jerry can and flexible nozzle tube should still be in the back of Charlene’s panel-van.

‘This wasn’t a good idea,’ Izzy says.

‘Think of it as a healthy exercise.’ I put one hand on the luggage rack and the other on the saddle and heave it with all my vigour. Although it’s heavier than I imagined, Izzy has to run to hold on to the Solex, and when she jumps on, I give it one last push.

‘I didn’t want to go here, you did,’ she yells over her shoulder.

I jog after her. ‘So do you. I wonder what Adam will say if he knew you were planning to fill up downtown. Sticking to your principles comes at a price,’ I yell back through deep gasping breaths.

At the station, she turns to me in a panic. ‘You will not tell him, will you?’

‘Relax, I can tell Lukas I’m fighting for a cause now too. Does he have a girlfriend?’

She scrutinizes me. ‘He talks politics all the time. You don’t want that, do you?’

‘He’s passionate.’

‘I didn’t think you shared the same passion?’

‘We like the same music.’

She ignores me as she unscrews the cap and adds fuel before walking off to the cash register.

‘Bring me back a cushion, will you?’ I yell after her.

I’m disappointed by her lukewarm reaction as I was hoping she’d say Lukas is a great guy and maybe has mentioned me in conversation, but it seems she holds a grudge against him.

When Izzy returns, she’s smiling again. The Solex starts straight away now there’s enough fuel to crank her over. I put my feet on the frame between her legs. Yelling for joy, we ride downhill past Sonsbeek Park and Station where I wave to Puigi, curious if he’ll notice before turning right at Willemsplein. Within minutes, we arrive at station Arnhem where Izzy parks the moped and ties the helmet with a lock to the front wheel.

Past a flower shop in the station hall, there are yellow billboards

that display the train network and various timetables. Izzy ruffles through the bristle hairs on the side of her head and determines there's one changeover to get to our destination before she looks up the platform and departure time. She refuses to stand in line with me at the service desk.

'Do you need a ticket too?' I call out to her.

She hangs back, looking grim. 'I have one.'

When the whistle blows, we reach the platform and jump in just before the doors close. Out of breath, we land inside a carriage as the train joggles into motion, and we spy four empty seats. We sit opposite each other next to a window. Izzy is riding backwards and rolls a cigarette, but before lighting it, she rubs her temples.

'Don't I have such a headache?'

'That explains your mood.' I purse my lips.

'It's not a hangover. My brother ... he was coming to visit me, but he has called to say he can't. My parents reckon he's too young, although he's already thirteen. They probably think I'll corrupt him. If I want to see my brother, I have to go home.'

'When did you last go home?'

'I want to show him how I live, what my life's like since I left. We used to get along so well.'

'Maybe your parents want you to come back.'

'They didn't expect me to move out, but they didn't stop me either.'

It sounds as if she wanted to stay home. I considered threatening to run away from home once, but even in the heat of the moment, I realised that making such a point has serious consequences.

Metal squeaking noises fill the carriage, and a vigorous rocking motion shakes us about as the train changes tracks and rolls westwards past the train yard. When the speed increases, city apartments give way to outer suburban villas until we're heading south, where we pass floodplains before crossing the river. I lower the

window for some fresh air, get the water bottle out and take a sip before offering it to Izzy.

‘Perhaps your parents can still support you when you want to get a higher education?’ I say.

‘Don’t I have a secondary school diploma? What more do they want? I’m happy here, and I don’t want to study. I told them I take care of myself, and I will. It’s not as though they enjoy having me around,’ Izzy says and as tears well up, she bites her lip.

‘What happened?’ I say, wondering why she thinks her parents are the enemy.

‘Isn’t it stupid? They blamed me because I was home, but I was doing my homework! I didn’t know what he was doing. Once I did, it was too late. They kept saying I had been irresponsible. Since then I always see the condemnation in their eyes. I couldn’t handle it anymore.’ She forcefully butts her cigarette in the ashtray and stares out of the window.

I’m lost for words, and I look at her, but she refuses eye contact. I ponder for a while if I should speak up or leave her alone, but watching the pain distort her pretty face, I take my chances.

‘What happened to your brother?’

Izzy turns my way and swallows hard. ‘I was listening to music on my Walkman,’ she says in a hoarse voice. ‘I had found one, and I knew they’d never approve, so I kept it in my drawer, and I loved how I could shut out the world. It also meant I didn’t hear him. When Mum came home from grocery shopping, she found him at the bottom of the stairs. He was taken to the hospital.’

‘As if that’s your fault. It could have happened to anyone. Why beat yourself up about it?’ I question why one incident should break down a family.

‘Don’t you think I know I’m guilty? I understand that, but I hate it.’

‘Hang on. It was an accident! You could have been on the toilet, and he’d have fallen. Is it possible that because you still feel respon-

sible, you misjudge every word and every gesture from your parents? Are you maybe reading more into it because you like feeling guilty?’

‘I hate feeling guilty.’

‘Do you? It sounds you like to dwell on feeling guilty. Perhaps you should forgive yourself and then your parents will too.’

‘Boy.’ Izzy crosses her arms and looks the other way.

We sit in silence as the train crosses another river, slows down and rolls to a stop at our connecting station. At another platform, we wait for our next train that arrives within minutes.

When I tell Izzy about Oscar’s letter, she insists on reading it, and my grandmother’s affair brightens her mood. I check the stamps on Kyle’s postcards and notice with relief that his first card puts him in Helderdonk at the time of posting. It confirms the likelihood he grew up in the town that’s directly linked to Helen.

Outside the windy station is a signboard with the map of Helderdonk. I pinpoint the street written on Helen’s aerogramme from ten years ago, addressed to K Kambier, and mark the route in my mind. Suddenly, I’m nervous and in the dark about how and under what conditions questions will be answered, feeling like an interviewer on location.

‘Do you know what you’ll ask when we get there?’ Izzy says.

I’ve been mulling over what to say before falling to sleep and again at the crack of dawn. I hope the words will come out as prepared.

‘More or less. With a bit of luck, I’ll get invited for tea, and they’ll bring out the family albums, and we can get to know each other.’

We pass a windmill on a mound and stroll east into a neighbourhood where the streets are named after flowers. There are trees on nature strips, and the rows of houses display well-maintained gardens. Izzy is peeping into living rooms, sometimes raising herself on tippy toes to see more, but mostly shaking her head at

the interiors, interspersed with an occasional nod.

‘Isn’t this another suburbia? It’s so predictable. I do prefer the obscurity of the city,’ Izzy says.

I like that unity brings order to a suburb. However, every house is unique as the garden designs, and windowsill decorations show the personal touch like personalizing a school uniform by adding scarf, buttons and jewellery.

Thousands of what if scenarios whirl around my mind, and although I’m well aware these thoughts fail to prepare me for what’s beyond my control, the exciting anticipation of events about to unfold means I’m unable to stop them.

It’s strange to walk in the area that has a link with Helen and Kyle. I gaze around keen to find the familiar, like recognizing a street watching TV, but I’m unsure if my grandmother has ever been in this part of town and how much it has changed since she left.

A woman passes us on a bicycle, while another walks home carrying full shopping bags. In one living room, a woman is reading a newspaper at the table and three doors down, another is doing a puzzle in the comfort of a lounge chair. Izzy is giggling and points to a front garden filled with gnomes. I wonder if they come alive at night.

When we reach the street, my heartbeat increases, and I reckon I should face a confrontation with the past alone. ‘Here we are.’

Izzy points to the low street posts and sits on top of one, out of sight from the nearby villa. ‘Don’t you want me to wait here for you?’

‘Yes, please.’ I sip water, clear my throat and shake loose my arms and hands.

The cottage style villa has brown roof tiles and dormers, and a wildflower garden in bloom with a carport and main entrance on the left. I scrape my throat once more and ring the bell. A woman

in her forties with short slicked hair wearing a white blouse and a glistering necklace opens the door.

‘Hello, I’m Sky, and I’m looking for Kyle, is he home?’

Confused, she looks at me.

‘Kyle Kambier? He’s my cousin, and I’ve travelled the world to find him. This is his last known address. Do you know if he lived here? Perhaps the Kambier family?’ I smile as prettily as I can.

She stares sideways to the pavement as if digging deep into her memory. ‘The Kambiers. Hmm. They’re a well-known family around here. He’s the director of the butter factory, and they live in the white villa on the main street. He must be retired by now. Many children. I only have one, and he’s about to finish his studies. I’m so proud. He’s getting married too.’

‘Wonderful. Is he friends with Kyle? Do you know who used to live here?’ I say.

She shakes her head. ‘Not a Kambier. There was a musician ... Eddie Hayes. Threw parties all the time. The cellar was his music studio. Can you believe all walls were covered with empty egg cartons? We’ve turned it into a sauna, so nice. It didn’t help much, those cartons, I believe the neighbours were happy when he moved.’

‘Where to?’

‘Not sure, they emigrated abroad to an English-speaking country, Canada or America.’

‘They?’

‘He, his wife and his son.’

‘When did you move in?’

‘Two years ago, mind you, we had to seriously renovate before we could move in.’

‘What’s his wife’s name, or his son’s?’

She briefly closes her eyes and rubs her forehead. ‘Let me think. We received a lot of mail addressed to him, long after he left. I had to cancel his newspaper and music subscriptions, and that was

a bit of a hassle as he left no forwarding address. He wasn't well organised, this Eddie, a big slob if you ask me, but I guess that's what these creative types are like. They think they get away with everything. My son didn't mind his *Guitar Player* magazine, but when I told him he'd have to pay for it himself, he wasn't too keen anymore. Mind you, not my kind of music. Cat, it said on a Xmas card, must be Eddie and Caitlin, but I don't know their son's name, sorry. You can try the city council. It's on your left, shortly before the Kambier villa, so go straight ahead and at the end of this street, turn right and keep going into town. You can't miss it.'

'Did the Kambiers live here before Eddie Hayes? How many years has Eddie lived here?'

