

# **THE ROAD TO FREEDOM**

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## **The Road To Freedom**

In every destiny, no matter how hard it may be, there lies a distinct meaning, even though it may not be disclosed to us in this world. The more difficult the time we pass through, the closer we come to God.

Willy Graf of the White Rose students.

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## *Behind a pretty face*

It's just the two of us now; we don't need everything we collected, I say to my husband Joe as I begin to throw papers in the incinerator.

I don't care if you burn your stuff as long as you leave my tools alone. Simon will need them, argues Joe.

I am happy to see that Joe and our son became friends; times were sometimes difficult when Joe was just a father who had to obeyed.

I must check what is in the boxes cluttering the attic.

Good luck but I bet you will need anything you throw away, warns Joe. He became a hoarder fiercely attached to his familiar possessions. We are both holding onto the memories.

In an old album I find a few images of my childhood. This faraway time and place has no relevance to anybody else but it tells me who I am. Who I am, grew out of the roots I inherited. I carry my past like some people carry the bones of their ancestors.

I look at my first class photograph. My young face surprises me. I WAS beautiful. I never considered myself beautiful; I was actually never happy with who I was and how I looked. I did not feel popular; and being popular means everything to a child. It amazes me now that people find faults with the way they look at the time when they look their best. Self image must come from inside; it is only visible to the person blessed or cursed by it. I believe in the invisible and inevitable despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Surely my well proportioned, slender figure, my huge blue eyes and blond curls did not only appear beautiful in these old photographs. My blond hair actually caused my much sadness. Kids called my whitey after the war. Whitey was a derogatory term; in some way it was the same as being called a traitor or worthless or an enemy of the nation. Being a whitey isolated one like smelly feet or poverty.

Home guards were whiteys; they were on the wrong side of the war; my eighteen years old brother was a whitey. Whiteys were anticommunists and therefore traitors. I wonder if my brother had any idea why the leaders of the time made him a whitey. Shame on them all! I wasn't quite sure at the time what connection my hair had with being a traitor but I began to hate myself because of it. I wanted to have straight brown hair like other children. How could I be so vain and ungrateful; I only appreciate my healthy functioning body now that it became aching, creased and slowly sagging.

Where did my negative interpretation of self originate? Did I mirror the perception my peers had of me? Did my peers mirror the society's perception? During my childhood church going peasants were on the bottom rung of the society; only anticommunists were lower. My family was all of

that. We lived on the edge. We were fringe-dwellers like Australian Aborigines after whites pushed them away from the riverbank and into the shacks around newly created white settlements.

My whole childhood seems so much prettier from the photographs of the past.

Pictures of my family always fill me with gratitude. I realise now that being beautiful and rich does not necessarily make one happy. Everybody suffers from the curse of envy, greed and jealousy as we compete for love. The idea of love is much like the idea of god; neither has ever been defined for everybody yet we all follow it like those children following Pied Piper. And we pay the Piper one way or another. Some pay with submission, others with wealth; others again keep on bargaining all their lives.

My husband Joe looks invincible with a protective arm around my shoulders. This handsome, tall, broad shouldered man has always been by my side and on my side. People believe that Joe and I are a perfect match. They know nothing about the demons hiding behind our smiles.

Most people have no time to discover each other's little imperfections and pains. Maybe all living things hide their vulnerable underbelly with everything they are. Most people are tormented by past embarrassments, failures and sins. They regret and relive their pain in the privacy of their aloneness while they present themselves as strong and happy to the outside world. In Australia people ask 'how are you' as a greeting on the road but nobody has time to stop and listen and tell. They politely answer: very well thank you and walk on; they fold up their pain into the hiding places so nobody will be bothered by it. People talk about weather and television news in order to blend and belong. Only Aborigines still hang around in groups giggling on the street corners. Hundreds of them come to the funerals of their extended family members just to be together. Most migrants scattered in the Australian outback have solitary lives and funerals.

People celebrate with a drink to relax and to dare be who they are inside themselves. After a few drinks some become argumentative while others embrace each other and sing or cry together.

As a young girl I made decisions without considering the consequences but consequences follow you like your own shadow down your life's path. I would like to repair my past so my sins will not be revisited upon my son. Although no longer religious I still hear the words from the Bible about sins of the fathers being revisited on the next generations. Everybody is apparently paying for the original sin Eve committed by picking that apple in the paradise. Perhaps one can never escape from the teachings of one's childhood.

I have to help my son, Simon, who was an unwilling, vulnerable participant in the choices I made. Is Simon paying the price because I made wrong turns when I did not know better? I know that ignorance is no defence; to atone I must face the retribution and repair the damage. I have no right to demand answers from Simon now; I never took time to listen when he had things to tell. I was busy keeping Joe happy; when Joe was not happy he made sure nobody else was. Joe had to come first. Simon was never first to anyone. He begged me to tell him bedtime stories but Joe demanded my love, presence and attention.

Are men jealous of their sons?

I did not offer direction to my son; we both became Joe's resentful followers. When Joe cried I had no words to comfort him; he cried the tears from deep unknown within himself. He cried for his mother and for his father and for the love he knew I never willingly offered him. He knew that my

dreams took me away from his dreams. All he wanted from life was to be a master of a happy family; he demanded obedience.

Obedience is the most difficult vow but when you achieve total submission you lose yourself into the wholeness that is God. You are no longer alone or sad or angry. You are at peace, said the nun I once worked with.

Is that why people write on your gravestone: rest in peace, I mocked seriousness.

When you throw the stone in the river, waters quiver for a moment but the stone and the water settle down in peace. Peace is a blessing, said the nun.

Is there peace in heaven and hell?

We travel through heaven and hell forever. We pass through one to enter another. They are moments in between; they are places within.

I passed through both.

We all do. Gadgets change but materials remain the same; fashions change but colours remain the same. Recipes change but the food is the same. We travel through life to meet the good and the bad. We would not be who we are but for the road we travelled, said the nun.

My son would never exist if I obeyed my parents and left Joe when there was still time. My wonderful grandchildren would not exist if I married the boy I thought I loved. I left James and followed Joe because Joe and I needed each other. Yes, I would do it all again because I would go through fire for my beautiful son and for my grandchildren.

Why did Joe choose me? Everything was against us; Joe's mother cried when he left his first family to marry me. She cried much in her life.

Right and wrong was never clear to me as I followed the fashions of the day. What was right in one place was very wrong in another. Right and wrong constantly changed as those in charge changed places.

I know that I have never been in charge and was destined to follow the teachings of the leaders even when the leaders change their teachings. Only the rich and the strong have a measure of freedom to choose and determine what is good and bad. They create laws that give them the freedom to be who they choose to be. The rest of us just toe the line to survive. I perched myself on the fence between right and wrong; I lean now one way and then another in order not to fall on the wrong side. I try to go with the flow but my swimming seems all against the stream. Joe is a strong swimmer. I feel safe beside him but sometimes I want to swim on my own, unassisted. Maybe it is too late to learn how to be a separate person. I am never sure if Joe would approve. Joe was always an all knowing adult while I remained an obedient child who followed the path he determined for me. Most people probably follow someone; they are coerced, forced, convinced, indoctrinated, or enticed to follow. I never had a speaking part in the drama of my life; I only echoed other people's opinions. I only ever made statements I believed people wanted to hear.

I check in the mirror for damages life inflicted on me. Buckets of tears washed down deep laughter lines before acceptance and understanding finally settled in my eyes. I grew up from what was

there before; I should not regret events that made me who I am. I am a follower not an architect of life.

I would not be here if Hitler did not invade Slovenia or if Tito did not kill my brother. Who would I be if Zigi did not adopt and molest me and if Joe did not rescue me to possess me? Joe dedicated himself to me and insisted to be all I cared about. He was the only God in our home. He bought me a dog once to keep me company while he was at work. When he returned he patted the dog first so I began to hate the dog; I was competing with a dog for Joe's attention. Perhaps we all need attention. Some people follow important people to shine in their celebrity while I surrounded myself with less fortunate because I needed to be their leading light.

Joe often boasted about us HIS perfect family. He needed to have something his peers did not have. He worked hard for it.

I forgave Zigi after he died. He made it possible for me to become who I am. In a little corner of my innocence I always knew that I had power over Zigi. I just had to keep my knees together as mum ordered when she let me go with him. Was my aversion to sex a side effect of this first hint of sexuality? I become a flirt; I needed to seduce men to have power over them.

I often daydream about James because I seemed just right in his eyes. He said that he wished I would never change. For a brief moment we were totally in love. We saved the memory of that love in the safe place of our hearts. This first love was like the precious flower that just opened its petals to let the sun in. Could we have perpetuated that happiness? Can one achieve an ultimate happiness and safeguard it for eternity?

Does happiness evaporate or die or turn mouldy? Can one become happier when one is already happy? Would greater wealth or love or loveliness provide greater happiness? Is love of the beautiful providing greater happiness than the love of the ugly? Can poor have as much happiness as the rich? Can common be as happy as precious? There is always the price. Precious things are expensive and fragile. I remember the verse: there is a time for every purpose under heaven. Maybe one is entitled to only one blossoming followed by mating and nurturing and dying. By leaving James it was possible for me to remain in love forever. It is easier to be in love with the person with whom you do not share daily chores and confrontations. I chose to marry Joe because he is strong and can face and remove obstacles. Is safety and security the same as happiness?

The images appear to me unannounced to interrupt the time present with smells, sounds, and colours of time past. So many memories; I think of them as stories stored in an antique chest full of compartments; each one with hundreds of folders ready to pop out at the slightest opening. The memory does not care about chronology; the memory is a circle repeating itself. Dance, monkey, dance! Particles of atoms dance; the stars and the planets dance perpetually; the universe is in motion. There must be a reason and a purpose for it all. I am constantly rotating in my own orbit; I am judging the outside by the hot core of my being. The lava is looking for cracks in the surface to erupt and destroy my tranquillity but I hold its fires carefully so not to disturb what I cultivated on the surface. I smile a lot. People like my sunny disposition so I maintain my fragile serenity. It is exciting to skate on the thin ice but I have to step lightly.

I always did as I was told. Was obedience my duty or I obeyed in order to avoid confrontations? Was my obedience a virtue or a sign of weakness? I listened to the authorities, I obeyed my elders; who am I to question the right and the wrong of the rulers?

Most crimes are committed by those who obey orders, said my father after the war. Dictators dictate to the obedient to do their dirty deeds. Give to Cesar... my father stopped there; I knew that he was sad and angry but I was too young to understand the meaning of his words.

I recently heard a joke about American recruit being tested for special military services. To pass the obedience test he was told to shoot his wife. The commander closed the room behind them and for a while there was much commotion in the room. Finally the soldier came out and said: You bastards put blanks in my gun so I had to strangle her.

Such is the total obedience.



You cannot shut your eyes to things not seen by eyes.  
Morgan, Charles

## *Infidelities*

I beg you, Kim, talk to me, I plead.

I am not talking to paedophiles, Kim, my ex daughter in law announces to the crowd in the busy shopping mall. I look around as the bulging eyes of strangers drill into me. Thank God nobody knows me.

I did not like Kim when Simon first introduced her as his girl; Kim's small mouth and her tiny eyes reminded me of a fish. Now Kim's mouth and her eyes seem to have disappeared. She is hissing like a snake.

People with no lips are usually mean, said my friend Cally.

Gradually Kim and I found that we have much in common; we became almost friends. As much as a mother in law and daughter in law can ever be friends. When two people love the same people there is always room for jealousy and competitiveness. Mother in law and daughter in law are a treat to each other's autonomy and authority. Both are convinced that they should be in charge; they are resentful of each other's know how. Daughters in law feel that they have a right to learn on their own mistakes and mothers in law try to make them avoid mistakes they themselves learned from.

Men have little to do with their in laws; they have a luxury of ignoring them unless they really like them but women meet at the sink and the clothesline; they also nurture the same children which gives one much opportunity for resentment. I was very careful not to offend Kim and Simon was particularly protective towards his wife.

Kim, I plead, forget that I am Simon's mother. Let's just do the right thing for our children.

Don't ever come near my children. Kim's words are icicles breaking in the winter morning; her face is a mask I haven't seen before. New dawn has broken.

You know that I love your children. Let's talk like mothers.

Talk to your paedophile son, Kim's words cut into my pain. Kim holds her head high now, she is in charge, she has the power; she has the children.

Don't do anything in anger. You will see things more clearly in time, I try to reason. Give yourself time, please.

I will not be happy until Simon is dead, says Kim grabbing the hands of her children and dragging them away.

I stand like a pillar of salt in the midst of the shoppers rushing past. Kim wants my son dead; my Simon who used to be so adored by everyone.

Simon loves you and the children. Talk to him, I lunge after the family I lost. I want to scoop Kim and her children into an enormous embrace; I want to wrap them in a blanket of love until they all felt safe and warm and loved as a family again. Safe against the world.

Mia is eight and she shoots careful glances from me to mummy. She looks like me, her huge blue eyes are staring into an unknown future; she loved to cuddle with me when I told her fairytales. Mia loved me. I was always careful not to make Kim jealous; I told my grandchildren how lucky they are to have so loving and smart parents. They were family back then.

Kim rang me recently; she was desperate; Simon was away and she suspected that he was with another woman; she said that she did not know what to do. I tried to reassure Kim and promised to talk to Simon. Simon is much like his father; he can be arrogant; he cut me short whenever I would interfere. He always took Kim's side and I approved of that. As long as they were both happy nothing else matters, I told myself.

David is thirteen; a heavy set boy for his age, an awkward age in itself; being in between childhood and adolescence is never easy; his eyes are focused on his shoes, his arm has superficial cuts from the wrist up to his elbow; his bottom lip is trembling. Poor babies; I want to stop their pain. The love is being denied. Stop it, Kim; stop it before it is too late, I whisper after them disappearing.

After an argument Kim called the police and complained that Simon yelled and threatened her. Children are scared; I am not going to put up with it. He has always been a control freak, Kim said.

Police have to make sure that children are safe. Simon had to get out of the house he has just finished building. David and Mia cry for daddy. Kim told everybody that Simon has a girlfriend on the internet so she packed his bags. She told the children that daddy does not love them.

Kim just finished her uni studies and found a job with the Department of Child protection agency DOCS. After the divorce and property settlement Simon applied for the custody of the children.

Over my dead body, said Kim. That was when she first mentioned child abuse to the all powerful DOCS. She knows that nobody would grant custody to the man accused of child abuse. A whiff of suspicion is enough to destroy men's chances of being fathers.

Kim wants custody so she can take Simon's house and money, says Joe. Why didn't she mention abuse during the divorce proceedings? Why did she wait until Simon asked for custody? She wants Simon to pay for the children while they are under her control. She is a control freak.

I am afraid that someone will hear about Kim's terrible accusation; in my youth nobody heard of child abuse. I have no idea what exactly Simon is accused of; there is just a black cloud hanging over the family. Kim is attacking the only thing Simon has left; his reputation and the love of his children.

It just never happened. The bitch is telling lies, says Joe. This never happened where I come from. How do you know, I ask.

Boys talk about these things and nobody ever heard about it. It just never happened, Joe assures me. Sex never happened in the olden days, I remember. Sexuality was only hinted at when a girl had been named a slut. Or when the slut got pregnant. Men boasted about their conquests but women had to guard their virginity. The names of sexual parts were whispered because they were considered swear words. For sex men used the words that no decent girl should ever know. Coarse language was never heard in my company. Why were people so ashamed of sex? These days sex, this forbidden fruit, is the subject of every TV drama and every book.

In my time we spoke of faith, hope and love; love was like a gentle rain moisturising the land. Love embraced the person in a warm exhilarating wellbeing while sex was dirty, violent and shameful. Lovemaking is a totally new word. I never heard of sexing let alone humping or bonking or screwing. People married to have a family; the bride took off her whites and offered her virginity to her chosen man. How would Joe know about violence and secret brutality of sex? Who would boast about abusing little girls? Or boys.

I pray that Simon will clear his name. When mud is slung smell sticks forever.

I remember the story mum told me:

A certain man came to the rabbi. I need to atone for telling lies about my friend, said the man.

The rabbi said: Go home, get a feather pillow, cut it open, empty out all the feathers and then come back.

The man did as he was told and returned to the rabbi.

Now go home, collect all the feathers, put them back in the pillow and bring the pillow to me, said the rabbi.

I can't do that, said the man, the feathers are scattered.

That's like words, said the rabbi, you can never take them all back.

Many men's reputations are unjustly tarnished by lies, says Joe.

At the custody hearing the judge says that David is old enough to choose where he wants to live. David chooses to live with his father; he tells me that this is the happiest day of his life. His ten years old sister Mia has to go with her mother. Mia is to visit Simon at weekends. Mia also wants to stay with her brother and their father. Mia always wants what David has. She is fighting until she gets what she wants. Mia is

becoming a difficult child. She screams until her wishes are granted. She is determined to keep her family together.

Simon rents a room from a newly divorced friend Eva. Simon and Eva cry on each other's shoulder because both miss the shoulder they used to cry on.

Mia hates the fact that her broken family no longer cuddles together. She runs away from her mother and comes crying to her father. She finds dad in bed with Eva. Daddy is cuddling a stranger who took him away from her family. So everything mum said is true, reasons Mia. Daddy does not love them anymore. She runs away and hides in the shed. Simon and Eva search for her, they beg her to come back and they will explain. They promise her whatever she wants. Covered with an oily rug Mia crouches behind Simon's tool-bench. She is holding her breath; she wants to punish them all for disrupting her life. She will make them pay.

Kim sends the police and they return Mia to her mother.

Mia tells her mum about dad's woman and Kim tells her that daddy never loved them. He loves that slut woman. Did he touch you? Tell me how he touched you. Over and over until the story becomes imbedded in Mia's memory and the revenge plot is completed. How dare daddy be happy with his woman when everybody else is hurting? Kim and Mia comfort each other with shared hatred of Simon.

Men are dangerous. Spiders. Did daddy show you his penis? Did he try to put it into you pee-pee? Did he touch your bottom?

Little girls only know what people tell them. They believe those they love. They learn from those they trust.

Mia stays with me on Sunday while on a visit with her father. She has a pain in her stomach. I gently press on Mia's tummy to find out where it hurts. I suspect appendicitis so I tell Mia to ring her mother.

Kim collects Mia; on the way home she tells her that I am also an abuser. Did she touch you? She has no right to touch your tummy.

Didn't I wipe Mia's bottom so many times? Didn't I shower her and dress her? It never occurred to me that I had no right to touch my granddaughter. Are women also spiders?

The lessons of generations follow me. The whisperings of old women are warnings for all little girls.

Touching leads to sex. Sex is sin. Men are hunters, women are hunted; men use women and discard them.

Men are only after one thing. Cover up, hide. Men sleep with sluts but they never marry them.

Run, run little girl.

Why are religions so obsessed with sexual prohibitions? Why is everybody's God so unhappy about people enjoying sex? The whole morality seems based on sexual conduct. Maybe sexual behaviour is the key to the survival of the species. Survival of the fittest. Eastern cultures do not seem to pay as much attention to sexual behaviour as Christianity and Islam. Have sexual prescriptions helped or hindered their survival and happiness?

In my youth nobody saw people kissing or touching; let alone having sex. Simple nakedness was considered pornography which was the evil of society but these days all possible sexual exposure can be seen on a family television. Porn is no longer the forbidden fruit.

If they would make pornography a school subject children will soon get bored with it, said a woman on television. Fuck became the most commonly used word on television in all languages. The only sin remains paedophilia which is often mentioned during the divorce, property settlements and specially the custody battles.

Yet nobody is protecting Aboriginal girls when many of them get pregnant at twelve and thirteen. That is their culture. Is culture everything we do; good and bad?

As a child I heard a woman whisper to her friend that sluts get used to sex and can't stop. Like a sow in the paddock of corn. I became scared of the image of a sow not being able to stop eating corn; I would never become a slut. You can tell by the dark circles under their eyes, whispered the woman. I checked my eyes in the mirror. I overheard my aunt prepare her bride daughter for married life. Keep your husband happy, she said. If a man is happy everybody is happy. I also heard people whisper that my

cousin had to get married; she proved that she loved her boyfriend by letting him do it; she should be grateful that he still wanted to marry her.

There were whispers about my neighbour who was caught with a boy in the hay. She became pregnant and the long court case followed to determine the paternity. Pregnancy meant shame, poverty and sin. The girl became an outcast with no prospects to marry a decent boy. The whispering of the old women shaped the virtues I tried to live by for decades. I realise now that most people's lives were determined by some small unimportant whispered piece of information or an insignificant decision made in their childhood or adolescence.

I kept running. I always knew that the punishment was coming. I ran to the end of the world but in my pocket I carry my sins with a hankie full of tears. In the other pocket are my dreams. I am leaning to the side where sins are pushing me down. I have to pave the dirt road I walked and remove the obstacles that tangled themselves into nightmares. I must empty the basket of mistakes I made; I have to return and become a soft spring wood again so my dad could make a flute and play music on it.

Everybody told me to be a good girl, nobody ever told me to be careful; nobody told me that there are men who like to touch little girls. Nobody ever mentioned that boys can be in danger. Nobody ever mentioned sex. Keep your legs together and cover your knees. Cover it up, wash it away. It never happened.

Joe and Simon are fishing down the stream. I sit with David on the riverbank. I try to find out what happened in my son's family.

I am so sad that your father's reputation has been tarnished by your mum saying things about him, I say skirting around the problem; I cannot even put into words what things are being said. I hope David will tell me. I should have known better than to expect a thirteen years old embarrassed boy explain what I could not even name.

What about my reputation. Everybody knows, David whispers towards his toes. His hands are trembling. The cuts on his wrists are slowly healing. He cut himself so the pain on his skin would camouflage the pain in his soul. I am afraid to look into David's pain. He is a loving sensitive boy grieving for his family. Did your father do anything bad to you; I ask looking at the river.

No. Never. David's eyes are turned away. I don't dare put words into his mouth. I have no words for the unspeakable.

I read in the newspaper that the high court judge was accused of looking for boys on the street. This respectable husband and father; this society's role model who decides between good and evil, goes into the night to pay some street urchin to satisfy his urges in some public toilet. What made the judge risk his family, his job, his reputation? When he was exposed he committed suicide.

Are sexual urges the source of all evil? Are they stronger than the judge? Was the judge born like that; did he have no say in how he behaved? Are some people born bad like people born crippled in other ways? Is a psychopath to be pitied like a blind person or a homosexual born in the wrong body or a person born dumb? Where does badness begin? Is everybody born with the ability to choose bad or good? What about a free will? What about destiny? If it was written that Judas will betray Jesus, how was Judas to change his destiny by his free will? Could Jesus save the mankind without the help of Judas? Is one born bad or one wills oneself to be bad? What if the will of the body is stronger than the will of one's mind? Is this irresistible will the original sin people are trying to overcome? Is the original sin forcing people to do things against their better judgement? What did the snake mean when she said to Eve: When you eat of the tree of knowledge you will know the good and the evil? Is good and evil a code name for sex?

Animals are allowed to mate but humans have to resist the temptation.

Christians world over have from the very beginning beseeched God not to lead them into temptation but to deliver them from evil. Is sex evil? Should that judge pray more to help him resist temptation?

As a child I used to run into the church to pray for the temptations to go away but now people are appalled as they watch television programs about priests abusing altar boys. They cast a shadow over all the Christians. I almost feel sorry for these solitary men who are supposed to take everybody's sins away but have no control over their own.

Nobody ever told me that men like to write on the virginal pages of a girl. How young? How unknowing? Do they want untouched or untouchable. Are men afraid to be compared to those before them? Are they afraid that they are not good enough? Children are ashamed to talk about the things done to them by the people they trust. The rape victim is more ashamed and afraid than the rapist. The victim is forever tarnished while the criminal often boasts about his crime.

Everybody knows everything about sex these days. They get it from television, says Joe.

They have no idea really. When I was young, I say as Simon walks in.

Times changed, mum, says Simon. Many boys want nothing to do with women. They are too scared to put a foot wrong and get accused of sexual harassment or abuse. Boys don't trust girls anymore. Under-aged girls get drunk these days, they initiate sex and the next morning they feel a bit guilty about it and they blame the man. The man is always guilty. You will soon have to ask permission to hold a girl's hand.

Women are after power, agrees Joe.

They already have all the power, says Simon.

Police just uncovered the international paedophile ring. Thousands of men are accused of watching pornographic images of children, I argue.

I am talking about girls who know exactly what they are doing, says Simon. One seventeen year old girl at school had a sexual relationship with a music teacher for years. She was boasting about it. When he moved away she went to the police accusing him of having sex with her while she was his student and a minor. She wanted revenge because he left her. He is never going to teach again after he comes out of jail. Girls these days drink and smoke and take drugs; they fight on the streets; they get equal pay and claim to be as strong and intelligent as men but men still have to protect them. A woman can call me any name she likes but I'd be in court for calling her what she is.

It is fine to call one a white pig but nobody would dare call a coloured person a black pig, says Joe.

Political correctness changed all the rules. We are under surveillance whenever we go It is fine to crucify Jesus all over again but don't dare say a word against Mohamed; says Simon..

Sodom and Gomorra will return, old people always predicted. Why did those Biblical men suddenly become homosexuals? Lot was the only righteous man. He saved the visiting angels from sodomy by offering his virgin daughters to evil men in exchange. Don't look back, people used to warn; you will turn into a pillar of salt like Lot's wife. Women always paid the price. Is God against women? Could it be that men wrote God's words to keep women under control? Lot's daughters made their father drunk to seduce him because there were no other men to make them pregnant. Was it right to commit incest to keep life alive?

You really have no idea what is going on these days; you still live in the twentieth century, mum, says Simon.

I noticed the change, I sigh. When I was young we were taught to respect and obey elders; now that we are elders nobody respects or obeys us.

I was the last generation of students that got the cane at home and at school, laughs Simon. Now I am not allowed to lay a hand on my son let alone smack him.

People are afraid to be affectionate; touching children can be misinterpreted as abuse, I agree.

Especially male teaches and fathers and stepfathers, says Simon.

Men are blamed for everything since women became dictators, says Joe with bitterness in his voice.

Women and all the other fringe groups looking for power and compensation; they are out looking for abuse and then they complain that there is no discipline, says Simon. If I say to my son that he is stupid or lazy his self esteem may suffer. Nobody ever worried about my self esteem. Nobody ever told me that I am smart or good or handsome. It was always do this, do that, don't be stupid, don't be lazy. Hurry up.

I worked all my life to provide a good home and bring food on the table for you, says Joe. Is that the thanks I get?

I was out of your house when I finished high school. From the age of eighteen I worked and studied on my own. My self esteem is intact, thank you very much. I am in charge of the whole government department and people look up to me, says Simon defiantly.

I am sorry, I whisper afraid of the argument. I am sorry for Simon while I apologise to Joe.

You never talk about your feelings, I turn to Simon.

Mum, feelings are not facts. Men do not play with what might have been. We move on. I live in the present. Simon leaves the room to have a smoke. I wonder why Simon needs to raise his voice whenever feelings are mentioned. Does he need to prove that he is as strong and important as his father? Is he his father's reincarnation? Both go into the world with all guns ready, alert to the danger that someone may steal their place in front. Is their fear of the world less or more than mine? Do they need to puff themselves up like frogs to boost their egos? Their faces change colour, their bodies tense. Father and son. Fighting the world as one; alert to the danger that someone will expose their Achilles heel; their pain; their soft belly. Like his father, Simon had to grow up fast.

I realise that the boy I tried to protect against his father became his father.

Simon returns contrite and relaxed after a smoke.

I remember the day Simon last back-chatted Joe. He left the cement mixer running while he chatted with his friends. Joe yelled in front of Simon's friends that Simon was a stupid good for nothing brat and Simon said: like father like son. Joe hit him to the ground. Simon got up and cried. He was eighteen, taller than Joe but he did not raise his hand against his father or to protect himself. He left home the next day.

I smoked to keep calm. Simon wouldn't dare smoke openly at the time. He told me later that he bought a packet of smokes before he went on the road to look for a lift as he left home.

Violence breeds violence. Everything changed, I say trying to reconcile the generational differences.

Bull-shit, says Simon. Watch the news. Terrorism, murder and domestic violence are the news these days.

Media is about murder. Yet nobody is allowed to smack their child to correct his behaviour.

Parents lost control over their children, agrees Joe.

People should take responsibility for their lives without police meddling in the family squabbles, says Simon.

Lawlessness started when fathers lost the authority to keep the family under control, says Joe.

When police gets involved conflicts are never resolved, agrees Simon.

Children are growing wild since police took over, agrees Joe.

I got a letter from Dean's teacher that he is on detention for cyber bullying, says Simon..

Children going through the divorce often misbehave; they have no say in the process that decides their future so they hit out, I explain.

Tell that to the teachers. They think that writing some new rules will solve the problem. When I was at school I would see the rule and think how I could avoid it, bend it, break it or change it. Most kids these days know more about computers than parents and teachers put together. Why not ask them how to go about cyber bullying; why not empower children to solve their own problems? Nobody ever listens to children. Underneath their aggressive arrogance kids are gentle idealists who want someone to give them credit for their ideas.

I agree, I say carefully.

I remember one of our teachers; he admitted that he could not draw so whenever there had to be a picture on the blackboard, he asked for help. We all competed for the privilege to draw on the blackboard for him. If grownups show off their superiority children have no chance to have a go or to compete. A little bit of adult humility would serve as encouragement for children. Giving children a chance to discover for themselves would make the school much more attractive.

I like to talk to Simon when on rare occasions he opens up in less personal discussions. We have so much in common. I believe that underneath the angry arrogance Simon is also a gentle idealist dealing with his anger and powerlessness. Joe never listened to him and he knew that it was useless to talk to me because I was not allowed to change anything.

Simon learned life lessons on his own skin. Joe learned from his father. Sins of the fathers. And mothers.

All children born with lilywhite innocence get damaged by their parents.

## Grandchildren

I hoped to remove obstacles from my grandchildren's path but the obstacles changed and I did not recognise them. Maybe obstacles are there to make the race exciting. We are all in the obstacle race.

### *David's story*

The end of the school-year play was called Daydreams. Teacher asked us to act out what we would like to be when we grow up.

I often daydream about last Christmas because everything was just right in our family then. Mum and dad paid the mortgage on the house. We went out to celebrate.

What I really want now is a new washing machine, said mum.

Why not a new bed as well, said dad.

What about a fridge, mum looks at dad all excited.

If we take another loan we might as well get everything we need, said dad.

We went shopping for the king sized bed. Mum and dad rolled like two huge beached whales on every king-sized bed at Harvey Norman's. Mia and I looked out to warn them if anyone was coming.

We bought a load of Christmas goodies to fill up the new fridge.

Stop admiring the inside of the fridge, said dad but he did it too and so did mum.

When they delivered a spanking brand new washing machine mum looked quite pretty. There was a permanent grin on her face.

Mum hung out her first load of washing when dad came behind her, took her in a bear hug and turned her around. They stood there like two fat idiots holding onto each other.

I looked around to see that nobody was watching. It would be soooo embarrassing to see two oldies standing there with the wind wrapping the washing over them. Mum's nightie was pulled high when she lifted her arms to hug dad. I could see the blue veins on the inside of her thighs. She is soooo embarrassed about those veins that she does not want to be seen in swimmers.

Dad's boxer shorts came down to unveil half of his fat bottom and mum's hand held it like it was her gold medal.

Mia came behind me and pushed me into the window. Perving perving, she sang and I told her to piss off.

Watch your language, mum yelled out. I pushed Mia towards the new washing machine and she cried out.

Let's go and get that dog then, said dad. I was grateful that for once Mia did not come with us. The dog was my Christmas gift; it was my shopping with my dad; a men's business.

There are about twenty puppies to choose from. Dad repeats to me everything the kennel owner says.

Dad is a bit excited and forgets that I understand English. Of course I can follow what the kennel keeper says but no, dad has to repeat and explain it to me again. I am not a baby.

Don't treat me like a five year old, I want to say but I just say yes because I feel a bit grateful and generous.

One of the pups sniffs my hand and takes no notice of anybody else so I choose him.

I am glad women are left at home. Dad tells me to think hard and decide because you don't get a dog every day of your life. I know all that, I want to tell him. Wasn't I waiting for this since I could utter the word doggy?

I would like mum to help us decide. She will have to help you look after the dog after all, says dad as I cuddle my chosen puppy.

I think dad is scared to make the decision himself.

We have to keep women happy; dad puts his hand on my shoulder like I was one of the men.

I want to be like dad and keep the women happy.

It's best if everybody is happy with your decision, don't you, says dad.

Maybe dad wants to please mum. I don't like mum and Mia having a say but at this stage I would do anything to get that pup.

It is a bit annoying when a grown up person like dad can't decide without a woman. It is my present, my Christmas after all and he told me to decide. But no, I believe that dad is a big sissy as far as decisions go. It is nothing new really. Dad goes shopping but he never buys anything on his own. He has to talk to mum about it. Come to think mum is a bit like that too. Why can't they make up their minds on their own? It's like they are half of a person walking through the shops and they need the other half to actually do something useful.

You don't mind if we get mum and Mia to help us decide. We will reserve this one for an hour, said dad sheepishly.

Of course I mind bitterly but I don't want to spoil the Christmas and my chances of getting the pup. If I do something unpredictable dad might change his mind. I really hate Mia having any say about which pup dad will buy for me. It's all too much but I say that's ok dad and I even allow dad to hold my hand. It feels kind of awkward holding dad's hand since I am almost as tall as he is.

I know mum will ask me which pup I want and when I will tell her which one I want all over again; Mia will say that the other one is cuter just to annoy me. We will end up arguing, I bet. Mia can't really overturn my decision since the pup is my present. She will choose her present and I don't even want to know what it is going to be.

You and I do things outside and the girls have what's inside, said dad once. My dog is going to be with us outside. He will sit next to us as we fix things.

I want that garage fixed before Christmas, mum ordered and her voice had that unpleasant annoyed shrill to it.

You going to help clean the garage, dad pats my shoulder.

I love fixing the garage. Dad and I go to garage sales on Saturdays and we buy good stuff really cheap.

There is no room left in the garage for the car so mum gets a bit stroppy.

It saves time and money when you need to fix things, says dad. I don't have to run to the shop for every screw and then every screw is a dollar, dad argues with mum. We heard it all before. Dad has millions of jars of screws he bought really cheap. He has every tool a man needs.

Sort it out, says mum as she closes the door with a little slam.

Mum sometimes complain that dad is forever looking for the right screw and that it would be cheaper to just go to the shop and get it when he needs one.

I think dad likes looking for things in the garage.

Garage is where a car is supposed to be. I can't even get in without breaking my leg, said mum. I am not sure if she is annoyed with dad or not.

All that junk. Get rid of the mess. One day I will take it all to the tip, said mum once.

Try it and I will take your junk from the bathroom to the tip, said dad in a sharp voice. You don't touch my stuff and I won't touch yours, dad added in a little friendlier tone. Mum put her head down and went inside.

It wasn't the first time either. Mum once actually dropped some of dad's things in a rubbish bin and when dad wheeled the bin onto the road he discovered his favourite pants and some pliers or something. A really bad row followed. Dad told mum that she does not appreciate his work and mum said that she works just the same. They were getting noisier and noisier until dad told me to get in and read.

Every time they have a row they send Mia and me to read in our bedrooms. I hold the book in my hands but I listen to what they are arguing about.

Dad did not come in to cook lunch. Mum made sandwiches and dad did not even have one. Everything was really quiet for a few hours. Just as well Nan and Pop came in the afternoon and we all hugged real hard and smiled and dad offered to cook dinner for everybody. Mum helped and she set the table and



served drinks and said that dad is the best cook. Nobody would guess that they looked daggers at each other only hours before.

Mum even cracked a joke on behalf of dad's old pants she threw in the bin. I bought him new ones because you could see half of his bottom through the cracks in the ones I threw away, she laughed and then dad also smiled and said that he is going to throw away the grease jars mum keeps in the bathroom. I was sort of happy that they were only teasing and I told Mia that I will clean her beauty case. Beauty what, I teased. She hit me, I yelled then to warn the oldies before I pinched her. She jumped at me then and stuck her claws into my arm. She made me bleed.

Each of you to your room and read, ordered dad.

Dad pretends that he is the boss when Nan and Pop are there. Reading is the worst punishment he can think of.

She started it, I protest. It's all his fault, whined Mia. We stuck our tongues out and left.

I hate reading. They talk a lot about my dyslexia and colour blindness and double vision and how they will have to do something about it but they never do and I don't know what is really going on.

As I predicted Mia did not like my choice of a dog but mum told her that it was my present and I had my choice. Mia called the pup a mangy mongrel and mum told her to behave herself.

Which one would you choose, asked dad and I was scared that mum would make me choose again. I don't care, she decided and I was almost grateful although it took some of the joy away from having a pup.

Maybe I remember last Christmas because last Christmas I still had my family.

It doesn't really matter what they get me this Christmas. Mum and dad will get me what I tell them to get me because both of them want Mia and me to live with them. The court will decide where we will live because mum and dad are too stubborn to decide for themselves. I want to stay with dad but I know that Mia will want what I get so there is no chance of her staying with mum. Women should stay together I reckon but no, what I have Mia must have.

I don't want to split you, said dad because he is a bit soft in the head about Mia. I know it and Mia knows it. So where one of us will live the other will too.

In your dreams, said my sister when I proposed that she stay with mum while I go with dad.

You would miss each other, said dad.

Of course we would miss each other, we miss mum and dad living together but they wouldn't even talk to each other. They expect us kids to be sensible about things. Why can't they be sensible? We could at least go together to buy Christmas stuff.

Mum is dragging us through courts instead. We spent over twenty thousand each for court orders and solicitors and counsellors, said dad.

They are paying for counselling for Mia and me so we don't end up messed up through the divorce. What's the use us going to counselling if mum and dad can't even say hello to each other? The counsellor keeps saying that the divorce has nothing to do with us and that mum and dad love us. They have a funny way of showing it. I wish they could be normal, say sorry and shake hands. Counsellors should talk to parents and make them see what they are doing but they expect us to be more responsible than our parents. It's all too weird.

Looking back now I can see that mum and dad acted kind of funny right through last Christmas holidays. They did not argue like usual. Dad tried to cuddle mum at every opportunity and she sniffed a bit every time he took her in his arms. Maybe cuddling and crying is the way to go when you are happy. They cuddled Mia and me as we opened Christmas present and mum sniffed.

One day I asked her if she was crying but she said that she caught a bit of a cold. I knew she was lying.

These days Dad buys me all sorts of computer stuff and he lets me sit at the computer for hours. I wonder what you would really like for Christmas, said dad with a twinkle in his eyes.

I don't care really what I get for Christmas. I think dad is going to get me some more computer games.

I love computer games; especially neo-pets. You get four pets, which are really different forms of creatures like monsters, and you get your team to compete against the other teams.