'No idea, sorry.' She smiles apologetically.

I thank her and rush back to Izzy. A pile of green leaves surrounds her feet.

'You've entertained yourself,' I say.

'Wasn't that a quick cuppa? Spill.'

'The Kambier family lives in town! We're looking for a white villa. She has explained how to get there. Come on.' I'm skipping past the house, and I notice the woman is peeking through the window but when I wave at her, she quickly turns away.

'Slow down Sky, there's no rush.' Izzy is lagging to roll another cigarette.

'The quicker we get there, the sooner I find out. Let's go.'

'It's not as if a few more minutes matter,' she yells. 'Don't you want to enjoy a stroll through Kyle's birth town?'

It's hard to suppress the urge to run towards the answers, but I wait for Izzy at the end of the street.

'What else did she say?'

'She only remembers a musician, Eddie Hayes, living there. However, Mr Kambier has a large family and is the director of the butter factory.'

‘Was he famous?’

‘Looks like everybody in town knows the Kambiers. Why?’

‘That musician Eddie, what band was he in? I don’t know all the band members names of the music I listen to but imagine we visited the house of a famous artist!’

‘Too late, he moved overseas two years ago with his wife and son.’

‘Where to? Didn’t she have their names?’

I shake no. ‘She said Canada or America.’

‘Isn’t she sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can’t it be Australia then?’ Izzy says. ‘What if Kyle lived there? You don’t know for sure he’s a Kambier. Imagine that Sky, Kyle has moved with his famous dad to the place you came from.’

It’s a terrible thought. ‘Come on. The letter was addressed to K Kambier. The K and the Kambier are missing in Eddie’s household, so maybe the Kambiers lived there before Eddie. I can check with the council. Besides, the family is now living on this street, they’ll know.’

The main street is a broad-shouldered boulevard with trees on both sides. A few cars pass by.

‘Sky, what’s butter made of?’

‘Cow’s milk. Why?’

‘Doesn’t Oscar mention in his letter he’s collecting milk churns from Helen’s farm and that he’ll take over from his dad at the factory? What if Oscar is Oscar Kambier, the director of the butter factory?’

‘Izzy, you’re brilliant!’

‘What about Helen? Oscar would have been a great catch!’

Lucky for me she chose my granddad.

‘If Kyle is his son, he’ll be a good catch too!’ Izzy says.

‘Kyle used to run around here, and Helen grew up here too, and her daughter. I wonder what it looked like in the thirties and forties.’

Even when Helen lived on a farm, she'd have been within walking distance of town and able to take part in all the action that the village could offer. This country is so small, it fits more than five times into the state Victoria.

'During the war?' Izzy says. 'It looks as if it didn't get bombed, those farmhouses are ancient.'

'Kyle's friends live here. I boldly go where Kyle has gone before.'

'And thousands of others. It's not as if there's any place left where man hasn't yet set foot,' Izzy says.

'Except for the hidden places! Makes me wonder though why some people leave while others stay put.'

We glance at each other and giggle.

'Cause I'm a wanderer, yeah a wanderer,' Izzy sings, and I join in.

Getting closer to town traffic increases and so does our pace as we march past the lime trees until I suddenly stop. 'Look at that.'

On the right in a park is a huge tree resembling a get together of droopy green ghosts.

'Haven't you seen a weeping willow before?'

'That big? It's gorgeous. Why do you leave such a place?'

'Stop asking the same question.' Izzy tucks her arm through mine. 'Shouldn't you go in? It's the town hall.'

I turn around to face a modern brick building with white cladding on its corners. I leave Izzy behind to smoke while I cross the square. Within five minutes, I'm back on the street, where I find her petting a dog tied to a bicycle stand. She must have left Bossy at home.

'The good news is, I was first in line,' I say cheerfully. 'Bad news is that the Coppins are unknown here and to top it off, they refused to give me any information on the Kambiers!' I throw up my hands in frustration.

'Doesn't it prove that they live here?'

'We already knew that, but I guess it's now official,' I say. 'There it

is. That's it.'

I point at a white villa with green canopy awnings, surrounded by a lawn and separated from the road and park by a low fence. At once, I'm nervous again. The Kambier villa holds the answers to my questions about Kyle, Helen, and her daughter.

There's a pub opposite the villa and Izzy proposes we go in. It's an old-fashioned refurbished place with dark timber furniture and small Persian rugs on the tables with fake flowers where two tables are occupied. A pensioner sits at the bar sipping from a tiny glass of liquor. I choose a window seat with a good view of the villa and drape my jacket around the back of the chair. She joins me after taking a pair of brown bound menus from the counter with its brass beer tabs.

'Shouldn't we summarize what we discovered so far? To decide which questions haven't been answered?'

I nod and study the lunch menu, which serves the basics as Izzy explains. When the host, dressed in black with an ironed white shirt arrives, we order a *boerenomelet* and an *uitsmijter* with coffees.

'You don't know in which town your grandmother was born, but isn't it around here somewhere?' she says while spying on the villa.

'Helen only ever mentioned Helderdonk rather than the name of the small village where she was born.'

'I guess it isn't relevant where she grew up,' Izzy says, rolling another cigarette. 'Isn't it more important to find Oscar, his daughter and Kyle?'

'But who lived at that address in 1979?'

'If not Eddie, shouldn't we go back and ask the neighbours if they remember who used to live there?'

'I should have thought about that earlier.' Having to walk back along the long boulevard again is a tiresome prospect. 'However, we do have the current address for the Kambier family, and they live across the road.'

Tucked away behind the shrubs and safety of curtaining, the white villa is silent as a fortress. I excuse myself, hurry to the bathroom and when I return, a candle has been lit, and cutlery, napkins, and the coffees are placed on the table.

‘There has been no movement behind the curtains. The pensioners are having a nap.’

‘When Oscar lives there, he should be home,’ I say, ‘but why did Helen leave her child with him?’

Izzy cups the coffee with two hands. ‘He wouldn’t see his daughter again if she’d move abroad. Maybe he forced her to abandon her baby?’

‘That sounds cruel,’ I say and pull a face. ‘I wonder what the girl’s name is.’

‘I wonder where Kyle is.’ She bursts out laughing.

I giggle nervously as the distance that separates me from the answers I want to find is only thirty metres, and although I know a little more than yesterday, the situation is surreal like MC Escher’s *Relativity* lithograph.

The host serves our food and Izzy orders more coffee, but I decline another drink. I dig into an egg-omelette filled with mushrooms, tomato, cheese and onion and Izzy into her *uitsmijter*—two slices of white bread with ham, cheese and fried eggs, sunny side up. We eat in silence. I only devour three-quarters of my late lunch as the knot in my belly takes away my appetite, so I rehearse what to say while Izzy keeps an eye on the quiet villa opposite. After I down the last bit of coffee, I ask her to wait for me as staying patient any longer is unbearable.

After crossing the street, I take a deep breath before walking over a gravel path to the doorway that’s located to the right of the villa. It’s made from solid oak and has an old-fashioned knocker in the shape of a lion’s head. Violent whispers float into earshot of a man and woman arguing inside, and instantly, my courage fails me.

I wait. When I look back at the café, Izzy is giving me the thumbs up, and I wave.

Suddenly, the door swings open and a man pushes me aside. He's followed by a whirlwind of icy chill that gives me the shivers while a strident voice continues to utter harsh words in my direction. It hurts my eardrums. A well-coiffed middle-aged woman with a round face stands on the threshold of the entrance and has her eyes fixated on him. Disheartened, I stare at her flustered cheeks. Then she notices me.

'Yes?' she snaps, and her light blue eyes hit me like a frozen lightning bolt while she re-composes her posture and shifts her face into neutral.

'Mrs Kambier?'

Of course she is, and the stupidity of the question makes me shrink even though I'm much taller. I feel like a little school kid who has been set straight without the use of words.

She purses her lips. 'And you are?' she says, with a voice like a piece of chalk on a blackboard.

'I'm Sky Beaumont, Mrs Kambier, I would like to talk to Mr Kambier please.'

She shakes her head and remains silent as though she wants more information.

'I travelled from overseas, and I've waited my whole life for this day. I ... I'm looking for Kyle. Do you know where he is? Does Kyle live here? Can you or Oscar, sorry, Mr Kambier, tell me more about him? Do you have his current address? I'd love to speak with Mr Kambier and Kyle.'

She stands there, watching me with hostility and unwilling to let me come in, so I take one of Kyle's cards from my bag. She takes it and glances at the picture of the river quay before turning it over. Nervous, I fumble with my fingers while I wait for her to finish reading.

‘Do you know my grandmother Helen Coppin?’

She’s still staring at the text but when our eyes meet again, hers are firing bullets, and the colour has seeped from her face.

‘That, I cannot help you with. I will appreciate it you will not bother me again.’

‘Who is K Kambier?’

She has closed the door. Crushed, I stare at the entrance for what feels like an eternity as of every possible scenario I conjured up, I failed to see this one coming. Like a battered dog, I trudge back to the café.

‘Didn’t she slam the door shut in your face?’ Izzy says.

‘Pretty much, as soon as I spoke of Helen, that was the end of it. Unbelievable,’ I say and slump in my seat, burnt like a witch at the stake. ‘I need a drink.’

Izzy is grinning like a gallant knight and winks at the bartender to bring us a beer.

‘Did you see that guy that came rushing out?’ I say.

‘Isn’t he tall and skinny, wearing a pilot jacket, baggy trousers and black boots, storming off like that? I heard the slamming of a car door and screeching tyres.’

I shrug. ‘Mrs Kambier is an unfriendly woman. Refused to let me speak to her husband.’

‘Edith is her name and isn’t she a snob?’

Incredulous, I stare at Izzy.

‘Isn’t it amazing what the locals tell you when you buy them a drink?’

Surprised, I check out the pub, but there must be a lull in business since the other tables are empty.

‘Didn’t you notice that old chap at the bar sipping from his *jenever*? He knows everything about the Kambiers!’

‘You’ve been busy,’ I say.

‘Edith used to be the housemaid of the family before she married

him,' Izzy says and leans forward. 'Isn't it sad that Oscar is bedridden? They have four children—Katie, Paul, Finn and Mark. Most of them live in a nearby city.'

Oscar mentions the servant in his letter to Helen, but his description of Edith hardly does her justice. At least I can tell Helen Oscar's still alive. Helen's daughter would have to be Katie as in K Kambier on the aerogramme, but it fails to explain why she lived in the cottage style villa. If Edith bears Oscar three boys, I wonder how well she and her stepdaughter are getting along.

When the bartender places a pot in front of me, I gulp half of it in one go. 'What about Kyle?'

'Isn't he part of the family?' Izzy says. 'Kyle is Katie's son. His dad is Eddie Hayes.'

I'm astounded. Kyle's dad is a musician, and he's married to Katie. Kyle is Helen's grandson. I always believed I was her first-born grandchild, but Kyle is. He's my cousin or half-cousin. Kyle Hayes. I keep repeating his name now he has the correct one and a family tree that connects him to me.

'Too bad he has moved away,' Izzy says, trying to suppress a gloating *I told you so* smirk that circles the corners of her lips.

It instantly deflates my hope of meeting Kyle. Still, there's a possibility that Kyle, aged twenty-three in 1987, stayed behind. Oscar could tell me more about Katie and Kyle, but if I want to talk to him, I need to get past Edith.

'Don't they have phone books here?' Izzy says, pointing to an old-fashioned phone booth near the bar. 'You can look up the telephone numbers of Oscar's children.'

'Food and drinks are on me,' I yell and rush over with a notebook and pen in hand.

There's a row of phone books that hang by their bindings at waist height. I pull the local one up and flip through the pages, searching for Kyle's number first. I ring the only Hayes number

in Helderdonk, but it's disconnected. After speaking with several others in the area without success, I jot down the few numbers of the Kambier family, one in this town and two in a nearby city. I had better make sure I know what to say as I prefer to avoid another cold shoulder and decide to call them from home.

'Everything's quiet across the street,' Izzy says, halfway through her beer.

'There's a mismatch with the Kambier names and their first initials.' I show her the list of the three or four letters in front of their surname.

'Aren't they a Catholic family? They often use a first name that doesn't match their given names.'

'But Helen is a Protestant.'

Izzy chuckles, looking smug. 'Can't that explain the issues between Helen and Oscar? It's like *twee geloven op een kussen, daar slaapt de duivel tussen*.'

'What?'

'It's a proverb stating that an interfaith marriage, especially back in those days, was unheard of.'

'Bloody religion again! Imagine what life without religion could offer.'

'Peace?' Izzy suggests.

Kyle knew. He hates the church and the sentence on the second card implies as much—'Contemplate the yoke of misery. A pile of laid bricks that can fall apart.' He picked a fine example choosing the biggest church in town, the one that changed denomination from Catholic to Protestant and putting it at the heart of his riddle.

'Haven't you gone quiet?'

'Huh?' Izzy's voice interrupts my chain of thought. 'Why do families keep secrets?'

'Nobody likes putting their dirty laundry out.'

'Why? I'm sure secrets cause much pain,' I say.

‘Because it’s embarrassing. You’re a stranger asking personal questions, and a pretty face isn’t enough to get answers.’

Helen is the matriarch of our family. She has given birth to another family tree. It functions separate from ours, and I’m curious to find out more about these relatives. However, there’s resentment about unravelling family history, and I suspect they’d consider my interest as me prying.

‘I came to find Kyle, so the least Edith can do is talk to me,’ I say.

How can Kyle be dirty laundry? He’s too young to be responsible and a creation of his lineage, both male and female.

‘Didn’t Edith say to mind your own business? Unfortunately, it’s not what you wanted to hear.’

‘I lost Kyle as soon as I found him. Let’s go home,’ I say.

‘Do you think your search for Kyle has been for nothing?’

## XVIII

It's dark and stars light up the sky while streetlights illuminate the cobblestones of the pedestrian area as I cycle through the city centre. Zoe's apartment block is located west of the church, and many bicycles are parked in front of its entrance. I push the bell beside the flat number, and when the glass door buzzes, I shove it open and ascend the steps to the top floor where a door is ajar.

Cheerful voices drift out and a well-dressed elderly couple nod in passing. I squeeze into an entrance hall that's overflowing with coats and stuff mine in a pile on the floor. In a compact kitchen, I find Zoe where she's taking off her short padded-shoulder jacket, revealing a bare shoulder from a long sagging T-shirt. She puts the jacket on top of the fridge before continuing to prepare snacks.

'Happy birthday Zoe.'

As she turns around, she smiles. I give her a kiss and receive two more, one on each cheek before I hand her a present. She's wearing pointy leather shoes with flashing buckles, which peek out from her legging-clad legs.

'Thank you! Great you came. Ryan is here too.' As she tears off the wrapping, she winks. 'Without the girlfriend, they had a fight.'

I laugh, and my heart misses a beat. Zoe is enchanted with the black velvet choker necklace and kisses me three more times on the cheeks—left, right and left again before putting the present in a cupboard above. She gets a beer from the fridge, opens it and hands

it over.

‘Unless you want coffee and cake first? There are still a few slices of flan left. Or do you prefer wine?’

I smile. ‘You’ll be right.’

There are bowls with chips and crackers on the countertop and a plate with French cheeses and dips. She takes her wine glass, and we toast to love. Then she diverts her attention back to cutting cucumbers and salami into slices, and Gouda cheese into cubes before arranging it on a platter and adding two teaspoons of mustard on the side.

‘Can I help?’

‘What else do I need?’ Zoe mumbles. ‘No thanks, but it’s a full house, so get your own drinks. Crates of beer are on the balcony.’

When I’m about to walk away, she calls me back.

‘You can go around with the snacks.’ She smiles as she puts a tray with refreshments into my hands.

Balancing the tray in one hand, I take a draught of beer and leave the bottle behind while I scratch the label with a thumbnail so I can identify it later. The black and white decorated living room is packed with lots of familiar faces, and as I offer the guests a snack, I introduce myself to the unfamiliar ones. The girls from my team are there and greet me with a smile. Chairs and couches are taken, and earthlings sit on red cushions on the carpet. When I shuffle the tray with the leftover snacks between the plates, cups and saucers on the coffee table, someone taps me on the shoulder.

‘Did you find Kyle?’

I turn around and face a smiling girl with straight red hair wearing glasses. ‘Gemma, what are you doing here?’

‘The birthday girl is my little sister.’

I laugh. ‘Then I know what your parents look like, an elegant mum and a law-abiding dad. You look exactly like him. My parents are here.’

When I hold my hand to my heart, her expression saddens.

‘They’re both alive,’ I assure her, ‘I’ll see them again at Xmas.’

Relieved, she smiles. ‘Where’s your drink? Twenty-two and still no manners, Zoe!’ she calls out.

I hush her and explain that Zoe has served me a drink. I retrieve my beer from the kitchen, bring a fresh one along for Gemma and spot Ryan in a corner talking to his volleyball mates. There’s pop music coming through the speakers, but the volume is low. Gemma’s going through a pile of CDs near the stereo and selects a few.

‘Is the Kawasaki motorbike yours?’ I say.

‘It sure is! I love riding, being exposed to the elements, going fast and feeling the wind on my face. I’m never stuck in traffic, and I can park right in front of where I want to be.’

I recall the hemp leaves on the window and frown. It might be dangerous to drive while stoned.

‘Don’t jump to conclusions,’ Gemma says. ‘I’m always sober while riding. Can’t afford an accident. I only have one life.’

She’s good at either reading my thoughts or my facial expression. But I’m making assumptions again, why do I expect that someone inside a coffeeshop must smoke cannabis like a person in a bar must consume alcohol?

‘I love driving too.’

I miss Charlene and my car. It’s great that public transport here is well organised, but I prefer the unlimited freedom and speed a vehicle brings, and a bicycle is a start.

‘Do you live here too?’ I say.

‘The apartment is way too small for two people. Besides, I’m happy to have a home on my own. I’ve bought a house. Another month before I move in.’

A girl gets up, walks to the stereo behind us to turn up the volume and starts dancing. I take her place on the couch, and Gemma sits on the edge.

‘Do you have a boyfriend then?’ I say.

‘Why do I need a boyfriend to buy a house?’

‘Hmm.’ It’s a valid question.

‘Any luck in finding Kyle?’

I lift my bottle in a lonely cheer. ‘You can stop looking for him. He’s gone. Kyle has left the country.’

‘Ouch. That undermines the purpose of your move.’

I shrug. It eradicates my reasons for being here, and it’s been less than a week since I arrived. I’m disappointed, and I must wait for Xmas before I can talk to Helen. It’s a bummer, but I’m relieved that I now know.

‘Life’s wonderful and mysterious but uncontrollable. Kyle emigrated with his parents even though he was already twenty-three.’

‘Boys take longer to grow up.’

‘But he moved out and lived in Arnhem, while his parents stayed in Helderdonk.’

‘Maybe he wanted a change of scenery. Where did they move?’ she says.

‘Chances are they left for Australia, considering Helen lives there.’

Zoe is turning the stereo up a notch before dashing off to welcome even more girls.

‘Double ouch,’ Gemma says, ‘but he’ll meet his idol.’

I’m angry with Kyle and with Helen. She failed to mention any visits from her secret family. Will they’ve contacted her once they arrived? How much longer does she want to keep it a secret?

‘Would you move to another country with your parents?’ I say.

‘I just bought a house. My life is here with my job and friends. My parents have no plans as far as I know. I guess it depends on what’s there for me.’

‘Kyle must have friends too, and studies or work.’ I’m amused to hear ‘Live it Up’ pumping out the speakers. ‘When he was sixteen,

he posted his second postcard from here.'

'That's too young to live on your own. Only troubled kids run away from home at that age. Are you sure he lived here? Maybe Arnhem was just his favourite city?'