I always play war games because I love to listen to the weird sounds people make when they die. You learn strategies to avoid getting killed and win the game.

I like the game called worms. You get a can of worms to fight other worms. It is sad to see your worms getting killed but when your worms kill other worms it is just so exciting. You learn a lot and you get better at killing other worms.

I am glad the school is over and I never have to go back. I am going to high school next year. I hated Brendan, he is a stuck up poof and I am going to kill him one day. He pisses me off severely. I wanted to get him on the last school day but dad did not let me go to school.

You see we have these groups and Brendan sticks up with girls like a poof. He and Craig, they are the biggest weirdos; they think they know everything and when they see me they make faces and I just have to hit them.

Reece and Lee are on my side but they are Korean and adopted and Brendan is a racist.

Craig's mother comes to school and complains to the principle that this big fat boy bullies her baby boy. One day I am going to kill Craig's mother.

Craig keeps running to the teachers. When he gets me in trouble he walks past me and makes these weird noises.

It got worse a couple of months ago. I brought half a pizza to school. We ate the other half for tea the night before. I woke up late and did not have time for breakfast. I took the pizza out before school and walked with it on the playground. Craig came from around the corner and he tripped me. I fell and my face landed on the pizza. I tried to cover my face with my hand as I fell into the gravel. Brendan came behind Craig and laughed. Some girls came with him and they laughed as well. Someone yelled: pizza king. I punched Craig then and shoved the pizza into his face.

I am the tallest boy in the school and in the senior class so I could not possibly cry. One of the girls ran for the teacher and Brendan said: fatso fatso pizza king.

I did not have time to get him before the teacher grabbed my arm. I swung to get free but the teacher twisted my arm behind my back and I told him to f off. He marched me to the office and everybody watched.

Mum was called and she said that I am not a violent boy and that I would not hurt a fly if they didn't provoke me.

I got suspended for two days and on the way home mum asked me what it was all about. I told her that Craig started it.

Mum got enough problems right now. She keeps on dusting and ironing all the time when she is not working. She buys something on the way from work for tea and we spread the paper on the table and eat it with our hands as we watch television. Mum never cooks. Cooking reminds her of dad I suppose because dad always cooked. She does not touch the kitchen. I think she is on a diet herself. She goes out the back and smokes because she is giving up smoking but can't.

I loved pizza and she got it for us almost every day. Since this thing at school I hate pizza. I told mum that my stomach hurts after pizza so she switched to chicken and sometimes she buys Kentucky or Mc Donald's.

My sister Mia and I stay in after school care until six and then mum picks us up on the way from work and we are all tired and hungry.

I only watch television and videos at mums. She does not feel like talking most of the time.

When mum drove home from dad's place one-day she didn't want to talk to me. I kept asking her what was wrong and I told her that I loved her but she just drove in silence looking straight ahead. I kept on asking what happened and she ignored me so I pulled the hand brake. The car swerved and hit the tree. It almost tipped over and the blood kept running from my lip. Someone stopped and rang the ambulance and the police. They took me to hospital and mum sat with me all night. They stitched my lips and put my arm in a sling. I was the only one injured. I took off my seat belt to reach for the handbrake so my head hit the dashboard.

Mum was very sorry and I felt really angry and I did not want to cry.

Mum said sorry and I said sorry. I wanted to ask her why she was upset but I could not. I saw her cry next to me in bed and I kept my eyes shut so I would not cry. I hated mum because she would not answer when I told her that I loved her. She took my hand then and I had to open my eyes then and we both said sorry again almost at the same time.

I wish mum and dad would say sorry to each other. That would be the bestest Christmas present really but they will not. Over my dead body, says mum.

It is exciting opening Christmas gifts but I would much rather go fishing with dad. And mum.

It is good fun to be with dad. Sometimes he embarrasses me though. Like that time he started singing jingle bells real loud in the shopping mall. One of the girls from school walked past with her mum and I walked to the other side and pretended I did not know dad.

Oh my little baby is embarrassed; dad caught up with me and tried to hold my hand. How embarrassing. Once I embarrassed myself bad. I spoke out real loud in class right in the middle of the lesson. I was thinking of something that happened at home and I just yelled out. I almost died of embarrassment but I told the teacher that Craig and Brendan made faces at me. They did really but just at the end of the playtime and I could not get them and punch them.

Mia is a big fat brat. She is the youngest in our family but she always wins. She sulks until everybody gives in. Nobody takes time to wait for her to get over it. Whenever I get a present she has to have the same one or two or better one or bigger one. She sulks if she does not.

Mum once called her a bitch. She hissed the word in a half whisper actually. Dad thinks that sun shines out of Mia's you know what. He let her get away with murder. They are too busy to make her behave.

As I came into the kitchen one morning dad told mum that he had a dream how he baked the cake and the crust rose up and separated from the cake. There was a huge empty space between the crust and the cake. I stood in the doorway listening. Dad tried to hug mum. We haven't slept together for weeks, he said.

Of course they did, sort of, king-sized bed is big enough to sleep together or separate.

It's like we are no longer together, said dad.

It's all your fault. Go to your computer sluts, said mum.

I announced my good morning and they put their best faces on and they smiled and chatted like the dream wasn't there.

Joy to the world goes on in every shop as mum drags us shopping this year.

As I said before, things began to change after last Christmas. I should have realised it before but I thought mum and dad were just going through a phase until one evening mum and dad had this terrific row. They behaved really peculiar.

Get out of my face, mum told dad. Keep away from me you porno maniac. I know everything about you and I am going to tell everybody.

Dad tried to kiss her.

What did I do, tell me what do you know, what did I do, dad kept saying. He looked like a little boy who was scared to have his butt smacked and I wanted to help him get out of trouble but mum put her face right up dad's face and said: liar liar liar.

Tell me what I did, dad begged.

Get fucked, said mum and even she flinched as she said it. I never heard this terrible word in our house before. It was fine to say the word when I played footy but it was shocking coming from mum in our kitchen.

Go to your room, said dad to Mia and me. We left the door ajar and heard every word. For the first time dad did not say go to your room and read. Something serious was going on.

I wish you were dead. I will not be happy until you are dead, you bastard, hissed mum.

Mia grabbed my hand then and I felt it tremble. I think it was the first time Mia and I hugged each other without a reason.

Just tell me why you are upset and I will explain, dad begged mum. We hoped she would explain. She always insisted that people have to talk about their problems and tell each other how they feel. She said that everybody has to give in a little so everybody is happy.

Please darling you know I love you, begged dad.  
He must have done something really bad to go begging like that.  
How long has this been going on, you bastard?  
Going on what, dad tried to sound innocent and big eyed.  
I read all your secrets. You have no time to clean the garage because you are chatting to those sluts.  
But that is just a joke. We used to do it together to relax, for fun. Remember?  
Do what? Talk about your sexual habits, you maniac. I never talk like that to my best friends.  
I wouldn't tell my friends but this is just a chat-room.  
Mia and I still held hands and I wondered what secrets mum found on the computer. Would dad use swear words? He told me never to swear because any dumb body could swear better.  
It is better to baffle others with intelligence, said dad. He taught us how to make fun of those that used swear words.  
During the last year I heard dad swear a lot at a lot of people who annoyed him. Especially mum.  
Dad has a girlfriend, whispered Mia.  
Don't be stupid, I pressed my hand on her mouth. It's about computer.  
I heard mum say that dad has cyber sex; Mia squeezes the words through my fingers.  
Close the door and go to bed, orders dad.  
We are both far from sleepy.  
We glue our ears to the wall but soon both mum and dad go to bed.  
In the morning both of them kiss us and ask how we slept. They don't usually do that. They are quietly polite to each other.  
I keep wondering what will happen in the evening.  
What I really want for Christmas is to see mum and dad standing under that hoist with the fresh washing flapping all over them with arms around each other like an enormous fat tree ignoring the rest of the world. I know this will never happen but I still hope it does.  
Mum told the court that she wanted dad to move out so the children will not witness their arguing. I hate mum for it. She treats me like I have no idea what's going on. Why can't they tell me what is going on.  
On the last day of school we came home and mum stood in the doorway speechless.  
What's wrong, I asked.  
We were robbed, she broke the spell.  
We follow each other from room to room in silence. The food we had in the fridge is stacked in the laundry tub covered in ice. There is no fridge in the kitchen; there is no washing machine in the laundry.  
Mia is searching for my hand. We follow mum into her bedroom. The king-sized bed is not there.  
Phone, I break the silence and we follow a trail towards the lounge. Mum's hand moves towards the phone. The message comes on and it is dad and I feel happy that he is there with us.  
I have split our personal property. I have been asking you to do that together but you refused. I am only taking the items I am still paying for. You can have the rest. The settlement for the house is due in the next few days so this will make it easier for you to move out of the house.  
We stand here like some dumb pillars waiting for everything to go away. Only the silence follows.  
Mum moves to the window and bangs her hand on the ledge.  
Bastard, bastard, bastard, fucking bastard, she chants in the smallest voice ever but it sort of hisses into the silence like a bullet through the still air.  
Mia and I move closer to mum and for a moment she moves her hands towards us but then she lifts the phone and rings her mum and dad. I suppose even grownups need mum and dad in times like this.  
The bastard took everything, says mum into the phone.  
What can the police do, she says after a minute.  
Mia and I hold hands; we do that a lot lately.  
Why did dad do that, Mia wants to know.

Because he is a mean bastard, I told you he is a bastard and you wouldn't believe me. He brainwashed you. Now you know. You never believed me, says mum spreading her arms around us and I am sorry for not believing her before and for wanting to live with dad.

David wants to live with dad, tells Mia at just this wrong moment.

Over my dead body, says mum squeezing my head onto her chest. Over his dead body, she says suddenly.

People say things they don't mean. I said these things to Mia and she is all I have now.

My hope that mum and dad will come to their senses is evaporating rapidly.

Say sorry and shake hands, people keep saying to kids. Why can't grownups do the same?

People keep asking me what I want for Christmas and I wish I could tell them that I want someone to take away everything I have and make us go back to last Christmas. I want mum and dad to say sorry to each other and shake hands and hug and kiss and start again.

They sold our home and they are going to spend the money to pay for courts that will decide who we are going to live with.

I am going all the way with this, mum keeps saying. I will make sure that he never spends another minute with you; she promises as she plats Mia's hair.

One morning I took the leftovers to my dog and he wasn't there. He often jumps the fence. Sometimes we go to find him and sometimes he comes back on his own.

I tell mum and she says that she couldn't care less where the dog is. Get dressed we have to go, she says.

At school I was thinking about my dog all day. I rang dad after school and he said that it was mum's responsibility since she took the house and everything off him and got an AVO against him and he wasn't allowed to get anywhere near the house.

I want to stay with dad but I know that Mia will want what I get so there is no chance of her staying with mum. Women should stay together I reckon but no, what I have Mia must have.

They expect us kids to be sensible about things. Why can't they be sensible?

Joy to the world goes on in every shop as mum drags us shopping this year.

Maybe she let the dog go herself, I say to dad.

I wouldn't put it past her, says dad.

What is AVO, I want to know but they tell me that mum is just trying to keep dad away from Mia and me.

Mum keeps saying over my dead body a lot.

Mum bought Mia a scooter so they cuddled and it made me sick. Mia is only thinking of presents.

Don't worry about mum, says dad. She is scared to lose you so she says bad things about me. She wants to stop me from seeing you. She wants you all to herself.

I am going to run away if she does, says Mia.

I think I will too.

What is going on, I ask mum but she says that there is nothing for me to worry because she loves me. She has a funny way of showing it. She has no idea. Nobody has. I am not going to listen to stupid counsellors.

Court first ordered that my sister and I spend half the time with dad and half with mum. In the final hearing the judge said that I am old enough to decide where I wanted to live so I decided to live with dad.

Mum got Mia. All our life became a court order.

I am too much of a sceptic to deny the possibility of anything.

Huxley

## *A princess or a saint*

And they lived happily ever after, said my father most nights before my soul transcended into the playground of a Happyeverafter. His fairy tales left a blueprint on the pages of my first awareness; the prince kissed a sleeping beauty and she blossomed and married him to live with him happily ever after. The big bad wolf and the monster were destroyed; the wicked witch lost her wand power and all the good people lived happily ever after. I was usually half asleep curled in my father's arms when the last words were spoken.

The belief in everlasting happiness has been imprinted on me by my father's words. I believe in ever after even now. Are people unhappy because they forget about everlasting love once they satisfy their sexual urges? Nothing lasts. Throw away what does not work. It is too costly to repair things. My soul still longs for everlasting.

Mum counterbalanced dad's fairytales with a strong doze of Jesus and the saints who all waded through the valley of tears before they settled in the paradise forever. The lives of saints were mum's recipe for desirable behaviour that led to Happyeverafter in heaven. The saints were heroic beautiful people who accepted their cross and carried it courageously; they never questioned the reasons for suffering; they trusted that God in his wisdom will eventually pay everybody according to their deeds. Mum reminded me that there are visible and invisible crosses for everyone to carry on the way to sainthood. God apparently never gives you a cross you cannot carry. The biggest crosses we carry are seven deadly sins: jealousy, gluttony, lust, greed, envy, pride, wrath and sloth. These sins can stop us being a good person, said mum.

Cinderella and I grew up in the valley of tears.

I combed mum's long hair while we sang hymns to the glory of God. Mum promised that God will never stop loving me as long as I confess my sins and promise not to sin again. Faith, hope and love were the most important ingredients for happy life. I decided to become a saint to please God and my mother. I believed that being good meant being obedient. Diligent and generous were extra attributes but obedience was the key. Obedient girl was always called a good girl. Children have to obey the grownups that provide for them and protect them against all evil. The evil was a part of every story my parents told me, but the evil never won in the end.

Mum repeated the stories about Fatima and Lourdes until I felt that I personally knew those innocent children who saw the Virgin beyond the hills. Joan of Arc became my heroine. Mum explained how a boy Augustine once tried to unravel the mystery of Holy Trinity; he sat on the beach when he heard God's voice: You will sooner empty the ocean into your bucket drop by drop than understand the mystery of Holy Trinity. Augustine accepted God's words and was rewarded by sainthood. Perhaps it is best not to question what one cannot understand.

I wish I could hear God speaking to me, I said to mum.

Keep listening and one day you will hear him, said mum.

I loved the purity, courage, generosity and great sacrifices of the saints. I thanked God every day for giving me a chance to serve him in preparation for the everlasting life in a paradise. When grazing the cows I imagined Virgin Mary appearing to me like she did to those other shepherds in Fatima. I looked into the morning mist with the longing for the Virgin to bring me an important prophecy. I daydreamed about the glory I would bring to my family if the Virgin chose me as a messenger. In my innocence I could almost glimpse the Promised Land.

In my solitude I listened for the voice of God that would speak to me like he spoke to Biblical people and saints of long ago. People gradually lost the ability to hear God; distracted by constant human activities we are dangling in space disconnected from this permanent energy source. And all the time we know that our actions reverberate through the universe.

Adam and Eve were as familiar to me as the Little Red Riding hood or Cinderella. God told Eve not to touch the fruit of the tree of knowledge but the snake tempted her to disobey God; she is the reason all humanity has to wade through the valley of tears before they could return to paradise. I wondered if the tree of knowledge with its shiny forbidden fruit is still in the paradise or has it been removed since it served its purpose. Is the invisible snake always present?

Is curiosity a sin or a punishment? Is knowledge bad? Does God want people to guess what he is going to do next or how he creates or why? Or what his name is? Or what pleases him? Is God just letting people discover how ignorant they were and are? Is he showing off how almighty he is? Or she? Under the smallest he hides a smaller still and beyond the biggest the bigger still. There is no end to the mystery. Is God playing hide and seek with people? He creates mysteries and then tempts people to delve into the unknown. Does it really worry God if people call him Jehovah or Jesus or Allah or Buddha or Father or Brother? Or sister? Does God really enjoy worship and adoration? Will God punish me for asking too many questions? Does God want people to live like other species who sustain life without questioning? Does anyone really know what God would have us do? Is God like governments who like people to obey without questioning? Is God like Tito? Nobody dared to question Tito. The more you praised him the better he liked you. People who questioned Stalin often ended in a mental hospital or dead. Nobody questioned Hitler.

Are scientists happier than tribal people of the jungle? Happier than bees collecting honey or birds making nests or microbes buried within our bodies? How can one measure happiness?

Mum told me a story about the girl who insisted that she would never succumb to the temptation. The girl's mother said that she will test her. She covered a dish with a cloth and told the girl that she must not look inside. The girl said that this was easy. When her mother left the girl wanted to have just a tiny peek to see what was under the cover. As she moved the cloth a mouse jumped out.

Every child believes in magic, I say to Simon as we watch a children's program on television. People need mysteries; they need to believe in something. Faith is a gift, I smile. Simon does not mind discussing general topics with me but he stops short of revealing anything personal. I am only allowed to look into his soul through the comments he makes about life in general.

Maybe faith is a gift parents bestow on their children. An atheist said: There is no such thing as a Christian child; only a child of Christian parents. There is no Muslim child but a child of Muslim parents, says Simon. There will always be preachers who will try to persuade you to think and believe as they do but no two persons ever believe the same.

I wonder what the atheist's parents believe. Did his mother perhaps read tea leaves or coffee stains or horoscopes or tarot cards? Maybe she consulted numerologist or clairvoyant or mediums?

People dabble with astrology, prophecies, drugs and dreams to escape the reality, says Simon.

We sit in silence for a moment.

We are all bundles of cosmic energy constantly renewing, transforming and reprogramming ourselves. This bundle of connections, vibrations and rotations perceived as a body is just a vessel for ever changing emotions, feelings, desires and thoughts. In the end a corpse reprograms itself back into bits of cosmos to become something new, says Simon.

Is that recycling, resurrection or reincarnation? Seeds carrying within the plan of life. Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, said the lord, I quote the Bible.

People over multiplied. Species that over-multiply become pests, says Simon.

What do you mean?

Someone wrote that intelligence is perpetually retarded by uncontrollable fertility of the simple. In a natural world the stronger male fertilises the female to make the species stronger but stronger and more intelligent human males became lazy and hedonistic. They want to enjoy life rather than multiply and nurture their offspring. It is now up to the weakest to keep the populations going. More people, more pollution, more climate change, says Simon.

Yet the quality of life is improving, I say.

Life is not improving for millions of nomads who are dying on the way to the feeding centres we supply with food, says Simon.

People always denigrate those lower down on the scale of evolution, I say.

We denigrate people who aspire to be our equals. Hitler denigrated Jews to justify their extermination. Humans subdue animals without justification but they feel the need to explain the subjugation of other humans. That reminds me of a story you once read to me about the mouse plague. The king got cats to eat the mice and when cats over multiplied he got dogs to kill the cats and so on until he got the elephants to kill the lions. But the elephants were defeated by mice nibbling their feet.

Amazing how old stories carry the lessons of life, I say.

There is no lower or higher in the natural world, says Simon. Humans are controlled by viruses and bacteria that we consider to be at the bottom of the evolution.

I wish that things would stay the same for a while, I say.



We revolve and evolve constantly. There is a discovery revolution going on. For the first time psychiatrists really look at the brain functions, doctors analyse genome mapping, astronomers are discovering new sky bodies, says Simon.

Too much information.

Science makes you think; it takes you out of the comfort zone that simple faith used to provide, says Simon. We are designed to see things at our eye level but science makes it possible for us to see further and deeper than our naked eyes. There are millions of little invisible grains of pollen carrying genetic material for fertilisation right in front of our eyes. He and she of the plant world are gravitating towards each other just like people do.

Science makes me feel small and ignorant. It is more pleasant leave the universe to God, I say.

Science will take us a long way towards understanding space and time but science will take more time and space than we have to find ultimate answers; it is not going to be in our time, says Simon.

Are you searching for answers, I ask.

I have no time to search for answers I know I will never find. Since the world began pooling mental and physical resources evolution is moving faster, says Simon.

People think too much. We forget to celebrate life. I wish everybody would take a long holiday, I say.

Life gets boring without mysteries and celebrations. Simon cheers up.

When I was at school we used to celebrate Tito's birthday and the victories of his regime.

We need something more permanent and traditional, smiles Simon.

Have you ever read the Bible, I ask.

Everybody should read the Bible. It is the foundation of our morals, laws and traditions. Not knowing the Bible is like not knowing history.

Do you believe in the Bible teaching?

Knowing the Bible has little to do with religion and a lot to do with understanding how our spirituality and societies evolved. Cannon is a list of writings that makes some sense even today. Many simple people simply said something about Jesus or God or society as it was. Bible emerged from individual human mind experiences. In the Bible like in any other constitution you can find a chapter that will contradict every other chapter but if you study history you realise why certain stories became a part of the book Bible; this is a collection of wisdom as existed two thousand years ago. It was a guide for people of that time on how to co-exist.

What do you believe; I try to get close and personal to my son.

I believe that everybody should be entitled to believe or disbelieve according to his or her knowledge of science or according to his or her understanding of Holy books, says Simon.

People need to believe in something, I say.

You cannot believe in science since beliefs are not based on evidence and science is. Greek philosophers knew that an invisible energy makes every particle of the universe rotate but we still don't know where that original energy comes from and why. We just follow the prompts of this invisible energy. I sometimes wonder if clouds really exist or if they are just a product of my senses. Are the values and virtues I hold as good or bad really good or bad?

Blessed are those who did not see, but believe, I remember the words from the Bible. It is so much easier to ascribe the unknown to God. Plans are man's odds are god's, mum used to say.

You can be certain that science will never be definitely certain about anything. The new generation will always dispute the previous one, says Simon. There will always be new discoveries.

To think that everything we discover was there just waiting to be unveiled, I say.

Nothing we do really matters, says Simon.

Rational explanations take away the magic, the poetry, the sense of possibility and the joy of imagination, I say.

Faced with endless time and universe scientists will forever search for answers. They now concede that Big Bang is not the beginning but just a stage in the everlasting transformation of cosmos. Since Higgs discovered Boson they are excited about the Little Bang. Some even call boson god, says Simon.

The ultimate question remains how to define nothing and how things became out of nothing.

It's amazing that in your lifetime scientists discovered atoms and in mine particles within the atoms, says Simon.

We are still left with the question of how space and time began. Some believe that even climate change is just a part of planet's natural activity.

I am trying hard to reconcile my faith with new discoveries. Since nobody will ever uncover all the secrets of the universe people need God of whatever description to hold him accountable for the creation and its management.

I was six when I looked at the grain of wheat and I convinced myself that it had a face of Jesus; I later saw a shape of Jesus in the host of my first Holy Communion. God was also looking down through the new growth of the tree branches covering the road. The spring sun created a golden crown on God's head and the birds sang his glory as they busily procreated. I felt tears of gladness as I peered through the spring growth into heaven. I was overwhelmed by the greatness of creation. Life was unfolding itself wondrous and fresh. It is sad that one grows out of childhood innocence. I am sad for Simon who was never as close to God as I was because my faith was never as strong as my mother's

Ever since my first communion I became acutely aware of my every sin. I regularly confessed and repented to cleanse myself for Jesus who suffered because of my misbehaviour. I unburdened myself in that dark confessional so I could receive Jesus in the communion. I revealed to the priest

my every evil thought; I knew that God already knew them all anyway. The everlasting fires of hell scared me less than the pain I caused Jesus.

I made novenas for the happy last hour on earth which meant that I had a guarantee of receiving a holy communion before I died. I smile now remembering how firmly I believed that my entry into heaven was guaranteed no matter what. Going to heaven meant everything in those days. Faith is precious. It's a shame really that one grows out of childhood innocence; never again to be certain about what to believe. Maybe the greatness of the universe can only be touched with a magic wand or faith or childhood innocence.

Life was a preparation for the birth of Jesus who was later killed to take away my sins. The festivities through the year were celebrations of Jesus' life. Whoever ever celebrated the birth of Jesus forever owes allegiance to that baby in some secret corner of their awareness. They can never completely abandon the idea of God watching in order to reward the worthy and punish the sinners.

Even people declaring themselves atheists sometimes sigh: Oh, my God, in the life or death moments. Some who claim that God does not exist still blame him for disasters. Shame on God bringing pain upon the innocent children. Oh, my God how could he? People curse God in all languages. There are believers who pray for rain or to stop the rain; some pray to win the lottery others to pass the test; some pray for good night's sleep others for food to eat. I also saw non believers pray over their sick child. When being rational does not help, people surrender and hope that there is someone with ultimate power, compassion and fairness. My mother used to say: He who does not know how to pray should sail the sea.

I say occasional 'thank you God' for good things in my life but I do not feel entitled to special favours or for God to change the laws of nature because of my prayers. During my childhood the idea of eternal happiness was so wholesomely awesome that I never touched it with a conscious thought. It was simply heaven to believe in perfect justice and eternal life in a paradise.

Everybody's reality is different, says Simon. Our bodies are operating on the auto pilot breathing, digesting, renewing, purifying and maintaining balances and temperatures but we really are who we are in the invisible domain of thoughts, feelings, desires, and beliefs.

Are colours we see real? Are sounds real? Does a colour blind person have a different reality? Can fish and birds and ants hear the same sounds as I? Is what I hold as good really good for all?

Nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so, quotes Simon.

We are just a link in a food chain.

The world eats us from outside and we eat ourselves from inside, says Simon.

Can any reality be perceived equally by all living things?

Living things perceive physical reality by their unique but unreliable senses, says Simon. I saw a poster saying: Millions of flies can't be wrong. It had a pile of shit covered with flies. The shit must be the sweetest smell to fly's senses.

Why are people so keen to make others believe as they do?

Leaders need to convince their armies that they are creating a better world, laughs Simon. Look at how many millions died believing in Hitler and Stalin and Caligula and Tito. We all need people like us to fight for us.

Atheists push their beliefs as aggressively as political and religious leaders, I say. My parents were labelled superstitious and stupid when people turned to Stalin and Tito for guidance.

Nobody has proof either way so people will believe what they feel comfortable with. Or what seems more propitious.

People need to believe that there is something bigger than themselves, I say.

The one thing we know for sure is that western society became what we are on the principles laid down in the Bible.

People try to merge the idea of God within the idea of intelligent design; they long for God even when they believe in the evolution, the Big Bang and the Black Hole. Who activated the Big Bang? Is there intelligence outside time and space? Is there time before the beginning of time; is there time after the end of times? What can one see from the edge? What is beyond the black hole? Who created God? Who made the evolution possible? *How can God run himself for eternity? How long is eternity? How far is the end of things? What is behind the last star? Does a bird have a different view of the world? What is the truth?* Is every part of the universe acting independently and singularly or do we act as one: solar systems down to DNA particles and atoms rotating, vibrating, and renewing.

Your questions will keep scientists in their jobs forever, smiles Simon.

Believers and unbelievers look so much the same on the outside but in their essence are so different.

We are all believers; we believe in our own explanations, smiles Simon.

Stane, a pious Canberra Slovenian sent me this story about a priest who was taken by an angel on an excursion to see heaven and hell. The story is meant as a warning for me to repent and pray. And not to question God's will, I say producing a print of the story where a priest reported:

After an accident an angel told me: I am going to take you to Heaven; the Lord wants to meet you and talk with you; he also wants to show you heaven, hell and purgatory.

First, the angel escorted me to hell. It was an awful sight! I saw Satan and the devils, an unquenchable fire of about 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, worms crawling, people screaming and fighting, people being tortured by demons. The angel told me that all these sufferings were due to unrepented mortal sins. Then the angel explained that there are seven degrees of suffering according to the number and kinds of mortal sins committed in people's earthly lives. The souls looked very ugly, cruel and horrific. It was a fearful experience. I saw people whom I knew, but I am not allowed to reveal their identities. The worst sins that convicted these people to everlasting torture were abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, hatefulness, unforgiving and sacrilege. The angel told me that if they had repented before they died, they would have avoided hell and gone instead to purgatory. I also understood that some people who repent these sins might be purified on earth through their sufferings. This way they can avoid purgatory and go straight to heaven. I

never expected to see in hell priests and Bishops but many of them were there because they had misled people with false teaching and bad example.

After the visit to hell, this Angel escorted me to purgatory. There are also seven degrees of suffering and unquenchable fire. But it is far less intense than hell and there was neither quarrelling nor fighting. The main suffering of these souls is their separation from God. Some of those who are in purgatory committed numerous mortal sins, but they were reconciled with God before their death. Even though these souls are suffering, they enjoy peace and the knowledge that one day they will see God face to face. I had a chance to communicate with the souls in purgatory. They asked me to pray for them and to tell the people to pray for them as well, so they can go to heaven quickly. When we pray for their souls, we will receive their gratitude through their prayers; once they enter heaven their prayers become even more meritorious.

It is difficult for me to describe how beautiful my Guardian Angel is, tells this priest. He is radiant and bright. He is my constant companion and helps me in all my ministries, especially in my healing ministry. I experience his presence everywhere I go and I am grateful for his protection in my daily life.

My angel escorted me to heaven passing through a big dazzling white tunnel. I never experienced this much peace and joy in my life. Then immediately heaven opened up and I heard the most delightful music. The angels were singing and praising God. I saw all the saints, especially the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, and many dedicated holy Bishops and priests who were shining like stars. When I appeared before Jesus, he told me: "I want you to go back to the world; you will be an instrument of peace and healing to my people.

It is amazing what people believe, says Simon.

I am sure Stane wants to help me reach heaven. Anton, a Born Again Christian friend, gave me a book of similar experience of people who claim that Jesus led them on a tour of hell and heaven. They describe the burning and the smell of sulphur, the melting rotting flesh, the worms and the serpents and tortured never-ending screams. Around their necks the hell dwellers wear signs describing the sin they committed. The worst sinners are homosexuals then come abortionists and people who cheated and gave to the church less than they were supposed to. They all scream for mercy but it is all too *late*. Nothing can be done to help these people, says the book.

It scares me that American president himself apparently belongs to Born Again Christians. Does he also believe in everlasting torture? Smiles Simon

Jesus loves you and God is the most loving father, I remember my mum's teaching. I cannot believe that her Jesus would allow such suffering. I am happy that our Catholic faith became mild and meek. Hell is rarely even mentioned in Catholic Church. Purgatory became redundant since people stopped buying off days in purgatory for their loved ones with money and prayer. Our father is a loving and forgiving father, Catholics insist.

One wonders if people are describing the same Jesus, laughs Simon.

Our Catholic priest even said in his sermon that the seed put in the ground either produces new life or it dies. There is nothing in between, I recall.

People believe some weird stuff, says Simon. I just heard a story about a publican who wanted to build a hotel next to the local Baptist Church. Parishioners unsuccessfully tried everything to stop the construction. In the end they turned to community prayers. About a week before the hotel's opening, a bolt of lightning struck the hotel and it burned to the ground! The church folks were bragging about "the power of prayer".

The angry bar owner eventually sued the church on grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building. The church denied all responsibility.

The judge read carefully through the plaintiff's complaint and the defendant's reply. He then opened the hearing by saying: I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but it appears from the paperwork that what we have here is a bar owner who now believes in the power of prayer, and an entire church congregation that does not.

I am the fruit of my parent's parenting so to speak; my mission was to make them proud so I aimed to become at least a saint if not a princess. I actually felt destined to become a saint. Female saints were virgins or nuns or martyrs. No happy go lucky girl ever became a saint.

I was baptised as Ema but on coming to Australia someone somewhere inserted another m into my name. Many names have been changed like that, some by mistake others by someone's intention.

Saint Emma was a countess who chose poverty for the love of Jesus. She was born rich but gave her possessions to the poor. I was nothing like my patron saint of course; I was born poor and was always too scared of poverty to give away things. It must be wonderful to give and make others adore you for being so generous; only one must first have things before one can give them away. Poverty by itself does not bring popularity or sainthood. If I had more than I needed I would give some to the poor. Things are so much easier if one starts rich and a bit famous in some way. Most people never become rich or famous. They do their good deeds unnoticed. Maybe even God does not notice the goodness of ordinary people. One has to be rich to be truly generous.

I remember my father once discussing with the neighbour the Bible story about the vineyard.

The farmer hired the workers; they were happy with the job and the promised wages but when they saw that the farmer paid the same to those who came late, they complained.

I don't understand why they were unhappy, said the neighbour.

Privileges are only appreciated as long as they make people feel privileged. As soon as everybody gets the same trophy, the trophy loses its meaning and value. It is always that little bit extra that makes one special, said my father. People are less worried about poverty than they are about self-importance.

I like the story about the rich Pharisee who gave part of his money to the church, said the neighbour. There was this woman who only had a coin and gave it as well. Jesus apparently appreciated that woman's gift more because she gave all she had.

Unfortunately a person with nothing more to give can no longer be generous, said my father.

I wonder why some people are generous and others mean, said the neighbour.

People give and expect something in return. I scratch your back you scratch mine. If your back is never getting scratched you stop scratching. If you live with people who never do anything for you, you become mean, said my father.

I never understood how turning another cheek would help me though, said a neighbour.

If you refuse to fight back you take the wind out of the attacker; you destroy his sting when you refuse to be outraged by his attack; it is no joy attacking a defenceless person. Look at Jews. When Hitler tried to exterminate them, they gained sympathy of the world and a chance to have a nation state. They realised their dream; they returned to Jerusalem, said my father.

Most explanations in my home were somehow connected to the Bible. When children displayed jealousy towards each other mum would warn us to remember what happened when Cain was jealous of Abel. Nothing is new under the sun, my father often said. He read books; he was also the only peasant in the village who bought newspapers.

I remember very few tangible events from my childhood and they probably were of no great historical value; like that time during the war when someone gave each one in my family a lolly. Mum only pretended to suck on hers. Days later she produced her almost un-sucked lolly and cut it into little crumbs for her children. I remember the flowery smell of that boiled lolly. That was how mum was. That's how acts of random generosity stay in the memory. While travelling the world I sometimes met strangers whose generosity remained in my memory like that.

Once when mum was chopping the ingredients for the stew dad leaned over her and said: Life is like a pot of stew. We drop in everything we have then we stir it to extract the juices and blend the flavours.

Mum gave dad the wooden spoon to taste this life-stew and dad said that it was good. I rejoiced when my family was like that.

Dad made toys and whistles from young spring saplings for me; he taught me to play tunes and imitate birds. He sometimes made up stories in the dark of long winter evenings and I listened, mesmerised by his words.

When you close your eyes you can be whoever you want to be, he said. Walk lightly into the world, because the world is constantly changing. The events will eventuate because of you and despite of you. Let them pass and change. Don't be afraid when things seem wrong because bad experiences make us enjoy the good ones. Things changed in my lifetime beyond recognition, said dad and his voice seemed far away. They will change in yours even more. There is a reason for everything that happens; accept the reason and what happens. Change as the world changes, but hold onto the magic land within where your favourite blossoms are kept. Nobody can ever take your magic land away from you. There will always be people above you and below you but most important people are those that walk by your side.

I can still hear my father's voice as he lulled me away into the magic land of dreams. My parents were good people. I loved and trusted them and wanted to be like them.

I wonder if dad's words follow anybody else as they follow me. Maybe he spoke them for me alone. Maybe he had nothing else to give me so he offered her the legacy of a magic land. I wonder what

memories my son carries from his growing up. Who knows what he will remember in the changed future. One only knows one's own memory; one small chapter in the history of life.

I know nothing about things Mum and dad dreamed about; I was too busy with my own dreaming. I was that young sapling storing up the melodies of life. People impressed their knowledge and wisdom on me and I soaked new experiences like a sponge. The more I became like them the more people liked me. In the end I became a tangled web of everybody's ideas.

I close my eyes to recreate the images of people who loved me. I revisit what might have been before I falls asleep most nights. As I wake up I try to make sense of what is real and what just the mixture of other realities. I try to remember where I had been in my dreams before they fade away. Is my life an illusion? Am I alive while I keep sustaining my body or when my body retires and my soul wanders where it pleases? Is the person sleeping next to me more important than the one my soul plays with while my body sleeps? Is my life only a story others tell? Am I a picture others painted? Do I only live my real life in my magic land? Are people around me causing my sleepless nights or are they also sleepless as a response to the same changes in the cosmos? Is everybody forever asking the same questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of it all?

Only people you love can cause you anger and sadness and happiness, said dad. But they will only make you feel a certain way if you allow them to, he added.

If at first you don't succeed try, try again, mum advised.

I let the ugly sisters try to seduce my prince because I know that in the end he will find me and know with unmistakable certainty that I am the one he has been waiting for. Mum told me about the guardian angel; dad told me about the fairy Godmother; one of them is bound to rescue me and rejoice seeing me and my prince riding towards Happy Ever after. In my enchanted kingdom I close my eyes to see more vividly the vision of Jesus or of a prince or of my guardian angel. Or James. I am still waiting for my prince to kiss me into being who I was meant to be. I keep peace in my family. It is easier to dream about the prince that way. Wrong princes stop with me while I wait for the real prince. It does not really matter who is there waiting with me.

James is the prince of my blossoming; he lives on the other side of the mountain, in the valley of tears on his own way to a paradise; he is passing through time until we will meet again. He is perpetually dreaming of our reunion. He is just a thought away ready to resume the only real loving we both ever knew. I rewrite the scenarios for our reunion. Whenever I want him he is ready to follow me with all of the romance we experienced when we were both eighteen. We would stare into each other's eyes and time would stand still. We would look at the sky and see God light up the stars for us.

I don't want James to come just yet; I first have to deal with the people who are waiting with me. I cannot afford to be rescued yet; I have to get rid of all the dirt and build a white road towards our Eldorado.

James and I parted prematurely; our romance is in suspense. James has no power to interfere with my waiting. I never have to wipe the dust from our shiny togetherness. We remained two children in a fairytale; our love can overcome obstacles of life and death. There is no urgency or fear; we are free of anger and jealousy; we live in love.



Joe takes good care of me; he is a passionate, patient lover; my love for James never interfered with our togetherness. James lives in my magic land.

I remember the words of St Thomas Aquinas: People are longing for something precious all their lives and when they get it they live in fear of losing it. One is always afraid of losing whatever makes life worth living.

The splendour of my blossoming reappears with the few people who touched me on my way. I am no longer sure where I am running and what I want to be; or if I want to be anything at all. Does God want me to just repeat the yesterdays and yesteryears until my energy runs out? Is my goal to reach an incredibly high old age; do I really want everyone to become tired of my extended dying? Would anyone know if I missed out a day, a year or a lifetime? Is anything I do worth doing? Is anything worth thinking about?

Millions of people dance every day on crowded streets without seeing each other. Nobody will notice when I dance my last. The eternity will chug along without noticing that the torch changed hands. Nobody really comes first or last; the circle closes to make sense of the bubble that was life. It makes no difference if one is the beginning or the end. Time is the healer and death conquers all. RIP is an order nobody can ignore. Rest in peace, enjoy the freedom, the run is over, the trophy is waiting. Mistakes will be forgotten; sins will be rubbed out.

There is no significant example in history before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion.