I shake no. 'Can you believe I arrived here too late?'

Gemma has a serious expression on her face.

'What?' I say.

'He's not registered at the city council, and nobody knows him. Listen, it might be preposterous, but ... there's a mental institution close by ... maybe he has spent some time there?'

Now I shake no wildly, the suggestion is mental as anything, and I take a long draught of beer.

'I've located Kyle's family. His surname is Hayes and his mum Katie is Helen's daughter. Kyle is Helen's grandson, and Katie is my half-aunt.'

'Blow me down,' Gemma says.

'You and me both! Katie has three brothers, or rather three half-brothers. My half-half-uncles.'

'I don't think they'd be your uncles,' she says, 'but you increased your extended family, interesting.'

'I rang Kyle's uncle Finn, but the phone number belongs to a student house, and they haven't been in touch since he left a few months ago.'

'How old is he? Katie should be in her forties, and her brother is a student. That's a huge age gap. And the others?' she says.

'When I rang Mark, he wanted to know who I was, and when I explained that his mother refused to let me talk to his dad, he said he's unable to help me either.'

'Mummy's boy!'

Earthlings are shuffling furniture around to make room for a dance floor, and we help push the couch forward.

Gemma sits next to me. 'What's with the other uncle?'

‘Paul. I called him, and he answers with this beautiful low voice. “Hello” he says, and when I fall silent, he adds, “You can talk to me, it’s safe”. I was so dumbfounded, I freaked out and hung up.’

‘You can always call him again, and at least you now have more information even if your new relatives are aloof. You’re here! What’s not to like?’

I check out the crowd and see a bunch of happy humans that enjoy life and welcome me in their midst. ‘What do you do?’

‘Asking for your motivations,’ Gemma says, ‘but in daily life, I’m an insurance advisor, I visit people at home.’

My mouth falls open.

‘No worries, when I visit you, I won’t talk about insurance unless you want me to.’ She tilts her head back and laughs.

‘I love houses too. I work at a real estate agency,’ I say and eat some twisted shaped chips.

‘It’s amazing what a home tells about its residents. House calls do give me a much better understanding of what people need than when they come into my office.’

‘I agree, I love how well a house can treat its people and how occupants can improve the way a house is treating them.’

‘I’ll ask my brother who works at the institution when I catch up with him next if he can find out about Kyle.’ Gemma gets up and walks onto the front balcony for a smoke.

‘I don’t know Paul, but I know how this house will treat you,’ a volleyball player says, as he pulls me up from the couch and leads me to the improvised dance floor. ‘It’s time to have some fun. No better way than dancing.’

He moves his arms and legs fanatically to the music. I’m infected by his enthusiasm, and the song he chose. ‘I Love Rock n’ Roll’ once inspired me to cut my hair into layers with a fringe, but Charlene made me see sense in time.

Our lips are syncing to the vocals without making a sound, and

we move passionately around in front of each other. His twinkling eyes make up for his less attractive crooked mouth, but it's his brown loafers that put me off. The next song is slow, so I head to the kitchen and pull out a cold beer before I take the crate from outside and restock the fridge.

When I return he's still on the dance floor, now chanting with his teammates, 'You Gotta Fight ... For Your Right ... To Party!'

They're as loud as they can be.

'They have one more match to win, Saturday week,' Zoe says and pokes me. 'Come and watch, it's a home game.'

'With this attitude, I'm sure they'll win.'

'How do you know my sister?'

'What shall I say?'

The room is hot and vibrant with chatter and laughter, and I point to the window. On our way to the balcony, I explain about meeting Gemma in a coffee café, unsure if drug-related matters should be kept a secret even when she says she only smokes cigarettes.

'I'll tell you when I'm going to Pam's party,' Gemma whispers in passing and butts her cigarette in one of the pot plants.

'Great party,' Ryan says, 'how many people did you invite?'

'As many as possible,' Zoe says.

She's tapped on the shoulder, and as she turns around she flies into the arms of a girl and is whisked away. Ryan and I are the only ones left outdoors.

The half moon is visible and so is the Big Dipper. I'm looking at the constellation that Helen is longing to see while she'll be looking at my favourite Southern Cross. Day and night occur everywhere on earth, and the moon is visible everywhere too. However, the moon is viewed in reverse in different hemispheres, and the stars and constellations only show up on the separated halves of the sky.

'Our latest catch,' Ryan says.

'The jury is still out.' I say, drowning in the vast depths of his

seductive eyes, 'and I'll be playing on the girl's team.'

'But you're still our latest member.'

I smile and feel my heart beating. 'How are you?'

'Now I'm alone with you, I'd say I'm good.'

A lump in the groin of his tight pants is visible.

I grin. 'Glad I arrived in time. I'd hate to see you suffer.'

'There's plenty you can do.' Ryan blinks his long eyelashes.

'Are you always such a frolic?'

'What if I am?'

'I could do a lot to lift your spirits,' I say, thinking he still has a girlfriend, 'but you might be barking up the wrong tree.'

'You mean you're like Zoe?' His smile disappears. 'Bummer.'

I burst out laughing seeing him perplexed, but before I compose myself to utter another word, he has already left the balcony. I look at the moon and stars, to heaven and earth and then there's man, there will always be men.

SATURDAY

## XIX

Chasing a childhood dream has shown that the present has caught up with me and the future has moved onwards. There's truth to Kyle's existence. However, I'm unable to share with him the causality I've discovered. I'm an idiot as I'm two years too late and stuck where he escaped. Helen has replaced her firstborn grandchild that moved halfway across the planet with a newer, yet older version that's now in her vicinity. I should be grateful her life unfolded as it did for it gives rise to my existence. Although I'm pleased she's reunited with her daughter and Kyle, it hurts too.

Tomorrow is the birthday of the mother of the Queen. Queen Beatrix celebrates hers on that date too, instead of in the middle of winter. The Queen's birthday is a national holiday, but this year, it's celebrated on Saturday. It's a day early so as to avoid violating the sanctity of the Sabbath.

When I open the curtains, it shows a sunny day that calls for a party, and I dress quickly. The tulips have wilted. With the vase in hand, I trot to the kitchen where I dispose of them and clean the glass. Thinking of wildflowers, the ones Helen loves and draws so beautifully, I grab a knife and head outside. It's chilly.

The yellow blossom on the corner has withered, and the street on the right is shrouded in the shade, so I stroll further south towards the light. The nature strip on the boulevard is flooded with sunshine, flowers grow around the stems of trees, and blossoming

shrubs hang from wrought iron fences. I cut twigs with yellow, white, pink and purple flowers, just one from each bush and hop home, sniffing the fresh fragrance of spring, which elicits optimism and growth. I arrange the wild bouquet in the vase, add water and place them back on the table.

After I wash off the green residue of my fingers, I put the letter to Charlene in an envelope, lock up and walk towards Lauwersgracht Park. There's limited motorized traffic, and earthlings flock to the streets.

The bright day is fresh, vibrant and filled with anticipation as this national holiday is celebrated outdoors. It's a day that breaks up the daily routine and offers a sense of freedom that puts a smile on many faces as what must be done is replaced by what one feels like doing—if anything at all.

The physical distance between my family and me makes it easier to reflect on the times we spent as a family. Those precious and beautiful moments are the roots my parents have donated while grooming and preparing me for my explorations. Like a caterpillar breaking free from its cocoon, I spread my wings and float on the current of life's eternal breath.

Although my dream is shattered, I have to accept that the universal source, like a cloud of vitalizing energy, has propelled me forward. Although I lack control of the direction, I'm part of an all-inclusive natural process. The possibilities are endless. Kyle's story is disappointing, but I'm responsible for making assumptions, so I must be tolerant towards this setback, take it at face value and move on. It's an exciting challenge to replace negative thinking with positive thoughts.

I find a bench in the park and sit to soak up the sun. I took this week's sombre weather for granted. It was of less importance while preoccupied with finding Kyle, but now, without any plans, when I need it most, I bask in the sun's energy.

There's a battle going on between the material world and the spiritual world. The first is winning as the latter is often regarded as the mumbo-jumbo of religion, but the material world sidesteps that spirituality comes from within. However, the aim is to establish balance. The material world needs to provide the conditions in which every human can focus on personal development instead of being distracted, again and again, by the material world's worries of war, money and suffering. When humans dare to be tolerant and connect to their hearts, the balance will be restored as the required change speeds up like a snowball rolling down a mountain, gaining momentum and increasing in magnitude.

The sun has given me an energy boost like a power-charged battery, and I walk to the heart of the city. Step by step and side-to-side, I stroll along the flea market in front of the church at Kerkplein. Locals sell a selection of used books, clothes, and haberdashery. Now and then, I brush against bare arms. Enthusiastic kids, under the watchful eye of an adult, sell their outgrown toys using basic adding and subtracting skills to earn a few cents. I forget to haggle when I buy a tiny yellow teapot with Chinese decorations for one guilder from a girl with two ponytails like Pippi. She's the spitting image of the Phoenix, and as I look up, her mother is smiling at me.

'Sky, it's great to see you've settled in,' Phoenix says. 'You're right. As long as the scales are tipping one way, equilibrium can only be reached by putting the emphasis on spiritual development.'

Has she been reading my mind?

'Body, mind and soul are an interacting trinity, and there's no separation,' Phoenix says. 'The soul's purpose is to lift the personal viewpoint, your mind, to such heights of consciousness it becomes one with the whole.'

'Your body is the expression of the soul. The human body is made up out of thousands of cells, and each cell has its function

but cooperates with its colleagues within the body. This one body makes up one cell of the universal body.

‘To get every body to work properly, cells must be educated in performing their role constructively instead of destructively. Perfecting this process is what humankind has been doing as it passes through the cycles of life and as it transforms humankind, it’ll bring forth the next level of consciousness. Trust you. Love you. Wisdom you.

‘Procrastinating by ignoring this unity and not allowing yourself time to discover equals betraying yourself. Enduring the urgent pressures of the hectic world and the deceiving words they feed you absorbs all your time and is a distraction, it’s fake. Shut it up, close it down and focus on you, on what you can control, and you can!

‘Dig deep, deeper if you must, to find where you feel your heart goes out to all. You’ll experience trembling shivers of joy through your body, and the sensation beats that of the biggest fun ride, and the hardest drug. The connection with the universal consciousness is up for grabs and the events occurring in the world today pale when compared to it.’

It’s as if she’s been tapping into my thoughts as we speak and knows what’s on my mind and what’s in my heart. It makes sense I’m the master of my destiny, but I wonder how long before I can read her thoughts.

‘You’re aware, but this consciousness is not yet part of your nature, and you prefer tools over ideas,’ Phoenix says. ‘Kyle has been telling you his story in chronological order, but life is more complicated than that. Remember the *San Yuan* cycles, those nine periods of twenty years?’

I frown, recalling she only mentioned *San Yuan*.

‘Each period is ruled by an element,’ she says, ‘and when a building is erected, the energy of the space is captured inside. To

find out how energy circulates inside a building, you need to know the period, and you have to follow Kyle's causality from the magic square where you start in the middle and fly the numbers forward.'

'What period are we living in?'

'Period 7 started in 1984 and will be followed by period 8 in 2004,' Phoenix says, still wearing her amethyst pendulum. 'Keep in mind that south comes on top in the magic square and you have to put in the numbers 4-9-2, 3-5-7 and 8-1-6 from top to bottom. Deepen your knowledge if you want to understand the influence of heaven on earth.'

I perfunctorily nod, at a loss by what she means.

'Think about it! What's closest to your heart bears the most significance. You can feel it.' Phoenix points at the compass hanging from my neck. She smiles before waving goodbye and turning her back on me.

I stroll through the crowd while clasping the compass. The personal numbers each relate to a wind direction and together with the element can be put in the magic square. In my mind, I group them and get SE4Wood-S9Fire-SW2Earth, E3Wood-C5Earth-W7Metal and NE8Earth-N1Water-NW6Metal.

Now it makes sense, the order of the word causality starts in the centre and flies to the northwest to west to northeast to south to north to the southwest to east to southeast. The number 5 in the middle moves forward up to 6 to 9 and then from 1 to 4. The magic square has the south on top and north at the bottom but either way, the numbers fly forward. I guess each building has its own set of numbers and these explain what type of energy is prevailing. One day, I'll find out how to apply this knowledge.

My grandmother talks about *Ba Zhai*—the personal number and its favourable wind directions. Tortoise speaks of *San He*—how the earthly natural and manmade landscape affects humankind. Phoenix addresses the heavenly *San Yuan* life cycles—that determine

the type of energy present in a building. These three different, yet related methods give insights into the relationship of humans with earth and heaven and how to improve an earthlings' life.

I open the compass, check I'm heading northeast, and as I'm about to close it, it hits me. The compass or astrolabe works by turning the ring of the compass in a specific order to a certain setting, like a dial combination safe that unlocks the underground labyrinth. I've been fiddling around with the compass just before I entered the various chambers, but I failed to pay attention. Jubilant, I kiss it before I press it to my heart and skip over the square.

In Koningstraat, I listen to the musical tunes that plummet from an open window above a closed shop. A bloke sitting on a windowsill opposite has one leg dangling outside. He watches earthlings stroll past and taps his fingers to the rhythm of the beat. Residents sell sausages and cans of beer, cooled in eskies, for a bargain price.

In a side street, a crowd has gathered to watch a band. A man gives me his half-full beer as his mate hands out another round of golden liquid, and we cheer and smile. I indulge in the buzz of excitement while I catch tatters of chitchat and boisterous roars whenever a friend joins the group or the live act finishes a song. After lingering for a while, I move along.

I think of Lukas and the others I've met this week. They all have a certain charm. It's a face that sparks my interest, in combination with clothes, attitude, and hairstyle before smell and language confirm or distract from the attraction. The shape of a face and its expressions speak volumes, although, how the other can be of use is unclear at the first sighting, unless ... a person's character also shows on their face.

Do facial features play a role, and depending on my looks, I'll be attracted to certain types of faces? It could explain why I'm intrigued by some and bored with others. But why can an instant dislike of

someone change into friendship after getting to know him or her?

Either way, it comes down to character. Although my parents raise me and teach me their rules to live by, I have a character of my own, adaptable, but unchangeable too. The blueprint of my life is set the moment I first inhale and is largely responsible for the path I follow, and that implies learning from the human beings that cross my path.

Izzy and Daphne became my friends but maintain separated circles. Is their antipathy based on jealousy or lasting because their characters match with mine but clash with each other? Will they ever befriend one another? Charlene's path and mine are going in different directions, but I hope we stay friends while Chris has had his chance.

To follow up on my crazy childhood idea to find Kyle, I had to grow up and become independent first, although I've tried to convince my parents to move or go on holidays to Europe. It's much harder to relocate a family than it is one person.

Could there be places on earth that suit me beter as a permanent living place than others? Maybe that's why my parents refused to move, and maybe it's why Kyle went along with his parents while another kid would stay behind. Could I've escaped my destiny if my grandmother had kept the postcards in a drawer? Why are mortals like the Brontë sisters happy staying where they grew up while others have an urge to move?

My feet have led me to Peach Blossom. The alley is packed with earthlings that stand around in small groups, chatting and drinking, smoking and listening to a rock band playing on the patio opposite, now full of trampled weeds. There's a light breeze with few clouds, and it's still sunny, which adds to the joyous feeling I share with these strangers.

Among the crowd, I spot Daphne and walk over, more or less used to the quaint sensation of having a small stick tucked into my

sock. It ends below my knee, hidden from sight under my jeans and my ankle-high sneakers prevent it from falling out. The top of the small rod has an orange flag attached to it on which I've written Kyle's name, and when I summon the courage of a rooster, I intend to hold it high, hoping to get a reaction from somebody who knows him.

'Remember Nick?' Daphne says, giving me a big wink, 'you met him at school the other day.'

From the way they glance at each other, I deduce he's now more than an admirer. His mouth cracks into a smile, and he makes polite enquiries before he puts his arm up and gestures to someone behind me.

Skin tones are pale and fair although there's a great variety of skin texture and looks, but everybody is wearing jeans. Some girls restrain their ponytails with a clip, while others have strands of hair in a roll like a crown pinned on their head.

'Dreaming of your perfect lover?' Daphne says, and they laugh.

'Why dream when he'll be standing in front of me soon?'

'That I want to see, him there?' She points to a boy with an acne face further down.

I shake no as I dislike his mono-brow. A pimpled guy comes back with four beers in plastic cups and hands me one too.

'He's here,' I say and point at Nick's timid mate, raise my cup and put a hand on his shoulder. 'What do you reckon, they're a couple, should we be one too?'

Nick chuckles, but his blushing mate is panicking like a kangaroo on a high fenced tennis court with a blocked exit. He draws back in shock, and I let go of the virgin. While Nick talks to him, I face Daphne.

'Did everything go well last night? You're suddenly back in town.'

'You know I considered breaking up, but I had doubts. His world is attractive and exciting, and I'm well taken care of,' she says while

playing with her necklace, 'but I hate how he's earning his money, it's plain wrong.'

'You'll earn your own. I can see the headlines—Daphne Hartman, Business Woman of the Year.'

'Nice prospect, thanks! But what irritated me the most, and it happened every time we went out for dinner, as we do every weekend, is that he's called away, or worse, one of his mates comes over. They always know where to find him and when one sits down at our table, I don't exist anymore.'

'It might differ from how you look at love,' I say.

Nick is eyeing her while listening to his mate.

'He likes it that way. The idea was to celebrate the Queen's Birthday together, but when he asked if I wanted to be the mother of his children and suggested I stop my studies and move in with him...'

'What?'

'Shit, I don't want to be a housewife,' Daphne says. 'That's when I understood he's not the right man for me. I freaked out.'

'Full-on.'

'I can't believe he's so old-fashioned.'

'You escaped the claws of oppression in time.'

'I ran off as he tried to propose. Shit, it wouldn't surprise me if he had a diamond ring in his pocket.'

'So you're moving on.' I nod towards Nick.

'Distraction and a chance for happiness.'

'Happiness you create, love happens.'

'I wouldn't mind another one.' Daphne stares at her empty cup.

'My turn.'

I shuffle through the mob to the outdoor bar of the café. It's working overtime and while the keg is being replaced, I suddenly gasp for breath. Stunned, I stare across the alley where a ray of sunshine lights up the face of a fellow leaning against a wall and lightning strikes my heart and convulses my belly.

‘Hey, do you want to order?’ The bartender’s hoarse voice makes me turn around.

After I return with four beers, I scan the crowd for the gorgeous guy that electrified my heart, but he’s gone, and my stomach churns in despair.

‘What happened to you?’ Daphne says.

‘I have ... I know ... I’m happy with what I saw.’

Her bewilderment is as big as mine and wings are flapping furiously in my belly.

‘I’ll wander around, catch you later.’

‘Hang on, you still have to explain why you made me sit in that particular spot in your room,’ she says.

I pivot on my heels. ‘Consider that everything in the universe and this world consists of energy.’

‘You mean as in stardust?’

I nod. ‘We breathe it, and we need it to live. It’s at the core of nature and at the core of our being.’

‘To cut a long story short...’

‘This energy influences us, and it’s either good or bad. From which direction it’s flowing, determines the type of energy it carries, and I can calculate if and how beneficial it’s to you. That’s what I use the compass for.’

She frowns.

‘Maybe you recognise that in a restaurant you instinctively choose a seat away from sitting with your back to the door. You want to avoid the draft and prefer to see who enters. At school, you have different classrooms for different lectures. Is there a classroom you prefer over the others?’

She nods.