Durant

### ***What is your name, God?***

My husband, Joe, and I often sit in the shade of a huge Moreton Bay fig tree admiring our garden; wind is moving the branches and its dark foliage throws long shadows; the strength of the trunk defies the storms; the gloss on the leaves protects them against drought. There is a perpetual war in the tree branches; flocks of small birds hunt away bigger birds with sharp screeching; there are also gentle love calls and happy whistling and preening and nesting. Spiders are spreading webs to catch flies. Ants are programmed to march in line following the leader who discovered a new source of sustenance. The nearby flowering bush is alive with bees visiting bloom after bloom. So many lives in the oneness of the nature.

Our house is the best in town, says Joe taking my hand, obviously satisfied with his achievements. Our house is his pride and joy; it inspires the envy of the neighbourhood.

We have everything we ever wanted, I agree. It is not worth the effort of not agreeing. It really is much easier to surrender and just get along in the first place. Joe and I had many unnecessary battles in the past before we came to an understanding that Joe is the leader and I am the follower. We are faithful to each other because we both fear infidelity. There are so many ways one can be unfaithful without ever having sex with somebody else. Joe and I demand full devotion from each other; we want each other to succeed and shine but we remain afraid that the success would stop either of us being a devoted admirer of the other.

There is a constant struggle for power; the moment one surrenders the other becomes victorious. The conquerors write the rules; they educate a new generation that it is desirable, moral, and honourable to obey and worship them, the heroes, who won against the enemy.

The defeated are often remembered as weak, immoral, ugly or shameful; vulnerable they move into dark corners to plan a revolution. People avoid losers. Losing is a contagious disease. Defeat is an admission of unworthiness; it is a destruction of everything once held precious and sacred by the defeated; surrender is rendering one's efforts futile.

It is never easy to clap for those who take your place in front yet the losers are compelled to clap and smile. People insist that human societies are no longer a subject of the jungle law but everybody still knows where they stand in the scheme of things. The struggle goes on in the cities and in the jungle.

Winners spawn historians to write about their heroism and their victories against the evil, backward, stupid and vulnerable. Germans were more despised for being losers than for being cruel. As soon as they became prosperous, they became the leaders of Europe again. Strength is admired. People worship the hero.

People learn historical facts as gospel truth because history books are decorated with undisputable facts and dates and names. The historians have to please the government of the day so they choose the names, the events and the dates from the vast archives of information to make

their opinions appear true; they simply ignore the dates and names and events that would contradict the rulers. Who would dare write against the winners? Read the history.

To win one has to fight. I am not a fighter; just as well Joe is. My family is safe with Joe.

Lock the doors, love, calls my neighbour over the fence. I just heard that a group of young burglars are working this area.

Nobody is safe these days, I agree.

People forgot God so God forgot them, says the woman piously.

Children are free to do as they like, I agree.

Nobody is teaching them right from wrong anymore. I blame the media, says the neighbour.

Is media a picture of what is there? Egg and chicken story, I mumble but she does not relate to that. Is media promoting rudeness and crime or just reporting it?

I sometimes wonder what would happen if parents, police and God were asleep or go on a holiday. Is there something good in people that one could rely on? Does good come from the same place as evil?

Do you believe in ghosts, asks the neighbour's six years old grandson.

I have never seen one; I try to squiz out of the difficult answer.

They are invisible, the boy explains. The boy can barely say invisible.

Most things are invisible, I smile. How could I explain to the boy that embarrassment and ignorance are real although invisible? Manifestations are deceiving. Smiles carry false messages. Tears flow with an invisible purpose. Love is an emotion everybody tries to explain and nobody ever could. Hate kills in infinity of ways. Love and hate, the two sisters forever dancing together. Now you see one now the other in the same fancy dress disguised as something else. Cain and Abel, black witch and white, black sin and lily white innocence are manifestations of the same invisible force to frighten and comfort forever.

Mum saw a ghost in her dream, tells the boy.

Sometimes we see things in our dreams, I venture.

Are dreams real? The boy grapples with what scientists cannot fathom.

Dreams are part of our invisible lives, I explain. I have no idea where the boy's thoughts are travelling. He does not understand; I do not use the right words. Words are deceiving.

But does it really happen what we dream about?

It happens to the dreamer in a dream.

Is that neutral enough? Is life real? Or death? Birth leading to death; day turning into night; thoughts changing into dreams, seasons following each other in their eternal dance. Are thoughts any more real than dreams? Is real what I touch or what touches my heart? Is voluntary more real than spontaneous? People use words to capture the invisible; they paint our perception of God, they write about love and hate; they explain their fear and smallness; they make their misery and joy into universal joy and misery so they can measure themselves by their own perception of their experiences.

Nanna said that she has an angel helping her, explains the boy.

That is good; I pronounce my approval. My mum also had a guardian angel, I add.

Does everybody have a guardian angel?

I think we all have an angel; I try to escape with a mysterious smile.

Do you know your angel; the boy drills into the invisible. Children like magic more than tangibles.

I think you get to know your angel when you really need one, I say trying not to offend the boy or his nanna or my mother, or God or my personal angel. Is anybody brave enough to say that the invisible does not exist? Wouldn't one have to be blind and numb and dumb not to perceive the invisible hand in the logic, beauty and enormity of the universe? On what evidence could I deny anything unknown to me?

I would like to believe in the guardian angel but where was he when bad people made me do bad things? I cannot even be sure that God himself will see my side of things. If he is at all interested. Should God take sides? If he exists.

I don't understand, says the boy.

Only God understands everything, I say in order to repair my own relationship with god.

Did you ever need an angel; the boy refuses to give up.

Everybody needs an angel sometimes.

Is God real, asks the boy.

He is real as long as you believe in him; I squeeze out of my dilemma. Everything makes sense once you are prepared to believe.

Where elephants fight, it is the grass that is trampled.

African saying

## *The shadows of the past*

I am travelling back on the road strewn with abandoned blossoms of my lost dreams, beliefs and hopes. I pick the dead blooms and try to breathe life into them. There are things I believed in; they did not exist anymore than they exist now; young people only believe them into existence.

Old people wish to be young again because now they know better than to believe. We are longing for the time of childhood innocence when love was everywhere and it was real and nobody waited for anybody to go to the nursing home or die. In that first love nobody willed anyone dead because one was not yet what one owned. There was love, there were soul mates. Far back at the beginning on the crossroad stand a boy and a girl waiting for the fairy tale union believing in everlasting love.

Ivan and I were six when Ivan turned his eyes to me and said: I love you. We were holding hands as we strew petals in the procession of Corpus Christie. The fields were covered in spring, the sun shone, hymns were sung; God was holding us in the palm of his hand. I wanted to embrace the universe.

I love everybody, added Ivan. I also loved everybody during that Corpus Christie procession. Everything seemed right with the world, birds were nesting, bees were buzzing, flowers were blooming and children loved. That is all there is, the blossoming, the courting and the nurturing. I wonder if Ivan still loves everybody. Maybe he doesn't love at all. Maybe he was too generous with love. Maybe love like flowers dies a natural death.

Of course there was greed even then and hunger and the choices were not all love; there was also the fear of poverty and the need to push ahead.

People told me who I was; their words, although spoken carelessly, attached themselves to me and I cannot rub them out or paint them over. The words of love I listen to again and again and the words of hate visit me in my nightmares. I am afraid that one day someone will discover who I really am in my hiding places and think less of me.

I was too young to know why kids called my family chickens, but I knew that 'chickens' was a call to war for my adored brother Jakob, who was old enough to fight for our family's honour. Jakob began a feud with the children of a nearby village and when they came to fight him he ran home. The nickname chickens stuck to our family like dog-shit to a shoe. I was marked for life by the name some little boy gave my brother.

Sticks and stones will break your bones but words will never hurt you, mum tried to reason. That was the biggest lie. Forget sticks and stones, it is words that sing into your nightmares. The mud sticks. Poor and weak carry the words of shame like a bag of manure around their necks

throughout their lives. Some laugh them off with a hollow bravado while their hearts bleed. Shame can never be deleted. It can only be scattered around like manure. Or be buried under. Don't lie about sticks and stones. I have no scars on my skin; they are all well hidden deep within. The impact of words remains long after the events are forgotten. The mind remembers the words while the heart feels the meaning behind them and they become the nourishment for the soul. Or the poison. Physical deprivations are quickly forgotten but wounded soul never fully recovers. One can boast about overcoming physical hardships and deprivations but nobody boasts about the pain of shame and of not belonging.

My brother David and our neighbour Milan were best friends. At the age of five I was in awe of these two smart, handsome, seventeen years old men. In 1944 Milan joined partisans and Home guards took David. One became communist and the other anticommunist. Milan became red and David became white. I became whitey.

I doubt now that the boys had any idea really what they became apart from becoming instant enemies. How could two village teenagers, who never read a newspaper or listened to the radio, know about the intentions of Hitler or Stalin? Even Hitler's close associates claimed after the war that they had no idea about the plans of their leader. Most war criminals were absolved of their crimes because they claimed that they just followed orders. What could they do? What could anyone do? People accepted war criminals as an inevitable evil.

Nobody was allowed to use this excuse with Stalin or Tito. They were afraid of opposition so their opposition ended up in mass graves.

Stalin's agents promised to take from the rich and give to the poor. They promised equality to the oppressed to justify the taking from the rich. Most people feel oppressed and exploited by those in power most of the time. One can always count on human nature. The oppressed covet the power and the riches of their masters and the oppressors hold onto their power and riches until those under find an opportunity to topple them. Revolution is an everlasting dogfight. I heard someone say: While you are oppressed you feel alive because you struggle but when you have it all you become depressed because there is nothing more to hope and wish for. Oppressed have no time to be depressed.

The words: equality, freedom, liberty and brotherhood began to appear and hope seeped into the hearts of the oppressed.

Hitler claimed that Jews killed Jesus and created godless Bolsheviks. He needed to justify the killing of the Jews and the taking of their property.

Dirty money grabbing Jew is manipulating people and creating wars, Hitler claimed.

Both Hitler and Stalin wanted to get rid of Slovenian clergy and intellectuals first. Without spiritual and civic leadership it is easier to establish new order and make people believe in it. Most people are like ants; they follow the leader.

Existing Slovenian leaders knew that Germans were losing the war and would eventually leave while Soviet communism threatened to stay and change their life permanently. The existing government created Home-guards to defend the legitimate, existing order.

Most small European nations were split into Hitler or Stalin supporters but in their desperation they were killing their own people and so made it easier for invaders to impose their rule. Hitler and Stalin, the two murderous egomaniacal dictators, these two self appointed gods, split Slovenians in half. Although both sides were made to believe that they fought for the liberation of Slovenia the Liberation meant a different outcome for their leaders. Stalin was on the winning side in the end so Slovenians who were against him had to be punished. Slovenian land is full of mass murder graves.

I remember my mother squeezing my hand tight as we watched the soldiers poke the haystacks with pitchforks. My brother David came out bleeding and walked away with the men never to be seen again.

Just before the end of the war Milan came asking for David. He seemed so much bigger in his partisan uniform with a bayonet down his leg and the gun on his shoulder. My dad ignored him and headed for the stable to feed the cows. Milan hit him on the head with the butt of the gun. Blood sprinkled the snow. Mum tried to help dad as he fell on the icy ground but Milan pushed her down with his boot and spat into her face. He yelled that he would shoot all of us if we didn't tell where David was. I was kneeling in the snow next to my parents.

There, I chirped pointing at the road up the hill. That was my first real lie. Something in me changed. Milan tortured and humiliated my parents and they could do nothing. They represented all the power in the world to me yet they were obviously powerless. I felt fear running in my veins. My father was a well respected man; I could not understand him being powerless.

One night Jesus was taken down from the cross that was in front of my home. My parents stared at the empty cross with horror and disbelief but they did not dare accuse anyone of stealing Jesus. Later I heard them whispering that Jesus was taken down from all the crosses in the valley. I used to pick first spring flowers and put them at the feet of Jesus. I wanted to please him and his mother. My mum regularly beseeched Virgin Mary and her son to save us from sickness, war and starvation. I hoped my flowers would help.

A neighbour disappeared and people whispered that he was punished for asking his captain: Why are we fighting home-guards and not Germans?

Children were swimming in the river while our cattle grazed nearby. I saw bodies floating towards me. I quickly moved out of the water to let the bodies pass. Where did these bodies come from; where did they go? Did they float from Krka into Sava and Danube? Other people must have seen them eagle spread floating towards Black sea. Nobody bothered to pick them up and bury them. Whose bodies were they? I was relieved when they disappeared down the stream. I found a body of a young man with his face blown off in the forest when I looked for mushrooms. I have no idea why I did not tell someone.

After the war Milan became a president of the local branch of the Communist party. The Shire sent him to a communist management school. When he returned he became a director of a nearby bike factory. He had the power to hire and fire. Everybody did favours for him. People were grateful for his friendship.

Power-mad dogs, hissed my father.

After the war the West repatriated Home-Guards, Slovenian anticommunist fighters, who escaped to Austria. The West had to be practical about solving the refugee problem; the communist Yugoslav regime demanded the return of their nationals; they promised to deal with them justly. The communists declared that returned refugees were Hitler supporters so they promptly murdered them. Twelve thousand God-fearing young Slovenian boys were buried in mass graves among countless thousands of other repatriated anticommunists. The government had to do that to put the fear into the rest of the population. Death to traitors!

The West also had to reward Stalin for helping defeat Hitler.

Why bother with long trials like those in Nirenberg?

This quick and easy final solution broke the back of Slovenian nation. People no longer resisted the new communist government.

There was an air of excitement, anticipation and cautious hope. The smell of victory permeated the air. Everything old had to be swept away to make room for the rosy future. We, the children of the war, knew nothing else.

Towards the end of 1945 a nineteen year old partisan invited villagers to a pre-election meeting. They were to elect their own representative for the shire. I begged my father to take me with him. I sat on his knees as the peasants seriously evaluated each other for the nomination. The nominees seemed shy and a bit scared to either refuse or accept the nomination. My father said that the tyre of his bike exploded and he could not walk 12 km for the monthly meetings. One man lost his son in the war and was busy working on the land; one war hero lost his leg. As the excuses kept coming the young partisan said: You don't have to worry about travelling to any meetings because we already have a representative. We only have to put down a name of your choice.

Villagers looked at each other and laughed. The noise they made was not a happy haha laugh but an hm hm sighing.

If you are going to laugh at me I am not going to tell you anything else, the young partisan concluded the meeting. The villagers whispered to each other. They were afraid of a boy who just won the revolution.

My parents seemed all knowing, ordinary and necessary to me; they were like the air I breathed; it seemed natural that I obeyed and relied on them; I had nothing to compare them with until I started school in 1946 and my self-awareness began to widen.

As I began school I learned that my family was far from perfect; other children knew that; teaches and other parents knew it as well. My parents who made me feel precious were far from precious themselves. Suddenly I felt less good. The feeling that I wasn't good enough followed me. After the liberation I felt less good, less beautiful, less rich, and less deserving than children around me. I began to feel ashamed of my family, their beliefs and their teaching.

Santa Claus was replaced with the New year's Granddad Frost, the nativity scene gave way to New year fern tree; belief in Jesus was replaced by the belief in the Communist leaders. I found myself standing alone without the hope that Mother Mary will help me or guardian angel lead me safely over the troubled waters. I trembled like a fragile vine trying to grab a hold of something stable



and real. Cinderella and her prince, Jesus and Mary became the same part of my superstitious backward parents; I became ashamed of everything my parents represented.

The school lessons began with chanting: For homeland with Tito we go. Death to fascists- freedom to the nation. All lessons were intertwined with the glorious stories of the heroes who defeated Germans, Italians and home-grown traitors. Everybody knew who amongst them belonged to traitors. Songs, poems and stories were all about the heroism of Tito, our ideal teacher and leader.

I sang the songs of revolution and chanted loudly but on the way from school I still prayed for my guardian angel to return.

I was a promising student; the teachers told me that I could make something out of my life but I could not share this joy with my parents. I loved the red scarf my teacher wore around her neck and hated the black scarf my mother wore; I loved the songs of revolution and became ashamed of the hymns mum used to sing with me. I tried to emulate the strong and victorious; I knew that I was less good than I should be and that I had to be grateful for being tolerated. I envied the children of national heroes who were proud of their families. I had to be especially vigilant and sing louder and better. I embraced the new ideology like women embrace stilettos. What is a little pain compared to how tall and desirable you become? It was like teenagers these days embracing sex as a sign of liberation and adulthood. What is the absence of dreams and romance compared with the instant gratification sex offers?

It became right and moral and fashionable to forget everything parents said; especially when the parents were traitors who refused to see that the communist party leaders will lead people into a just and fair future. Brotherhood, unity and equality. One for all and all for one. United we stand. We are one.

We are who we are. Nobody is any closer to the Promised Land. Nobody is richer, better or more loved.

What could possibly be wrong with brotherhood of equal people? What is wrong with taking from the rich and giving to the poor? Didn't Jesus teach to love thy neighbour as yourself? Did everybody learn from Jesus? Are all gods teaching the same?

The subsistent peasants-land owners instantly became second class citizens. They were barely allowed to keep enough of their produce to survive; the rest was taken for the common good. The peasants soon calculated that it wasn't worth producing more than they needed to survive. In the past they cultivated every piece of land but now they left the land to rest. The young left the village and searched for the factory jobs in the cities.

Yesterday ways became ridiculously stupid, shameful and irrelevant in the rosy future where our leaders were our equals, friends, protectors and teachers. Gradually most young people learned to worship and fear the new leaders who made so many sacrifices for our happiness. Old God-fearing people did not dare voice their disapproval; they knew that they were powerless.

It was everybody's duty to denounce anyone who did not agree with our leaders. If people are not with us they are against us and have to be silenced. I wondered if my parents ever realised how wrong they were.

The authorities urged everybody to be vigilant because dark forces were trying to destroy the communist paradise. The foreign superpowers were jealous of communist success; there were also people inside bent on destroying what the revolutionary heroes fought for and won for them with their blood. The enemy was everywhere trying to sully the names of the righteous, compassionate communist leaders; the enemy lured people into a trap; they tempted them to escape to the West where people perish exploited and forgotten. The West was the worst enemy. The West was a snake in the paradise. Children learned at school that the West sucks the blood of the poor workers. They learned to fiercely hate capitalists that squeezed the employees dry and dumped them once they were no longer useful. During the festivities in honour of the communist leaders students chanted that they would rather die for their leaders than let outsiders meddle in their lives; we became patriotic and shunned all that was foreign. I embraced the splendour of this new fashion. I genuinely felt sorry for all those mistreated workers of the West; if only they could escape into the communist paradise.

Still some people were tricked into escaping to the West; some even returned with a car; some brought home money to build a house; some never returned. The West was the forbidden fruit, shiny and dangerous. People whispered about the west. The government had to be especially vigilant with those who tasted the forbidden fruit of the west and then spread western propaganda at home among the lucky people of equality and brotherhood. More of the peasant boys escaped every day.

I accepted the new world and willingly left behind the burden of the old. Nobody disagreed with the regime; nobody would dream of criticising the leaders. It would be immoral, disrespectful, ungrateful and maybe even blasphemous to criticise national heroes. Everybody knew that the government would have to punish dissent.

It is shameful to wear last year's fashion.

My childhood ended at the age of six. Dad stopped telling stories and mum did not sing anymore. I never again knew my parents. The death of my traitor brother David changed my whole family; my mother cried; my father became silent; nobody wanted to hear the good news I brought from school where my beautiful young teacher loved me.

On All Saints day 1945 my mum looked through the window as people walked past our house towards the cemetery to put flowers on the graves of their dead. She called dad for lunch but he ignored her. Mum cried as she lit the candle next to the statue of Virgin Mary in the corner of the house. Dad later told me that they heard about David being among the returned refugees and killed at that time. He was eighteen. They had no grave to put the flowers on.

The memory of David had to be secretly destroyed and his name was never to be mentioned again out loud. My parents never spoke of their grief; their silent powerless acceptance, their moaning spread over our home like a fog. I understand now that they did not dare get angry or complain or demand justice. Or ask where David's grave was. They never cursed openly to vent their anger; they only whispered, whimpered and muttered like frightened beaten animals. The worst of all was the silence and the denial of grief. Their heavy muted rage reached my bones. Mum once touched dad's hair lovingly but he just pushed her away. I still remember the pain of knowing that love has gone from our home. My father whispered once that I will see the day when all these will be... He spat on the ground but he never finished the sentence. In the most hidden corners of my soul I felt sorry for my parents; I also felt guilty because I became a part of the new system. I hated belonging to the traitors' family. I depended on the goodwill of the new regime.

I accepted the fact that the victorious had the right to impose any law that would secure their position; they won that right in a glorious revolution. A fair fight. I was aware that I belonged to the vanquished so I tried hard to emulate the victorious.

Students were busy performing rituals in honour of our leaders; the writers wrote odes in honour of Tito, the painters painted his portraits, journalists wrote how great and honourable and wise he was; philosophers praised his ideas. Tito's portrait had a place of honour in every office and classroom, in every place of employment and in many homes. Nobody would dream of opposing or saying anything disrespectful of our leader. Except my parents, of course. The walls of my home were covered with religious pictures.

This will pass, whispered my mother.

No victory is permanent but the children of the victorious will be lawmakers of the future and they will make laws that will benefit them, said my father.

My parents didn't really count; thank God that I was the only one who heard their whispers. I tried to avoid listening to them but inside me I longed for the times when I sang hymns in mum's lap and listened to stories dad told me as I snuggled into his embrace in cold winter evenings.

I finally became an intricate part of blue, white, and red parade on the stadium spelling the word TITO. We all played an equal part for Tito's birthday; we became an equal part of the flag of the future, the colour of the word, the flavour of the day. I rejoiced being one in the huge brotherhood marching in the spring green grass of the stadium. For a moment I managed to rub out the fact that I came from a family of traitors. I joined the victorious.

I learned to love the communist leaders and hate those that opposed them. I learned to love God and hate the devil with much the same intensity before I started school. The students paraded and sang for the glory of the revolution like they used to sing for the glory of God during the Corpus Christie procession; they recited revolutionary poetry with stars in their eyes. Only the young believe so wholeheartedly. We exuberantly walked behind the flag in step with our teachers towards an ideal society and future. We learned to believe that we were free and equal; that every kind of labour was honourable. In communism everybody has the freedom of speech, my teacher told us.

We only have the freedom to think, whispered my dad. We must think. All wolves are hungry.

My parents seemed confused, weak, and vulnerable; they were irrelevant and wrong according to the authorities that knew these things. They were a part of the old, no longer valid world of superstition. I wanted to protect them from the new world they knew nothing about. They became smaller and smaller in my eyes. I felt like a parent to me parents; I wished to enlighten them. So much shame! So much fear that something dreadful was going to happen because my parents did not love Tito.

Who in their right mind would reject brotherhood and equality? The West did. They did not care about justice. Everyone looked after number one in the West. How could I know anything but what my teacher told me? Or what was prescribed for us in our text books. I was not aware yet of the everlasting war between the wealthy and the poor; about the historic processes of distributing the wealth of nations. I simply believed in the ideal world won in the revolution.

They won against Germans and against the property owners of the old order; it was their duty to take from the rich and distribute it to the poor. What poor person would argue against that? Many young people firmly believed in this ideal in the same way their parents believed that Saviour will come and then the lion and the lamb will lay together and the snake will no longer scare or tempt people.

Faith inspired people; with hope burning in their hearts they believed they could move mountains and overcome obstacles. They worked hard to reach the ever higher factory norms.

Inside of me I was hiding in confusion. I proudly brought home my first school reader but when I went to bed I saw my dad tear out the first page where the picture of Tito was. I felt that there was something very wrong with me father. Next day my lovely teacher asked about the missing page. She took me to see the principal. I said that I spilled ink on it by accident so I tore it out. The teacher and the principal whispered and looked at me.

In my childish innocence I loved my father; I sensed that he would be in great trouble if the teacher knew so I had to protect him. I felt slightly guilty because I knew that it was my moral duty to denounce my father and my family. I learned that anyone suspected of subversion deserved punishment. I really had no idea what subversion was but soon new words got a meaning with the threat they represented.

I was nine when the name Stalin disappeared from the walls of public buildings; there were whispers that Tito quarrelled with Stalin. Most slogans were gradually rubbed out, changed or repainted. Nobody explained why we suddenly stopped chanting Tito-Stalin. Stalin was removed from textbooks and conversations. Even the memories of lessons about the world without property or money gradually faded. Komsomolsk was gone. Somewhere in the background of people's consciousness were slotted the pictures of big Russian style collective farms where people work and sing and eat from the same pot while their children are brought up by the government.

I remember a man in a black suit who came at that time with an order for my parents to surrender the piglets to the co-op. Mum protested that she needed to sell the piglets so she could buy shoes for the family. The man in a suit gave a signal for the two men in working clothes to load the piglets. Mum stood between the men and the piglets like a mountain. The man in a suit told her to move out of the way or he will arrest her for sympathising with Russians.

I did not sympathise with Russians when you sympathised with Russians, back-chatted mum and I grabbed her skirt in fear.

Watch your tongue, said the man and his voice reached my bones. The men loaded the piglets.

Food and shoes were the main concern for my parents after the war. Anything could be used to clothe us. My neighbours were lucky to catch a parachute and make silken clothes for the family but my mother only found a huge canvas lost by a retreating German truck. She made all our clothes of this harsh brown material. The children went barefooted for the months without R in their names but from September until the end of April shoes were a constant worry. Children's shoes invariably leaked and our feet were never warm enough. Socks were nonexistent so the boys wrapped the canvas pieces around their toes. Girls' stockings were held in place with the piece of string knotted above the knees. The icy wind blew under girls' skirts because long pants for girls were not invented yet. I could never forget the medical examiner coming to school; he

lifted my skirt in front of the class to check me over but discovered that I had no underpants. He quickly covered me up but not before my whole world discovered my shame. Poverty is the biggest source of shame.

After the mass people lined up at the local co-op for any item on sale and my mum lined up not knowing what was on offer. I remember her glee when she succeeded in getting enough black cloth to make aprons and scarfs for the family. Black was the colour of the day.

At the age of eleven I left home to study in the city. I knew that city kids felt superior to the village kids. City people aspired to reach heights while a peasant only aimed to feed his family. Tito did not like stupid superstitious peasants because they were clinging to the land ownership and to God. Tito, our supreme teacher, told students in no uncertain terms through our teachers not to listen to our superstitious parents. Any enlightened person knew that to believe in God was a sign of madness. Going to church was a no-no in the city. God was ever present inside me, of course, but in the city I had to hide him where my fear and my shame were hiding. Dogs smell fear. Kids are much like dogs.

Private property was a smelly sin hanging onto my new socialist skirt. Unbeknown to my peers my skirt actually came from American relations after the war. Having someone in America meant that one was contaminated by the west and so a threat to the brotherhood and equality. I could never tell my city schoolmates how I dreamed of being in America. America was a magic land in my understanding since the parcels of food and clothing began to delight those who had someone in this rich land of milk and honey. Mum carefully unstitched the American clothes; washed and ironed the material before she made my city school clothes. Only I knew that I did not wear a socialist skirt.

In my class was a boy Andrej who played a violin; I looked at him with awe. Someone said that Andrej was belted by his father if he didn't practice enough on his violin. I dreamed to become a musician; I would practice however long it took. I imagined myself playing next to Andrej as my parents watched with shining faces proud of their daughter. Making my parents proud was my ultimate goal. Andrej liked me but I did not feel good enough to be his friend so I kept the distance. Susan, my classmate, was as popular as Andrej. One day the two of them came to school red faced and changed. Everybody knew that they kissed. They became a couple. That definitely proved that I was not good enough. I would die if anyone guessed that I was dreaming of playing a violin next to Andrej. Just imagine his city family with a long history of musicians and me coming from a cow paddock. I was ashamed of my dreams and of my family but I was also ashamed of my shame; I felt tainted with an indelible mark of inferiority. I believed myself to be the centre of the universe with people watching and judging my every move. I told myself that my destiny was to restore my family's pride; I had to succeed and become someone important.

Village boys used to run after me; they used to call me names and pulled my plats on the way to a primary school but these same village boys became shy and friendly when I returned for holidays from the city; they brought flowers on my window at night. Some sang for me and whispered my name under the window. Everybody forgot about chickens but by then I no longer belonged to the village although the city has not quite accepted me yet. I so much wanted to belong somewhere. I would so much like to feel cosy and contented with people like myself. To merge and become one with those around me.

When I felt small and alone I pretended that I was a minute part of something unimaginably awesomely timeless and endless. I was playing my tiny part in the enormous drama that keeps

repeating itself. I looked at the night sky and pretended that I was one of the infinite numbers of stars floating in the unknown. It does not matter what one is as long as one is. I am, I whispered to the stars. I am a significant particle of the Alpha and Omega. Thank God nobody can see inside me while I am carefully arranging my appropriate exterior.

Strangers applied their favourite colours on my canvas. The painting is almost complete; huge strokes cover the details best forgotten; one cannot take away a single layer without destroying what became my landscape.

I keep repairing my tangled web. Worry, worry, mother spider! Weave, spider, weave.

The next greatest misfortune to losing a battle is to gain such victory as this.

Wells

## *Jacob*

Bombing during the day and raids during the night, soldiers and guns, this was a normal state of being for children who never yet experienced peacetime. Partisans came during the night to take their food and their boys. Germans came during the day to transport people into labour camps.

On 9.8.1944 my brother Jacob had an argument with his father and he ran away. I ran after him and mum ran after me. On the riverbank Jacob met his friend and together they swam across and joined the Red army. I can still hear my mother calling after them. We begged Jacob to return but he was gone and we did not know about him for the next three years. My older sister left home so I was all my parents had.

When Tito broke up with Stalin in 1948, Jacob returned. The government provided a scholarship for him. He finished university and became one of the communist leaders. I felt honoured and redeemed by his success. His name was like a badge of righteousness.

Jacob stopped corresponding with me after I escaped; in his position it would be unthinkable to associate with a traitor. My every letter was opened and Jacob was questioned by authorities. Coming from a traitor's family he was always under suspicion. Even I, who was given every opportunity by communists, jeopardised my brother's position by later escaping to the rotten West. I betrayed the ideals of brotherhood, equality and unity.

Jacob resumed our correspondence after communism collapsed in 1989 and Slovenia became independent. Before he died Jacob wrote:

Jews have a day of atonement; days when the door opens and through this door should only go the one who truly confesses his sins and repents. I will try to pass through that door.

My parents and teachers made me keenly aware of the life's choices: our destination was heaven, purgatory or hell. We feared hell and strove for heaven. For a catholic child this used to be simple. You sin, confess, repent and sin again. As long as you confess before you die you have nothing to fear. I worried about dying without confession. It did not seem fair though that the eternity depended on this one last act. Why didn't God keep some kind of ledger to balance your good and bad deeds?

I often wonder how my subsistent farmer parents clothe and fed our family. Two cows and two hectares of land was all they had but I don't remember ever being hungry. If they were lucky they sold a nest of piglets and maybe one calf a year.

This idyllic lifestyle ended when the war began.

Our village came under Italian occupation/administration until in 1943 Italy capitulated. I was a restless teenager ready for excitement and rebellion. I suppose I was adventurous and often disobedient so I had to be punished by my father. In 1942 at the age of 12 I first ran away and joined Italians. They wanted to take me to Italy but mum begged our priest to intervene so they let me come home. I recently read what the priest wrote about it in his diary: I said to Jakob's mother that Jacob looks like ten years old Jesus lost in the temple. His mother commented: of course he does being the son of Jozef and Marija.

I vividly remember when Germans transported nearby villagers into German labour camps. I was 13; I saw people crying and packing their meagre belongings in bundles as they were forced to leave their homes. Brave, foolish and idealistic I wanted to fight the Germans. At school I sat next to a boy whose parents were known communist activists. We were friends and on my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday on 9th August 1944 we ran away from home and joined partisans.

There was no forced ideology at that time and I even remember our unit going to Christmas midnight mass in 1944. In January 1945 they offered to send me with another 62 Slovenian boys to the Soviet military academy. We arrived to Kiev where we celebrated allied victory on 9 May 45.

In Russia I learned in Russian what Russian authorities wanted me to know. Mainly I learned political science, ballistics, armoury, topography and war strategies. I remember the hunger, the loneliness and the homesickness. This was a sad part of my life. I was forever hungry and cold. At night I searched the fields for any turnips and carrots missed by the peasants. Everybody in Ukraine was starving. I liked swimming in Dnieper, horse riding in the open countryside and dancing at the weekend. Russian girls provided some intimacy and emotional experience for us young boys so far away from home.

I returned home from Soviet Union in October 1947 for a holiday. While I was on holidays Tito and Stalin broke up; I was allowed to stay home.

At the age of 17 I felt like a stranger in my family. The door between my father and me remained closed forever. Each of us lived out our own bitterness. I needed the love and understanding of my family but my family mourned my dead brother. They never spoke about it but the silence was painful. My mother eventually showed some love and understanding towards me but my father remained bitter to the end. In that atmosphere I left home. I tried to make something out of my life. I always wanted something better. I always tried to make the best of what life offered.

I began working and studying at the same time. I became an engineer and later became a director of the large building company. I succeeded in my efforts but I found happiness in my family.

There is a reason for everything one does. In life one easily finds a crutch for himself when the going gets tough but one rarely extends this crutch to a fellow traveller. People like to rejoice with others but in one's pain one is often alone, an island for himself.

As I look at the world events now I see that we did not win or learn anything. Young boys still claim that God is on their side as they kill for the beliefs their leaders instil in them. As some poet said: Theirs is not to reason why-theirs is but to do or die. Only young can be made to believe and follow orders like that; they do and die without thinking. More they believe more ready they are to kill and die. Soldiers are trained never to question orders. These days Muslim religious madrasa schools prepare students to do and die for Allah, their leaders and their nation. As a reward soldiers are promised virgins in a paradise.



Albert Einstein once said: One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity and of life.

I am still in awe of the enormity of universe although my faith in people changed. I believed in making a better world but I am disappointed. The survival of the fittest still prevails in our jungle however much we try to disguise it.

Recently I listened to Neil Armstrong telling about his trip to the moon.

He said: There is too much logic and beauty in the universe to have it all happen by accident. The creator is above all religions because space and time are beyond human understanding. I found my God and peace in space.

Facing eternity is scary, wrote Jacob. What is there in eternity? I do not believe in never ending happiness or everlasting torment but I believe that the creator of the universe has a more imaginative plan.

So my communist brother never completely dismissed the higher power. The remnants of the almighty are still imbedded in the man who learned to renounce religion. Did the teachings of his parents prevail or was this his independent conclusion at the end of his life? Jacob needed to forgive and be forgiven.

Religion is the opium of the masses, said communists. Isn't praying better than opium? It is legal, less harmful and always available. I sometimes watch the crowds of people mesmerised by the words of evangelists. Their faces shine and their whole beings exude goodness. The masses are in love with God. Praying inspires hope. If God is a delusion then maybe most people need a delusion when reality is neither attractive nor comforting. What is love if not delusion? Being in love cannot possibly last yet the euphoria it creates is real. It makes everything worth it.

I thank the Almighty for my life; I now talk to the Almighty of no particular name or fixed address because I am afraid to thank the wrong God. Or to give the right God the wrong name.

No nation is fit to sit in judgement upon any other nation.

Wilson Woodrow

## ***Brotherhood***

Tito decided to build one nation of many Yugoslav nationalities. As part Slovenian and part Croatian residing in Serbia, Tito was himself a creation of this new Yugoslav nation. He demanded that people forget their old nationality and their God and become brothers Yugoslavs united under his wing and flag.

People acquire prejudices with their mother's milk; they learn who to please and who to fear and who to despise. Slovenian children of my generation grew up in fear of Turks and gypsies. My house was close to the woods so my parents were careful in dealing with gypsies. It was a well known fact that gypsies stole children. Looking at this memory now, I wonder why gypsies would want to steal children. They had too many of their own barefooted hungry brats. Just shows you how baseless prejudices are. Slovenian children sang the song: Run, run for Gypsies are coming carrying children in their brown sacks. I remember gypsy children following close behind their parents, all barefooted and scantily dressed. I felt a bit of pity and a lot of fear. Mum gave gypsies bits of food and any bits of clothing she could spare. Nobody ever questioned the duplicity of her behaviour. Was she afraid of what gypsies could do if she refused to share with them?

Maybe parents just used the fear of Gypsies to keep their children obedient. Like Aborigines who invented Yurri woman; they say that Yurri woman coasts children away from home and drowns them. It helped keep children close to their parents.

During the winter gypsies went from house to house asking if any animals perished. My parents would never eat anything that wasn't perfectly healthy; they even refused to eat a rabbit caught in a snare. Once a pig died of red fever and my dad buried it in the woods so the sickness would not spread. Gypsies dug it out and ate it; they said that the soil took out the sickness.

In spring an old gypsy woman came with a sign on her chest saying: totally blind. I begged me to pick some of those nice beans growing in their garden.

Never believe a gypsy, said my mum.

Gypsies also became brothers with other nations in the new Yugoslavia; people had to accept and tolerate them; they had to provide for their development but nobody liked them; they considered them conniving, lazy and dirty.

Slovenians also harboured an unspoken prejudice against Southern Yugoslavs; this prejudice must have become a part of our national psyche. Turks ruled South Slavs for centuries. Slovenia was in fear of Turkish attacks. Children learned how Turks invaded and pillaged Europe; they stole young Slovenian boys and trained them to become Muslim soldiers; Turks sent these converted Christian boys back to attack their own villages and kill their own people. These stolen Slovenians -Janicarji-

soldiers became the subject of national folklore; I read numerous stories and poems about them. Even after Ottoman's empire disintegrated and Turks no longer ruled Southern Europe, some Christians who were coerced to convert to Muslim religion remained Muslims and the fear of Turks lived on. Southern Yugoslavia was known as being full of Muslims; I often heard that Turks left the seed of evil in the countries they invaded.

Slovenians were a part of Germanic political structures for centuries and reluctantly assimilated into Germanic, industrious lifestyle; they considered themselves a notch better and more advanced than southerners who lived under Turkish rule. Tito declared that it was up to Slovenians to help southerners become equal. Privately Slovenians resented the order to contribute financially towards the development and advancement of Southern brothers. Many even refused to believe in brotherhood even though it seemed to me only fair and sensible that a land of brotherhood and equality shared their fortunes.

Now I lay me down to sleep- I pray to Lord my soul to keep

## ***The sacred world of womanhood***

After the war my older sister Milena became a domestic servant in the house of rich people in the city. She was the first girl to leave the village. Milena's rich mistress gave her the clothes she was tired of so Milena could go out with other domestic servants on Thursday afternoon which was their time off. The former village girls looked forward to these social occasions where they shared experiences, compared their new homes and talked about the people they served. They also met boys, went to the pictures and shopping.