‘Hold that thought. The 360 degrees of a full circle are divided into eight wind directions. You’re always facing one of these when you sit at your desk or in a classroom, or when you’re working behind

the bar. Of those eight, there are always four directions that'll benefit you. It'll help with your studies when you face a positive direction as much as possible. Most important is the orientation of your front door, your bed, and the place where you spend the most time during the day, either sitting or standing.'

'What happens if you don't?' Daphne says.

'You could spill your coffee.'

She laughs. 'Yeah, sorry for that.'

I shake it off.

'Is that the worst that can happen?' she says.

'Anything could, but it'll certainly hinder you in one way or another. Keep in mind you only sat there for a few seconds...'

'Shit, you're right.'

'Your front door is favourable and your bed too, so you'll be right. Maybe change your desk around,' I say.

'Is that all?'

'I apply what I know, but there's much more to it, and I'm still learning.'

'What are my directions?'

'You're a West group person, so facing southwest, west, northwest and northeast is good for you. Let me know what direction your favourite classroom is facing, I bet it's one of these. Get a compass,' I shout over my shoulder as I squeeze through the mob with a beer in my hand intent on meeting the man of my dreams.

My thoughts drift back to Sunday night when I end up in a discotheque with Daphne and Izzy. On the dance floor, I ignore the flirting boys but join in a mating dance with Lukas on 'Paradise by the Dashboard Light'. Afterwards, I find his ongoing talk about the way of the world too much to bear and go home.

It's warm, and I zip open my jacket. Still, I'd like to see Lukas again, so I head for The Green Dragon.

'Hey,' I say when a guy bumps into me and beer spills on my

shirt and drips onto the street.

‘Are you blind? Watch where you’re going,’ he yells while smashing the empty cup out of my hand.

I’m taken aback by his surprise attack, but he’s laughing and has moved on with his mates. Annoyed, I mull over his behaviour, as an apologetic smile would have kept the peace and protected my good mood from disappearing.

It’s crowded at the corner café. When I order a beer, Scott comes out, and I wave at him. The gesture is enthusiastically reciprocated and followed by loud exclamations, making it sound as if we’ve been friends forever. He walks over and pats me on the shoulder.

‘Any luck in finding the underground labyrinth?’ he shouts.

Nosy earthlings turn their heads our way.

‘My special compass has special powers,’ I smirk, less audibly.

‘You’ve been watching too many movies,’ he slurs and takes another draught of beer, ‘but explain.’

I wonder where to start and if I should tell everything.

‘Close your eyes and bend your head forwards,’ he says.

I oblige, curious to find what Scott has in mind, and I relish how he caresses my neck. His fingers are coarse, but I’m aroused. However, it only lasts seconds as I realise he’s taking off my compass. I jerk back my head, but he’s already dangling the astrolabe in front of my eyes.

‘Give it back,’ I yell.

‘I want to have a go,’ he pleads with a sullen look.

‘You should have asked.’ I grab for the compass, but he’s fast and keeps it out of reach.

‘Why? I have it anyway.’ Scott smiles.

He randomly turns the ring. I’m afraid he might break it, or worse.

‘What bloody illogical argument is that?’ I snatch the compass back. ‘You upset me when you take something that’s mine with-

out permission.'

'I can't wait in vain for other people to give me what I want,' he bleats.

'Listen to yourself. You're a bully when you assume you can get away with stealing from others and expect them to say thank you.' I spit out the words. 'Grow up!'

Now he's shaking his head. 'Lighten up. The compass doesn't work, anyway.'

You must have the right intentions I say to myself, and I'm glad that's how it works. It's wasted on him, and I was prepared to grant him access too because he told me about a few city secrets.

'I didn't know you're such a material girl,' he sneers. 'Coming up to rock my boat and then playing hard to get. I reckon you love it this way.'

'You might have been born in a cave, deprived of love, but try something different if you want to win me over,' I retort before lowering my voice, 'I like you as a friend. I'm sorry if you wanted more.'

I'm apologetic although he has brought my rage upon himself. At least I've now seen his true colours before I put further trust in him.

'It's all in a day's work, testing you out but you don't get the joke.'

He tries to brush off the incident, but the damage is done. As I hold the plastic cup between my teeth, I hang the compass back on. I take a long draught, bid him farewell and go in search of some fun.

Why are some men attracted to me while others avoid me? Nick's mate finds me romantically unattractive, and the feeling is mutual while I liked the student photographer at the society, but he made sure he kept well out of sight. Scott likes me amorously, but it's a one-way street. I find it hard to envision sharing a primitive boating life and dislike his lack of career aspirations. Is it my reasoning that makes him unlikeable or does my annoyance stem

from our incompatible blueprints?

A cover band is playing on the stage in front of the art house at Korenmarkt, and as I move closer, the crowd absorbs me. After rocking back and forth to the music for a handful of songs, I leave. While I ponder where to go next, I run into an uncomfortably jiggling Izzy.

‘Fancy seeing you here, I thought you hated the royal family,’ I say.

‘Don’t we all? They use our tax money to fund their exorbitant lifestyle and party around the world with their rich mates, spend fortunes on designer clothes and own more property than a family ever needs. To top it off, they use our money for the upkeep of their palaces. They claim it’s their right because it’s in their blood, but the direct royal bloodline they say they belong to is long dead. Don’t they say they arrange good business deals for the country, but where’s the proof of that? We see none of the profits. Everything they do is shrouded in secrecy, and isn’t it a joke that people want to drool over what they’ll never have and still accept royalty as part of an ancient, outdated system.’ Izzy’s deluge of words comes to a halt and leaves her breathless, but she’s quick to regain air. ‘Besides, didn’t I need to go into town today? But the shops are closed, and there’s nothing to do but party. Doesn’t leave me much choice.’

‘You sound like Lukas,’ I say, ‘but symbolism costs money.’

She sighs and is clenching her thighs together while scanning the square.

‘Pee,’ she grunts.

Following the example of a guy who pisses against a wall pretending to go unnoticed is inappropriate as it’s hard to obscure our private parts while squatting, so we walk into the nearest bar and shuffle to the back. As waiting in line for the ladies in a queue that extends to halfway the bar lacks appeal, we go to the gents.

There are three occupied urinals and Izzy ducks into a free cubicle. I avert my eyes away from the backs of the men, hold my breath for as long as possible to avoid the unpleasant stench and stare at the ceiling. As soon as Izzy is relieved, I squeeze in and hover over the pot while little puddles on the floor shine in the bright fluorescent light. The door is covered with obscene texts, drawings, and phone numbers. When I get out, the men are gone, and she's triumphantly waving a black wallet in my face.

'Look what I found.' Izzy swiftly takes out two pink bank notes, a blue and a green one and drops the wallet on the floor.

'We should bring that to the bar.'

'*Ein gefundenes Fressen.*' She shakes her head and smiles cheekily like a money raker.

She notices me staring and hands me thirty guilders. 'It's your lucky day.'

I think of when Charlene and I are roaming the streets, and in the gutter next to a car we find a wallet with more than three hundred dollars. We knock on the door of the nearest house where the owner is indeed visiting. When he comes to the door, he thanks us sincerely and gives us some candy.

'I guess that's the finder's fee I missed out on then.' With less remorse, I accept the two notes and tuck them in my pocket. 'At least he still has his bankcards.'

I pick up the empty moneybag. Shuffling back, I wave to the bartender and give the wallet to her.

'Found it at the toilets.'

She gives me the thumbs up and puts it on a shelf behind her while we hurry outside.

'Aren't you coming with me to The White Tiger? There's a band playing I want to see,' Izzy says.

'Sure, but I'm peckish. Let's grab a bite to eat first.'

We walk eastwards past the window with smiling redheads and

cross to the square where my real estate agency is located.

‘Will you leave now?’ a pouting Izzy says.

‘Why?’

‘Kyle is gone, and you only came here to find him.’

‘It has been seven days,’ I say smiling and stop to look at the display of houses for sale.

‘Wouldn’t I like to live there,’ she says happier than before, pointing to a villa with a thatched roof, ‘but I can never afford that.’

‘If it’s vacant, you could squat,’ I giggle. ‘I’ll find out for you, I start working here on Monday.’

‘Huh?’ Her mouth falls open.

I tell her how I landed the job as we pass the statue of the Duke on our way to the next square. There’s music blasting from large speakers, and earthlings are dancing. Outside the post office, food stalls are set up. Izzy orders chips from a caravan and from a grill beside it I order a *broodje beenham* with honey mustard sauce. We sit on a curb and watch the wobbling heads of the dancing mob, the groups of humans standing around and the erratic path of earthlings on the move. When I put my teeth in the bread roll with ham, sauce drips over my hand, and I lick it off while she greases her fingers with mayonnaise.

‘So you’ll start your studies after summer?’ Izzy says.

I have my mouth full and nod.

She quickly swallows a chip. ‘There’s a punk concert next week at The Travelling Horse we can go to.’

I nod again and push the ham back that’s about to escape from my bread roll. ‘I have to finish decorating my room too,’ I say.

Izzy stuffs three chips into her mouth. ‘Can’t we go on a road trip together on the Solex?’ she blurts out with her mouth full.

‘I simply have to stay,’ I say, blissfully happy with my new life, ‘there’s so much fun stuff to do!’

## XX

At high speed, raw sounds are being spat into the audience going wild on the outdoor terrain of The White Tiger. Hordes of earthlings spill out onto the sidewalk while others are sitting on the embankment opposite that borders the railway emplacement. Peculiar fumes are distinguishable as grass, and smoke rises upwards. I recognise Lukas, Ben and Adam throwing their weight around in the mosh pit where cups of beer frequently fly through the air. Izzy rushes over to Adam and joins the pogo dancing, but I stroll carefree through the crowd to the nearest bar.

This birthday bash increases in excellence as the day progresses and the celebrations have shaken off the paleness of the citizens, and their flustered faces match their fiery feathers. I lean against a pillar with a drink in my hand and move my legs and head to the beat. When the noise subsides, the pit crowd disperses, and before long, Lukas walks up to me.

‘Best party of the year.’ He wipes the sweat from his forehead.