After six months in the service Milena returned home for her first free weekend. The villagers glared at her. Boys laughed awkwardly. She had expensive looking clothes, her hair was permed, her hands were smooth and white, and her face was pale. She spoke with a city voice.

Milena suddenly looked precious.

Other village girls followed Milena into the city to become domestics. Village boys followed village girls but it was harder for boys because they had no accommodation. Many travelled long distances; some slept on the park benches in summer some were hiding overnight at the railway station for warmth. Accommodation was scarce.

The girls were lucky if they married someone who had accommodation. Communism offered a gift of equality to women. They not only had the right to work they were compelled to work along their men. Feminists praised the system for allowing them to become financially independent. In gratitude for the gift of equality in the work force women tried to be perfect housewives as well. Men still came home expecting a cooked meal, a clean house and well behaved children.

Many young Slovenian boys escaped to the West after the war and their places at home were quickly filled by Southerners. Bosnian Muslims first came to Slovenia as seasonal workers. Tito's government also created in Slovenia key positions of power for many Southern Yugoslavs. Most of these new officials- male guest workers-were housed first and paid best. They became a convenient husband material for Slovenian girls who wanted to move out of their domestic live-in situations.

There was a shortage of eligible Slovenian boys. Thousands were killed by communists after the war, thousands escaped to the West and thousands were without accommodation.

Milena met Zigi, a handsome officer of the Yugoslav army. His real name was Zuhdija but everybody called him Zigi. He spoke Serbo-Croatian and most people accepted this mixture of languages as the official Yugoslav language. Zigi told Milena that he will begin his new job as a custom officer and with his job he will also get accommodation in Ljubljana. Milena was in love. Zigi and Milena were a beautiful couple.

I remember that nobody really talked of being in love in those days. Or about being beautiful. Marriages were between the people who knew each other's families for generations. When children came of age it was natural that they marry and start a family. Match making was the favourite pastime for the villagers. There were no surprises; rich were looking for rich partners and poor took whatever was left over. People behaved with propriety because they knew that they will live next to their neighbours forever. For better and for worse. No-one ever married a foreigner in this cluster of small villages.

I was eight when Milena first brought Zigi home. This polite, handsome man became instantly popular with children; he played with us and gave us lollies. In the afternoon he offered to teach me to swim in the nearby river. He was holding me carefully, one hand under my belly and the other on my thigh. I felt uncomfortable when his hand got caught in my flimsy pants and he rummaged inside for a second. I did not want to learn to swim any more. One day Zigi took me to show him the places where mushrooms grew in the forest. He was playing catches with me; once he tripped and fell on me and we both laughed. In an instant I sensed something unknown and unpleasant; I got up and stopped playing. Zigi's hands were trembling and his face changed.

I was nine when Milena married Zigi in a registry office. Nobody from our family attended the wedding; Milena's marriage to a Bosnian Muslim and a communist, was a great blow to us. There was an unspoken understanding that no self respecting Slovenian Christian girl would marry a Bosnian Muslim but Milena married him because he had accommodation and a position of power that demanded respect. Nobody ever openly said that they were ashamed of Milena's choice; they would not dare because Tito ordered them to be brothers and equals and to respect each other. Love thy neighbour. We had to prove that we were good hosts to our guest workers.

Zigi and Milena adopted me to rescue me from poverty and ignorance of my backward superstitious parents. Out of goodness of their hearts they wanted to give me a chance to go to high school and make something out of my life. Everybody told me to be grateful, especially to Zigi, because he did not have to make this great sacrifice for my sake.

She has it all now, the little princess, said my aunt as I sat in Zigi's car before he drove off. Few villagers ever saw a car before.

Keep your legs together and cover your knees, instructed mum as she patted my skirt over my knees; she wiped her tears as the car door closed. I was on the way to the better future. I became acutely aware of my legs and knees; I sensed that mum's advice was somehow the preparation for a sacred womanhood.

Milena and Zigi loved me so much that they let me sleep in their bed. One night I felt a hand between my legs; I taught that Milena who slept between Zigi and me let her hand wander. I kept my legs together but the hand tried to pry them apart. I turned over carefully not to wake Milena; I realised that the hand belonged to Zigi. I crossed my legs and moved to the edge of the bed. The next morning I asked Milena to let me sleep on the couch.

During the following night I woke up and saw Zigi on the floor next to the couch. His hand slid under my blanket. I turned around and pulled the blanket under me. After awhile Zigi on all fours slithered into his bed and I went to sleep. He came night after night and his hand tried to come between my legs but I was ready for it; I turned away and pulled the blanket under me. I followed my mother's teaching.

During the day Zigi behaved like all other respectable citizens. He was an older man; he was over thirty while I was a fast growing eleven years old child. Maybe what happened during the night was a bad dream. How could I say in the daylight that Zigi crawled out of his bed and lay in wait next to his bed to see that Milena did not stir before he crawled on all fours towards me? I peeked from under the blankets and prayed to Virgin Mary to stop him coming. Why didn't I make a sound so Milena could save me? How was I to know that Milena did not know? Who was I to say that it was wrong? It was my duty to keep my legs together and my knees covered. Every time I moved, Zigi lowered himself to the floor like a guilty dog. This cat and mouse game was replayed most nights. I knew that it was up to me to keep my legs together no matter what.

One of Zigi's friends once put his hand under my skirt and pinched my bottom.

Careful she is a Catholic girl and might tell the priest, warned the man's friend and everybody laughed. My superstitious beliefs were often a subject of their jokes.

Zigi himself stroked my budding breasts in front of everybody, indicating to his friends that I was quickly becoming a woman. Milena laughed with the men. My breasts soon became a source of great embarrassment. After sport we had to shower at school and other little girls compared their first brassieres. They had neat little breasts that did not need support while my huge lumps were already weighing me down.

I felt stupid and small. The only sexual education I ever received was from the older women's whispered gossip about the sluts who got themselves in trouble. I sensed that it is a woman's duty to guard her virginity because virginity was her only asset. A woman should keep her legs together and cover her knees.

Only I wasn't yet a woman when Zigi tried to pry my legs apart. I wondered what the priest would do or say if I told him about Zigi's nocturnal visits. I needed to tell someone. Tell who? Tell what? They were just teasing. How was I to know that it wasn't well known among grownups that men like getting little girls' legs apart? Maybe they would laugh at me and make me feel more ashamed. Maybe it was my fault and they would punish me.. Maybe they would make it impossible for me to stay at school; maybe they would tell my parents and make them angry or ashamed or sad.

Zigi was like other men; he worked, read the paper and ate respectfully at the table. He said please and thank you and wiped his mouth with a napkin after eating. He taught his children good manners. There was never a hint of impropriety. I had no way of saying what other men did during the night.

I had to finish high school and make my parents proud. It was my mission to restore my family's honour. My parents did not protest when Milena and Zigi offered me this chance in life. Mum must have known that men like to pry little girls' legs apart so she warned me to keep my legs together. I did as I was told; I had no idea what else I could do.

What could my parents do anyway? What did they do when they learned that communists murdered their son after the war? They did not even dare ask in which mass grave he was buried. They were too scared to mention the name of their first born. My parents did nothing. Dad stopped speaking and mum put a black scarf on, that was all. My parents became mourners. Our home became gloomy and silent. I wanted mum to wear flowery scarfs and sing the songs of victory with me. There was a procession of powerless black scarfs going to village church every Sunday. I wanted dad to hold my hand and tell me stories; most of all I wanted to make my

parents strong, proud and happy. Virgin Mary, Jesus and the saints helped me a lot during that time. They were on my side against the Muslims and the communists. On the way to school I sneaked into the empty church and silently prayed for forgiveness of sins. Mother Mary looked down on me and I saw tears in her blue eyes. Maybe they were my tears. I knew that religion was the superstition of the old and ignorant but Mother Mary looked very kindly at me as I told her about my shame. Sitting there by her feet on the pedestal I felt safe.

When I finished high school I wrote a letter to Milena telling her that Zigi tried to get between my legs. Milena told me that I was an ungrateful slut; they have done so much for me, the ungrateful whore.

I wished I did not tell her; I was glad I did not tell my parents. Everybody would blame me. Maybe spit at me. I was asking for it; the home wrecker slut. I destroyed a perfectly happy family.

I did not see my sister's family after that. Years later I heard that Zigi chased all the little girls. So I wasn't the only bad girl. I wanted to tell Zigi's daughter that she is not the only bad girl.

To be poor and independent is very nearly impossible.

Cobbett

## *The wrong turn*

My parents made me believe that I was destined to become someone special. I had visions of being a centre-stage draped in flowing velvety robes of goodness and wisdom. People would look up to me and my parents would beam with pride. I enrolled to study medicine at university.

Joe is a twenty eight years old owner of a building construction company in our neighbourhood. He employs tradesmen. I occasionally do errands for him to earn some pocket money; I am reliable and diligent. I tell him that I had an argument with my sister so Joe finds a room for me; I am to do some office work for him in return for his kindness.

Joe becomes my boss, my protector, friend and father. I obediently file his documents, post his letters and write what he tells me to write. I have no romantic notions about my boss but I am delighted when Joe praises my work and brings me presents. He started with sweets and progressed to jewellery and flowers and meals and clothes. I am childishly pleased with attention and trinkets. I need new clothes and paints and perfumes to cover up the flaws and the shame of my past. For the first time I am able to pay for ice creams and coffees and cakes as I wander around with my student friends. Everybody suddenly wants to be me friend. I enjoy my new status. Nobody told me yet that there is no such thing as a free lunch and that one day I will have to pay.

Joe is a respected employer while I am still a little obedient girl. I feel safe working for him but when he takes me for meals in the restaurants I feel out of place. I tell my friends that this old man is my uncle and that I do his office work for him.

I often dreamt about buying exquisite presents for all my friends who would then praise my generosity and love me. What does it really mean being rich? People eat the same food, love the same friends, and work at achieving the same goals. Money only gives one the opportunity to give to less fortunate. Does everybody want to grow in the eyes of people around them? Does everybody dream about being rich, successful, beautiful and unique so people will love them? What else is there to wish for? Do gamblers wait like that for their numbers to come up? Is money the root of all evil? Is the snake still luring people to eat the forbidden fruit? Is everybody selling their souls to the devil? Do they all dream of climbing to the top of the ladder to see the other side. Are all those at the top forever scared to fall?

After a few months Joe invites me to Venice for the weekend. On the proverbial love boat-gondola he tells me how much he loves me and that he cannot live without me. He would do anything I wanted him to do and he would look after me for the rest of our lives. You will be my princess; you will never have to work or worry about money, says Joe.



Does Joe know that I am destined to be a princess? Does Joe hold the key to my Happyeverafter? Is life without work and worry what the paradise is like? Are all the poor and overworked hoping for a place where they will sit idle and well fed? I am grateful; it isn't Joe's fault that I am not in love with him. I feel at home with Joe but my dreams are not about Joe.

That night I pay for Joe's promises. Joe gently caresses my body and tells me that nobody loves a woman like the man who takes her virginity. In some part of me I believe that I am lucky to have given my virginity to the man who knows how to appreciate it. I feel an enormous emptiness inside but Joe promises that with time I will learn to enjoy lovemaking.

The next day Joe takes me to a wishing well and I drop a coin in it to make a wish. I wish to die. I know with certainty in this instant that I took the wrong turn. I promise myself that it is just a matter of time before I will start my real life. I am looking forward to the time when I will leave Joe behind. What is done is done for now but one day I will get my second chance. The road ahead becomes blurred.

Joe takes me to a jeweller to get me an engagement ring; he takes me to a hair dresser and a dressmaker. I have to have the best of everything. I feel important and precious but also strangely scared and ashamed because I know that I am not in love with Joe. He tells me that he has enough love for the two of us. His love is overwhelming and always present. Perhaps one does not dream of chocolates in a chocolate factory. Precious is always out of reach and hard to get. Joe is not precious. He is there waiting to serve me. Joe took my virginity and therefore it is possible for him to love me completely and unconditionally. He owes me and he owns me. All I know about love and sex is what Joe tells me. I am sure that as an older man he knows what is what and what is right and wrong. I am grateful that Joe made it possible for me to escape from Zigi and to continue my studies.

Joe tells me that he is going through the divorce. He caught his wife Jana kissing Steven, his best friend. Joe shows me a picture of his wife and their two little girls. I have no intention of marrying Joe so it does not really matter to me that he is married. Joe tells me that Jana wasn't a virgin when he met me; maybe Joe hates her because of it. He says that he could never love a woman who slept with another man.

Everybody loves me until they find out that my 'uncle' is really a married man I sleep with. The news breaks out like a wild fire.

Joe tells me that we are going to marry as soon as he is free. His words are meant as a promise but I feel threatened by them.

Joe and I meet an old woman. This is my little girl, mum, Joe introduces me. His mother says: you have two little girls waiting at home. She keeps on walking.

I run away from Joe but he follows me and professes his undying love. He buys more gifts; I feel safe and happy in some part of me; I like being looked after but the more Joe adores me, more I feel that he is a second hand man. He is not good enough; he makes me feel not good enough.

Whenever Joe and I are with his relations and friends they invariably ask him about his children and his wife. They remember events and celebrations they shared. They tell him that his girls look like him and that they miss him. Once he brings the girls along on an excursion. Everybody admires little girls frolicking among the wild flowers. Nobody looks at me; I can hear the silent

message that I am in the wrong place; that I do not belong with the people who share history and affection. I feel like an unwanted child.

Jana was the prettiest girl in town; I once overheard Joe telling his friend. The words remained with me for the rest of my life.

Joe and Frank are in the workshop while I am in the little office at the back; the door is ajar and I can hear most of what is said. Frank is an older man with the voice of authority. He has a car so he must be doing well. I later learn that he is Jana's uncle.

Cut this bullshit, Frank yells. He is here to persuade Joe to return to his family. I cannot hear what Joe answers. Frank does not know that I am in the office.

She does not love you. You better remember that before it is too late. You have a family to look after, says Frank. He is almost pleading now with Joe.

Tell that to Jana and Steve, Joe says barely above a whisper.

They are just old friends, Frank dismisses the suggestion that Jana was unfaithful to Joe.

I have no problem with you wanting to fuck this new skirt but don't get all melodramatic about it, says Frank quietly after the silence.

She is not like that, says Joe . You don't know her.

Does she come from another planet? They are all like that; one day she will see a way out and you won't be able to hold her. Wake up to yourself before she realises that she can do better. Look at the bigger picture; look beyond this little affair.

It's not an affair, Joe whispers. He knows that I may hear.

She will walk as soon as she gets a better offer. Mark my word.

Not her, Joe 's voice is not confident. If she wanted someone else she would have before but she never...

Uni student. Going with an aging tradesman who has children to support. She must be desperate.

I will never let her go, says Joe .

The words become my writing on the wall- the prophecy of my future. Deep within, I felt right from the start that I will join my life with Joe because neither of us can afford to fail and both of us are strengthened by our bond.

I do not tell Joe that I heard but Frank's words stay with me.

Is love like Father Christmas? Or a tooth fairy? Wishful thinking? I felt that same hollow emptiness when I realised that St Nickolas was really my parents.

Towards the end of school year Jana brings Joe's two daughters to the office of the university dean. She tells him that her children are hungry because Joe spends his money on me. They have to expel me to save Joe's marriage.

We feel that we are greater than we know

Wordsworth

## *James*

I am on the run again; I am determined to make it on my own. I find another university and a place in the campus; I apply for help from the government. The brotherhood road is being built to connect Slovenia to the South of Yugoslavia. Students of the five Yugoslav nations spend school holidays working together for the common good. I have to convince the officials that I genuinely want to build the socialist brotherhood state of Yugoslavia so I join the brigade. The sunburnt students show off their strength, dedication and enthusiasm. We camp in the forest along the road; at evening assemblies the leaders call out the best workers for commendation. I am called out most evenings. After the evening assembly we dance Serbian kolo. This dancing circle unites us; the energy of warm hands and joyous voices, the music, the stars and the glow of the campfire inspire us to sing and write poems in honour of our country and of glorious future we are building. We believe ourselves to be the chosen heroes building a perfect new world. We chant Tito-party; we sing Serbo-Croatian songs. We feel alive and in love with life. We are united; one for all, all for one. We are One. Maybe everybody longs to be recognised and accepted by their peer group; belonging to a group makes one stronger.

Love is everywhere; love is everything to eighteen years old. I can still hear the echo of a Russian kolo song: Oja ja Dunja ja komsomolicka moja. This Russian song remained a part of our psyche long after the name Stalin was rubbed from people's conscience and city walls. Kolkhoz and consomol were a shadow of the past.

I need to belong. It doesn't really matter if one belongs to a nation or religion or race or football team or a family. One fights for the group one belongs to. Fighting invigorates the group and the individual. I welcome my belonging to the brotherhood of the future. Belonging to a Catholic peasant anticommunist family made me feel less good, less wanted, less loved and respected so I replaced the old unwanted belonging with the fresh stronger one. I work hard and sing loud and salute firmly. I feel that I finally belong in the ring of firm friends who are equal brothers and sisters. I become a part of the circle of Tito's youth.

Historical hatreds, nationality and religion are no obstacle to true love. Was the brotherhood road designed to help people from different republics unite, marry and have children who will become a nation of true Yugoslavs- South Slavs? Were we intended to strengthen our unity? Leave your family and follow me, said Jesus. All the leaders must have learned from Jesus; they all want people to unite and follow. Hold hands in the procession of Corpus Christie.

I need the scholarship so I can continue my study and redeem my family. The government must have heard of my good conduct so they offer me just enough money to survive. My past is deleted.

James, a fellow student, hands me a piece of paper; he says that he wrote a poem for his girlfriend and wants me to read it and tell him what I think. I read the words:

I will not lay my heart into your lap

because without my heart

I would be just a scarecrow

and you could not love a scarecrow.

I do not know that James wrote the poem for me. I do not know yet that James adores me. The words of his poem change my life.

Back at the campus James and I look at a little souvenir in my hands. James says that it is kitsch. I say that it isn't. Tugging at this kitsch figurine our heads come together and we kiss. The kiss leaves us both breathless. I don't remember if we said anything at all. When James returns that evening I am still in a trance. He knocks on my door and we kiss in the doorway. James tells me that he told all the stars that we love each other.

I am in love with James; I never knew such undiluted wholesome wellbeing. James restored my belief that I am a perfectly good person. I want to put a smile on everybody's face. I want nothing more; I have what I was born for. I feel special; I feel like a princess. James makes me feel precious. He looks up to me. He writes poems for me. I still carry with me those first expressions of love. We walk hand in hand through the forest in its autumn glory and recite poetry. We are each other's first love.

James says that he has nothing to wear for the New Year Eve's dance. He finds an old mouldy suit his uncle in America sent to him. I wash it; it feels good to be able to do that for James. It somehow makes us more of a couple. We are equally dirt poor but feel equally enormously rich.

I relived this richness for the rest of my life. No possession could ever compare with the richness of wellbeing resulting from loving and being loved; no poverty could be as devastating as the poverty of lovelessness.

James and I dance cheek to cheek oblivious of the rest of the world. We walk home in the crystal clear night holding hands on the narrow path cut into the snow. James points to the three stars in the sky and says that Orion will be forever our constellation.

Did James know that I will be looking for Orion from foreign skies for the rest of my life? The memory of that crystal clear winter still carries the hope of a coming spring.

James and I sleep together the rest of the night fully dressed. We do not make love because I am scared that James will stop loving me if he finds out that I am no longer a virgin. Joe made it clear that men only love virgins. James is happy to just hold me.

Next day we go home for holidays. James writes me a love letter. That is the first and only love letter which I show to my mother. Mum is pleased that I found a boy to love. You know how I feel, James writes. There is no doubt about it. We both know. I feel just right; I feel good, proud and honourable; my life is joyous and uncomplicated. I am free and strong. I escaped from Joe; I moved on; I began my real life; I am in charge of my destiny. James made it possible for me to like myself. He gave me the best gift one can give to another. James loves me as I am.

In February 1959 I return for the new semester; the dean calls me in his office and tells me that I cannot return to where I experienced the happiest moments of my life. I do not dare ask why. Nobody knows why I suddenly disappear.

Thirty-eight years later, I learn that James' mother ordered the authorities to expel me; the woman was protecting her son who spent too much time with me and neglected his studies. The shire was paying for James' schooling because his father was a national hero who died in the communist revolution. They have to look after their own. My family are traitors.

I am afraid that the authorities know that I was previously expelled from another college, because I seduced Joe, a married man, who left his two children and his poor wife penniless.

I am on the street again. Joe arrives and tells me that he is divorced and ready to marry me. I tell him that I do not love him and will not marry him. He says that I have no right to leave him now that he left his family to be with me. I remind him that I never asked him to leave his family. Joe demands that I return all the gifts he ever gave me. He would burn them so nothing will remind me of him. I return my engagement ring and he drops it at the deep end of the river to show that he meant what he said. I need the things Joe bought me; I feel that I paid for them with my shame and guilt. Aren't gifts meant to be one's property? It is so easy to get used to little luxuries in life. Losing everything is hard regardless of how little and worthless this everything is. I need Joe and his rags and his trinkets; I also need his protection; I promise myself that I will leave him as soon as I graduate. The fear of the unknown makes it easier to take the easy road with Joe. But only for the moment.

Joe says that nobody will ever have me if he does not have me. He would rather kill both of us. Joe carries a pistol. I cry in Joe's arms because death seems so tragically romantic. Like Romeo and Juliet.

I pack my meagre possessions and Joe carries them into his car.

I am afraid that James does not love me enough. He did not ask me to run away with him or to marry him. Joe did. James will probably write a sad poem to recover from his despair. I will never read what he will write. I see James watching us drive away; his hand is suspended in an attempt to wave goodbye to our love.

Joe stops at the big shopping centre. I am measured for new clothes, I choose new shoes. We pick a new engagement ring and the earrings to match. Joe suggests that we should also have the wedding rings made. The excitement makes us forget for the moment that we are making decisions for life. I feel like a little girl jumping over puddles careful not to muddy her dress. I know that only my graduation can provide me with freedom to make decisions about the future.

Events that follow each other in a panic stricken rush seem only a distraction. I am oblivious of how my actions will affect other people. I am surprised how easy everything is once I submitted to Joe's will. When you lay yourself down you are no longer in danger of falling; of being put down, belittled and criticised. It is safe to be down where nobody will push you away or try to take your place. I am free to remove myself into the dreams of what might have been.

James never offered to remove the obstacles on my way the way Joe did. Joe is my strength.

Youth, which is forgiven everything, forgives itself nothing; age, which forgives itself everything, is forgiven nothing.

Shaw

## *Excommunication*

Joe promises to wait for me to finish university before we marry. He insists on being with me all the time. I stop seeing friends; I stop going home at weekends. I stop being a separate person.

The less sure I become of myself, the more I need Joe's love. So many things called love, so many lovers, so few loved enough; I am not sure of anything anymore. I wonder if the ideal true love exists. Is falling in love an involuntary hormonal reaction to another or is it a mental and emotional expectation that a certain person will fulfil the needs as yet unidentified?

I knew right from the beginning that my place is beside Joe. He makes me feel loved, protected, appreciated and suffocated. I need Joe. Is need the same as love? Is need at least a legitimate component of love? When either of us feels vulnerable we revisit the hurts we caused each other; we re-remember why we should not be together and then we need to heal in each other's arms to repair and strengthen our togetherness. Our union grows with constant nurturing and healing until I forget how to function on my own; I cannot sleep without Joe's arms enveloping me. Nesting in his embrace I feel at home. Is that love or need? Is love needing something the other can provide to fulfil both?

Joe needs my youth and innocence to restore his self-esteem after his past betrayals. He needs to make Jana realise what she lost. Is that a legitimate component of love? Joe and I are struggling to be good enough in each other's eyes. Does it matter who is more attracted to the other.

Only the love for one's child is bigger than personal needs.

I am pregnant. I feel trapped. I try hard to imagine myself in love with Joe. Not being in love seems worse than not being loved. Is falling in love necessary for marriage? What if one falls out of love? I need Joe's love. Joe needs to be loved.

Like an insomniac I reason myself to sleep.

I have to own a dream that one day I will be free to live my real life without external constraints. I will surrender to Joe, I will be a wife and mother; for the time being I will be who Joe wants me to be but I will not give up my dreams. I will retreat into my magic land where I will pursue an independent life of challenges and successes. Falling in love with James made me feel euphoric, optimistic, reckless and courageous. Marrying Joe is convenient.

I remember the verse of St Francis of Assisi my mother used to recite:

It is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

I was always afraid of poverty; I wanted to be rich so I could give to others who would then love me.

You should find yourself a young boy; Joe is too old and divorced and trade, an old man said to me. Everybody over thirty seemed old to me. He was supposed to be Joe's friend. Was he jealous? Did he want to hurt me or Joe?

There is a stigma attached to private sector; private businessmen are almost as bad as the West that sucks the workers dry.

In the country where slogans proclaim that every kind of work is honourable, everybody also knows that a tie and clean hands are the sign of success. Office girls look down on manual labour; they aspire to accompany their bosses on business trips. To sleep with a government official seems to be a sign of success while planning a future with a tradesman means downgrading.

My mother is weeping and praying for me because I will burn in hell for all eternity. My father tells me never to return if I go with that man. No-one in my family mentions Joe's name; he remains that man who destroyed me.

I am sad that my marriage will never be blessed in the church. It will not be blessed by my parents either. I used to imagine my father handing me over to my husband and then rejoicing with the villagers uplifted by the righteous path his daughter has chosen. I did not give my parents what I owed them. I will be forever shunned by the people I love. I have nobody to invite to my big day. My family would not dream of being present at my wedding. Instead of honour I brought them shame. In my wedding finery I cry as Joe's friend drives me to the registry office in a hired limousine. I have a premonition of doom; something terrible is going to happen. Joe's business associates witness my vows to be faithful to Joe and to bring up my children according to the socialist ideals.

If only Joe's first family would vanish. They are a blotch on my landscape. I would then confess and re-start the good life; I would get a white dress and get married in the church with my parents happy and their pride restored.

I am excommunicated. What a terrible punishment excommunication is. One minute you are holding hands in a circle and then you are squeezed out never to belong again. A tiny whisper inside me tells me to run but it is not strong enough amidst all the distractions.

I am much too busy to think about other people's pain. The events follow each other so fast that my mind does not stretch to considering Joe's family; I do not even care how Joe feels about making this second uncertain step towards his future. My ego is so wounded that I can only focus on my own pain.

Looking back I realise how disappointed and frightened my parents must have been.

The valley brought up its children with the ancient code of behaviour so everybody knows what to expect and who is likely to misbehave. Like father-like son, like mother-like daughter. The whole



family is diminished if one of the family lets them down. The whole clan is made less in the eyes of the only people that matter, people of the valley that carry each other's memories for generations.

People pray: with him in him in the unity. I neither know nor understand this unity of which I am a part. I reason and feel about things that are in my mind alone but how can one ever really be a separate being? I carry within me national, religious, racial history with the rest of people of the valley; the valley itself is made of layers of ancient sediments. The plants and animals flourish on top only because of things that are underneath. People of my valley belong to the unity of my valley.

Church used to guide and advise; it provided meaning and purpose for the villagers. Church rituals and celebrations gave structure to the village life. The war eroded old beliefs and traditions. Communists teach children that old beliefs and traditions have no place in the new world. Villagers' deeply ingrained sense of good and evil is shattered; the sense of propriety has gone.

My family was the first to break the centuries old mould and entered the uncharted waters outside the village. My brother was the first to cross the proverbial Rubicon river and left the valley's ways for good. My sister and I followed.

I remember what Dudley an illiterate Aboriginal elder said about the ways a white society imposed on their ancient culture: Government is providing for our kids now but nobody is teaching them right from wrong. Aboriginal parents lost the authority and our children grow insolent and unruly. Government is in control while parents are growing weaker. Aboriginal elders feel shattered.

I wonder if it would be less painful for my parents if I had Joe's child on my own. Would an unmarried mother be a lesser disgrace than being a wife of a second hand husband? I want to be courageous and heroic but I am afraid of poverty; poverty brings shame. Money buys respectability.

I know that I took the wrong turn but right now is not a good time to turn back. Joe is all I have. We promise to forget our families and friends.

On my wedding day I promise myself to love and please Joe. Life is much easier when Joe is pleased. I will honour my marriage contract with obedience, loyalty and fidelity.

What is this fidelity people promise each other? I will be true to Joe in all my actions but in my dreams I have to be true to myself. To yourself be true and then you cannot be false to any other, I read somewhere. Joe knows that I am holding back a part of me; he tries passionately and patiently to make me surrender but I cannot let myself surrender. As long as my surfaces shine and the wheels are turning without squeaking I am free to remove myself into my magic land where the prince is waiting for me. In this magic playground my parents are proud of me, I win the lottery, I belong. I cry at Joe's funeral. I dance with James who never forgot me because we were each other's first love; the first sexless barely kissed belief in eternity untouched by real life. In the years to come I create scenarios for our reunion. I imagine him dreaming about me. I wonder if he forgets hire purchases and mortgages and his children's snotty noses and his wife's nagging when he closes his eyes in the evening to dream of what might have been if Joe did not terminate our loving and James' mother did not put a stop to our relationship. Do flowers pine for their blooms cut in the bud? Is James still searching for our Orion when he lays to rest?

I save the memory of our love to help me survive the life sentence with Joe. I reason that Joe has a memory of his first family so I have to have something of my own. I need James. James and I never promised anything to each other; our love remains forever untouched like a rosebud that never opened. It never became wise. Or afraid.

In the end of my fantasy I dutifully return to Joe and my reality. Joe and I are not each other's first choice but I am gradually becoming used to our comfortable existence. Joe was kissed and cursed before we met. He would not remember the fragility of our first kiss.

I wonder where Joe's thoughts go when he closes his eyes. Without fail I imagine them travelling to his daughters who are crying for daddy. Dreams are the forbidden fruit one should never touch. Maybe men don't dream. Maybe Joe dreams about catching a fish or shooting a kangaroo. Dreams are personal like death. Nobody can take them away. They are everybody's magic land.

There is no virtue like necessity.

Shakespeare

## *Joe*

Joe often tells our son Simon stories of his poor childhood; he wants Simon to be hardworking and grateful for a good home Joe provides. He wants to remind us how lucky we are because he provides plenty of food for us.

After the war we starved. Everybody was hungry after the war, he adds. We were rattling our spoons long before the corn meal was ready. Dad was a coal miner in Germany before the war but when he married he found odd jobs at home; he cut hay, prepared wood and looked after farmers' vineyards. At weekends he dug water wells.

There is no chronology in Joe's story; he tells bits about himself when he feels like it. Simon is mesmerised by his father's story telling.

At home we prayed rosary every evening. At the end mum always added: Save us from starvation, o Lord. Dad refused to pray; he swore that he should be able to save the family from starvation if the rich people paid him decent wages. He hated rich people. Dad often boasted that he was one of the first members of the communist party in the old Yugoslavia, says Joe. He said that he was in goal because he was fighting for workers' rights. He firmly believed that communist revolution will bring justice to all. He was sorely disappointed. He began to drink.

Mum insisted that we to go to mass every Sunday. A miracle happened early one morning on my way to mass, says Joe, especially delighted in telling this story.

On my way to the church I found a 100 Dinar note on the blanket of the first frost. I ran home and gave it to Mum. She took it to the parish priest so he could make an announcement from the pulpit and return the money to the rightful owner. He was a good priest; he told mum that nobody needed the money more than she did. He added that if someone told him within the week that they had lost the money, he would give it back.

We waited a week and nobody came forward so Mum used the money to buy corn. I helped my family survive that winter. The menu was sauerkraut and cornmeal. As the snow began to melt, Mum began to sow the vegetables in the garden and that was the main source of our food.

One Sunday afternoon, my father was drunk when he passed the sports ground where an organisation called Skol was having a big festival. Dad called out "Heil Communism!"

Everything went dead quiet. As he continued walking home, a few boys caught up with him and wanted to fight. He turned and put his hand into his back pocket. "Come boys, come here!" He beckoned them with the other hand.

Careful! He has a pistol someone said. Everyone moved back quickly.

I don't know if dad was only boasting or if it was true, but a couple of weeks later, the police arrested him. He told them that he had made a mistake. Instead of saying "Heil Sokol!" he had said "Heil Communism!"

Dad inherited some money from his relations in America so he began building our home. We had just settled into it in 1941 when the Germans invaded Slovenia and transported many Slovenians into concentration camps. I remember them inspecting every student – they measured our faces and wrote down the colour of our eyes. We were told that fair-haired, blue-eyed people were allowed to stay. It also helped if your name sounded German.

Germans first transported priests, teachers and communists. My father was taken first; after a few weeks, the rest of the family were told to pack what we could carry and we joined Father. We arrived on cattle trucks to Serbia where villagers were very kind to us. They gave us an old mud house with one big room and a little kitchen. We put straw on the floor and slept one next to the other, five children and our parents. Serb shopkeepers and other rich people paid for our keep.

During the German occupation, partisans in Serbia carried out isolated attacks on Germans; they also blasted bridges and the railway to sabotage transport. The Germans retaliated – if partisans killed one German soldier, Germans killed 100 Serb civilians. For one German officer, they killed 1000 Serb civilians.

Germans ordered town's people to guard the railway against partisans' sabotage. There were about 20 guards at Palanka every night so each adult male had to serve some time. The town's rich people paid my dad and other Slovenians to serve their time guarding. There was no other income so they accepted.

The job was very dangerous. If the partisans destroyed the rail, all guards on duty that night would be shot! I remember my father telling me how he thought he saw someone hammering something on the railway. He pleaded with what he thought was the shadow of a partisan, not to blast the railway. As he got closer, it was only a dog eating a bone!

We believed that we were transported because dad shouted "Heil Communism", says Joe explaining his father's predicament. Later in Serbia dad could actually be called a German collaborator because he guarded the railways in Serbia for the Germans. He justified his actions by saying that he was saving Serbian lives.

About 1200 Germans were housed in the Army barracks. When Italy capitulated in 1943, 200 Italians were brought over from Albania to look after horses for Germans. They were allowed to come to town in the afternoon, and many of them came to our place.

My father read German newspapers and was well informed about politics and the War. He bought wine from villagers and served it to soldiers. He had about 20 regulars, who came to hear the news and to drink. They toasted each other quite openly with the slogan: 'Slavs will win against Berlin!'

Once an Italian soldier offered Dad some bridles, reins and chains in exchange for wine. These were valuable commodities during the War and the Germans had lots of that stuff in the barracks. The Italians helped themselves to anything they could sell for drinking money.

Peasants brought wood, vegetables, meat and wine to sell at the market once a week. Dad offered farmers the horse gear that the Italians had sold to him, and they paid for it with wine. When Italian soldiers came again, Dad served them the wine and asked for more belts, chains, reins and bridles.

At first farmers brought bottles of wine, then small barrels, and then bigger barrels. Once they brought a barrel that wouldn't go through the front door so they had to cut a bigger opening into our mud house! Hundreds of litres of wine – ruzica being the favourite – were sold each week.

By now, Dad had quite a business buying and selling alcohol. He tested the wine for strength by putting a strip of newspaper half in the glass half hanging out. The wine would soak into the paper and the water ran out over the glass through the strip of paper. He told the wine producers that they were putting too much water in their wine so he could pay them less. I don't know if it really showed that water was being added but the farmers believed him. I think it was only a trick Dad used to get wine cheaper!

About fifty regulars came to drink outside our house most evenings; about twenty Italians, many more Slovenians, and sometimes, even a few Germans came. When Russians began coming, they wanted vodka, and they drank it in big wine glasses. They sang, told jokes and laughed.

Someone must have told the Germans about Dad trading in their horse gear so they came to search the house. A Serb interpreter came with them, and he saw the chains through the straw on the floor but quickly covered them up. Dad always liked Serbs.

Italian POWs also traded things like old uniforms and other sorts of clothing for wine. Once, Dad bought a wool jumper and later sold it to a villager; the wife of the Orthodox priest recognised it as one she knitted for their son. When she approached the man wearing it, he told her that he had bought it from my father.

I saw Germans gather all local men and made them parade in the yard, says Joe. The men had to look up at a window where Germans and their Serb collaborators watched. These Serb collaborators helped Germans choose 18 men suspected of being communists. Germans took them into the field and ordered them to dig their own graves before they shot them. Italians had to bury the bodies and before they did, they took their clothes. I heard dad tell my mother that this woman's son wasn't even dead yet! He pleaded for mercy but was hit on the head with a spade.

The woman asked Dad where he got the jumper but he only told her part of the story: he said that the Germans shot her son and that the Italians had taken his clothes but he couldn't tell her that her own Serb neighbours pointed out her son for Germans or that he had been hit with a spade so he would fall into his grave.

In Serbia people raced pigeons. At an arranged time on Sunday mornings, owners released groups of up to five birds from their homes. One sort raced in circles and the others flew high and did up to ten summersaults coming down. Some stayed in the air for up to 8 hours. The owners and the players placed bets on whose pigeons would stay the longest in the air and do more summersaults.

I began breeding pigeons. I let them circle up, and when they came back close to the ground, I whistled them up again. One of my pigeons always came to sit on my head. At night, the Russians liked to give him vodka to drink until he got drunk!

Dad used to send me to buy him big packets of tobacco from the farmers. When I sold some pigeons, I also bought a bag of tobacco then made smaller packets to sell to those who came to drink at our place. I made quite a bit of money but then my father took it to buy wine. Once I made a good deal when I traded a pair of young pigeons for two piglets but usually I just traded them for corn and wheat.

A pigeon's courtship is much like ours. The males are very protective of their females. Before they mate, they wipe their beaks and then they kiss. After mating, both pigeons fly a couple of circles. Both parents look after the young –one sits on the eggs and the other brings food.

I bought a pigeon pair of a really good breed. They mated and had young every month. When the chicks were still in the nest, there were already new eggs. I had about a dozen pairs of pigeons when someone stole them. Eventually I found out who it was and I told Dad. He came with me and told the thief that he would report him to the German police if he did not return them and pay for my losses.

The man had re-established my pigeons at his place by not letting them out until they had young. He knew that they would return to look after the babies. The thief was afraid of my father and brought back the pigeons and the money they earned him.

Before I left Serbia, I sold most of my pigeons. I took three pairs home with me but in Slovenia peregrine falcons got them.

It was 1945 and I was sixteen. I looked for an apprenticeship but there was nothing available.

I found a job in the textile factory tying the ropes that ran around pulleys that turn the spindles under the machines. There were about 600 spindles and I had to check them regularly during my eight-hour day. I had to be on my knees most of the time and my hands were blistered from pulling the ropes. It was a very dirty, hard job.

After about a year I got a position as an apprentice carpenter. When I completed the apprenticeship I worked for a private firm. I applied to go to a business college that would qualify me to become an independent building contractor. I went to school mornings and worked afternoons.

I finished college and started full-time work until they called me into the Army. Slovenian boys had to go to the southern Yugoslav republics and soldiers from the southern republics served in Slovenia because the Communists wanted to assimilate the five Balkan nationalities and change them into one Yugoslav nation. We were all supposed to speak Serbo-Croatian to build the brotherhood and unity. The children of mixed marriages would have no choice but to call themselves Yugoslavs. If Communism lasted another generation people might have forgotten their nationality.

When I returned from the Army, I worked for about three years as the manager of a government building company before I opened my own business.

Joe adds new details and emphasis to his stories with every telling. I realise that Joe learned his survival skills from his father. The war years were his university. He also remembers his early childhood from before the war.

Dad was sorely disappointed because communist revolution did not improve our situation, says Joe. He was still a poor peasant only now he had to sell to the government the wine he grew in our vineyard. He refused to sell it for a pittance the co-op paid so he began drinking it with his friends. Before the war he managed vineyards for bigger growers to supplement his income. After the war other winegrowers stopped hiring workers because farm produce was no longer profitable. Nobody was allowed to make a profit.

Before the war mum stayed home with us children and grew vegetables and fruit in our garden but as we returned from Serbia after the war she often worked on the fields for bigger landowners and when she returned, tired in the evening, the kids jumped to untie her apron where she carried bread and leftovers from the farmer's table. We thought only of our hunger and blamed mum if she didn't bring enough or if she came late.

Dad began drinking with soldiers in Serbia; on return to Slovenia he still worked in the vineyard sometimes and often came home drunk, singing through the forest. He chased mum through the house and sometimes he caught her and danced with her. Mum usually ran out of the house to feed pigs and chooks, so dad chased us kids. He hugged the children and we were delighted. That was the only nice thing that happened to us then. He sang silly songs and the tears rolled down his face and we asked for more.

Joe's voice grows sad as he continues his story.

Mum nagged us to help her but dad told her that kids should have fun. On the way to school I heard a farmer talking to a friend and pointing at me and calling me a little bastard belonging to that drunken loser. I soon realised that everybody felt sorry for my mother; she inherited a vineyard and a paddock from her parents but dad came with nothing. I became ashamed of dad and hated mum for marrying him. People said that mum deserved better.

Dad's sister used to send us parcels from America but dad never brought them home; he sold them to buy drinks for himself and any friends drinking with him in the pub (gostilna). He spent all his money on cigarettes and drinks. When he had no cigarettes he hit mum and us kids. Sometimes I had to walk to the shop barefooted in the snow to get his smokes.

Smoking is a no-no to Joe. He abstains from smoking and drinking. He can say no to anything. I have never been strong like Joe.

Once I heard whispers that my father was drinking with a woman in the vineyard's storage room. Kids teased me about that but I was strong and I hit them to shut them up, tells Joe. One day I went to the vineyard to get some grapes for mum. I heard the laughter from the storage room above the vineyard. At the door I noticed a fancy basket full of grapes and red peaches covered with silky flowery scarf. I realised that the basket belonged to a woman who laughed with dad inside. I grabbed the basket and ran home to tell mum. She ran to the vineyard and abused the woman who was drinking with dad. The other woman was younger, she had a flowery dress and she laughed at mum. Mum yelled at dad and the other winegrowers came out to listen. I was hiding behind the bushes and felt ashamed.

Mum kept the woman's basket and the scarf; whenever I saw either of them I was sorry for bringing them home. People said that the woman was a gypsy.

Joe started to stand up for his mummy who was terrified that his drunken daddy would hurt her children. Joe also kept his younger siblings under control. They resented him but did his bidding. He made sure that everybody behaved.

Joe told me about his father's death one night as we were alone in bed. Joe was sixteen when he found his father hanging from the rafters in the cellar. His mother collapsed and his young siblings did not understand what was happening. Joe had to take charge of the family; he had to provide for them and keep them under control. He was already an apprentice to a local carpenter builder who took pity on the family by providing Joe with lots of overtime.

Joe does not want to remember how he cut the rope and the dead weight of his father fell on him. His tongue was blue and protruding, his eyes were opened wide. Joe never forgave his daddy for the shame he caused the family. The memory of Joe's father hanging in the cellar serves as a silent reminder to me of what can happen if I offend Joe. I cannot risk inflicting such memory on my son who does not know about his grandfather. Nobody knows. The pain is always camouflaged by a smile.

I wonder why Joe's dad smoked and drank. Who did he rebel against? What did he want to forget and couldn't? Before the war he complained that he was overworked and underappreciated but after the war he wasn't even allowed to complain; he became powerless. I gradually realise that Joe also carried painful history on his shoulders and had much to prove to himself and those that wronged him.



Few men have virtue to withstand the highest bidder.

Washington

## *New beginning*

Towards the end of my pregnancy I drop out of university to administer Joe's business and his finances; I pay his employees and suppliers. I bank the money coming in and I can buy anything I want. We eat in restaurants because nobody cooks in the villa we share with Joe's land lady. Joe is planning to build a villa of our own in the near future.

I cross the road to have coffee in my favourite cafe. A boy in police uniform demands to see my ID booklet.

It's in my bag in the office just across the road. Would you like me to get it; I ask smiling at the boy.

Come with me to the station, he orders.

I am not sure if the boy is flirting with me or threatening me.

Can I come later with the ID, I ask.

No.

Sit here, says the boy policeman as we come to the empty waiting room at the police station. The boy disappears and I wait ever more apprehensive. The grey walls are barren except for the picture of Tito looking down at me. I cannot hear a sound. It feels like a tomb. After a couple of hours an older man calls me into his office. He does not look at me as he fires the questions. Name, address, date of birth, names of parents, address of parents.

The man does not look at me when he leaves the room. Another policeman, younger and friendlier comes in and he asks how I am, what was I doing on the street, where I left my ID, how much money I have on me. He looks at me intensely and asks what size shoes I am wearing. Where did I buy them and how much they cost? I am confused. I bought this ordinary pair of shoes at the corner shop opposite the police station. Where did you get your skirt; the policeman seems to be undressing me with his eyes. This tall jovial man looks at my chest and asks what size bra I am wearing. I feel vulnerable but I tell him. He says thank you, stands up, runs his fingers through his hair, pats the creases in his trousers, tells me to wait a moment and leaves the room.

After about twenty minutes a fat, slow man rumbles in and slumps into a chair. He looks at me for a long minute and then asks me about my friends. Would one of them be able to bring my ID to the station? Am I married? The name of my husband, the date of his birth, the date of our marriage, witnesses to our marriage. What does my husband do, where is he now, could he bring my ID? I tell him that Joe is in another town supervising a job.

The fat man yawns and stretches back in the chair.

I might let you go this time and you can bring the ID later, he smiles a friendly smile like a benevolent uncle to his naughty niece.

I wonder what all this is about. It all sounds remotely funny and ominous. I say thank you grateful to be out of there.

I know that my friends despise me for marrying Joe. Marrying money is the lowest thing one could do, especially money from the private sector, money with the rotten west capitalist exploitation flavour; money on the border between good and bad.

Joe opened his building construction company at the age of twenty six. He employed tradesmen and apprentices. He worked sixteen hour days. He slept on the bench of his tiny workshop. He rented a room and bought a car just before he married me. Driving a car is a red flag for the shire officials who ride bikes. The government has to stop Joe from prospering because in the country of equality and brotherhood nobody is allowed to step out of line, overtake and walk faster.

They want everyone to be equal to the slowest, dumbest and laziest, mutters Joe's friend who also wants to get ahead.

Equality is the only thing Christians and communists have in common. Both want to have people lined up so they can lord over them.

They want people to relinquish their private property and live from payday to payday so they would be forever dependent on the mercy of their masters.

The country goes down when you are forced to run as slow as the slowest in the pack, says Joe with unbroken confidence.

When people stop trying to break their chains the country gets broke, says his friend.

America quickly recovered from the Second World War and American relations began to send a dollar or two in their letters to their poor Slovenian relations. Foreign currency could only be bought on black market and the punishment for doing so was severe. Joe was buying dollars at every opportunity. Many people were arrested for this immoral and illegal activity but that did not stop the entrepreneurs who wanted to buy western goods.

I need a new car, Joe tells me. His friend bought a car in Germany; he came home where people admired him and girls hoped that he would take them for a ride. He took many nice girls for a ride. During the fifties and early sixties a new car was a sure sign of power and prosperity and potency and desirability.

Joe gives the dollars to an Italian acquaintance to buy a car in Trieste. I am to tell custom officials that my aunt sent the money from America to my relation in Italy for the car. I became an accomplished liar. I learned what lies one has to tell to get through the system.

Joe became a dashing cavalier; he is as desirable as his friend who took girls for a ride. I hear about Joe dining with elegant young women but Joe tells me that women are the clients and business associates. Joe buys a television set even before Slovenia begins to broadcast. I really have nothing to complain about. I am the best dressed and housed woman I know. Right there on the border between virtue and sin.

Joe says that in his position he has to dress well. He spends a lot of time dressing in front of the mirror; he buys new scents and ties and suits in Italy. I find expensive perfumes and nylon stockings in the car. He tells me that he bought them in Italy for the wives of his business acquaintances.

Synthetic fabrics and parkas became popular and Joe carries samples in the car as well. I am happy because Joe is happy. For the first time we both live a life of luxury.

Rich people always sing better. One plays the fiddle, the other dances. It does not really matter who does what, jokes Joe. He is always in a good mood. I am expecting our baby and in the warm glow of motherhood I almost love Joe. He ignores my mistakes and my faults do not bother him. His demands for sex and attention became less. He lets me go shopping and visiting on my own.

Joe in his euphoria forgets that I am his wife; he treats me with the same charisma he uses for his business associates.

One late evening, only days before I am to have a baby, I see Joe arguing with a girl in front of our house. They are leaning on his car and do not see me behind the curtain. I do not want to be seen. I convince myself that they are arguing about some business transaction.

Don't even think about it, Joe raises his voice and there is a sharp threat in it.

If you don't make a decision, I will, the girl slams the car door. Joe flinches and looks up but I stands wrapped in the darkness, protected in me secrecy. In my mind I never stopped being the obedient child employee of my husband.

I will go to the police, yells the girl as she walks away. My eyes follow her enormously high heels. Her legs almost reach up to her long blond hair falling straight and bouncing on her back as she walks. I almost feel sorry for the girl and for Joe because they both seem unhappy. I am proud that other women find my husband attractive. He looks so much better when he is admired by other young girls. It does not even enter my mind that he might want to be with somebody else. Wasn't it just months ago that he threatened to kill himself if I would not marry him? He would die rather than lose me.

Joe is in a foul mood when he gets in. I kiss him.

He brushes me aside and then changes his mind and becomes attentive. He pats my stomach and puts his head on it to say hello to the baby; I am grateful for his love. The baby needs us. Joe gently initiates sex but for the first time his body does not respond. He kisses me all over and whispers to the baby in my stomach.

We have to be careful not to hurt you, he says to the baby and I am grateful for his consideration. It does not occur to me that he cannot make love. I do not even consider that he might have had sex elsewhere.

The next day police arrest Joe. I forget about the girl with long legs. I have to think about the business, about Joe and about the baby. Joe is everything my baby and I have.

The man who smuggled Joe's money to Italy confessed and police closes Joe's business and private accounts. Currency smuggling is highly immoral and illegal. It comes next to treason. We are traitors.

Joe is free again a day before Simon is born. He paid to have the charges against him dropped but he becomes weary.

You can only bail yourself out so many times, he says.

Joe is very affectionate to me and the baby. For awhile we have sex for breakfast, lunch and tea. I am really sick of it. I almost wish that he would have sex with somebody else.

Joe keeps on working and saving. He buys a block of land on a beautiful part of the city to build our home. Soon after two policemen arrest Joe in his workshop. They handcuff him in front of his employees. The government taxation office has to calculate his income; they have to find the proof that he could not buy the land by legitimate earnings. They have to teach him a lesson. Joe has to understand that private sector is a rotten branch on a healthy socialist tree. He has to be cut down; he is a bad example to people who believe in equality. One rotten apple can spoil the rest. Tito spoke about auditing private sector at the time and officials imprisoned most private businessmen for interrogation.

The government officials question Joe's employees and clients. They check people who provided jobs for Joe. They are government people on the take. Everybody knows that.

Please understand that I have an order to find something, pleads the interrogator/investigator who escorts Joe from one job provider to the next. The old investigator is almost apologetic; he seems scared himself. On the verge of his retirement he does not want to blot his credentials. He is checking the bills I issued to customers. Joe, of course, told me what materials and labour to charge for.

The interrogator and Joe both know that everybody knows someone who would do favours for the price. Bribes are a part of business life in the socialist system. Maybe bribes are part of every economy. Or relationship. Everybody has a price. Joe is a naughty boy who tried to be a capitalist in a communist system. He wanted to stand out and be rich and respected. People cannot resist money and gifts and favours. I know how hard it is to ignore gifts and favours; I became desirable and envied because Joe showered me with gifts. How could a poor seventeen years old refuse the gifts of love?

After Joe's arrest his job providers become weary of him and scared of police.

I stand outside the jail and see Joe waving to me through the little barred hole window of a prison. He points at me and him and then with both hands makes a gesture of us running away. We understand that we have to go. After two months they let Joe out on bail. The investigation can last a year or more, they say. Joe puts a car as a surety and we prepare for escape. Joe knows a man who knows a guide that will take us over the border. Just as well we can pay. Everybody knows someone who escaped; everybody knows someone who would show the way for the price; everybody knows someone who would be paid.

Simon is eighteen months old when Joe pays a guide to help us escape over the mountains. It is too dangerous to take Simon with us so we find a place for him until we can claim him through the Red Cross from Austria. I figure that my cousin Maria would look after Simon because she needs the money. It is too dangerous to tell her that we are escaping. Too dangerous for everybody.

It is only for a month at most, says Joe. We are excited about getting away. As far as possible and as fast as can be.

Life becomes unpredictable. On the run things happen to distract you from pain. Austrian authorities tell us that we can go either to Canada or Australia.

But first we have to get our son.

I don't even remember saying goodbye to Simon; I don't remember if I cried; if he cried; if I missed him or worried about him. I had simply thrown my baby to the wolves without considering if he was fed, changed, loved? Was he smacked when crying? Was he abused? I paid Maria to look after Simon and felt sure that he will be fine. Everybody loved my adorable son. I suppose all babies are adorable to their mothers; I did not know then that all babies also become damaged by life and people around them.

I wanted to be the best super modern mother to Simon. Without parental guidance or experience I applied the mothering trends and fashions of the day. The parenting experts advocated a strict regime for babies. The baby must get used to proper routines. As long as the baby is dry and fed it is best to be left in the cot on his own. Cuddling a baby was wrong according to modern rules of the time. Baby must not be handled between meals or be comforted if it cries;

Every parent learns new ways to damage the child.

Maria's husband is promoted into communist leadership after he finished his political course. He has connections to help Maria get a clerical certificate as well. She never finished school because of the war and the certificate means everything to her. More than my little Simon. Maria cannot afford to be in any way connected to people who betrayed their country by escaping. When she finds out that I escaped she becomes scared and takes Simon to my frail parents who themselves need looking after.

Joe asks his younger brother, Peter, to contact the guide who would smuggle Simon over the border for a price. Peter wants the money himself so he decides to cross the border with Simon but he is caught drunk with Simon in his arms. He is imprisoned for two years and the police family keeps Simon for a month before my mother can claim him again. Police tell my parents that they will confiscate their property and put them in prison if they let Simon go with anybody.

I write to mum that we were returned from Austria to Ljubljana and Joe will come to get Simon. Joe finds a travelling salesman who posts my letter in Ljubljana. A couple of days later in the middle of the night this salesman collects Simon; he gives him a sleeping pill and makes him a bed under the back seat of a car.

How did Simon cope? Was he bruised and abused? Did he store everybody's rejection into his subconscious? Did he know that he was abandoned again and again? One is what one grows up to be. Can the scars of childhood ever heal? Is that why Simon never talks to me about his pain? Maybe he does not know where his pain started. Maybe he does not know where it hurts. I wasn't there when he needed me. I was always there for Joe but Simon had no one. I remained Joe's little girl when I should have been a mother to Simon. Is Simon's bravado and arrogance his way of coping? Is that why he smokes and drinks? And boasts about his importance? Is his arrogance covering the sediments of pain and rejection?

Did Simon become a paedophile? Did I make him forever afraid of grownups when I abandoned him? Is he fond of children because he lost his childhood? Kim invented the story of abuse to punish Simon but the dirt of Kim's accusation can never be completely washed away. Simon denies it; Joe does not believe it for a moment. Only I cannot stop agonising about it.

On arrival to Australia I pay a German woman to look after Simon when I start to work in the mental hospital. Mental hospital patients are mad so they do not care about my poor English but I have to write a report at the end of the shift. I do not know the proper words to report how one old demented man pooped into the flower pot. I decide to learn English fast; I do not want Simon to grow ashamed of his ignorant mother.

Simon pooped his pants, Simon's babysitter complains at the end of the day. I am not having him; I thought he was toilet trained. Simon is two and he was toilet trained before he was one year old but he does not know the words to ask for help with the buttons of his jumpsuit so he could go to the toilet. The woman left him in soiled pants the whole day and his legs and bottom are angry red. I arrange to work nights in the club so Joe can look after Simon.

Half to forget the wonderings and pain,  
Half to remember the days that have gone by,  
And dream and dream that I am home again.

Flicker

## *Migrants*

British imperialists established English language and Christian religion in all their colonies. These basic tenets of culture prevail in most of their colonies even after these colonies became independent nations. My Aboriginal friend Roy once said: Brits gave us the language and the Bible in exchange for our land.

After the WWII Australian leaders realised that they had to populate or perish. Since they could not recruit enough British migrants to defend and develop Australia, they extended their welcome to any young, white and able, preferably skilled, persons.

For many decades Brits dreamed of a white Australia like their mother England used to be. For decades no coloured person was admitted to Australia. After the Vietnam War the first few Asians arrived. In the twenty-first century many Middle Eastern and even African refugees found sanctuary in Australia. In this melting pot of 199 nations everybody gradually found their place.

English speaking Australians greeted every new wave of migrants with resentment and mistrust. They feared the unknown. Even non English speaking migrants, who assimilated and became proficient in English, resent newcomers whose language and heritage is unfamiliar. In the twenty first century everybody resents new refugees because they believe that the government offers them too many privileges. European migrants were happy until they saw someone they considered less deserving and less desirable get a bigger piece of cake.

Most of European migrants came to Australia in the fifties and sixties. They escaped from a war torn country or war thorn family. European political borders changed, religious and political leaders changed, so customs, beliefs and traditions had to change. Migrants often argue about the history and politics because each of them views the world from the political, religious and national perspective they grew up with.

Stalin and Hitler uprooted, expelled, dispersed and deported some 30 million people. After the war starvation and diseases killed many millions. For many the victory became worse than the war. When the rebuilding started in the West, the killing continued in the East as communists tried to establish a new social order. Young ambitious men and some women escaped from Europe and tried to re-establish themselves fast.

Blond and blue eyed Balts as the first non English speaking Europeans in Australia paved the way for darker Greeks, Italians and Yugoslavs who followed in big numbers bringing with them their cuisine and traditions.

Soon the smell of European delicacies brought Australians closer to migrants' kitchens; they started buying pasta and kranski and pizza. Asian cuisine later also contributed to the melting pot of cooking.

Migrants understand that everywhere there are those who consider themselves socially above and those below. Everybody also understands that it is up to them to rise above their initial status. Migrants are busy with upward mobility and survival; they ignore petty prejudices and discrimination. They work and save to build comfortable homes and national clubs; the only status that really matters to them is measured by people of the same nationality attending the same functions in their national clubs. They are who they are in the eyes of their group. All their emotions are concentrated within their national identity. Everybody knows where one belongs in the small hierarchy of their nation. All rejoice in showing off their newly acquired possessions. Europeans are as happy to have come to the land of opportunity as the first English settlers, who left England with chains on their feet.

As migrant exchange their life histories they soon learn about intelligence, abilities, skills, and the depth of religious beliefs, political affiliation and family history of each other. Little groups of religious people become close friends, those with hatred of communism congregate together; academia keeps a distance from the common folk. There is also a group which wants to remain in good books with their homeland.

Migrants were never rich on self esteem. They had to re-establish and remake themselves too many times. They had their confidence crushed, because on arrival to Australia, regardless of their home status, they became instantly illiterate and distinguishable only by the manual task they were assigned to perform. They realised that they had to use their own muscles and brains to overcome obstacles.

During the seventies and eighties Australian policy of assimilation dictated that New Australians had to be civilised and become similar to English. It was up to the teachers to advise migrant parents to forget their language and customs for the sake of their children. Most migrants are fiercely ambitious for their children; they send them to best schools. Children soon become their interpreters and advisors; they quickly learn to deal with Australian institutions, write letters and fill in forms. Many become slightly embarrassed by their illiterate and therefore dumb parents.

Migrant children cannot count on their relations smoothing their path in life. Most never met a single relation until they went overseas. They have to become self-reliant. Some become teachers, a few become politicians; some even become rich and powerful. Most of them, however, are just ordinary public servants and tradespeople.

New Australians often go OVERSEAS and return undamaged. Even a few Australians ventured into OVERSEAS. They realised that OVERSEAS wasn't just a figment of migrants' imagination. Foreigners sound less foreign OVERSEAS. By the end of the second millennium most migrants of the fifties, sixties and seventies became ordinary Australians. Europe recovered and prospered but the only home their children know is Australia.



Assimilation policy expired during the seventies and everybody began celebrating multi-culture. The government provided means to promote all and any traditions and beliefs in order to enrich Australian culture.

At the beginning of the third millennium there is a great influx of Muslim refugees. Australians again feel too fragmented by their religious and political affiliations so many demand that everybody becomes a part of the mainstream. The majority are sick of the government pandering to all the fringe groups. The fringe groups seem most vocal; they want to rule Australia.

Joe says that the story about the ant and the grasshopper sums up and illustrates the reasons why he left Slovenia and came to Australia. He pinned the story on the bathroom door.

Morals: OLD VERSION: The ant works hard in the withering heat all summer long, building his house, and laying up supplies for the winter. The grasshopper thinks the ant is a fool; it laughs and dances and plays the summer away. Come winter, the ant is warm and well fed.

The grasshopper has no food or shelter, so he dies out in the cold.

MORAL OF THE OLD STORY: Be responsible for yourself!

MODERN VERSION: The ant works hard in the withering heat and the rain all summer long, building his house and laying up supplies for the winter. The grasshopper thinks the ant is a fool and laughs and dances and plays the summer away. Come winter, the shivering grasshopper calls a press conference and demands to know why the ant should be allowed to be warm and well fed while he is cold and starving. Channel 7,9, & 10 News, and A Current Affair show up to provide pictures of the shivering grasshopper next to a video of the ant in his comfortable home with a table filled with food. The country is stunned by the sharp contrast. How can this be, that in a country of such wealth, this poor grasshopper is allowed to suffer so? The Labour Prime Minister appears on A Current Affair with the grasshopper and everybody cries. The Green Party stages a demonstration in front of the ant's house where the news stations film the group singing: We shall overcome.

Green Party Leader condemns the ant and blames The Liberals, Capitalism and Global warming for the grasshopper's plight. The treasurer exclaims in an interview with TV News that the ant has gotten rich off the back of the grasshopper, and both call for an immediate tax hike on the ant to make him pay his fair share. Finally to gain votes to win an election, the Government drafts the Economic Equity & Anti- Grasshopper Act retroactive to the beginning of the summer.

The ant is fined for failing to consider how his hard work and preparation has affected the Grasshopper's Mana and, having nothing left to pay his retroactive taxes, his home is confiscated under the Government Land Repossession Act and given to the grasshopper.

The story ends as we see the grasshopper and his free-loading friends finishing up the last bits of the ant's food while the government confiscated house grasshopper is in, which, as you recall, just happens to be the ant's old house, crumbles around them because the grasshopper doesn't maintain it. The ant has disappeared to Vanuatu, never to be seen again.

The grasshopper is found dead in a Drugs related incident, and the house, now abandoned, is taken over by a gang of Skinhead spiders who terrorise the once prosperous and peaceful, neighbourhood.

MORAL OF THE STORY: Be careful how you vote!

Grasshoppers took over Australia and we will have to escape again, says Joe.

Marx predicted that communism will first succeed in the west, agrees Joe's friend.

The only right everybody should have is to work and look after his family, says Joe who is a firm believer in the Liberal party and free enterprise.

The rich always exploit the poor, I say.

People are for sale; if I don't buy them somebody else will, says Joe.

People are greedy; there should be a law against exploitation, I say remembering the lessons of my teachers.

Everybody IS greedy. Nobody is poor by choice. The poor just cannot figure out how to get rich; they are either stupid or lazy, or both. If Labour party removes the incentive for capable people to create wealth we will all end up poor, says Joe.

New Australians struggled to quickly validate their skills and abilities. Most started as manual labourers but soon their diligence and tenacity brought them to the notice of laid back older Australians who are constantly amazed that migrants prosper despite their apparent ignorance.

Australians are not at all pleased with that. They expected migrants to remain servants to the upper English class. Who do they think they are? How dare they build better houses and drive bigger cars.

O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.

Sir Walter Scott

## *Canberra*

Australia during the sixties is full of young foreigners; even Slovenians in Canberra seem foreign to each other; we came from different regions; our behaviours and traditions are unfamiliar; we think differently. We left our peers, we left our old valley ways and connections.

Australians identify people from Yugoslavia as Yugoslavs. I am used to being a Yugoslav but most Slovenian migrants insist that there is no such thing as a Yugoslav nation. There never was one. There never will be.

No more brotherhood and unity. No equality. I am bewildered at first. Everything seems upside down. I just accepted Tito as the best teacher and father of the nation and everything in my life was done according to the gospel of Tito.

Tito was God of Yugoslavs. He convinced people that Utopia is possible; we learned to deny our individuality for common good. We are one. One for all; all for one, those were the slogans we grew up on.

Stane, the leader of Canberra Slovenians placed a page long letter in the national newspaper telling the readers about the atrocities of Tito's henchmen.

Tito is an evil murderer, declared Stane. Tito had twelve thousand innocent young Slovenians murdered after the war, because they did not believe in communism. He tried to destroy Catholic Church which is the foundation of Slovenian culture.

Mass murders began under Stalin before the war and lasted after the war. Hitler learned from Stalin how to remove all opposition. Stalin's recipe was: Ridicule, humiliate, exterminate. Stalin instructed Tito to exterminate the opposition in order to create a new classless society.

Hitler exterminated millions of Jews in gas chambers while Stalin starved millions of Ukrainians to death. Hitler and Stalin agreed to divide Europe and establish new obedient classless proletariat dictatorship. Anyone resisting or suspected of resisting or belonging to a class that resisted, had to be exterminated. The extermination had to continue in order to remove anyone unhappy with the new order.

Stalin joined the West to conquer Hitler and that gave him the licence to continue with the extermination of his opposition after the war. Stalin and Tito held onto power by murder. Stalin was Tito's teacher.

Jews recorded their suffering; their extermination is part of the history while Stalin's murders are ignored just because in the end of the war he was on the winning side.

Stane is a butcher who opened a little corner delicatessen selling his kranski sausages and things he imports from Slovenia. Canberra Slovenians congregate around him. They hire halls to celebrate life's milestones together. With voluntary labour they build a club which becomes known as a home. They soon establish relationships; they become friends and enemies.

New leaders emerge.

Leaders and their opposition are needed for the community to grow and prosper. Strong opposition makes good government, said an Australian politician.

Helena, a friendly Slovenian teacher, is teaching in a catholic school where I enrolled our son Simon. We meet in Slovenian club and exchange life stories.

Helena came to Australia three years before me; she worked in a grocery shop for the first two years until she became fluent in English and could pass the exams to be again employed as a teacher. They only gave me a spelling test and asked a few questions about Australia, says Helena. They need teachers; actually they need qualified people of any sort. Most of our men became builders because Australia needs builders to build Australian cities. The men who built their own home as owner builders can then apply for a builder's licence.

How could they be builders when most don't even speak English, I say.

English architects draw the plans, English inspectors inspect every stage of the building process and our men are good tradesman and hard workers. What did you do back home, asks Helena.

I was a medical student but then I got married and dropped out.

Maybe you could produce some evidence of your studies and they might give you a certificate if not a doctorate, says Helena.

Tell me how did you start your teaching career, I ask.

It was chaotic and still is but I make small steps every day, says Helena. I told the principal that I was terrified because I did not know the professional vocabulary for programming but this old nun gave me good advice. You'll be fine, she said. Just follow the curriculum, check the aims and goals, study the school policy and ethos and prepare lessons.

I was even more perplexed but then the nun smiled. Seriously, do not worry about the big picture. You know how to teach so make sure that you are at least one page ahead of the kids. Study from children's textbooks the night before what you will teach the next day. The rest will become clear and familiar as you go.

I still love that nun for her advice. I had no idea what curriculum was or school ethos but I could read a page ahead in children's text books. I was determined to do my best. My teaching was fine but I had no confidence to impose discipline. The louder I spoke the noisier the class was until this nun called me into her office and said: Look after yourself and save your voice. Children get used to your loud voice so they only get noisier. If you want a quiet class you speak quietly.

I felt insecure because of my accent and my lack of sophisticated, intelligent words. I was grateful to nuns for guiding me by bluntly pointing out my mistakes. They needed teachers so they groomed me well.

How did the parents react to you accent?

Half of the parents are migrants themselves. I am lucky really that my school is in the embassy district with students also from African, Asian and European embassies.

What gave you the idea that you could just walk into a teaching job on this new continent?

It was actually Stane; he told me that they need a teacher at his son's school. As a good catholic he knew the nuns and he recommended me.

I think you were very brave.

Look who is talking, you just stepped from the plane and into a medical profession, laughs Helena.

I make no decisions in the hospital; I just do as I am told, I smile.

One day you will I am sure, says Helena. Show initiative and enthusiasm plus the evidence of your studies and they will lead you towards recognisable qualifications because they need nurses.

Helena tells me that Stane's father and brother were killed in Kocevski Rog after the war. His older brother escaped to Argentina.

Stane and his friends don't trust people who were indoctrinated by communists, warns Helena. They especially mistrust us Primorci, she laughs. We are rejected as traitors, communists, and two faced con artists. Living on the border we had to be two faced to please the west and the east. To trade with Italians we had to pretend to like them and we had to be communists and Yugoslavs in order to survive in Yugoslavia. We are practical people.

I come from the other end of Slovenia on the border to Croatia; we traded with Croatians.

We, Primorci, always traded with Italy, says Helena. We took farm produce to Italian markets and for the Italian currency bought goods we could not buy in Slovenia. We used to smuggle food and drinks to Trieste to sell them for Liras. Children learned to become two faced smugglers in their mothers' arms. I was about ten when Mum wrapped five kilos of lard in a linen cloth and tied it around my waist to go on the bus to Trieste with my grandmother. I must have looked a bit too fat to the border inspectors so they made us wait for inspection. They put me to stand next to the heater and the lard I was smuggling soon started dripping down my body and legs. I was crying so they took the precious parcel off me and my grandmother and I were sent back and were not allowed to cross the border for awhile.

Historically our territory has always been disputed by Austrians, Italians, Slovenians and general Yugoslavs. No wonder we often had to change our attitudes and behaviour to suit those in charge. We needed many faces to survive.

I remember how during the WWII a leader of the occupying German division always carried me on his shoulders as he walked through the village, says Helena. I believed that he liked me and that he was a nice man but village women later told me that they were petrified as they watched. They knew that I was a human shield for the German so the partisans who were on the hills all around the village would not shoot him. The German carried me for his protection.

Stane invites Joe and I to a Sunday Slovenian mass. Most Slovenians come; they want to see each other; even those that dislike each other and those that do not believe in God come to mass. We long to see other Slovenian faces and speak about home. We quickly accept each other for who we say we are. We need to become connected as a community.

Gathered here we are no longer strangers in a strange land, says Slovenian priest. We are no longer birds without the nest since you built the home for Slovenian communities in most of Australian cities. We have to sustain our community by celebrating life together.

Singing hymns offers the faithfuls emotional healing after the loss of our real home and family. I feel that I can trust the people who believe as my parents did. My image of God has a face my mother painted with faith, hope and love. Perhaps other worshipers carry a different image of the almighty; some fear God, others talk about God's unconditional love but we pray and sing the same.

People would kill each other if they were not afraid of God, said Stane. I am inspired by this young man kneeling in the church; his eyes closed; his head bowed; his hands raised in prayer. I follow him to the altar to receive Holy Communion; I feel redeemed with all the holiness around me. If only my mother could see me now.

I soon learn that there are two groups of Slovenians: those loyal to the regime at home and those loyal to the Catholic Church. I only have a black and white picture of politics; nobody ever even suggested that there might be something grey, something in between wanting to shine. You are with us or you are against us; this message is engraved deep in my knowing. Nobody ever conceded that the other side might also want to do some good. Who could argue against brotherhood and unity; who could say that there is something wrong with loving your neighbour as yourself? Aren't these ideals the same? Was Jesus a communist? Didn't he look out for the poor and the sinners? Why are one black and the other white?

All cats are grey in the dark, said my father once.

What do you mean, I asked.

You have to be careful who you trust, he said enigmatically.

Slovenians loyal to Yugoslav Embassy oppose those connected to the church, explains Helena. The tension between the two groups keeps us alert. Fierce lobbying from both extremes brakes many friendships but it also invigorates us and keeps us focused and excited.

The conflict generates competition and a sense of purpose, I agree.

We are busy building Slovenian club while the other side boasts about the embassy party they attended and the gifts the ambassador gave them, says Helena. I help Stane by teaching Slovenian children to recite, sing and dance for the opening of the newly built club. We prepare programs for mothers' and fathers' days and for any other celebration, say Helena.

How do you know about people going to Embassy parties, I ask.

Easy, says Helena. They are so honoured by Serb ambassador's invitation that they can't stop crowing about it. They bring a few books and some tapes for the club and pretend that this propaganda is our culture; as if they had any idea of what culture is. Talking about thirty pieces of

silver. They go to tell the ambassador about those of us that wouldn't be seen in ambassador's company. They are spies and traitors.

Just as I became comfortable living outside the church I am introduced to this group of pious believers who are against everything communism represents. I am grateful to Stane and his friends for making us an instant family. I was equally grateful to communists for accepting me and I gradually forgot all about the church and the teaching of my superstitious parents. Joe does not like authority and was not a church goer either but now he joins those who oppose communism.

Could people be very good and very bad at the same time? Can a person present himself as a moral, kind and generous and be cruel and nasty as well? Can one hide behind the apparent kindness while plotting deviant or malicious acts? Is it possible for anyone to be totally righteous without expecting a reward? Here or in afterlife? What about all who stumble on their way towards goodness? Some get up and dust themselves up, confess and try again to reach the finishing line; others never recover; they perish without the blessing or a reward.

I wanted to shine like a beacon of virtue. Maybe I only wanted to shine. Perhaps everybody has a need to be good and recognised for doing good.

My mother was a true believer; she was good for the glory of God. Did she believe in a payback in an afterlife when everybody will be rewarded according to his or her good deeds? Mum silently accepted her powerlessness in good faith that God in his wisdom and justice will punish the guilty and reward the righteous. This faith was mum's reward. Faith is a gift. Religion is the opium of the masses, I learned somewhere in my ambiguous education. Is opium bad even when it helps one to survive? People become addicted to opium. Opium takes away the pain. Opium adds a little happiness when life seems hopeless.

This is a new beginning Joe and I dreamed about. Joe soon finds agreeable friends; capable, ambitious and anticommunist. I feel reborn and redeemed with these respectable people who welcome us into their club and their homes and their hearts. Everybody becomes an instant friend; we exchange stories of our escape and of our first experiences in Australia.

In Slovenian club Joe and I meet Tomaz and his wife Mari. Tomaz shortened his name to Tom to make it easier for Australians to pronounce. Joe and Tom, the two prospering businessmen, soon realise that they have much in common.

I hear Vince and Jaka outside the church sneering as they look at Tom.

He thinks that he is god's gift to women, says Jaka.

He knows everything about everybody, says Vince.

Nobody knows if he is spying for Yugoslav Embassy or for the church. Or both.

He may have everything but his God did not bless him with children, says Jaka looking in Tom's direction.

They are jealous, I conclude. Spiteful. Men are like crabs in a bucket. They drag each other down to stop each other from rising up. Tall poppies are first cut down. A prophet is not appreciated by his own. Men probably hate Tom because he is more handsome, successful and popular.

Tom is a good looking man; tall and slim he towers above others; he is the owner of the large car dealership. People feel honoured to be in his company. He even employs a few Slovenians.

Tom soon becomes my imaginary prince. He is safely married, of course, but he holds a promise that if only...If his wife somehow vanished we could share the most holy matrimony and I could give him all the children he surely wants. I naturally assume that it is Mari who cannot have children.

I know Tom desires me and I desire his desires. Men with desires act like princes. Maybe all men eventually disintegrate into ordinariness; they become mean and tired, bored, boring, demanding and demeaning. I have no use for their ordinariness. I dreams of being desired and adored.

Tom probably prays for the temptation to go away but his desires are stronger than he is; he would sacrifice his beliefs in a heroic attempt to be with me forever. Maybe Tom hates me; I am the source of his temptation. I imagine him praying on his knees asking God not to lead him into sin. Maybe I should not want him wanting me. I know that I will never be unfaithful to Joe; I just need a prince that will see and appreciate my inner beauty; the man that will love me, unattainable as I am, in my invisible world. I want Tom to discover and love my soul.

At the end of my fantasies about Tom is Joe, of course; Joe is always at my side protecting me from wrongdoing. I need the stability of Joe's love and fidelity so I can search for a prince who will discover the precious uniqueness of ME.

Tom and Joe become best friends; both are hardworking and ambitious.

Tom and Mari often invite Joe and me out for dinner. Tom arranges the seating so he can play with my foot under the table. Sometimes he touches my thigh by accident. He listens to every word I say; he asks what food and wine I like. He finds an opportunity to touch me as if by accident but we both know that this is not an accident. I am convinced that Tom is desperately in love with me.

Joe and I become regular visitors to Tom's home. Tom shows me his immaculate orchard; he tells his wife Mari which peach to pick for me. I eat the peach and ask Tom where to put the stone. Tom does not answer immediately but Mari makes a 'flick over the fence' gesture without saying a word. She takes the stone and flicks it down the retaining wall where it lands under the fallen leaves. Tom eventually asks for the stone so he can dispose of it properly. I look at Mari who nervously looks behind the retaining wall. How could you, says Tom to Mari. The stone will rot and the rot will spread over the entire garden. Sorry, says Mari going down the steps to get over the retaining wall and under the tree where she rummages for the peach stone among the fallen leaves. Never do that again, says Tom with a finger almost touching Mari's nose. Mari does not seem to notice the harshness of Tom's voice.

I like Mari; this vibrant easygoing and beautiful lady becomes my instant best friend; we go together on shopping sprees and often stop at the cafe to chat and curse our men.