I’m surprised he kept on his glasses. I offer him my beer, and he quenches his thirst.

‘I’ll buy you another one,’ he says, hurries over to the bar and comes back with water and a richly foamed beer.

‘Any more chances to let off steam?’ I say.

‘In an hour, you can try your luck too.’

‘I doubt I’ll survive between the romping and stomping. I’ll enjoy

it from a distance.'

'We'll be over there,' Izzy says, pointing to a sunny spot on the grass as she walks past with Adam and a grinning Ben in tow.

'Wait, plant this in the ground so I can find you.' I pull the little flag from my sneaker.

She takes it and runs after the boys waving the orange flag like a royalist.

'How do you enjoy it here?' Lukas says.

'I bet I know places in town you can only dream of!'

'Sure.'

'I could show you the underground labyrinth,' I say.

He raises an eyebrow, purses his lip and locates his friends who have claimed their spot in the sun before he looks at me.

'Come on, Lukas.'

I wonder if it's possible to enter Station with its earth box together. Considering Izzy freaked out there, it's a safer bet to try the metal space.

'Okay,' he says.

I grin from ear to ear and Lukas follows me towards the lawn with the deer. The phoenix pond has turned into a celebratory water-spraying feature. He's quiet but excited and can't get the smile off his face. The shortest way to the metal space is via the Korenmarkt, but once there, the crowd hems us in. It takes forever to cut through, but once we reach Rijnstraat, only a few humans are around.

When we get to the door though, it's locked. I turn the ring on the compass from N to S to E to W before adding the inter-cardinal directions to the combination, but the door stays closed. I wonder if the required order depends on the direction I'm facing too. Overwhelmed by the number of options, I give up.

Disappointed, I face him. 'Looks like it'll happen another day.'

Lukas scans the street, and determined like an ox, he pushes his

shoulder into the wooden door but without success. 'Are you sure this entry leads to the tunnel?'

'That's how I entered last time.'

I wonder if the labyrinth is only for me to discover. The thought saddens me as it's pointless if I alone can roam around underground. Meanwhile, Lukas has taken a small crowbar from his pocket and jams it between the door and its frame, and as it gives in, he stumbles into the courtyard and gestures me to come through.

'That's vandalism,' I yell out, but curiosity wins, so I follow and close the door.

'I knew I'd get in,' he says.

The windows around the courtyard lack movement and I descend the three steps to an unlocked entrance. The hallway is dark, so I take the mini torch from my bag. I peep into the metal space, and although it's still oval shaped, its features are hidden.

Lukas sticks his head around and glances over the space. 'Let's go. I wonder where this tunnel leads to.'

I'm curious what experience the metal space has in store for us, so I'm disappointed, but I'll love to find out too if, and how the rooms are connected. Although Lukas promises to keep it a secret, I wonder what plans he might have. He walks straight ahead, and as we climb through a hole in a brick wall, we reach a cellar. Boxes are placed against the wall, and next to it a set of steps leads up to a hatch on street level.

'This is where people used to work centuries ago.' He points to a small alcove in the wall with a triangular shaped top. 'The candles they used for light were put over there.'

'If we continue west, we leave the city centre. Let's try south,' I say and follow Lukas's broad shoulders through another bricked cellar, past some wine racks and then we discover a wooden panel on the floor.

'It's like a bunker,' he says. 'Hang on, help me try this latch.'

We pull up the heavy wooden slab, and a narrow staircase descends deeper underground. I light the steps with the torch and wait till he has descended before I climb down, but as soon as I get there, the light dies, and it's pitch black.

I jolt when there's a sudden noise followed by a weak light. Then the sound rattles faster, and the light intensifies as if somebody's rubbing the wheels of a toy car back before putting it on the ground to let it shoot off forwards. The noise stops and the light fades.

'What's that?' I say and hear Lukas grin.

'It's a *knijpkat*. A torch without batteries,' he explains, 'works like the dynamo on your bike—when you cycle, it generates power for the headlight. This one you keep squeezing. Here, go for it.'

'That should have scared away the rats,' I say and wonder what else he carries around on a daily basis.

An electric current runs from his fingers through mine when I take the torch from him. It's too dark to see his expression but I feel myself blush. Cautiously, I squeeze and a weak light illuminates a tunnel ahead, just high enough to stand erect.

As I walk, I find the more and faster I squeeze, the more light there is. I jog, chasing the light and Lukas's boots are thumping after me. When I'm certain the tunnel continues in a straight line, I speed up and confident I can leg a few more metres in the dark, I stop squeezing and as the sound wears off, I go on like running along the beach with my eyes closed.

'Wait for me,' he yells.

After another twenty noiseless steps, I smother my breath in the collar of my jacket, and I kneel while flattening myself sideways against the wall. Then the sound of his boots dies. Shortly after, I detect a scuffing sound—Lukas's effort of walking inaudibly, and I quietly snigger. I slow my breathing and inhale, hold and breathe out at intervals of 8-4-8. He has mastered to tiptoe after all, and a dark cloak of silence descends. While I sit dead still and only sense

my pulsating ears, I estimate the distance between us. When I consider the possibility he has turned around and gone back, there's a slight rush of wind moving past.

I suppress another giggle and wait for him to pass me before I silently rise. He squeaks when I leap up to him and throw my arms around his neck, but I bump my head on the ceiling and screech, and we burst out into laughter. Off balance and clinging on to each other, we scrape along the wall before falling down together. Lying entangled on the floor, his nasal laugh sets me off again, and when I calm down, I knock my head on the floor, which sends both of us laughing again.

'Are you hurt?' he eventually says.

'Are you?'

He's panting and squeezes my hand. It's a gentle gesture, and I swallow hard to get rid of a lump in my throat.

'We better stick together,' he says.

I pull my legs away from him and scramble up. When we sit with our backs against the wall, I squeeze the *knijpkat*, and study the silhouette of his rounded skull with a prominent nose and small chin. He takes off his glasses and rubs them clean with his shirt. When he notices I put a finger on my pupil and hold it there, he freaks out.

Then he says, 'contacts.'

'Since four years I have protection shields, and I've never cried over onions again.'

'Henceforth, I delegate the job to you.'

I laugh at his practical solution. 'I found out in the car when Dad challenged us to read the road signs first, and since I lost repeatedly, he wanted to know at what point I could read a sign so the next day, I'm at the optometrist. It was a miracle to see blades of grass again.'

'Finally sitting in the back of the classroom again,' he adds, 'and

not with my nose glued to the TV.'

'I play sports.'

I'm afraid to admit that wearing glasses, although easier, makes me look ugly. However, they look cool on Lukas who's beaming with confidence. I've added the insertion and extraction rituals of contacts to my daily ablutions, but when I'm so tired that all I want to do is strip and roll into bed, I sincerely dislike the task.

'I fight the system,' he says.

'At least I'm able to hide my handicap,' I say, aware he has avoided talking politics for a while.

'I don't think your beautiful brown eyes qualify for a disability allowance,' Lukas says.

I laugh and hope the overall darkness of the tunnel hides my flustered cheeks. 'When will they find a cure for bad eyesight?'

'There's still a lot to cure in this world,' he says and squeezes my leg. 'Hand it over now.'

I give him the dynamo torch and open the compass while he gets up. 'Shine a light on it, will you?'

We're heading south, and I guess we'll reach the water wave soon if this tunnel will lead there. I follow the light of his noisy *knijpkat* as he continues at a steady pace. After a slight bend, sparkling blue light falls through a hole in the wall. I smile as it proves that the metal space and water wave are connected. I wonder if Helen is still lying there, but I doubt she is.

Lukas confidently climbs into the wave, but when I want to follow, a glass pane prevents me from entering. Separated from each other, he moves his lips but his words are silenced, and he raises his hand as an apology. I put my thumbs up and gesture him to move along. The water wave looks only vaguely familiar as its irregular shape differs from what I remember, but there's little time to track his steps as the glass window is fogging up.

I sit, prepared to wait. Having found the tunnel from the metal

space to the water wave, I expect the next tunnel will lead to the wood tower, and then round to the other chambers. Instead of sticking to the enhancing or weakening order of the five elements by walking around in circles, I hope there's a shortcut in between tunnels. My chain of thought is interrupted when Lukas exits the water wave.

'Bloody hell, I jumped to the wrong conclusions! I've hated him ever since.' Lukas grumbles as he shakes his head and paces up and down in the blue light that illuminates the tunnel.

'Who?' I say.

'My dad,' he says sniffing like a horse. 'Sorry I kept you waiting so long.'

'That's okay,' I say, but it's odd our perception of time is so different. 'What happened?'

He keeps pivoting around with his eyes to the ground. 'I happened!' he sniffs.

When he looks at me, I nudge him, figuring he might as well get it off his chest.

'As a kid, I overheard my dad say to my mother I'm useless and that I'll never be a man.' He kicks against the wall. 'So I lived up to his expectations, sought the confrontation and went against everything he said, regardless whether he was right or wrong. I was so angry with him.'

He has a painful grimace on his face and looks disillusioned. 'In there, I saw me when I was a little boy, standing in the hallway again and overhearing my parents talking in the kitchen. This time I listened to everything he said, "The boy is a big toddler. Obviously, he's weak as he isn't a man yet, but one day he'll make me proud, our boy, my son". I couldn't believe it.'

Lukas kicks the wall again and slouches down. 'All those years ... I have no reason to hate him.'

I squeeze his hand, but he pulls it back.

‘Leave me be for a moment. I don’t know who created this impact room, but...’

We sit in silence and let time pass. The effects of the water wave are unpredictable, but water is refreshing, honest and deep. I get a glimpse of the future and Lukas of his past. The only thing I can deduce is that it involves overcoming the pain of emotional hurt. I fear my grandma is dying. Lukas is afraid his father hates him, but his father loves him, and he has behaved like a prick his entire life. It’s shocking that hearing a flash of conversation has had such a big impact, but he could still make amends.