Joe and Tom are discussing pruning techniques as we turn in from the garden. Tom guides me with his hand gently under my arm towards the steps and into the lounge room. I attempt to take my shoes off so not to stain the plush white carpet, but Tom would not hear of it. I admire immaculately furnished lounge room full of carefully arranged items on the shelves. I pick a book at random and look at the title. It is something about cars so I place it where it was. Tom picks it up again to adjust its position. Mari brings a tray with the cake and the coffee. Tom shows Joe the



new DVD he bought and explains how it works. I look around; there is not a trace of dust anywhere. Nothing is out of place. Is heaven like that? Immaculate. There is another world within this one; I read on a poster somewhere. Could heaven be right here?

We sit in a semicircle on the pale lavender lounge to watch the film Tom made on his last trip around the world. I notice Tom's forefinger lightly tapping the coffee table. Every so often he shakes the finger carefully over his plate. I realise that he is picking almost invisible crumbs off the shiny table surface. I become conscious of holding the cake over the plate to save Tom picking up the crumbs but his finger is still tapping like it is automatically searching for the invisible particles resembling dirt.

Tom invites Joe and I to a Wednesday prayer group gathering. We meet Rozi.

Holy Virgin urges us to give up sinful ways and begin the life of prayer and good deeds, says Rozi as she distributes books of messages our Holy Mother gives to her seers.

Is that some new religion? We wouldn't want to stray from the ways of our parents, says Joe in mock seriousness. I am afraid that they will see how irreverent Joe is. All good Catholics are constantly watching, afraid that one of their flock would embrace some more popular evangelic group.

I will always be a Catholic, Rozi reassures us. Our Holy Father allows the publications that deals with private apparitions and revelations as long as these revelations contain nothing contrary to our Holy Father, our Holy Church, morality, and our Holy Faith. Anybody is allowed to tell their story about meeting with Our Mother Mary and her Son Jesus, Rozi explains the booklets she distributes.

There is a pilgrimage to Berrima next Sunday, says Rozi. Berrima is in Penrose Park between Canberra and Sydney. Polish Fathers and Brothers of the Order of St. Paul, the first Hermit, built a Shrine to the Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Jasna Gora. People express devotion to Our Lady there, according to the Church's teaching, explains Rozi.

Come along, invites Tom.

Joe and I look over the Penrose Park valley where thousands of people confide in the Virgin Mary. Most have nobody else to confide in. Migrants uprooted from the network of extended family embrace the church as a family substitute.

Only one thousand can fit in the church so monthly devotions are held in the open, explains Rozi.

People walk from shrine to shrine and kneel down piously as they cross themselves. The candles are burning, the flowers are fresh. Every group of migrants gathers around their own shrine in the forest; they march in the procession under the banner of their homeland united in their faith.

Thousands of old migrants are on their knees begging the Holy Mother to intercede for them with her Son and let them find peace and be holy and loved, whispers Helena to me. The forest is full of little shrines. Helena came with her husband Jaka. I know that Helena could hardly be called a devout Catholic. She is making fun of Rosa's piety. I am much like Helena, sitting on the fence; two faced; many faced; living in a no-man's land. Follow the leader. We want to look like Rozi who KNOWS everything for certain. We also both like Stane and his wife who pray with total sincerity. I especially want to get Tom's approval so I kneel and cross myself like he does; I feel that I again

belongs like I belonged in the circle dancing Serbian kolo in that other life. Helena kneels and prays beside me.

We built a shrine to our own Madonna so we can kneel as a nation on our own ground, explains Rozi reverently the meaning of this holy place.

One in ten Australians is a migrant who never fully learned to speak English to feel at home with the rest of Australians, says Helena more seriously as we listen to the nervous, young Polish Prior proclaim the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary in a broken stuttering English.

Helena and I made learning English our first priority.

These people cannot return to the country of their birth because their children are born in Australia. They can only return to their Holy Mother and God of their parents to make sense of their lives, I say.

Brave Slovenians walk up to the pulpit to say prayers to the Virgin in Slovenian like Italians do in Italian and Portuguese and Filipinos do in their own tradition. They are among their own stuttering broken English speaking people who fight foreign demons. They are still strangers in a strange land with no hope left that they will ever feel at home anywhere.

Mary's humility, her chastity, her generosity and willingness to surrender to God's will should inspire us all, concludes the prior.

The valley reverberates with holiness as they contemplate holy mysteries and express their needs.

The Virgin Mother was without the original sin; she was the Immaculate Conception, explains Rozi.

It must have been harder for Josef with original sin and all hanging over him. He must have also died a virgin since according to Rozi, he never consummated his relationship with the Virgin Mary. I wonder why they claim that Jesus comes from the house of David through Joseph's line since Joseph is only his foster father, says Helena.

I know that Helena does not think much of a virgin birth or Immaculate Conception. Like I, she was indoctrinated by communists. She is teasing Rozi. There are endless opportunities to make fun of any myth religious or political.

The Virgin and her son never succumbed to the temptation, explains Rozi.

Nobody would dare to openly dispute the truth of Rozi's words; not in the valley so holy and not in front of people so reverent. Faith is a gift, I remember. Faith is followed by hope and love. That is all anyone needs in life. With one of them missing the other two vanish.

Helena and I are drinking coffee in a little refreshment room.

Paternity used to be a big issue in the days when they had no sure way of determining who the biological father was. The woman's virginity was the only guarantee that the family's property fell to the rightful heir, says Helena.

But our faith is based on the virgin birth and Jesus being god's son, I argue.

There were virgin births all over the world in those days. Most were attributed to gods and angels casting a shadow over some pretty maiden. We must remember that the rulers in those days were often worshipped as gods. If one of them cast a shadow over a virgin she was likely to become pregnant.

Did people really believe that their rulers were gods?

Dictators never abandoned the ambition to be gods. Most become slaves to the greed for power and glory. They barricade themselves with trappings of riches they stole from those they ruled and then live in fear of losing their power and position so they need ever more guards to protect them. Caligula and Hitler and Stalin and Tito considered themselves gods.

And yet they all promised equality and fairness, I remember.

Some leaders sincerely want to improve the human condition; many actually did improve society but most are soon forgotten while Jesus is remembered, says Helena.

Do you believe that Jesus is the son of god? I ask a little scared of the answer.

We will never know who his biological father was and it is of little importance at least for me, says Helena. The rulers in ancient times were called saviours. When John the Baptist said that this little Palestinian peasant from Galilee was the saviour, the ruling elite first laughed at him and then they got mad when people actually followed Jesus. Who did he think he was; what did he own; where was his army? Where was his castle? He did not even have a home. No wonder they crucified him.

And yet these mighty rulers died and are forgotten while Jesus lives, I say.

The poor and oppressed need a champion. There were other people like Jesus in history. Their teachings were adopted, adapted, used and abused but in their purity they are much the same. I do believe that their messages are inspired by god. I believe that we are all inspired by god; who else is there to inspire us?

Isn't this a blasphemy, I smile half in relief and half in fear.

Bible scholars these days no longer pay as much attention to virginity of Christ's mother as they do to his teaching and the divinity of Christ himself, explains Helena.

Why then do we still glorify the blessed virginity, I say a little sad because my own virginity may no longer be such a valuable asset.

Sexual taboos are no longer an issue in the civilised world. In the olden days they had little idea how the pregnancy itself happened. They assumed that the woman was a wet cold field into which a hot dry male planted the seed. If there was no child it was the fault of the field, -the woman- and not of the seed. That's why some childless women were called barren. Barren ground. The Bible writers were dealing with the knowledge of the time and explained it with the language people understood. Marriage was a property contract. Women had no property so their virginity had to be proven as a security that the man's property remained in the family hands. These days we can tell for certain who the father is but virginity still remains a social and moral control agent in some societies to keep women oppressed, says Helena.

In the Muslim world there are still honour killings when the woman flaunts the virginity tradition, I say. I am talking about sex and virginity for the first time. I only knew what Joe told me and he said that only virginity makes it possible for a man to truly love a woman. He could never love a woman who had sex with other men.

Unfortunately virginity rules haven't changed for most women even today, smiles Helena.

Do you believe in God? I ask a bit scared of Helena's explanation.

My God is much bigger than the myths of the ancient stories, says Helena.

But you are Catholic, aren't you?

I believe that God is bigger than religions. He is everywhere, smiles Helena.

Do you believe in Jesus, I ask.

Jesus' teachings show the way towards society as we would all like to imagine it but Jesus knew that we are fallible by nature, smiles Helena.

If Jesus is not God then Roman Catholic Church does not exist, I say.

The church is not God and church laws are not always made from love either. I don't worry much about the religious leaders in Rome or elsewhere. People often manipulate Jesus' simple teaching of love so they can manipulate the masses.

I am sure Stane and Tom would not agree; in fact they might excommunicate you, I smile.

We each have our own image of God, says Helena. We carry within us the morality and religion from our parents who carried traditional beliefs of their villages through centuries; these primordial beliefs became embellished and changed by our more or less personal experiences. Stepping out of that mould does not take or add anything to the teaching of Jesus. He understood sinners. We struggle to be good but we fail often and are forgiven often. He had forgiven a woman who had many sins. The one, who is forgiven much, loves much, he said to men who would stone the woman. Catholic first pope Peter betrayed Jesus and was forgiven.

Where do you get all these ideas, I say afraid that I may be contaminated by Helena's opinions.

I work with Josephine nuns. Their founder Mary Mac Killop was herself excommunicated because she was more concerned about helping the needy than she was about the catholic hierarchy. It is rather significant that they listed her for sainthood now. She will be the first Australian saint. Time will tell who and what is from God and what is just the human greed for power. Take the celibacy laws for instance; they clearly go against the nature.

For the first time I begin to hope that I may not be excommunicated forever. I rejoined this church community much like I once joined my peers chanting: Tito- Stalin. I danced Serbian Kolo because I needed to hold hands and be accepted. Ever since my family was disempowered I tried to regain the feeling of being one with my group.

We travel home with Tom and Mari. It is obvious to everybody that Tom and I like each other. Tom makes me feel special; better than other women; better than his wife. I am proud that this handsome, successful pious man thinks so highly of me.

I am regularly posting the money for Joe's daughters. The posting is a constant reminder that Joe's other family is alive. I promise myself that one day I will return Joe to them. For the time being I have no proper reason to do so; Joe loves me, he is the father of my son; he is a good looking man; he works hard; he is faithful: he makes our family legitimate, respectable, popular, comfortable and protected; I try to convince myself that nobody needs to know that Joe has been married before.

What would these pious new friends think if they knew? Would they excommunicate us like our families and friends did back home? I do not dare tell Helena about my past. Joe and I have a chance to delete everything we were before we came to Australia. We decide that for the time being we will not say anything about Joe being married before. A good impression on our new church-going friends is important.

Joe and Tom became friendly combatants; each tries to put the other down by having a friendly little stab at his vulnerable spots. Tom often points out that Joe does not contribute to all the good causes Tom supports; Joe retaliates by saying that Tom would have no one if he did not buy his friends. Both accuse each other of trying too hard to be in control.

Mari and I smile benignly to cushion the blows as we switch sides to balance the equilibrium into a relaxed position; we try to turn men's sparring into a joke. We laugh to reduce the underlying tension. I feel like a ball thrown from one corner to another. As the men's game ends the ball is no longer of anybody's interest.

Tom is becoming bold; he is touching me at every opportunity. I am a trophy Joe possesses and Tom wants to take away. Joe is fighting to save our marriage and his face.

Mari is an innocent bystander. In the end she wins the only prize; her prize is respect and pity of the audience.

During one of our dinners Tom asks Joe if he was married before and Joe says: no. The instant denial forever seals our fate. One can never completely delete a part of his life because in secrecy that part will grow ominous and bitter; it will take over his life. I know how difficult it must have been for Joe to lie. I know that he lied to please me. I am afraid that he will hate me for it. I sense that the denial will be forever wedged between Tom and Joe. I know that Joe compromised his integrity to protect me. Both of us are ashamed of not being strong enough to say: we don't care about your opinion, Tom; we are proud of who we are. How can Joe ever overcome the denial of a major part of his life? Joe's past life is none of Tom's business. He did not deny his family because he was ashamed of it; he resented Tom putting him in a position where he had to either deny part of his life or explain what should be none of Tom's business. It was demeaning for Joe to say that he is not who he is. He could say: yes I was married before and have two daughters in Slovenia which I love and am proud of; or he could say: my past is none of your business, Tom. Joe chose to please me. There is no way back. I believe that Joe secretly began to hate Tom then.

We know that Tom knows the truth. I believe that Tom made inquiries about our past. He probably got information through the church or through the government. Who knows what else he found out? He really must be a spy. No wonder men hate him.

Neither Joe nor I ever mention the denial again; it remains suspended between us like forbidden fruit. Do not touch. It became one more unexamined thing that could resurface at any moment. There is nothing to be said. No words could improve the situation so we put it away for the time being. Secretly Joe and I begin to hate Tom because he forced us to live a lie. The episode put an end to a possibility for Joe and me to ever openly talk about Joe's ex-wife and children.

Nothing changed on the outside only friendliness became false. The smiles and the laughter acquired a strange new flavour. Our gatherings left an unpleasant taste like eating unripe fruit.

I know that our denial will grow heavier and more sinister with time. The guillotine of our own making is hanging above our heads. The children are not old enough to understand; they will never understand; it will be more complicated and difficult to explain and understand the longer they wait. I am convinced that Joe's first family is now always on Joe's mind. Like it is on mine. ALWAYS. The thorn in the foot festering. I deserve better. I ran away but they followed. They are hidden but they threaten to emerge at any moment.

I am used to lying but Joe is not. I started lying at the age of five when Milan made my parents powerless. Lies helped me survive. I live a pretend life in order to be adored by people and tolerated by Joe. I reason that Joe must have told lies in his business sometimes; everybody tells lies. Only this lie was different. It exposed his weakness.

I write letters to my school friends at home telling them about freedom and democracy we enjoy. My friends marched with me when we formed the word Tito during his birthday parade but they don't want to know me now. I betrayed our ideals.

What exactly is democracy? Rich people fool the poor into believing that they are equal, writes my friend Marta.

How can I describe something I only vaguely understand that the West holds as precious?

We are encouraged to say what we think. We choose our leaders. We have freedom. America and Australia are the most successful countries in the world. Everybody wants to come here, I argue.

Freedom kills. People need strong leadership. Without government control the whole society falls apart. Look at fat Americans gorging themselves while watching poor people starve. They are out of control, writes Marta.

I am not sure; I have never been convinced by anything for long. Would people get bored without rules and borders and fences? Would people become afraid of the sameness; of endless perfection? After winter's gloom everybody rejoices in fresh spring warmth. Politicians promise change. Maybe change is what people need although we constantly complain that nothing stays the same. Politicians boast about reforms they managed to get through; people elected them to change things. Maybe change is a necessary part of a cycle of life.

When the hem of a skirt reaches the ground, fashion turns in the opposite direction, said Joe as I dabbled with fashion. I wonder if too much of the good thing makes people lazy. Experimentation keeps societies on their toes. Politicians have to keep everybody busy coping with change. Boredom is dangerous. New dress brightens the day. New fashion is exciting. We need distractions. It's time for a change.

Liberty for the wolves means death for the sheep; Marta quotes the words of a politician who argued that government regulations and leadership are necessary for the survival of society. Everybody is searching for an acceptable level of control.

Is democracy an ideal system? Is it fair and just because people choose their leaders? Do they really choose the leaders or they vote for one group of self appointed leaders against the other. I read somewhere that you must not enthrone the ignorance just because there is so much of it. Maybe the leaders know better than the masses.

Joe is busy with a client in the club so he asks Tom to pick me from work late one evening. Tom drives into a quiet street and stops the car.

I am mad about you; he professes his love and gropes my knees. I am happy that Tom so urgently loves me; I let him kiss and embrace me but move away when his hand reaches between my legs. I tell him to stop. This is not how I want Tom to desire me.

I know you want it, he breathes heavily into my face. Nobody will ever know,

Tom climbs over me, he pushes into my clothing, and he squeezes my legs. I am cold and scared. I feel something wet on my knees. Suddenly he eases himself off me. Did he come to his senses and changed his mind. He starts the car and drives without saying a word.

Is this what people call love affair or lovemaking? Is this what infidelity is like? Did Tom realise that he risked losing his family and friendships for that one minute. Would a grown up man risk his family for a single moment like that? Did I drive him into insanity? Was I the trophy he took from Joe? I never felt desire for sex with Tom but I was flattered by the urgency of his desire. I felt power over Tom.

As we enter the club people stare at us. Is it written on our faces that we committed adultery? Tom's fly is still slightly undone. The knowledge travels from one to another without a word.

I detect a certain mean glee in the eyes of our friends. There is an excited curiosity; pain is suspected but not quite evident. There is attraction in scandal; the tragedy is to be unveiled to be experienced by the audience. Other people's tragedy feels like a blessing for onlookers. People can't wait to offer comfort, advice and opinion.

People try to get closer to an accident while they walk briskly past someone playing a violin. Causing pain was never my intention but in pursuit of my own happiness I often ignored the pain others felt because of me. The winner of the race never considers the pain he causes to those that trained with him but came after him. Causing others to lose never took away one's glory.

People hate Tom for winning but they also admire his success.

I never wilfully injured another although my actions caused much pain. I never felt good enough; I needed desire and admiration. I was made to feel unworthy from my early childhood. My family's unworthiness was transferred onto me. I began to hide my unworthiness behind the flirtatious smiles as I led men into sin.

I told Joe that he was a second hand man. He could not restore my worthiness. By losing his first family, he was tainted. I was accused of taking him away from his little girls; I knew that he loved his little girls and I had no way of cutting him away from his past. I need compensation. Joe

worked hard to compensate, he was devoted to me but that simply wasn't enough. I was jealous. Is jealousy a result of not feeling good enough? On arrival to Australia Joe bought me a dog to keep me company when he was away. As Joe returned from work he first patted that dog. I could not share his affection with a dog. I became insanely jealous of that dog.

Joe is cursing all the way home. I beg him to let me explain. Until now my immaculate virginity and subservient fidelity gave me permission to blame Joe for everything wrong in our family; he was soiled by one failed marriage; he brought disrepute into our life.

If only Joe would let me explain that I wasn't unfaithful; I haven't done anything; I did not let Tom do anything. Could I claim that Tom raped me? I did not feel raped, just dirty. I only enjoyed desires in my mind and heart. I only led Tom into temptation. Like Eve in the paradise, I will be condemned forever. Jezebel. Another sin on my plate.

I believe that Tom was more interested in punishing Joe than having sex with me. He will confess his sins and become cleansed. He buys Mari jewellery and gives her money to buy herself something nice.

Mary is loved by everybody. She is again confirmed as virtuous and victorious; she enjoys being the best dressed and adorned woman in our group. She remains as virginal as mother Mary; men never try to seduce this older childless woman so she is no treat to anybody.

I feel guilty, dirty and ashamed. I cannot even confess since unbeknown to our friends am technically excommunicated. I lost my attractiveness and Tom became indifferent. He proved himself and now he has to repair the damage.

Joe feels defeated; he has no weapons to retaliate with. He was betrayed for the second time. He could not admit defeat without losing face. He pretended to have an ideal marriage with a young obedient wife but I proved to be a fake.

I know that my whole family will be marked by the ominous cloud that descends on our home. Simon has no idea why Joe does not speak to him. Broken bits of my life are swept away. The stabbing pain comes and goes. The raw ugliness of it all makes me nauseous; I can't wash away my dirt.

I seduced Joe's best friend. I betrayed me best friend. My infidelity fuels gossipers with refreshing speculations; fresh wind blows in our small community.

The respect for Joe and for Tom's family stops people from openly lynching me but I know that everybody is talking about us.

I have to re-evaluate my situation. What can Joe really do? Kill himself? Everybody would blame me. Men blame women and women agree with them because men are women's children. Joe threatens to tell everybody about my past. But who could he tell that his devoted wife had an affair with his best friend? He needs the envy and admiration of those around him more than my worthless fidelity. He cannot admit that he is a loser. Joe's fragile new friendships in Australia are not strong enough for confidentialities like that; new loyalties haven't jelled yet. Joe has no one to confide in. He needs to pretend that he has a perfect family. Family is all one really has.



When I return from work I find Joe red eyed. I snuggle into his arms searching for spots that respond to my touch. He tells me that he knows that I never loved him. In these moments I almost do. I offer him my body.

Joe eventually forgives me but he never allows me to explain. He will not leave me but he will hold another ace up his sleeve to make me do anything he wants. He will never again let me leave his side; he simply can no longer trust me so he will watch me. There is always a chance that Joe will punish our son. Simon will mope like frost bitten tomato when Joe will excommunicate me for whatever transgression, real or imagined. He knows that I will beg like a dog for the bone, any bone he will want to throw my way. He will forgive me so he can keep me and torment me whenever he wants to. Joe loves me too much to let me go.

*I need a smoke.* Joe can't understand why I have to hide behind the shed puffing away whenever he raises his voice to correct me or Simon. Smoking reminds him of his violent father. This evil smelling deathly drug is like a red rag to the bull. He can smell tobacco a mile away. I smoke to rebel against him but smoking also makes me sufficiently guilty to return into his arms as a repentant, loving, obedient wife. I brush and brush my teeth and suck lollies but Joe always knows. My defiance makes him mad and he has to punish me. He stops eating and speaking. I tell him to go to his first perfect family. Joe slams the door and I follow to beg forgiveness. I keep on kissing and caressing him until he can no longer resist. The cycle of sin and forgiveness always ends with lovemaking. Joe makes me beg ever more frequently. He likes me begging for his love.

People tell Joe how good he is for letting me smoke. He likes that. She earns her money and can do as she likes, he boasts. I finally won the battle; if only I won something that wouldn't kill me in the end. I cannot sleep from coughing. The fear of rejection is greater than the fear of cancer. I was never brave enough to express my sadness or anger; I smoke instead hidden in some remote corner. Do all addicts self harm to take attention away from real pain?

Behind every cigarette is an unhappy person, I remember Cally's words.

Joe is especially provocative one night as we play cards at Tom's place. He is losing so he desperately tries to invent new rules and disputes.

I am not playing by your stupid rules, I say without thinking.

Other card players are stunned for a moment but then they almost burst out laughing at my sudden attack of stupidity. Men are happy that for the first time I dare defy Joe. Women rejoice witnessing the paradise turn into hell. Joe turns grey and becomes speechless for a moment. It is obvious to everyone that there will be a storm; I always play exactly as Joe wants me to.

It's getting late, is all Joe says as he takes car keys and goes towards the door. I follow; I always follow.

On the way home Joe's voice is like a blade. He will make me remember the day I embarrassed him in front of his friends. Everybody complained that Joe invented rules but I always supported him. Until now. I totally betrayed him; I made him look stupid. No other wife would do that to her husband. I sided with the enemy. I made them laugh at him.

Joe always knew when people tried to belittle him. Maybe everybody remembers moments when they are made to feel less. Being put down leaves an indelible mark. Insults intended or not, are written in the memory. Joe also knows exactly when someone needs to be put in his place.

I cannot exit a merry go round of sins and forgiveness. I cannot go away; there is no such place. All I can offer Joe is me body. My slightly abused body.

Nobody ever mentions the card incident. Only Joe and I know that friendships died. We distance ourselves from each other and from other Slovenians until months later just before the New Year Joe and I meet Tom in the mall with a pretty young woman. Tom awkwardly introduces Jana.

Jana's husband Frank works for me, explains Tom. Actually Jana does too. We were getting supplies.

I am looking at Jana. I know that adoring, dreamy look; that gentle expression of preciousness.

Tom seems nervous and keeps talking and explaining what items they were looking at. Jana smiles.

Let's have some coffee, Tom offers.

I wait until Joe sits down. The men talk business; they both try to repair something dead.

Jana tells me that she came from the village close to mine; the closeness of our villages makes us feel instantly close. The intimacy of being born in the same valley almost makes us sisters. We part with the promise to meet again soon. We know that we are in need of a friend. Jana had been in Australia less than a year and feels very alone and homesick.

Tom sleeps with all his friends' wives; I once overheard the man saying in the club. I wonder how Tom could do that to the men he calls friends. Does he feel guilty? Would he tell the priest in confession that he succumbed to the temptation of lustfulness? Does he repent and promise God never to do it again? Does Mari know? I never felt guilty about flirting with Tom. I did not let Tom have sex with me but I stole Tom's affections from Mari. Am I as guilty as Tom?

Jana knocks on my door a few months later. She begs me to let her stay for a few days. She has nobody else. Jana sobs as she tells me her story.

Tom is a very unhappy man; he wanted me to have his baby. Mari has been trying for years to get pregnant but Tom never saw a doctor about it. Mari told me how he keeps tormenting her about not having children. Tom said that we would be so happy if I was his wife. I left my husband and my son. We were going to get a divorce even before we arrived to Australia; we escaped to try and save the marriage for our son's sake. When I called Tom to tell him the good news, Tom reminded me that he promised God to stay with his wife until death will part them.

Is Tom punishing his friends for having what he can't have? Is he hoping to impregnate his friend's wife? Is he trying to seduce women to humiliate them and destroy their marriages?

Everybody is talking about Mimi; everybody is busy condemning the stupid bitch that left her own son and a good husband to have a fling with Tom. Nobody is blaming Tom.

There but for the grace of God, I remember the old saying. I feel lucky that Joe still loves me.

My heart leaps up when I behold the rainbow in the sky  
Wordsworth

## *Opal fields*

I became a registered nurse in Canberra hospital; I am finally where I feel comfortable. I produced some evidence of my studies and they put me on probation for a year before they granted me a registration. Simon started school and his teacher Helena became my first real friend in Australia. We are the same age, we studied in the same places and socialised in the same circles.

We are going to Lightning Ridge, Joe announces out of the blue. My plumber said that one can get rich overnight there. You just register a claim and start mining. Black opal is the most magnificent gem and it can only be found in Lightning Ridge. We will let our house and the rent will repay the loan.

Are we running towards a better future or away from past mistakes?

I do not argue because I suspect that Joe is running away from Tom and the people talking about us. We pack our personal belongings and bring them into a tin and hessian camp on the opal fields. The shack belongs to Joe's friend Ludvik, another Slovenian who made a fortune in the dust of the hot outback. Opal miners quickly simplified Ludvik's name into Less. Less is a known identity; whatever dirt he touches turns into opal, people say.

Joe promises that living in a place with no electricity or running water is just temporary until he builds a house in town. Camping in the bush is a welcome adventure for Simon and Joe finds the company of other miners a good source of local knowledge. They all gather around the fire in the evenings, barbeque meat, drink beer and tell yarns.

The promise to become rich overnight is shining in front of the miners during the hungry years of their search. They came from every corner of the world and speak little English but they soon become fluent in opal mining jargon of the field: gouging, fossicking, trace, shin-cracker, pocket, patch, noodling, carats, potch, rolling pattern, harlequin pattern, dry run, wet puddling, and dry rumbling.

As the only medical practitioner I instantly became a part of the community. Locals soon introduced me to Lightning Ridge history.

Just over a hundred years ago the first white settler pastoralists arrived in these vast outback tablelands where the only high ground is a ridge a couple of hundred meters above sea level. There are no rivers or springs so no human life existed until these new settlers dug dams and made rain water tanks. The surface is covered by reddish ironstone. The story goes that the ironstone attracts lightning and the lightning struck and killed the shepherd his sheep and the dog. The place got a name Lightning Ridge which became officially recognised as such in 1963.

There are different stories about who first saw the rainbow in the dust of Lightning Ridge.

Aborigines always had eyes to the ground foraging for food as they were, so they surely noticed pretty stones on the surface of Lightning Ridge ground, said Roy Barker. Some opals would have surfaced after the rain eroded the ground. They must have been delighted by the beautiful colours

but they never considered them as having commercial value. They were not food and they did not provide shelter.

Nobody is quite certain which white settler first spotted a flash of lightning in the stone. Maybe it was the first white shepherd in the middle of the nineteenth century wandering around the mound of raised dirt in the middle of the flat outback. Jack Murray was the first recorded to have taken a serious notice of the sighting and began to look for opal.

The first dam was sunk in 1885. The first parcel of opal was sold by Nettleton in 1903. Aborigines first started coming to the Ridge in 1930s after white settlers drilled for artesian water and made dams to water their animals.

What a short history.

Everybody in Lightning Ridge knows everything there is to know about opal; they mine it, polish and sell it for cash. Nobody needs to know how much they found, nobody knows that they are alive. Most live in camps without running water and electricity but the promise of instant riches keeps them happy. One may be broke today but the next day everybody may talk about his wealth and success. Wealth and success brings respectability and admiration.

I suppose we all need to be admired and respected. One can always count on respect envy brings, says Anton.

I meet people of many different backgrounds who brought talents and skills to energise this outback town. I soon learn that about seventy percent of miners never become rich; they just get used to their camp dwelling and hoping and creating. Another twenty percent make a fair living and they build houses in town. About ten percent become properly rich. A fair lottery, they laugh. The only tickets you need are muscles and perseverance.

Joe and I sometimes go to the pub after dinner. Joe would have one beer and I would have one smoke and we would go home. Sometimes Joe gets caught in a shout and then he has to wait for his turn to pay for the round. Often the group would get bigger and our home going time becomes delayed.

Drinking singing and storytelling is how miners spend their free time.

Most miners are migrants who did not assimilate and integrate into the regular Australian workforce. They wanted more; faster. In the zenith of their lives they want to shine, to attract attention and love.

Opal buyers come to our home to see what Joe found and they haggle, toss the coin and pull match sticks to determine the price of his opal.

Hungarian opal buyer Imre introduces himself to Joe.

Australia really is a melting pot of nations, says Imre. I ask him what was the hardest thing for him when he first came to Australia.

There were no girls, he says without hesitation. No girls, no dances, no singing, no romancing, no social life, no cultural activities. We lost the best years of our lives without the pleasure of female company. We lived in cultural vacuum.

I believed that it takes a real strength for a man to admit that he wasn't worthy or able to find a partner in the first years of his manhood.

But you have a beautiful wife, I say to Imre.

I was lucky to bring Eva from home, he explains. Most non English speaking boys came alone. Some of them accepted the rejects of other nationalities and races. It was better to have anybody than to live on their own though many got used to being on their own.

Maybe a lovely wife gave Imre the confidence to admit his initial vulnerability.

It gets easier when you learn English, I concede.

It gets easier especially for women, because there is a shortage of women, says Imre. I speak better English than most Australian yobboes here but I still have an accent and it really goes on my nerves when people ask me where do you come from and I say Sydney and they say no I mean where you really come from. You have an accent. Let me guess, they propose and they list the names of the nations they know nothing about. Oh I once met a Hungarian fellow on the bus, nice man, yes Hungarians are nice, and they are a bit like this and that, people begin weaving a story about people like you. They keep explaining to me what Hungarians are like because they once had an acquaintance that happened to be Hungarian. I once knew a man who once met a Hungarian man; this person feels obliged to tell me all about my nationality. I feel like saying shut up, you ignorant idiot. They hang on you their whole preconceived ideas of what a person of your nationality is like. Migrants hate being asked where you really come from. I am proud of being Hungarian but when they ask me where I came from they are telling me that I don't belong and that I am not an ordinary Australian. And never will be. People like to poke in migrants' private selves so they can adjust their prejudices. They never ask you where you came from because they admire your mind or your face or

your history; they just want to single you out to put you down so you would not pretend to be an ordinary Australian. Ordinary Australians come from England. Some boys even changed their names and became Johnsons and Smiths but as soon as they open their mouths they expose themselves as liars; they look foolish and weak camouflaged by a foreign name.

I remember that Joe was often annoyed when asked where he comes from. Slovenija he would say but they always ask: is that Yugoslavia?

Just as well our children have no accent, I smile.

People still ask them where does that name come from, where are your parents from? In some ways it is harder on our children because they never knew anything about any other country. All they are and know is Australian.

Sometimes changing a name seems sensible. Like in the case of my Polish friend Peter Jedrzejczak. He got sick of spelling his name again and again so he took the pronunciation of the last part of his surname and named himself Chuck Peters. Simple for everybody. Easier for his children. Then there is Eva Didenskov Nickiphorowitch; she is so proud of her name that she would not dream of shortening it. I remember this dignified lady who carries a piece of paper with her name to save her spelling it.

Australians consider European men domineering.

Migrant men often cover up their vulnerability with aggression and arrogance, admits Imre; they work harder because they need to build their base in Australia, they also need to establish their status. I often feel sorry for migrant women because their husbands feel that they have to dominate and control them. Men are simply scared to lose their women.

I never looked at it that way, I admit. I begin to understand Joe's need for control; it would mean a failure for him to lose respect and love of his family. He simply does not know how to deal with failure.

For us, the post war men, it was a shock to find ourselves in the situation where we could not find a suitable wife, continues Imre. We were made to feel undesirable in Australia. In Europe there was a shortage of men after the war. Millions of men were killed in the war and in communist countries more millions of men were killed after the war. Many soldiers returned from the war disabled and disillusioned. There was a great shortage of marriageable men so women felt lucky to find and marry

any man; they found it hard to feed the orphaned children and old people on their own. Men were appreciated. Europe was starving after the war; actually the world was starving, says Imre.

I read that in the past Muslim men were compelled to marry two or more women because there was a shortage of men when many men were killed during the wars. Women had to be taken care of, I remember.

We have the opposite in Australia. There are about ten non English speaking migrant men to one migrant woman. Good Australian girls would not be seen with a boy who cannot speak English unless that boy becomes rich. That gives migrants an incentive to get rich quick, says Imre. Most non English speaking migrants suffered some condescension at least at the beginning; they were 'New Australians'; outsiders to the land, people, politics and culture. They needed to grow roots fast.

A few migrant boys live with Aboriginal girls in the camps scattered over the fields. I meet the first Aboriginal couple June and Roy. June tells me that both her grandfathers came from Scotland on the same boat. They were pastoralists who had children with Aboriginal women.

My Scottish ancestors were never a part of our lives, says June. They didn't want to know about me and I don't worry about them. They made Aboriginal girls drunk to have sex with them but they did not want to know them in the daylight. Aborigines accepted all of us half castes and they still do.

Everything changed though when non English speaking Europeans came, says June. Europeans took Aboriginal women for their wives and made families with them. They improved the life for Aborigines. We like Balts, says June. I realised that for many Australians Baltic sounds the same as Balkan. European geography is as far away for them as Australian used to be for me.

Miners meet in the pub and tell stories about the opal they found and about the plans they have for the future. Some dream of going home to bring with them the virgin girl that is waiting for them in their village. They only need one good load, just one patch of red on black.

On Sunday I take our boys to church. The silence of the church always brought me closer to the core of myself which I call my soul. Believers are lucky people because their beliefs make them feel secure and at peace. Belief opens your soul to the divine; faith offers possibilities of the everlasting which all humanity craves. I really hope there is god in charge and that he will in the end make everything right.

There are about twenty farmers and shop keepers but no opal miners in a small wooden church. Cut off from their familiar grounds, miners got used to living in sin. Hotel is their place of worship. In the

hotel one could find the bishop, the policeman, the doctor, the teacher, the drover, the artists and poets, the academics and the illiterates talking about opal and mining.

I figure that the secret of Lightning Ridge harmony lied in the fact that nobody is quite certain which nationality, race, culture or religion is dominant, or who holds the majority, or power or popularity. The only colour miners are interested in is the colour of opal; the only race they are interested in is the race to find the illusive rainbow colour on black silica. Everybody has an equal chance to get rich. Everybody especially has an equal chance to become equal.

Most Europeans arrived to Lightning Ridge in the sixties and seventies. They came to be free to do what they like when they like, without the boss making them feel less because their English was not good. With hard work and a bit of luck they hope to become who they intended to be. When a new field is discovered the message spread and opal fever rises. People from any remote corner of the world may know about the new rich area before the miner's neighbour.

Miners are ingenious inventors of machinery, dwellings and community. They are mixing bits of themselves with bits of others; they mix bits they brought from their country with bits that were here before.

Olga, a Polish lady of Jewish descent visits her friend Slavka who is a Slovenian Catholic. Olga brings a Serbian paper for Slavka to translate her horoscope into English because Olga wants to know what her former German boyfriend is doing with his new Filipino wife. Neither Olga nor Slavka speak much English but they find a way to share this vital information.

Greed will win hands down every time, I hear a wise old Bill explaining to new miners around the camp fire. In mining you can't trust your friend or your brother. When two men are after the same thing both will want a bigger piece. Maybe kill for it.

Most migrants carry a hope to recreate in Australia a country much like a homeland they blossomed in.

I brought a model of a mosque with me to remind me why I am here, says Sheref. Allah keeps me young and strong. I have never been sick. People often ask me what is the secret of my fine health and I tell them: believe, believe, and believe. Believe in justice and righteousness. Follow Allah. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself if what you are doing is right. My job is to do service to Allah.



I pray to Allah regularly and ask for his help to be righteous. Being rich means having a peace of mind, health, and the belief in God. Australians don't believe any more. In the olden days Christians closed their shops and hotels for Christmas and Easter and worshiped God in their churches. Now the trade is best on feast days and the trade became more important than worship. They spend the feast days in the clubs and hotels. I came to Lightning Ridge to bring Allah here. I have a model of a mosque on my table and I pray to the merciful Allah to change Lightning Ridge into the second Mecca. I believe that in not too distant future there will be a real mosque in Lightning Ridge. We Turks value loyalty, family, honesty, and cleverness.

Others brought national robes and grape cuttings and seeds and recipes and memories of rituals and celebrations that make life meaningful.

Home is where the heart is, says Amigo.

Time passes quickly amid the excitement of opal mining. Every day brings new adventure. I listen to stories of everyday people and events. Most of my friends found a hobby; an artistic expression of some kind. Some built castles in the sky as they share their lives and the news of new opal rushes.

We are such staff as dreams are made on.

Shakespeare

## *Reunion*

In 1996 the principal of the local school asks me to conduct the hearing tests of the students. Up to seventy percent of Aboriginal children have perforated eardrums. The hearing loss and nasal discharge, Otitis Media, more commonly known as glue ear, are much more common to Aboriginal children and children from non-English background, says the principal. It is causing children not to hear their teachers so they don't pay attention and misbehave instead. There are negative psychological, educational and social consequences of hearing loss due to Otitis Media. Constant ear discharge and nose secretions also make these children subjects of ridicule.

There is going to be a seminar in London next month looking at health problems experienced by native children from different continents. Would you be able to attend that seminar for a week and then in-service the teachers? Department of Education is covering all expenses, says the principal.

I could extend the trip for a couple of days to visit friends, I say.

I see no problem, says the principal.

I am free for the first time in my life. In Ljubljana I call James. It is now or never, I reason. James suggests that we meet. I allocate half an hour for the meeting I daydreamed about for decades. I want to see if James exists.

James is holding a yellow rose as he waits in the hotel lobby. We stare at each other in wonderment. The silence reaches into every part of who we were and are. We have nothing to say. Where we have been, what we have done has nothing to do with what we remember. We don't need to know who we became. How can one introduce years of events into the intimacy of remembering a moment in time when we were quite different people? How many moments does one live on the average? Does everybody carry that one special moment tucked at the bottom of their being?

Decades in between were just endless repetitions of cooking, washing, weeding, sleeping, working and rebelling. I could put it all in one sentence. Joe and I brought up a family, we built a home and we bought a car; we have nice clothes and eat whatever we desire, we travel when and where we want to.

Would James and I ever be able to have an ordinary life like that? Ordinary has never been a part of our togetherness. James and I were reaching for the stars. Maybe stars should remain where they are. Maybe everything is as it should be. What would I do with a star in my lap? Maybe I should not even look to the stars. Wanting to be a star. The biggest and shiniest. I always wanted to be somewhere else; with somebody else doing something else. More, more, more applause, another continent, another dollar. Another mountain to climb looking for the prince.

A princess or at least a saint. Great expectations lead to great disappointments. What happens to the wish when it is fulfilled? How can one live without a dream?

Is this your first holiday, asks James to drawn the silence. There is an ocean separating us as we shake hands.

Yes, I answer from the edge of eternity. I do not tell that this is my first holiday away from Joe.

It is thirty-eight years since you left; James calculates the distance of time as we sit at the little hotel room table. We both smoke. Weak people smoke.

I wonder if James knew at all times exactly how many years passed since we parted.

Australia is far and you know....., I try to explain. I have no idea how to condense those years and the distance in a proper sentence.

Still it is thirty-eight years; James repeats the accusation with the numbers clearly shining in his eyes. Restless eyes; frightened hands move to give words meaning. His and mine. What can one do with hands? We are again two frightened children caught in hope. We need a place to rest our eyes after the surprise. It should not be a surprise really; we decided to meet. We had twenty-four hours to rehearse this dialog. There is too much light; the years and the distance shine in the space between us. Was thirty eight years only an introduction for this meeting? Were all the imagined meetings only a practice run? Were the events of the last thirty eight years a rehearsal for this one event, the only event with the meaning? What meaning?

We steal a look at the container of smuggled hope each brought along. The hope is fragile and may crumble after the years of hiding in dark, damp places. It might turn to ashes like the cigarettes we puff on. There were decades and life and the world. I want to protect this last vestige of our togetherness so it does not turn to dust from exposure.

You didn't change; I try to catch myself into reality.

Neither did you, James sighs gratefully like I'd opened a door for him. It is obvious that we do not see what is in front of us. We look at people we were.

Are you happy? I boldly turn our meeting into the jungle where nobody ever walked.

I live, James propels me back on the main road. Wide and empty.

The main thing is that you are happy; I build the road into a tropical forest.

I am married for the second time, James dives head first.

Married and already second wife. There is no time for me to think whether this is good or bad. Do we have the right to talk about other people? Something seems good but it is wrapped tightly. We both experience the tightness. Just as well we only have half an hour. Whatever will be will be. Thirty eight years of preparation does not help. How many dialogues did we prepare for this meeting? How often did we rehearse?

Are you healthy? I asks because she become overwhelmed by sudden weakness. My hotel room feels like a church. The touch of his lips from thirty-eight years ago is an eternity away. The

universe of waiting is rising and falling between us like an overexcited ocean. We flutter with our hands like fish out of sea.

Yes, thank you. And you, he offers me the leading role. He always let me lead, I remember. He just opened the doors.

I am fine. What are you doing these days, I blurt like an acquaintance in a grocery shop. I blush into my hands full of this dry question.

This and that, from day to day, offers James. He is just as inspired as I. His eyes are searching for a proper answer. Obviously he also forgot the script we prepared for thirty eight years. I become afraid that we will run out of grocery shop talk and touch something real. We search for safe, neutral and painless.

Why did you leave? James smiles like my leaving was the joke we shared.

I look at my watch. Another ten minutes. I smile within.

That is so long ago, I say. He must know that I slept with the memory of my leaving for thirty eight years.

There were circumstances, I continue my monologue. There was life; I cannot describe decades of life in ten minutes. Was that really life? Waiting time? Is all time waiting time?

It is unbelievable how life... James stops suddenly. I realises that he does not know either what happened to us.

Life goes its own way; I blame life because it is bigger than the two of them.

I have a twelve years old daughter with my second wife. I love her. James wraps himself in love. I don't dare ask if he loves his wife or his daughter. Or both? He smuggled his wife between us; a wife in full bloom of motherhood. Is he afraid that I would enter his life and hide under his blanket? He forgot that we only have half an hour. I am afraid that he is afraid of our meeting. I want to reassure him that I will soon leave and let him continue his safe life. I will let his young wife and loving daughter move into their rightful place. I want to tell him that I am glad that he is happy and that he loves his daughter. I want to say that I love him and want our meeting to last forever.

I am glad; I condense my speech of approval.

How long are you staying?

Going home tomorrow.

I feel that he wants to check his watch. Maybe he saw me checking mine. I get up and offer my hand.

It was good meeting you after so many years. I am really glad, that you are alive and healthy and happy. Our hands do not touch as we move to the door where a final goodbye has to happen. I remember that old acquaintances sometimes hug or kiss the air around the ear somewhere.

Sometimes the breath of a kiss touches the skin and people kiss the other side to neutralise the air and establish a proper balance. Only James and I are not old acquaintances.

Our lips meet by surprise. The time stops, the earth ends, everything outside our universe is silent; everything is as it was meant to be. The thoughts fly away like migrating birds. We are enveloped in soft silky surrender. We are in heaven.

Good bye, I whisper because I still believe that we are in church. Words like rosaries fill the presence of divine.

Will we meet again, he asks not expecting an answer. This is tradition.

Maybe, I opens the door into the unknown as we stand near the lift. We know that there is much still to be said.

Did you ever think about me, he asks bewildered.

Always, I whisper before the reasoning returns. The words plunged out like fish into the water grateful that they could breathe again. WE echoed in the depth of the river, sticking to the bottom of thirty-eight years waiting. There we joined the moment when we parted because circumstances and life and regime... Because Joe told us to stop this nonsense. Because James' mother did not want a traitor in the family.

In the lift we touch hands for a fleeting moment; we do not seek the road to the future; we do not search into the past; we just hold the moment like holy bread in front of the altar. We know that we will be returning into this moment when life and circumstances will return. There is no sadness and no excitement; we are neither young nor old; this is the harbour to escape to when life and circumstances will be painful. We will be returning into this moment to find the dreams only eighteen years old can dream. We will escape from Joe and from James' wife and daughter and my people and life and time. We will always be good enough together.

I hope that you will always be happy; I offer him a bridge into real life. I am not sure if I really said the words or maybe they are written on my face.

You too, he says appropriately before we step on the bridge. For a moment we admire the surface of the ocean spreading wider and deeper between us; the light is sparkling playfully on top of the water. We dedicate our eternal, unchanging love to the deep.

Nothing changed, he sighs. His words do not need an answer so I keep looking at the eternity hidden under the restless surface.

Nothing changed, his words slip from my lips unintentionally. I want to say that our meeting confirms us but I do not know what that means.

We will never part, he says reading my thoughts. We smile benignly.

We will always be, I agree.

Is life just a parade of meetings and partings? We touched the beginning and the end; only for a moment we forgot the life in between.

Will you write to me, he whispers like he is afraid of the question?

We exchange addresses.

He does not ask if I am happy, married or successful. I do not tell him that I have people in my life. In some corner of life we will remain forever alone together.

Life goes its way, his words echo. Nothing changed; just the river of years passed by. At the bottom of the river we are the same part of eternity. We are happy that we are; we still are.

I stand looking at the door through which James left my life.

I intended to visit my sister before flying back to London but there is *a knock and I open the door to a stranger.*

Remember me? Your sister told me where to find you. I came as soon as I heard that you arrived, says an elegant middle aged woman bursting into an elaborate embrace. I have been searching for you for the last 38 years. We sat next to each other at school, remember?

Did you? Were we? I panic. Who are you? You must be mistaken. What's your name? How can I activate my memory? Is memory like a slow burning fire that needs to be fed regularly to glow into the night? Does a memory need to be re-remembered daily to stay alive. Does a memory re-remembered keep burning underneath the ashes of all other dead memories?

I am Nada, the woman embraces me. We sat together in the second row near the window, remember, you must remember me.

I have only been there for a few months. I try to find an excuse for forgetting Nada's face. And her name. And her existence.

We were best friends. I have pictures of us. We went everywhere together. Remember? Nada shows an enlarged photo of us smiling and eighteen years old. I am scared of my lost memory.

I think so; I lie in the face of so much evidence. I want to be kind to Nada's memory so I am searching for one single moment of our being best friends during those few months decades ago.

I never forgot you, Nada repeats her testimony. She tries to force my mind to remember our friendship.

How can I tell Nada that the only person I remember is James? Being with James. I never noticed anybody else. Being James' girl was the only thing that happened to me there. Us being a couple for a couple of weeks. We kissed for the first time in the middle of December and by January I was gone. I cannot tell Nada that I spent my life in love with that memory. All my senses blossomed into life then; I felt in charge of my destiny; I was the chosen one. I was who I was born to be. I loved everybody then and everybody loved me. It was the only time when I believed myself to be a good, beautiful person. Maybe Nada also remembers this lovable me who was transformed by loving and being loved by James.

I accept that James was and is only a dream but as a dream he was and is more essential to my happiness than anything happening despite of me. We created a magic land where we live forever. We were and are in need of protection; neither of us was ever strong enough to resist the forces

outside us. Everything about James seemed fragile. James jumped under the train and tried to kill himself when I left, yet I wasn't sure if he would survive the life with me. We were just two children lost in the splendour of the spring that never arrived. I can almost touch the cherry blossoms he promised me when spring will come. I wonder if our love was just a welcome illusion for both of us; maybe we needed an illusion to take into the ordinary life. We discovered love and needed to believe in everlasting eternal exhilarating feeling of being in love. We were not ready for everyday repetition of living together. We took the exuberance and elation and played with it on our way of discovering other ways of loving.

Do you ever think about those days, Nada brings me back into the present.

I was very happy then. What do you remember about me, I turn to this best friend.

Everything, this pleasant lady puts her arm around my shoulders. Some people you never forget.

Let's have a cup of coffee so you can tell me all about it, I offer.

Let's go to Minion cafe where we used to go for ice-cream long time ago, Nada tries to bring back the familiarity.

We sit near the window of the cafe looking at the busy street.

You must have been homesick, says Nada.

I missed everybody, I say.

Everybody talks about homesickness; everybody went home for holidays after communism collapsed only Joe and I refused to revisit our past. I often daydreamed about finding that spot where I took the wrong turn. I wanted to see if there is a second chance. Are all living things longing to return to the place they were born into? Migrating birds do and so does the fish. Is life simply a circle that has to be joined at the end? Dust to dust. Same dust for eternity returning home. Is homesickness an instinct urging me to be with those that like myself were born on that same patch of soil? Attached to the same time and remembering the same irrelevant events and scenes? What about people who were born travelling.

Seems like yesterday, sighs Nada. I wonder if Nada admired my clothes and jewellery during those few months when I was sitting next to her. Nada does not know that those things were Joe's gifts. Nada only knew Emma that was loved and that loved everybody. How quickly the mind dismisses the chain of meaningless events; the endless repetition of dusting, weeding, cooking, washing, performing, responding to anger and sex and shame and fear. Dreaming of going home was only an escape from that reality. Even my dreams became exhausted from repetition.

If you had another chance, Nada looks into my eyes. Would you stay here?

Who knows; I dreamt of coming back though, I confess.

I was like a bird living in a cage dreaming of freedom and flying and mating but when the cage opened I became afraid of flying out. I knew from the very beginning that I needed the love, protection, safety and security Joe offered. I knew that James wasn't brave enough to fight for our survival.

Remember how we went to that fortune teller? She looked into my cup and said that I will have two children and one of them will be famous. That's my daughter. An artist, Nada tells. Let me have a look at your cup. Nada folds a napkin and turns my empty coffee cup over it. In some corner of our being it seems like we never lived apart. Two complete strangers and best friends.

You still believe in coffee cups?

Just for fun. One cannot live only by things one believes in; Nada tries to make a joke. One has to have a dream.

Even a dream in a coffee cup is better than nothing, I agree. What do you see?

Much is happening in your life, says Nada enthusiastically with her eyes on the coffee stains; she is turning the cup around towards the light; her eyes narrow and I see the lines on Nada's face that tell the story of Nada's life.

There is a treasure of some sort. Money or maybe a gift of jewellery. I also see a man waiting for you, thinking of you. He is always thinking of you. He is saying goodbye.

That's the story of my life, I smile.

There is a funeral and lots of flowers.

We often meet at funerals these days, I confirm the truth of Nada's telling. Is Nada seeing her own dreams in my coffee cup? Is she trying to be kind by giving my cup her own dreams? Do all people dream of a secret lover waiting for them somewhere in a time capsule made for them alone? Do all people dream of a treasure? Of an exquisite gift from a lover. What else is there, really? Love and admiration. And power. Spending an imaginary million with people so they will adore you; have a perfect lover; see the enemy defeated. Dead. Tears at the funeral. There are always people that should be dead. With the competitors dead one might not even need the money. One may not need to try and work so hard.

I see destiny changing your life. Do you believe in fate, asks Nada.

Doesn't everybody, I laugh. You have to believe in something. People are constantly searching for a sign of a higher power intervening on their behalf. Is fate more rational than Faith?

Anyway, Nada turns my cup upside down; you will meet someone from your past. This person will make you very happy but I also see an angry man; Nada travels on the edges of my Turkish coffee stains. You will hear some news, adds Nada, some you will like and some you will hate.

That's for sure, I smile.

It was a difficult time when you left. Nada puts the cup down to find the reason for my escape. They would have us believe that now we have independence and democracy, she sighs.

Revolution is an ongoing thing; I absolve Nada of the responsibility for the regime. Those at the bottom never cease to push up. There is a perpetual dance going in going out; everybody is dancing in the same circle.



I received a political asylum after Joe and I escaped. What did I know about politics then? What do I know now? What does anyone know? Is politics what you live? Are people happier now? Were people ever happy? Does happiness have anything to do with the regime? Or with possessions?

Most people actually felt safe in communism, says Nada. Everybody had his place and everybody had a job. There was no crime. Now everybody looks out for himself. Cheating and stealing and pushing ahead.

Maybe communist idealists really envisioned the ideal world; they did not consider the world as it is; they were not workers or producers; they were administrators who believed that they were leading the oppressed into justice and fairness. They forgot that people are neither fair nor just by nature, I say quietly.

People became greedy, agrees Nada.

People were always greedy; they are forever stretching the boundaries; they are afraid that the boundaries will brake and they will descend into the abyss but they are still pushing; they want that flower growing on the edge of the abyss.

I am aware that my words reflect Joe's words.

Our new leader was a communist but he betrayed his own teaching. He goes with the wind. He only looks out for himself and those that hold him up.

Shakespeare was right when he said: There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so. I don't know why I quote the poet.

He has the church behind him, says Nada.

No system is perfect, I say. Slovenians are old nation but a very young country. They are still learning.

The church has too much power, says Nada; she is angry because the church is backing capitalists. Neither of us can understand how the church suddenly became relevant again.

Perhaps the church offers hope. That is all one can really offer, I say.

You should have seen how sad everybody was when Tito died. People congregated on the streets and cried together. Children in schools cried, sighs Nada.

Of course they cried; they were made to believe in Tito; people cry when someone they believed in dies. We all believed for awhile; they told us who to believe in and what to think and when to cry. People get used to being told. Faced with new problems they even become nostalgic for problems they learned to cope with. Once a friend who had a violent husband said: I know how to handle him. She also cried when he died.

We live in selfish materialistic society now, says Nada. Equality, unity, one for all, all for one; they forgot all that overnight. Me, me, me, give me. Selfishness. People are scared. They feel insecure and unprotected. We used to really care for each other and for the common good. All that means nothing now.

We think more and believe less; we are no longer idealists; we became realists but the young ones are still believing that they will create a perfect world.

Everybody talks about productivity and GDP; they are only concerned about profits and growth. We were happier when we were concerned about each other.

We were happier because we were young.

In communism everybody had a chance to go to school; everybody had medical care and everybody had a secure job. *Every body is treading on the weak and poor now, says Nada.*

The poor will be with us always, I quote from the Bible.

We never heard of bribery and corruption before, says Nada.

Nobody was allowed to talk or print about those who were corrupt. Things became more transparent now; everybody is allowed to criticise. People are glimpsing the darker side of the society but that same society was always there.

There is nothing wrong with the idea of communism, says Nada.

It is a beautiful idea. People always fought for equality; some did it for political others for religious reasons but to this day it remains a dream. Jesus promoted this idea. Utopia has been tried and it failed many times in the history.

Most of us accepted equality, says Nada.

Communists promised to lead masses of obedient followers; they were counting on people like me. I am a born follower while Joe is a natural leader. He would never be subordinate to any system. Even the communist intellectuals escaped the totalitarian system they created because they wanted to be free to express themselves. People always tried to create a better world. And a little better for themselves.

We were certain that nothing will ever change, says Nada.

You can bank on change.

We believed in brotherhood of Yugoslav nations, in equality and in freedom. I cannot see anything wrong with that, persists Nada.

I was there; we believed, I agree. We also believed that all those who did not believe, were traitors.

Now everything changed and people feel shattered, says Nada.

They feel cheated because the rules they lived by became redundant. Reminds me of this fellow who lived next to the railway station. One night he woke up at three o'clock and could not go back to sleep. He knew that something was wrong but couldn't figure out what woke him up. The next day he found out that the three o'clock train stopped running. He got so used to its noise that he could not sleep without it.

They say that in democracy everybody has an equal voice, Nada dismisses my silly story. Who are they kidding? Little people sell their little voices for little money to magnify the voices of the money people. It's the same jungle dressed in different greenery. People are left to look after themselves, says Nada.

Maybe every living thing is meant to look after itself.

Capitalism poisoned people's hearts, insists Nada.

Who poisoned Tito's heart? He never had enough palaces.

But those palaces were not his own property; when he died they remained public property.

Nobody can take their wealth with them but children of the communists bought it now for almost nothing.

They are the only ones with money; they became capitalists, admits Nada.

The cream always ends on top. Nothing really changed since Adam and Eve. Greed is a condition no wealth can cure, said my friend. Communists are not different from other mere mortals. Chinese have a saying: white cat-black cat, they all eat mice. There is a story about Napoleon. He apparently requested that the palms of his hands be opened in the coffin so people will see that he took nothing with him.

China kept communism; look how prosperous they became, Nada grasps this new idea.

Millions died for this prosperity. One child per family made a difference but they are paying the price; thousands of Chinese boys will not be able to find a wife because many families choose to keep the boy and abort the girl.

They changed China, sighs Nada.

I recently heard a Chinese freedom fighter in a political re-education detention asking his fellow prisoner:

Do you know the difference between an ordinary prison and the communist political re-education detention?

Is there a difference? Asked his friend.

Yes, said the man. In an ordinary prison you know what your crime is and how long your prison sentence is. From political re-education detention you come out only when you are changed or dead.

That soldier came out dead.

They promise that things will improve, says Nada resigned to my negativity.

Progress is the exchange of one nuisance for another nuisance, I remember reading somewhere.

I wish things remained as they were, says Nada.

Leaders win the hearts and minds of those they rule with the promises of change. Slovenians are just people, rich people and those that want to be rich. The poor still believe in the common good but the rich never did. Life is a race; nobody wins every race; some never win, some run out of breath; some run out of breath to win once; some keep on running forever for that one taste of victory. No one ever wins enough; everybody is waiting for one more chance to push that winning button; to open the door to heaven; one more hope; one more drop in the ocean; one more hurdle jumped over; coming ever closer to that green light of the green valley of scented lily white peace to rest forever.

That is a capitalist way of thinking, says Nada. I can see that she does not relate to my senseless blabbering.

The leaders make people believe in good ideas to justify the killing of those that oppose them.

I still do not understand why people hate communism, says Nada.

Maybe communists killed too many so that they could stay in power.

People kill in the war, says Nada dismissing the death of those that were murdered in order for communism to succeed.

They killed after the war.

The waitress takes our cups indicating that our time is up.

Will you ever return for good, says Nada a bit tired of my silliness. She realises that we are no longer idealistic eighteen years old believers.

I wish it was more simple. Aborigines in Australia say that kinship ties are most important to them; kinship to the land and people. They say that the land owns them. They revere and love their old people and their extended families. Maybe everybody is connected to the patch of land they were born on. I am sorry that migrants' children grew up without extended family but they grew fragile roots into Australian soil and I would not dare disturb these roots; you can only transplant a specie so many times before they become too weak to survive.

We carry memories wherever we go, Nada becomes thoughtful.

Home is where your heart is, I agree. I realise that I am homesick for Australia. There are people waiting for me. Joe and Simon and our grandchildren will be happy to see me.

Life levels all men:

Death reveals the eminent.

Shaw

## *Stane's funeral*

Helena rings to tell us that Stane died. We travel to Canberra on a cold day in August 2009. We stand outside watching the mourners fill the church. Tom and Mari whisper respectful hello as they join us. They became an ordinary old couple. Friends nod and smile and shake hands and embrace. How nice to see everybody again, we all agree. Old affections and animosities have long become irrelevant. It is like coming home. I never before noticed how we all aged

It's going to be huge, says Helena.

They are coming from as far as Sydney and Perth and Brisbane, says Tom.

Fashionably dressed women and men in white shirts and dark suits; the flowers and wreaths are mounting up. Stane's wife, Ana, and his daughter, Natasha in their black designer outfits are dabbing at their eyes. Stane's son, John walks behind his mother and sister. I notice that John has no collar or tie, just black skivvy and a heavy gold chain. He also has an earring and a beard like a rabbit tail.

Soft solemn music from the church mingles in the warm breeze as we read the pamphlets made about Stane's life..

Stane was a simple peasant boy when he came to Australia almost fifty years ago as a teenager with a cardboard suitcase of old clothes. He got a job with a butcher from Poland. Stane killed a pig and made sausages and hams like he saw his father make at home. His kranskies became instantly famous among Slovenians. Soon Stane opened his own butchery and a little delicatessen on the side of it. Slovenians came from far and wide and asked for parcels to be sent to friends in other cities. Stane's shop became a meeting place for Slovenians. That's where the idea of a Slovenian club was born. When Slovenian clubs opened Stane became their supplier. The rest is history.

It has been thirty years since Stane made his last sausage but kranskies found a place in every delicatessen and many restaurants and clubs in Australia. Stane became an entrepreneur. His smallgoods business employed over one hundred people. The business seemingly ran itself.

In 1970 Stane organised imports of Slovenian smallgoods for his delicatessens. By 1980 he was selling small goods from all European countries. When Asians started to migrate to Australia in the eighties Stane began importing Asian goods. His employees told him what the market wanted and he found it.

You only have to listen to what customers want, said Stane. He carefully chose his employees and paid them well. The difference between ordinary wage and good pay is small compared to the extra work and care I get from the employees, he said. A happy employee wants to make the employer happy. If you give the employee a hundred percent, he is likely to give you a hundred percent. You get what you pay for, said Stane.

Mourners read from the prayer booklets prepared by the family:

This is what Lord asks of you, only this: To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.

Eulogies are made to turn sinners into saints. They will canonise him before he is buried, says Helena as we watch people line up to farewell Stane.

Stane used to speak at funerals. Now his friends are going to say what needs to be said.

Words from the Bible remind us how short and fragile life is.

It is nice that at the end of the road someone remembers who we were, says Helena. We become aware of aging; our own and of our friends. The best part of our lives is spent.

The ancient prayers echo over the graves: I am the way, the truth, and the life. Whoever believes in me...

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.

The first will be last; and the last shall be first.

That's what it is all about. The kingdom of heaven is promised to those that missed out on Earth, Helena whispers to me.

Stane died at the age of sixty-nine. He watched television when his heart failed.

Rejoice with them that do rejoice and weep with them that weep.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, and neither do they spin.

In our minds we return to the splendour of our youth.

Janez was one of Stane's earliest and longest serving employees. He is the closest thing Stane had as a friend so he is first in line to speak at the gravesite.

Forty years ago Stane asked me to help build the Slovenian club, says Janez. My wife and I were annoyed. We haven't built our own home yet and I haven't learned to speak English yet and my children were learning to walk and talk.

We must have a place to meet and celebrate, Stane urged us. We have no time to meet and we have nothing to celebrate, I argued. Our children will grow roots in Australia but it's up to us to teach them how to be Slovenian, said Stane. We need a place where they can learn to speak Slovenian without being ridiculed.

Our children are going to be Australians, argued my wife.

I am working six days a week, I protested.

On the seventh day you can bring your family along and we will build our Slovenian home in Australia. Our children will be history makers, begged Stane.

We all came to the piece of land that was to be a Slovenian club. Women planted flowers and served refreshments; men levelled the ground, laid the bricks and cut the wood. Something changed in all of us as we worked into the late Sunday evening. We realised how much we needed our togetherness. We became a family, concluded Janez.

It seemed easy for Janez to express gratitude, admiration, and appreciation. Stane in his coffin isn't a threat to men any more. He made room for others to be what he was.

Stane was a successful, respected man, Helena begins her eulogy. We wanted him to be more like us but we knew that he had to stand above us in order to look after us. Stane was a solitary tree that gave shade to smaller trees but did not need the protection of other trees. When Slovenian club neared completion Stane came to see me. He knew that I was a teacher in Slovenia. He asked me to prepare a cultural program for the opening.

I have no books or music or costumes, I protested.

You are the best we have so use everything you have. If you need more, tell me and I will find it, said Stane.

Nobody will want to perform on the stage, I tried to get out of it.

Convince them that they are good and that their children need them. They sing and read and speak and some play instruments. Find them and teach them.

We celebrated the opening. Slovenians from other cities came to celebrate with us and they also decided to build their own clubs.

Little did I know that I will spend the next forty years preparing programs for Mothers' days, Fathers' days, Santa Claus and yearly concerts. I had to be prepared for an endless string of celebrations so I organised a Saturday school for Slovenian children and gave them whatever knowledge I had. Nobody ever mentioned a payment for it. Money would never give me as much satisfaction as the knowledge that I contributed a little to a new generation of Australian Slovenians.

In the seventies Ethnic Radio began to broadcast programs for all ethnic groups in their own language, continues Helena. Stane said that I have a pleasant voice so would I read Slovenian programs for half an hour a week. Little did I know that I was to become a permanent broadcaster and scriptwriter for the rest of my life. I had many sleepless nights compiling news and thinking of interesting little bits I could share with the rest of Slovenian community, Helena concludes her farewell.

I was twenty-two when Stane persuaded me to cook for the opening of the Slovenian club, begins Mojca. I told him that I was a boarding school girl who never cooked before we came to Australia. He taught me how to make sourcroust and how to boil kranskies. I couldn't get out of it. He always

got what he wanted. Since then I cooked for many festivities but I never felt as proud as I did on the night Slovenian club opened.

One day Stane came with the typewriter under his arm, begins Marjan. He heard that I worked at the library. He asked me to type a letter for the fifty Slovenian families. He had the envelopes and the addresses. This letter was the first news bulletin Slovenians in Australia had. I became a publisher and the journalist and the typist since then.

Stane was a grumpy, manipulative, pushy old politician, says Marjan after a pause. I came to the club to argue with him but he always showed me the other side of the coin. Stane said that Australians not born in Australia needed recognition, which only the people from the same country can offer. He promoted multi-culture while the government policy was still assimilation. Our children assimilated but, thanks to Stane, they also know where their parents came from.

I often wonder how did Stane, a twenty something years old peasant boy, away from home, know that our children would need the support of the nation before they began weaving a new identity for themselves, concludes Marjan.

Stane told me that he never ate strudel as good as mine, says Rozi. Her bony, tall body is erect and her features are motionless. I baked more strudels for the club than any family could eat in a lifetime.

Stane asked me to invite my brother's singing group from Slovenia to perform in the club, says Marty.

Who will pay for them? I asked.

We will, said Stane. We will also take them around Australia, feed them and accommodate them.

You don't expect me to drive the group all over Australia, I protested.

We all need a holiday, said Stane.

Meeting Slovenians in other Australian cities was the greatest experience for all of us who went with the group. Of course we protested that we missed a few days work, spent dollars that should have gone towards building our own homes. Now we realise how lucky we were that we found each other, continues Marty. Stane said that you could never run away from who you are. I always remembered his words, says Marty.

When Slovenia demanded independence Stane urged me to join the demonstration in front of the Embassies, says Vince. We petitioned Americans and Australians and British and Germans to help us. There was a Slovenian Ambassador representing Yugoslav regime who advised us not to demonstrate because we will only make things worse. He refused to join us; he was Yugoslav ambassador and had to prove it to Yugoslav government that he was more Yugoslav and more communist than Slovenian. After we won Slovenian independence this same Yugoslav ambassador became the Slovenian ambassador somewhere else. Opportunists never miss an opportunity.

Stane counted on me to arrange public and private meetings with politicians and explain to Australian public the history and the will of Slovenians.



Joe and I do not speak at the graveside but we remember how important were celebrations Stane organised.

The funeral reminds everybody that our numbers are dwindling. Death shakes us to the core; we need to believe that this final curtain is really the beginning of new life.

Eternal rest grant unto him o Lord, and perpetual light shine upon him, says the priest.

Receive his soul and present him to God the most high, we finish the Commendation.

We humbly acknowledge our sins and ask God for forgiveness as we re-establish the ties with people that touched us during the years of our exile. We are all we have.

We live in hope to meet again in the eternal Jerusalem, says the priest.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want, we sing.

May the peace of the Lord, which is above all understanding, echoes the voice of the priest.

Lord hear us, pray those who believe and those who don't.

A group of mourners concludes the service with a Slovenian funeral song about the forest that will be green again while the one we mourn will never be with them again. The words of the song Gozdic je ze zelen reverbrate over the graves. The birds will sing again, the spring will come again but you will lie under the black soil, they sing and the voices tremble and brake and people cry openly leaning on each other. We regret our arguments and divisions as we hug and kiss.

We deprived our children of Slovenian heritage but we offer them our graves, says Helena. Maybe our graves will help them feel at home in Australia.

We can jump on the plane and have our home and family and memories in Slovenia but our children have nothing in Slovenia. With us gone they will be cut away and cast loose, says Rozi as we all gather in the Slovenian club.

Stane had done what he tried to do all his life. He united us, says Helena.

I believe that he is watching from some corner of heaven very pleased with himself, I add.

There are rows of tables laden with delicacies; people are hugging and kissing their partners, children, friends, opponents and even enemies. We remember past celebrations. Stane was part of a fishing family and fishermen remember every fish they ever caught as well as those that got away. They remember the wild pigs they chased, the goats they shot, the lake they almost drowned in, the surf that pulled them into the ocean.

In the end all we have are memories, says Helena as we load the plates with Slovenian delicacies.

We have never really developed the taste for Australian food. It looks nice but it is tasteless, says Rozi.

Flowers without fragrance, food without taste, friendship without warmth, love that does not last, says Helena.

Instant friends who never remember you when they move away, says Rozi.

I believe that Stane suspected us all of being secret communists, smiles Helena. He was a Catholic first and Slovenian second, says Helena to me.

He escaped because communists oppressed the church so God help you if you were not properly Catholic, says Mari.

John is a handsome man, I add.

John is not half the man his father was, says Helena.

John is not a butcher; he is a computer programmer, I remind Helena.

I suppose our sons will never be what their fathers were, sighs Helena.

The quality of mercy is not strained  
It dropped as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath  
It is twice blessed  
It blesses him that gives and him that takes.  
Shakespeare

### *The catalyst*

I find Joe leaning over the vanity basin in the bathroom. There is an empty wine bottle on the kitchen table next to the painkilling tablets. He must have been sick. Or drunk. Joe has never been sick or drunk or out of control. He never allowed himself to be vulnerable. He needed to be bigger than he really was. He sometimes cried in anger to punish me but he never wailed and pleaded like I did sometimes in total disappear.

As I step towards him Joe sways and gradually his knees buckle under him. I grab him to help him into a sitting position. Did he take too many tablets? Did he want to commit suicide?

What's wrong? I kneel next to Joe and cradle his head. I call the ambulance. His speech is slurred. He suffers a stroke. Thank God I came.

It is my fault, I wanted to change him, now he changed, I cry as Cally comes to comfort me in the hospital waiting room. Poor man must have been sick all this time.

High blood pressure, says Cally.

I can't imagine living without Joe. We sacrificed everything for love. Or was it for survival? Or is it the same thing? Love of life. I stay next to Joe's hospital bed until he recovers enough to come home.

You are his guardian angel, says the doctor.

You deserve a medal, says Cally.

I realise that I need Joe more than I knew. I need the fences he built around our family. There was nobody else ever. I threatened to leave Joe; he lived under threat all his life, poor darling. I was imagining love outside while all the time real love was waiting for me at home. It took me all this time to realise how safely anchored I am in a rich required love; I finally appreciate this haven away from all the troubles of the world.

I go to church and pray for Joe's recovery. I need this place of silence to reach the good in myself; to heal myself; to make myself believe that I am living a good life; that I am a good person. For the first time I feel completely in love with Joe. I beg God for his recovery.

I believe in scientific and technical world but only the silence of the church confronts the questions of things that cannot be measured or observed by science. I would like to believe something with certainty and sincerity but the creator and creation remain as much a mystery to me as they always were. My fascination with life and my awe of the universe grew while the certainty vanished. I promise God that I will take Joe home and let him reconcile with his past. Thank you God, I love you God, I will make everybody happy, I promise.

Simon brings his children when he hears about dad. They look at him cautiously at first but then he smiles, half his mouth hanging down, his hands limp on his lap. His eyes mist and they come closer touching his hands. Silently the tears run down his cheeks unchecked. Slowly Simon kneels beside him and puts his head on his lap. There they are on their knees with their heads in Joe's lap like a holy family. They come to sit with Joe every weekend. Joe loves his grandchildren. Poppy becomes the centre of attention and he loves it. Everybody loves Joe now for not being who he was. One cannot hate a sick old man. Joe in a wheelchair is no threat to anyone. It is so much easier to love someone who has no will of his own.

We often resented Joe's strength but now we know that we relied on it always. He made everything work, he removed obstacles; he was the captain; he never gave up. Joe is now showering his family with affection and praise.

Dean comes with his girlfriend and they sit and talk to dear Poppy. They recall their fishing adventures and praise Joe for getting them out of dangerous predicaments.

Remember how we were pushing the cars over the bogs in Snowy Mountains. There were trees over the track and deep holes but we got there laughing all the way. We pushed and almost carried the cars over, remembers Simon.

Everybody blamed you for taking them on these dangerous journeys but they all looked up to you to get them out again, I add.

Other men complained that dad bossed them but they were asking for it, says Simon. Our fishing trips were the highlights of their families lives.

We are the only people that will always rejoice looking at the smiling faces of our grandchildren, I say to Joe as we look at the albums.

One day they are babies and the next they fly away, says Joe with his mouth slightly twisted sideways.

Life pays no attention to what we are doing or planning. We suddenly realise how precious we are to each other. The weapons of our lifelong war are laid to rest. We have done the best we could. We smile fondly as we pass to each other images of our growing family. The flame of life is in their hands. They are our reincarnation. It is so easy to believe in the reincarnation since everything has a way of recreating itself.

Joe tells me how grateful he is to me for looking after him. This is definitely not the time to rock the boat. We get along just fine now. My poor darling does not row our boat anymore. The waters are slow and still and I row the best I know how. The oars are in my hands so I have to be careful.

Joe is still scared that I will throw something away. An empty tin can be reused, a piece of bread can be fed to the birds; he became a successful, well respected businessman but inside himself he never grew out of poverty he lived in as a boy, I tell Cally.

We are what we started out to be, says Cally. We are war babies.

He was the oldest and had to become a man before he grew up; his brothers and sisters resented his authority so he had to invent strategies to keep his family doing what he decided was the right thing.

Boys learn from their fathers before they realise that fathers can be wrong, says Cally. She is thinking of her own boys drinking with their father.

Joe is using a walking stick now, his leg shuffles a bit to one side as he pulls it along. With physiotherapy he recovered enough to walk with me in the garden. His good hand holds onto me for support. I am happy that Joe is so easily pleased now. I feel like a bird that grew in a cage and no longer wants to fly out.

What would I do without you, says Joe every day. You are all I have. You are my angel.

Being an angel might be as good as being a saint, I smile to myself. Gradually I realise that I can make decisions; I must decide and take responsibility, I have to arrange events independently. I finally have the power to say and do; maybe even do something good. Whatever happens from here on will be my responsibility. Joe became my child; my sick obedient baby. He is a pet I never had so I pour all my love into making him comfortable. This is the time to forgive and forget, to repent and make good.

Making decisions makes me feel alive. I can do great things; I feel rejuvenated. I do not have to look over my shoulder to see if Joe will approve. I feel the inner strength I so long denied myself.

I got used to being a little girl who followed Joe; I almost enjoyed my helplessness and my rebellion. Now there is no one to blame or to follow or ask for advice. Joe tells me not to worry when I make mistakes.

I have to repair whatever needs repairing. Like Joe's first family. The people I forced out of my knowing; the people I wished would stop existing. It is my responsibility to reconcile with Joe's family. His children are a foreign body imbedded under my skin. Hidden to all but always present to me. The thud-thud of the constant, dull, lifelong pain. It should have been examined long ago. I can finally afford to love Joe and accept his family. A smile comes to my face. There is urgency to expose all that was hereto hidden; an urge almost physical like a sore that demands to be open and dressed and then healed. Before it is too late. I will tell Simon as soon as everything is sorted. I am at the beginning of a new journey.

I regret that I stopped Joe from communicating with his children; I never actually had the power to forbid it but I knew that he did not communicate with them to please me. I am sorry that my parents died without ever seeing my family. They had so much sadness. One daughter marrying a Muslim in a registry office and I marrying a second hand man. They lost face with the people that

mattered to them. Their own children diminished them. Only Jakob married in the local church to make up to his father for joining partisans and being a communist. He was seeking forgiveness which his father could never extend to him. And yet all of the children wanted to restore respect and family's honour. We all wanted to make our parents strong and proud.

Every man desires to live long but no man would be old

Jonathon Swift

## ***Returning Home***

In 2012 Lightning Ridge celebrates the centenary of its existence. The settlement got the name about fifty years ago and I saw how it grew and changed during that time from a camping mining ground into a tourist destination. A hundred years old Australian opal mining industry is dying. Old adventurer miners that arrived during the fifties, sixties and seventies are dying as well. The young ones moved away into other well paid secure mining jobs. They will have a more secure but much less exciting life than opal miners had.