At some point, I suggest we move on. We discover another tunnel heading northeast where the sound of the creek comes from the other side of the brick wall. Lukas is keen to go back, but I insist on at least checking where the tunnel ends or splits. He reluctantly agrees. We’re slowly making progress in the dark, each touching a wall along the way to feel for changes in structure and only occasionally using the *knijpkat* as we prefer silence over light. The longer I’m in the labyrinth, the more comfortable I become with the surrounding darkness and the moist smell that belongs underground. The sound of water has disappeared. As we stop and shine a light on the environment, we detect a tunnel curving north.

‘I’m happy to descend into the city’s dungeons again another time,’ Lukas says, ‘but I’ve had enough for one day. Besides, the band I want to see is playing soon. I hope I’ve not missed it already.’

I almost forgot about the festivities, and although I love to continue to map the subterranean landscape, I love to spend more time with Lukas too.

## XXI

According to Puigi, with only five human beings, change can be accomplished. I'd love to start off with a group of friends to effect change as friendship is about trust, solidarity and companionship.

Lukas brushes off the sexual innuendo from Ben, Izzy and Adam who are sitting on the embankment next to the orange flag before he ushers them closer, and grouped in a circle, he explains, 'this town has a network of tunnels. I've been underground. It extends well under the city centre. I need to map it, locate where other entry and exit points are before we can work out how to use it to our advantage.'

'Mate, talk about an escape route, that's a great find,' Ben says.

'Did you discover this labyrinth?' Adam says.

I nod. 'Being curious has its advantages.'

'So hasn't your search for Kyle turned up something else completely?' Izzy says, 'next thing you'll be telling me it's normal to walk through walls. Aren't you the alien?'

'Australian, Izzy, Australian! It's impossible to explain how it works, I barely know myself, but you can check out the subscape and see for yourself. Let me know what you think.'

The first blasts of a band blow through the speakers and attract the boys' attention. They get up and rush to the pit, and Izzy follows while I stay put on the slope overlooking the partygoers. When I take off my jacket to sit on, I pull up my knees, square my back and

swallow beer while tapping a foot to the drumbeat.

Torn leaves are scattered around and between my feet, there's a patch of dirt. One bit of grass is left, and I tear it out before I firmly plant my plastic cup in the unearthed area. A pair of army boots with its fur rim turned down is coming into vision as someone to my right is stretching his legs. Feet immediately move in tune with the music. I smile at the simultaneous rhythm of foot beats like a spontaneous orchestral symphony.

'I hear you're looking for Kyle?'

Startled, I turn around. The deep voice belongs to a bloke who's casually lying back, resting uphill on one arm, his leather jacket open and showing a black printed T-shirt. The evening sun is in my eyes, and I only see the contours of his head like a backlit photo.

'Who told you?' I say.

'It's all over town that a foreign girl is looking for him. Are you?'

'I was,' I say before realising more information is always welcome, and I add, 'I am. Do you know him?'

'Just being curious,' he says.

I shift position to get a better look at him, and suddenly my heart jumps for joy. It's the good-looking guy with glistening green eyes I saw earlier at Peach Blossom. Did Daphne spot him too? Immediately, I'm suspicious.

'Has Daphne sent you to impersonate him?' I say.

'Who's Daphne?'

'A friend I bumped into. Sorry, that's Izzy. Long story. Good one, but long. Daphne and I live together. Izzy lives with Bossy. He lives in her jumper, mostly. She, Bossy is a she. Whatever. She's a rat.' I shake no. 'I'm different from Zoe. She's my housemate, Daphne that is. Izzy is a rat. Sorry, she has one.' I take a deep breath. 'What's your name?'

His forehead is wide with pronounced cheekbones, and he has a narrow chin and luscious lips. It adds to his boyish charm.

‘I’m Paul.’

If he had said Kyle, I know Daphne had been involved. ‘You like talking to strangers, that’s a good quality.’

‘It’s the only way to expand my inner circle, but I’m choosy.’

‘Much obliged then. Let me decide if you’re worthy.’ I give him a quick glance over and have to admit his parents created a sublime specimen. ‘I’m in a good mood so you’ll do. You could be dancing though.’

I nod to the band where Lukas is still going wild. He’ll be exhausted by the time they’ve finished.

‘Want to get rid of me already?’ he says.

‘Others are going for it.’

Paul has long hair, and it’s thick and curly. I wave to Izzy at the edge of the pit, and when she sees me, she gives me the thumbs up.

‘There’s a better band playing later tonight, and I just met you, stranger,’ he says.

‘What’s in a word? I’m sure there are other foreigners,’ I say and take a draught of beer. ‘I’m a student. What about you?’

He’s slim, has a dimple in his chin and he’s honestly handsome.

‘I play bass guitar in a band.’

‘Tonight? Which one?’

‘We’re still rehearsing, but I’m sure we’ll be on stage next year as The Crazy Five.’

‘Is that the best way to describe yourself, as crazy?’

‘It means we get away with more than usual, very beneficial.’

‘You’re taking advantage of opportunities, a smart move! I play the harmonica.’

‘What’s the story with Kyle?’ Paul says.

‘Thanks to him, I’m here.’ While I tell him more, I use a leftover piece of plastic from the trampled on beer cups to draw four lines in the dirt.

He’s looking at the nine squares. ‘Tic-tac-toe, isn’t it?’

‘Do you know when you put the numbers 4-9-2, 3-5-7 and 8-1-6 in there, all lines add up to fifteen? It becomes a magic square. Let’s play.’ I pull my right foot under my left bum to make space and draw an X in the centre.

He slides his butt down and plants his boots in the grass. A smooth hand with long fingers and short shapely nails takes over the scrap. He draws an O in a corner. We keep exchanging the chunk while drawing noughts and crosses and every time our fingers touch I’m thrilled to the bone. I win the first round, wipe out the game and start again. I sense his eyes are tracing my every move.

‘It’s a magical day,’ he says.

‘It sure is, magic is everywhere.’ I smile as I’m in seventh heaven.

He has a dint on the rim of his nose and full eyebrows I’d love to touch and caress. When I win again, he rejects the offer of another game, but he’s interested in why I’m so keen to find out more about Kyle’s family.

‘Considering he’s family now,’ I say, the option of becoming lovers out of the question, ‘I want to know how he, and his mum, have lived. We have the same grandmother. I guess I’m intrigued, although Izzy says I should focus on creating a new family, friends that is. What about you?’

‘I have a sister and two brothers. We’re on good terms, but everybody lives their own life.’

His smile is making me melt, and I could drown in the vast green depths of his dazzling eyes. After I take another draught, I wonder where the intoxication is coming from.

‘I like your black hair,’ he says, and as he smiles, laugh lines appear at the corners of his eyes.

I’m blushing. ‘Why there are so many redheads here is a mystery to me.’

I imagine how I’ll wind my fingers around a strand of his hair

and feel its softness as I stroke my skin with it like a painter's brush.

'Are you or am I the outsider?' Paul says.

'You'll fit in somewhere.'

'But is it where you want to be?'

'I'm happy.' I smile, longing to lie in his arms. 'Have you seen the movie?'

When I see my mirrored reflection in his pupils, I quickly put the cup to my lips.

'Don't you know a rumble ain't a rumble without me?' Paul says in American slang.

'Good one! I'm sure I could feel at home there and at many other places on this planet too. I love that everything is energy and that we're all connected. Knowing how it influences my life, I can use it to my advantage.'

'Opportunist,' he says.

'I'm smart, and I must take care of myself first,' I say. 'Take love, for example, you're aware of when you're in love, but it's impossible to measure what love is or how much there is. Do you ever think about your love for family and friends, and for life itself? Are you ever overwhelmed with love when you look at the stars and glimpse the universe? I bet you've experienced the love! It's all we ... and it's you ... and I and everyone and everything. Love is one.'

'You're a passionate creature,' he says.

'Why would anyone choose suffering over happiness? All it takes to be happy is to change your point of view.'

Paul offers to get me a beer and agilely hops down the slope avoiding obstacles as if he's afloat, and the sunlight adds a red glow to his dancing hair. I want to kiss him but when I spot Lukas in the celebrating crowd, my emotions join the party, shaking their booties like a disco dancer, and I feel loved. Bulk Ace. When the band finishes playing, arms wave a loud applause and those

who can, whistle loudly. The last beer flies through the air, and as I wave at Izzy, both Lukas and Paul wave back, a gesture that acknowledges my existence. Now what?



## Glossary

Balanda\* = the word used by Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to refer to non-Aboriginal people. It is one of several words of Indonesian found in the Aboriginal Languages of the Top End. For a couple of hundred years before Captain Cook landed, Macassans would sail down from Indonesia to Arnhem Land on the annual monsoon winds to harvest *trepang*, a kind of sea slug, establishing trade and cultural exchange with the locals—*Balanda* comes from the Macassan word ‘Hollander’, for their Dutch colonisers.

Corroboree = an event where Aboriginal people interact with the Dreaming through dance, music and costume.

Strippenkaart = paper ticket that’s stamped when boarding public transport where each ‘strip’ equals one zone, since 8 May 1980.

Tikkenteller = Rental device from the monopolistic network administrator that counts the quantity of charged units per phone call. Commonly used in student housing and the hospitality industry.

\*From the book *Balanda, my year in Arnhem Land* by Mary Ellen Jordan, ISBN 1 74114 280 6.



# In search of Kyle

Sky Beaumont moves overseas to find Kyle—the writer of cryptic postcards addressed to her artist grandmother Helen Coppin. It's the spring of 1989 in a society where capitalism and anarchism clash. While overcoming heartbreak, Sky sculpts her life based on Feng Shui principles. Then she gains access to a mysterious underground labyrinth.

How can her new friends—the punk Izzy Elliot and Daphne Hartman, housemate and economics student—assist with her quest? What do the nine cards mean? When Sky delves deeper into Kyle's city she experiences the influence of the subterranean chambers. How will she cope with discovering a reality different from what she expects? And where is Kyle?

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