Lightning Ridge became a retirement village, said an old man at the bore baths.

At the beginning of the third millennium a nursing home opens in Lightning Ridge and I am placed in charge. I only work mornings now so I can look after Joe. I do not need the money but I need to get out of the house and be with other people. Joe calls the nursing home a waiting room. Waiting for what, I ask. Heaven, smiles Joe. It scares me to see my friends entering a place that has no exit. Most residents are at some stage of dementia and have to be kept safe behind locked doors. Suddenly they are cut away from the familiar people, activities and places. The sights and sounds and smells they loved are a thing of the past. They are shocked into a realisation that life is only a fleeting moment; that time never stops to give one a second chance; that their future has been cancelled. A few residents at first receive an occasional visitor until they too are forgotten and left to rest. They have no one to impress; nobody is interested in what they do or feel or think or remember.

Most residents are administered antipsychotic drug Risperidone which helps them sit still and forget their sadness and anxiety. They are less of a problem for the nursing staff when sedated. With their heads hung low they are like wilted flowers during the drought. As soon as a resident becomes unhappy, or fidgety or starts to pace the corridors the doctor prescribes something to keep them quiet. I know that the drug makes the work easier for the staff but I worry about the harm it does to the residents. Antipsychotic drugs have been condemned and banned in most age care places in America but they are still widely used in Australia because they make the work of caring easier. I believe that they also speed up the dying process.

Wasn't it only yesterday that these adventurers told me their life stories; they flirted and tried to impress me as I looked after their health complaints. Decades ago these exuberant solitary individuals brought their plans and hopes for the future to Lightning Ridge and now they are suddenly alone, lonely and forgotten. Irrelevant and unloved. The young care-workers serve them food and make their beds but they have no idea what dreams these people are dreaming. Some never had a family, some have broken families; some never had children, others have children who are busy in distant cities. I seem to be the only person that travelled some way with them.

Migrants broke their kinship ties and in their old age they feel the pain of being disconnected. They came young and energetic in the fifties and sixties and now half a century later they are alone waiting for death. Many forgot English and speak in their native languages to themselves since

nobody understands or wants to understand what they are saying. Their children never learned from their parents to care for the old; they never met their older relations. They never learned to revere the old.

Old Age residents are much like my garden. The flowers hang their blossoms unless I water them but as soon as I do they lift their heads in a blooming salute. Same with people in a nursing home who gradually forgot who they were. The spirit of life returns to their murky faces as I shake them into remembering by sharing my memories with them. I can feel the vibrations of reawakened information in their bodies; when they make connections their faces blossom. There is a demented old man they call Polish Joe in a nursing home. Nobody visited him for years. Heavily sedated he lives in a twilight zone but as soon as I come, his eyes smile and I take his hand and look into his eyes and he whispers that I am kind. Then there are Allen and Peter and Heni and Trudi and Dominic and Stefan and Lisa, Sally and Ursula. They all call to me and hope that I will spend a few moments with them. To the young nursing staff they are foreigners who have to be fed and washed but to me they are people I knew in their younger days when they were important community members. They told me their stories and we became connected. Our connections are fragile but they are the only ones. They love me. They know that I know that they are real people. For some I remain the only witness that once upon the time they were young. People lose the will to live when they become disconnected. They became invisible, irrelevant, forgotten, unloved, not-hated even; washed and fed they are waiting for god. I wonder if they are scared of death; if they are more terrified of dying than people who are still performing their duties. One is only truly alive as long as someone wants him to be alive.

Joe and I become keenly aware of our own mortality. Our conversations become sprinkled with memories; events from the past are dropped into the present like ingredients into the cake.

We decide to go home; Joe wants to take a share of our wealth to his girls so his daughters will give and receive the love that was always there. I imagine dialogues with Joe's daughters and his first wife; I am determined to be generous and forgiving and strong. I let Joe's younger brother Peter know that we are coming.

Peter and his wife Ursula are waiting for us at the airport. Peter helps Joe to the car after everybody is kissed and I get a bunch of flowers. We stop in a nearby restaurant for a drink. Peter finds the table and pulls out chairs for everybody. Peter and Ursula were courting when I last saw them; now they are grey haired pensioners.

Are you all right, Peter turns to his wife? He is like an old mother hen lovingly monitoring Ursula's every move. Maybe there comes the time when one stops dreaming of being somebody else doing something else. Maybe fear of death makes people grateful, kind, forgiving and accepting.

I am fine while sitting but I can't stand for long, Ursula explains to Joe and I.

Something wrong with her spine, explains Peter.

They will operate, she says shifting on her chair and hunching forward.

She is on the waiting list for laminectomy. They do miracles these days, spinal surgeons do. She is growing spurs in her spine the doctor said, explains Peter.

Osteoporosis, arthritis and sciatica, explains Ursula.



I had my hip replaced and it's like new, tells Peter.

How are you, health wise, asks Ursula.

Not bad, says Joe.

Good, really good, I add.

My shoulder needs replacing now, says Peter.

He can't open a jar of jam any more, smiles Ursula patting Peter's arthritic hand with devotion.

Not as young as we were. Lucky to be alive. Most of our friends are dead, Peter turns to Joe.

I believe that we are all scared of running out of words.

Every day is a gift, says Ursula.

You both look really good, says Peter as we settle and look at each other in comfort.

You too, I confirm, you haven't changed.

Joe seems stunned by the people that changed so much so I must keep the conversation going. I am used to saying appropriate words to old people. I realise that I am only a few years younger myself. The thought makes me shudder.

We are really happy that you came, says Ursula to fill in the silence. There is so much to say but nobody knows where to start.

Remember us, says a cheerful white-haired sagely old man coming towards Joe with outstretched arms. Joe is searching his face but the man turns to me and explains: I am Steve, Joe's best friend, and this is my wife Jana. The pretty old lady with wisps of thin strawberry hair smiles at me.

So pleased to meet you, says Jana. We have been waiting for you. Peter told us that you are coming.

I hold Jana's hand and notice the blue veins on her pale transparent skin. Jana's nail polish matches her lipstick and the purple of her blouse.

We really have, Steve repeats after Jana.

Took you a long time, says Peter to Joe.

Better late than never, I say still stunned by the surprise.

After kissing and hugging, everybody finds a seat and we look at each other for a long moment unable to find words to say. Steve sits next to Joe and Jana sits between Steve and me.

I first saw Jana's face on the little photo Joe carried in his wallet. That picture became firmly imbedded in my remembering. I smile to disguise my thoughts as I stare at the smiling angelic face of Joe's first wife who used to be just an obstacle I couldn't quite jump over.

We were so sad when you left. Could never apologise properly, Steve turns to Joe. When we heard that you are coming we just had to see you.

I thought you were dead; Jana's eyes brighten with a glimpse of memory as she turns to Joe. You were always waving that gun.

That was so long ago, Peter tries to banish the memory. I never knew that Joe was waving the gun at Jana as well. Did he threaten to kill her or himself or both? Threatening worked for him.

How long are you staying, Ursula wants to change the subject. I am conscious of how uncomfortable everybody is so I keep my smile in place as I turn from one to another.

I am so pleased to finally meet you, Jana turns to me again. And who is that man with a stick, she asks pointing to Joe.

That's your husband, Steve explains. Your ex-husband I mean.

Is he, so pleased to meet you, and what is your name dear, she turns to me again.

Emma, I smile.

She forgets, explains Steve, Jana's smiling husband. Especially when she gets excited. You are not in pain I hope, says Peter holding his wife's hand. Ursula here is on painkillers, he explains.

We all do, I say. I am used to my own lapses of memory. And to signs of dementia I see every day in my age care residents.

Tell us how you are, really, beams Steve. It is obvious that everybody wants to fill in with words the strangeness of our meeting. We all want it to go well. We are like spiders repairing their webs; we are connecting the dots that were cut off and left dangling without explanation. The enormity of what we have done was never acknowledged. The holes in our relationships have to be filled.

Joe is stunned seeing that people do not die from broken hearts. They simply begin to love someone else and break some other hearts. Love dies while life continues. The fear and guilt and regrets also died a natural death.

Did you have a good life in Australia, asks Peter.

Looks like you had a good life, says Steve, his grey blue eyes piercing into Joes.

I notice how long Steve's fingers are and that the veins on his hands are as blue as Jana's. I rarely notices details about people because I am busy listening to words. Now we are all searching for words so I has time to notice little things.

We have the best, says Joe.

Are the girls coming, asks Joe. He is ready now to pay what he owes and so repair the troubled past. We are all looking for forgiveness so we can like ourselves properly.

They want to give you time to settle down from your travels but they promised to come for the weekend, says Steve.

You know how busy women are.

Joe and I never thought of Joe's girls as women. They remained forever two innocent little girls Joe abandoned.

Really nice to see you again, Steve leaves his hand on Joe's shoulder like he was repairing a web of connection with his best friend.

Young ones have better things to do than to hang out with us oldies, helps Peter.

We hardly ever see them, says Steve.

They are busy with their grandchildren, I suppose, says Peter.

Everybody is busy these days and grandmothers come handy, says Ursula.

So Joe's little girls are grandmothers.

How are the girls, asks Joe.

Joe wants to hug his little girls into loving like they used to love him before he left. The tears on their faces never dried in his memory.

I doubt that they will recognise you, says Steve. We told them everything, of course, before they got married. You see, for years they believed that I was their father, says Steve. They grew up with our three boys, their brothers. They were always happy, says Steve.

They never wanted for anything, Peter confirms.

Jana and I had a good marriage. Steve is also repeating himself; I notice that his hands tremble.

Very happy, Jana looks adoringly at Steve. He is a nice man, isn't he, says Jana.

Very nice, I agree not knowing if Jana means Steve or Joe or Peter. It does not really matter. One old man is as nice as another. They are all so very nice.

Kids grow up and want to do their own thing, continues Steve. Life goes on.

They have families of their own to look after, Ursula reminds them again in order to excuse their absence.

You should see their homes; we never even saw all the things they have, says Peter.

They are doing really well, says Ursula.

I seem the only one hearing Joe's silence. Has he lost his voice?

They are coming for the weekend, Steve embraces Jana.

I hold Joe's hand to comfort both of us. We need the connection. We need the confirmation that we belong. We are all happy that the meeting did not blow into a war.

Life is like a baby's shirt, always too short and always crappy, Peter tries to crack a joke. Ursula is rearranging her position with obvious discomfort as she turns from one chatting person to another.

You have to live long to realise how short life really is, Ursula tunes in. The well oiled old words of wisdom become useful in awkward moments. I realise that this meeting has been carefully orchestrated and rehearsed to prepare everybody before the girls are introduced.

The waiter in black and white hovers around with a wine list.

What are we drinking, asks Steve. I'll get it, says Peter. Ladies first, Steve turns to me. She likes her bubbly, he pats Jana's hand. Gin squash, says Ursula. Beer for me, says Joe, I'll have a beer as well, I say. Joe and I always acted as one. I am rather thirsty.

Australians; they drink beer. What's the weather like in Australia? Hot, I bet, says Steve. We saw the fires on television.

That's why they drink beer, says Peter.

You can stay with us; we have plenty of room, invites Steve. What with kids gone, we only see them a few times a year. They come in their flying machines to kiss their mother and have a drink with me and then they are gone and who knows when we will hear from them again.

You must stay with us, Jana whispers into my ear, touching her hair with mine. Jana's face seems ageless and serene.

My bladder has had it; you never know which part of you will give up first, says Steve heading for the toilet.

Dying in instalments. Maybe it's best if the memory goes first; at least you don't mind watching your friends die, I say but fortunately nobody stops to relate to my silliness.

Have you got any children? Jana lights the table with her smile.

Our son stayed in Australia.

Tell us about Australia, says Jana but before I begin Jana becomes distracted and she points at Steve coming from the toilet.

That's my husband.

I am really sorry, Steve pats Joe's shoulder before he sits. We both are, aren't we, he gently prods Jana. We always wanted to find you and apologise.

Let bygones be bygones, encourages Peter. We all did silly stuff in that other life.

Life is too short to look back, agrees Ursula.

Jana and I were childhood sweethearts but then I was taken into the army for three years, Steve turns to me sensing that I need an explanation. We wanted to get married before I went but Jana's parents wouldn't let her because she wasn't eighteen yet. Jana was devastated and you were there

to comfort her, Steve squeezes Joe's hand. You and Jana got married when Jana realised that she was pregnant; Jana and I had no idea that Jana was expecting our first child before I left.

Steve keeps turning from me to Joe hoping to be rescued from explaining and apologising. Jana was certain that the baby was yours, Steve pats Joe's hand. She honestly believed that it was your child. When I returned from the army Jana already had a second daughter. She wanted to do the right thing and stay with you. But as the fate would have it, Steve stops for them all to consider fate. I am sure it was fate; we were meant to be together, he concludes. Jana wanted to stay with you for the sake of the children but then you saw us kissing and it just wasn't meant to be. I am sure you understand. I am so glad you found yourself such lovely wife.

We are very happy, says Joe. He is holding my hand tight. I know that he is shell shocked and hurting and wants to be brave. His body is tense and his face grey. He needs me. It's Joe and I against the world; it always was. He could never share with anybody the grieving for his first family. He could not allow himself to lose again. He made sure that he would never lose me. Now he lost his first child; the daughter he longed to see is not his after all. He cannot express his rage and disappointment. His sadness would make him look vulnerable.

I suddenly feel the bitterness of tears in my throat; I try hard to keep them hidden. I hold on Joe's hand and lean my head on his shoulder. I love Joe with all my heart. He needs my love and support. He has nobody else. He never had.

Maybe I should have told the girls sooner, Steve continues his explanation. We weren't sure about the first one being my daughter until much later though. It must have happened just days before I went into the army.

These things are easier with DNA, Ursula steers us into a reality but I know that Joe is not listening. He has to hold his rage inside the way he held his guilt and shame all his life. He has to remain in control to show them that he is happy and that they cannot hurt him.

Anyway both girls were very happy; they love their brothers. Poor Jana felt so guilty. She never forgave herself.

Things happen as they are meant to happen, says Peter.

Meeting Emma was the best thing that ever happened to me, says Joe with one hand still under Steve's and the other entwined with mine. My love must have reached his heart as he confesses his love for me in front of everybody.

Enough of that old stuff, Ursula tries to rescue Joe and Steve. Everyone is aware of how awkward it is for everybody else confessing but confession is what we all need. And forgiveness. And time to mourn the lost dreams.

I am so happy you don't hold grudges, Steve's voice trembles a little. It was meant to be, that's all. We never intended to hurt you; you were my dearest friend after all, he almost embraces Joe.

We have something for the girls, says Joe.

You shouldn't have; they are not expecting anything, they married well, pretty little things that they were and now they have everything anyone would want, says Steve. They never expected anything from you.

Steve really looked after them well, confirms Peter.

Jana keeps offering kids money but they don't want it. They tell us that we never learned to spend and enjoy ourselves, says Steve.

Our son says the same, I smile.

We never knew the luxury but they know how to enjoy it. You'll be really proud of their families, says Peter.

Best to enjoy each day as it comes, says Ursula trying to find a comfortable position for her back.

Let's drink to that, says Steve.

There is an obvious feeling of acceptance and understanding.

As long as our health holds up we might as well enjoy life, says Ursula.

Let's drink to that, Steve raises a glass and we follow gratefully because everybody is a bit sad and tired from the wisdom of repeated words.

I am really happy for you, says Steve. You have such a lovely wife and you obviously love each other very much.

I never looked back, I have the best, says Joe gently pulling me closer. He has nothing more to prove to anybody. He succeeded. He proved it to Jana and Steve that he is loveable and well loved.

We were holding hands all our lives; we needed the assurance. No wonder people believed that we loved each other. Maybe we did more than we knew. Maybe holding hands and holding the family together is all there is. The feeling of wellbeing springs in me unexpectedly.

We are very happy; I lean on Joe's shoulder and he kisses my hair.

I believe that everybody is grateful that we all accepted the past for what it was. The smiling faces are hiding whatever each of us feels.

What would I do without you, Joe whispers. I am so lucky to have you. You are my princess.

Did Joe know all the time that I aimed to be a princess?

Maybe even sainthood is possible.

I will organise a reunion for the weekend, says Steve happy that his plan worked and he made the path straight. He books a restaurant and at the weekend the two middle aged ladies with their husbands, their children and their grandchildren file around the tables specially decorated in our honour.

In the restaurant is all of Joe's family but Joe and I finally feel unmistakably together as one, needing each other's support. *I returned Joe* where I thought he belongs but now we both know that we belong together.

Joe does not recognise his daughters but after the introduction they hug and say nice things to each other. How nice to finally meet you. They embrace me and present me with flowers.

Nobody even guesses what is behind the smiles. The young ones are just as self absorbed as I used to be. They are not interested in dreams and sins of their ancestors; they are dreaming their own story.

The following weekend I invite my family for a reunion. I embrace my sister Milena; we need no words to explain what happened half a century ago. We hold each other with gratitude. Milena was my mother for awhile, maybe she wasn't a perfect mother but she did the best she could. There is no reason why we should bring up painful memories. Milena's husband, Zigi, has been dead for years. Did he ever agonise about his sins? Was he a victim of his urges? He tried to be good in so many other ways. He helped me become who I became for better and for worse.

I ring James before we return to Australia. A woman's voice tells me that James died two months ago. I visits his grave. I place a bunch of forget me nots in the middle of the grave where I hope his heart is. I wonder what his family will make of them if they will notice them at all.

An elderly woman comes and kneels beside me to rearrange the flowers on his grave. Did you know my brother, she asks. I tell her that James was my friend from school.

He was my brother, Sara extends her hand and invites me for coffee.

Sara sees James through motherly eyes.

Poor James could never sort out his life. Women always liked him; I suppose they wanted to mother the romantic, sad country doctor. He had a small practice in a remote little town. After work he helped villagers build the road; he helped them install electricity. James was a believer. He believed all right. Mum was a believer too. She was in the war and saw our father killed. James was about two and as the oldest I took care of my younger sisters and brothers while mum fought against Germans. Mum really believed in justice for all. James felt that he owed it to mum to make her revolution a success.

James first stayed at an inn and the wife of the innkeeper cooked and cleaned for him. She was twice his age so she spoiled James like mothers spoil their favourite child. He was infatuated with her for years. He met Irene, the wife of a high ranking politician, at the party meeting. Irene loved James; she wanted to leave her husband but James was scared of her husband. Irene left and unbeknown to James had his son on her own. James became sick after Irene left. Mum sent Tina, a good village girl, to look after him. Tina became pregnant so James married her to please mum. He had a decent little family but he felt obliged to visit the fat innkeeper's wife from time to time. I suppose they never wanted more from each other so they never disappointed each other. Ten years into his marriage James was called into the army reserve training in Serbia, continues Sara. A Serb general invited him home. James felt honoured by the invitation of his superior; he slept with general's daughter Nada, who became pregnant. Nada's father was posted to Ljubljana where he provided James with an important army doctor position. James and Nada shared a beautiful villa with Nada's father. Life was good for the general and his daughter's family until in 1991 Slovenia became independent and the general lost his position. The brotherhood ended and Slovenians began to hate Serb presence in Slovenia. James lost his boss and then his job. Believers denounced each other; nobody wanted to know about the revolution. They denounced Tito like they denounced Stalin before him. The brotherhood and unity ended overnight. Capitalism was

the way to go. The West was best. Former revolutionaries quickly converted public property into their private property and became the first capitalists in Slovenia. They denounced the ideals of the past. Most denied that there ever was a revolution. James was disillusioned; he remained an idealist to the end. He lost the will to live.

Someone once said that we can never have a revolution in order to establish a democracy. You must have a democracy in order to have a revolution, I chant more to myself than to Sara.

Nada worked as a fashion designer for a fashion house before she established her own little business in the new capitalist Slovenia. As a business-woman she provided jobs for her father and her husband but neither James nor her father could make a go of it. James felt more and more vulnerable. His father in law was a retired general now but he still had power over James because James lived in his house and worked for his daughter. One day Nada found on the computer that James wrote to another woman. She showed the letter to her father so her father threw him out of his home.

James smoked and drank more every day. He caught pneumonia and died alone. He might have died of sadness and disappointment, sighs Sara. He was looking for something; I wonder if he knew what he was looking for. It was always women, mostly other men's women. I don't know why women had the need to love him but they did. Maybe they rebelled against their husbands who had affairs with their young secretaries. Women like vulnerable men.

Poor James, I say. Maybe all those other women said the same. Was my James just a figment of my imagination? Did he really believe that if we were together we would be eternally happy? Maybe he needed a dream like I did. Maybe we would be happy or maybe we wouldn't.

Soup is never eaten as hot as it is cooked, says Sara. I have no idea what she means. I thank her for coffee and company

James and I were searching for the feelings we inspired in each other when we still believed in everlasting love? Maybe everybody longs for that first spring of their life. James and I needed to be special to someone special. Maybe I rebelled against Joe like all those other married women James slept with rebelled against their husbands. I could never count on James to travel with me but Joe always removed obstacles on my path.

I realise that James was no more perfect than I was. His women provided comfort and sex. Is pure love really just a wishful dream about an untested and unfulfilled attraction? A hunter's dream about the one that got away. Is everybody seeking what they can't have; just because they can't have it?

I visits my parent's grave. I tell them that I would like to be closer to them and to their God. I hope that there is God. I want life to mean more than it really does.

*In* the heart of Ljubljana I stand at the newspaper kiosk and reads the big black headline in the newspaper Democracy: Communists were terrorists. We demand a decent burial for Home guards.

I stands like a pillar of salt; I shudder and look around. Someone must have put that headline on the stand in front of me to test me. I pretend to look across the river in the centre of the capital but nobody takes any notice of me or of the headlines. People walk up and down the street clutching their bags and their pockets. They don't even glance at the headlines. It is there black on white;



nobody can claim ignorance. Did people always know? Did they learn to accept that knowledge? Did they know all along that they were lied to? The truth stares them in the face but they don't even blink. No need for defence or denial. Like the river, people go with the flow. In their hearts they play with the pleasures of the next weekend, next holiday, next love. Some pray to secure everlasting pleasure in heaven. Some read papers with their coffee or their beer, to relax. It is easier to get along than to think. In the end it makes no difference. Nobody takes any real notice of what they read. Or think. Not after a hard working day with a beer or coffee or schnapps in your hand. Men flex their muscles as the girls in short skirts pass by. Girls flick their hair as they throw glances at boys.

This is a new generation; they do not even remember Tito or Stalin or brotherhood. They have enough problems holding their jobs, paying their bills and watching out for the sins of the present ruling elite. The notion of crime and punishment for the past sins makes no sense to the young. History is for the books; the young have to keep up with those that would overtake them.

Now everybody knows that there were thousands of people killed in Slovenia after the war in 1945 yet nobody blinks an eyelid when the newspaper states in big black headlines that communists were terrorists. They whisper to each other about the new mass graves they uncovered but they are grateful that gradually things are improving. Communists are dead and dying; they are best forgotten.

I remember Martin's words. He escaped from one of those mass graves.

May 1945 was a miserable wet month, he said. Everybody wanted to get rid of refugees camping in the southern fields of Austria. The world was tired of the war; they had to solve problems quickly. Sending refugees home seemed practical and sensible at the time. Let Tito and Stalin deal with them.

For the kingdom the power and the glory is yours now and forever, I remembers the prayer Christians the world over say daily. People also fight for the kingdom, the power and the glory. Maybe that is the reason they created heaven where they hope to have an equal share of the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever.

Milan's son comes; his father asked to see me. He is dying. I look at Milan on his deathbed and for the first time remembers something she locked away since she was nine.

One spring day after the war I prayed to Virgin Mary on my way from school. The newly green branches of the forest met on top of the road. Through the greenery seeped the specks of yellow sky and I felt very close to god. Milan came behind me with his horse-wagon and asked me to sit next to him. I would have taken a ride with any of the villagers I knew with the knowing of some primordial wisdom that my parents wouldn't be happy if I accepted a ride with Milan. They held him responsible for the murder of my brother.

Milan jumped down from the wagon and tried to scoop me up. I said no, no, no but he said don't be silly, I don't bite and we wrestled and then I fell into the grass and he fell on me and pulled my pants down and put his hand between my legs and then he smelled his hand. He put one hand on my mouth so I could not scream. Then he lifted his hand and with his knees on the ground on each side of me he tried to unbuckle his belt and then with some supernatural terrified strength I pushed myself backwards from under his bottom and ran into the forest fast and faster and with my last breath. I ran and ran and never looked back until I fell into a hollow on the moss and laid

there under the magic of the spring forest and the yellow sky and there in the stillness I could hear God speaking the words of comfort. I escaped.

I never told anyone about Milan because I was ashamed. Who could I tell anyway? Dad was himself bleeding there in the snow when Milan hit him and he could not even defend himself. Mum just cried for my dead brother. I never took a short cut from school through the forest again.

Thank you for coming, says Milan as he opens his eyes a little. He is gasping for air. I silently stand over him; he has things to say; it is his dying moment. Impotent, pitiful and ugly and yet there is life saying goodbye. A thought comes to me then that I could take down my pants and stuff them into his nostrils; only there is no more anger and even my pain and shame disappeared. Death is death. There is something holy about dying. Maybe the good and the evil angels come to fight for the soul. I can almost touch the spirits hovering over Milan's body.

I am sorry, he whispers.

It's all right; I touch his hand.

Thank you, he wheezes and his chest stops rising. I feel the good angel rejoice as he carries Milan's soul and my shame. God is right there in the silence of dying. It is one of the greatest moments of my life. I can finally laugh at my fears, my shame, and my guilt. Milan is grateful to me. I am humbled by that. In the end I have the power over him, the power to forgive.

I visit uncle Miha just before we return to Australia. I find him sitting next to the window in a nursing home. He is ninety-six.

He likes this window. They get funny like that with age, explains the young nurse, who holds uncle Miha's hand. She does not know that uncle Miha was funny like that all his life. He was a dreamer and a poet.

The nurse put her arm under Miha's shoulders to lift his head and adjust his pillow.

She is my angel, uncle Miha pats the nurse's bottom as he presses his face into her bosom.

I can see her better near the window, he coughs a little laugh. I believe that he opened his eyes a crack.

I'll leave you alone now. Just ring the bell if you need me, smiles the nurse.

I tell Uncle Miha how afraid I am of loneliness and old age.

There is a little child in you that needs to be hugged until the day you die, uncle Miha pats my head. We grow old but the child still needs hugging. Don't let the child be afraid. Love is love, it is all there is. Take it as it comes.

I visit the river of my childhood. The branches of the weeping willow and my tears touch the water. I cry for the opportunities Joe and I missed. The river is old now; it does not remember the bodies I saw floating on it. Or the cross with Jesus face up floating down the stream. Or my bare, blue, wet, cold feet as I walked in the morning dew. What happened, happened. Not even God can change what once was; no use going over what might have been.

Wild bushes cover the footprints of my childhood; only the land producing cash-crops are now cultivated.

The words of the song *Kje so tiste stezice*, comes to my lips.

I never really escaped. Everything I ever was followed me. Unbeknown to me those left behind travelled much the same road.

*In* the village I left, subsistent farmers produced their food, their wine and timber, their tools and utensils, much of their clothes and all of their toys. They washed and swam in the nearby river Krka; children skied on the surrounding hills and skated on the frozen creeks. The cows pulled the wagon with farm produce. They stored fruit in the cellar, smoked meat in the chimney, made lard, ground the grains, shelled the beans, made doonas and pillows from home grown chook and goose feathers. Dad read the newspaper and told stories for entertainment and enlightenment.

I expected to find things as I left them but people who stayed in my tiny village also have computers, dishwashers, all the electronic gadgets, cars and tractors. Electric fence takes the place of a shepherd. The tiny village store now sells goods from all over the world much like Australian supermarkets do. Farmers produce cash crops. Even little Slovenia could not resist technology and progress.

*I am* searching for the sights and sounds and smells of long ago; I want to embrace the exultation and exuberance I felt as I first discovered self and the world. The magic and the dreams, the knowledge and the beliefs, the good people and the bad shaped me into who I became. I rotated in my own orbit long after times and people changed.

This new generation is like another country, says Joe. People no longer sing Slovenian songs, children no longer recite Slovenian poetry, the struggle for independence invigorated Slovenia but the victory...Nobody seems happy with the victory.

There is no escape from home and there is no return either, I smile. I realise that home is not a place on any map of the world; it is only a memory of first blossoms one carries within. They are everybody's *magic land*. You cannot step into the same water twice, I remembers the words of the philosopher.

## ***Returning home to Australia***

What are we doing stuck in this godforsaken desert, says a Croatian miner Mirko as I return to Lightning Ridge. Mirko was grumpy all his life.

Where else would you like to be stuck, I make conversation.

Not here, that's for sure. With all our money we could be living on French Riviera, he adds.

Why don't you?

Because I am stuck here.

You would be old, sick and alone anywhere you went.

I notice Mirko's slow shuffle and bent back. I could tell him that there is no one waiting for him on French Riviera; that one does not step in the same river twice; that new generation grew over our playground. I am sure that Mirko knows all that and is unhappy about it.

The walls of my prison crumbled; I finally forgive myself for following the wrong gods. The magic land is around me; I do not have to close my eyes to see it. Joe depends on me; he is no longer my boss and my judge; he trusts and believes in my love. God smiles at me.

God's greatest gift to us is a free will, my mother told me. Free will gives us a chance to choose how we live. Animals act in fear but people have the power to choose.

My life suddenly feels precious; I love the freedom to love. People die for freedom and kill for freedom; generations of nations fought for freedom. It wasn't for power or adoration; they wanted freedom.

What if I forget to confess one of my sins, I asked my mother when at the age of seven, I first confessed.

There is only one judge and that is you; only you know if you cleared your soul. Only god in you can offer forgiveness.

Mum planted these words on my soul and they came alive when I needed them.

## ***Harmony Day***

During the Senior's week 2013 the office of Intercultural Community organises a Harmony Day celebration; they provide a BBQ in the Lion's Park for us elderly of many nations.

Harmony day at Lightning Ridge is about honouring our tradition of a fair go; of appreciating the benefits of our cultural diversity and of respecting each other, says our local historian Barbara as she opens the festivities.

Barbara is a pretty part Cherokee Indian who came from America to be with her Australian boyfriend. They have parted long ago but she stayed and devoted herself to the history of our community. You have to devote yourself to something when you find yourself old and alone in the world.

I retired to devote myself to Joe. Since we returned from Slovenia Joe sits in a wheelchair most of the time but we still attend all the community functions and enjoy time with our friends. Joe does not talk much but we hold hands and feel the love and the communication flowing from one to the other. We are no longer trying to impress those around us. We are aware that our time is running out. Joe squeezes my hand from time to time and I look at him and we smile and sometimes he kisses my hand and sometimes I bend down and kiss him. We know how important we are to each other. We are free and at peace. We are all we have. We have everything we need.

About two hundred mostly elderly people gathered and we chat to each other to make sense of the harmony and of ourselves. We are trying to create a sort of family out of remnants of slightly damaged world's adventurers. We must be careful not to look desperate or depressed. Most of us are a bit depressed and desperate at times. As our working days came to an end we realise how disconnected we became. Perhaps some would like to just sit and stare at those who still have the energy to make attempts at being funny but we all feel obliged to actively engage in the festive spirit.

We try to forget that we are strangers and that we don't really care for or know each other; we are only here for a free BBQ and to let the organisers go on with their job. It is apparently healthy for older citizens to socialise; it is healthy also for the organisers to have the organising jobs. Outback Health organisation employs people to exercise with us; they help us with water aerobics, walking and gymnastics; they also help young families to shop wisely and look after their babies properly. The whole town is looked after. We just have to be grateful. Being grateful is a source of happiness.

This reminds me of my mother. As a child I tried to help the newborn chicken out of the eggshell but mum told me not to do that because the struggle makes the chick strong and healthy. We no longer have to struggle; there are helpful community workers all around us. They write vouchers when your money runs out; they also provide counselling. No need to struggle; no need to be strong or wise. Just smile gratefully. Deal with your aloneness privately, please.

Forty years ago we were all struggling as we invented dwellings, machinery, entertainment and community. We loved our neighbour because we knew that we depended on each other. Life was in front of us. We were busy climbing the ladder of social and economic success.

Now we only need the community workers who organise festivities for us; we smile as they serve us sausages and steaks with smiling faces. We will remember our homeland, our youth and our

dreams in the aloneness of our other days. Our successes and failures are of no interest to anyone. Even our elegant eloquent influential friends became worn out old people more interested in the popular cures for urinary and digestive problems than in having their picture in the fashion pages of our four page local newspaper. There is nothing in this paper, we all agree, because we don't relate to the events young ones celebrate.

In the morning I watched the line of ants diligently marching through the brick wall towards the supply of food in my kitchen. I watched their disciplined struggle for survival and then I sprayed them dead. The swallows came, hundreds of them celebrating spring. In their beaks they brought the mortar for the foundation of their new homes on the eaves of my house. They like brick houses. They seem to like white brick houses best. Every year hundreds of them come and mark the spots for their nests all around my house. Some nests are already architecture in progress others are just foundation markings where the swallows mix the gluey saliva into the dirt to secure the nest. You can't hose down these gluey foundations. I watch the flurry of their excitement and enthusiasm. Full of life they are building a home and a future for their species.

I remember those swallows in our barns at home; swallows were the harbingers of spring; they were welcome every year to nest in the warmth of the stable. As children we loved to watch the little beaks waiting for their parents to bring food. We were told never to harm swallows. Only here are hundreds of them and the dirt falling from their beaks is all around the house. Their building site is my veranda; I can't let them build hundreds of nests. I take the hose, wash away their efforts and make their struggle futile. The gluey brown marks on the white brick are reminders that I stopped their friendly colony multiplying. I see the confusion in their flight. I feel the pain in my chest but they found another house and they start again. Such is life; it never gives up.

We crave harmony because we are tired of life's futile conflicts and confrontations.

It is economically sensible to keep people kicking as long as they can rather than put them in the residential care which costs the government plenty. People live longer so the governments have to be sensible about the age problems. It is much cheaper to keep community harmonious with little gatherings in the park. The debate about euthanasia scares me; the idea of having a friendly farewell from life is nice but life itself wants to go on. It's comforting knowing that our children carry our genomes into the unknown future. Is immortality our only purpose; is there no other meaning to life? Just the repetition without an explanation? Did we weave stories about god just to preserve the hope that there is after-life? Is life independently organising its future without our help and prayers? Is life an enormous everlasting onion? We cry peeling away its layers.

We have everything we ever wanted, says Impi.

To have nothing and want everything is better than having everything and wanting nothing. Wanting gives meaning to life, Graham shows off with old clichés. I suppose we all want to contribute some words of wisdom to the Harmony because wisdom is all we have. Wisdom travels hand in hand with old age. Young ones are not interested in our wisdom so we are happy to scatter it among our generation. Who would want to trade precious innocence for old wisdom? It is better to laugh silly than cry wise. It is so unbecoming to know it all.

We gravitate towards each other to create harmony and so please the organisers. We have to show our appreciation by creating a body of unity that is a bit bigger than the sum of bodies we are. Gravity is like god; invisible and unknowable. The smiles connect us like electric impulses of the

brain connect the memories. We are all scared of losing our memories so we smile at faces and try to remember their names. Harmony is important for our mental health. We must keep alert.

Young servers are coming around with drinks.

Times have changed beyond recognition, says Barbara. I am glad I am old and don't have to follow the trends.

The bell indicates that Ursula wants to begin with the Harmony Day program so we all look up at her standing on the platform with the microphone to her lips.

For the beginning of the third millennium we dig into the history and culture of our ancestors to offer Australia all we are. We always knew that the suitcase we brought was light compared to the wealth within us. Places we came from, things we have seen, and people we have met uniquely shaped us.

I will call on some of you willing to tell about yourself so we will know each other better. It is only right to start with Joan who is an Aboriginal lady and so the first Australian.

I am one of the so called stolen generation, Joan begins as she takes the microphone from Ursula.

It is hard to believe how confident and well spoken some Aboriginal people became during the last few years. Money from mining made it possible for many to become well educated.

I was lucky to have good foster parents who helped me find my real family in Lightning Ridge, says Joan. I feel sympathy for those members of the Stolen Generation who didn't get to meet their parents or get to know their own people or culture; it's very sad to go through life without your real family around you and not knowing who you belong to or where you come from.

I also feel sorry for those Aboriginal people and white people who don't understand and don't want to understand the full story behind why and how Aboriginal children were taken away. Some say and believe it was because of neglect and abuse, but this is not entirely true. Sure the abuse and neglect have happened to some but the majority, especially in the early years, were taken because of the assimilation policy; the government tried to breed out our black skin. Aboriginal people are a resilient and strong race and this is why we are still around to this day.

Elena, a Philippine lady, takes the microphone next. She tells how her husband came from Lightning Ridge to Philippines looking for a wife.

After White Australia policy ended during the fifties many aged European Australian migrants went to Philippines to pick a young girl for a wife; these girls provided an opportunity for the old men to have a family. The men's hope of ever finding the girl from their hometown, faded as did their youth.

Filipino ladies are pleasant, beautiful, young, well educated Catholic girls who abandoned their dreams of marrying a young husband of their own nationality because they wanted to make their families in Australia. Love is a many splendid thing. Love for the offspring comes first. Old European men and young Filipino women had to give up something to make a family in the right environment. Perhaps we are all trading something for something else to get what is really important to us. Most of us traded our beautiful homelands so we could offer our families more prosperous life in Australia.

I remember my previous conversation with Barbara.

Females pick a male that will best provide for their young, said Barbara. The strong male inseminates more females; the richest man picks the prettiest girl. It's only natural; the same happens with other species.

No girl wants to admit that she married for money but many do, I said.

Everybody sticks to money; men even more than women. You only have to look at television. Everybody is honoured to be in the company of someone rich. The rich and the famous claim to love each other for who they are but when they part, they only remember the money and fight over it. Money truly is the root of all evil. Women may sometimes marry for money but men murder for it all the time, said Barbara with a hint of bitterness in her voice.

I came in the early sixties when the town had two teachers, one policeman, a visiting priest and a bush nurse, Charlie takes the microphone. I used to be Drago back in Croatia but it is easier to get along as Charlie being named after Prince Charles, he laughs awkwardly. Anyway, when I arrived in the sixties one policeman administered mining, traffic and law and order. If he said to a miner I don't want to see you here tomorrow the miner had to pack up and go. We had no ratters, no thieving and no disorder. We had no social security or unemployment benefit. You couldn't claim that you were looking for employment if you chose to live in Lightning Ridge. There was only opal. We were proud of our self sufficiency. When a miner struck opal he invited the town to a BBQ and people would pass along uncut opal to be licked and admired.

Now we have more people in the offices than down the shaft mining. Those in the know have the power to use the poor miner any way they like, Bill calls out; he is an old-timer respected for his experience, wisdom and knowledge; he does not need the microphone.

Office workers are out looking for the needs in the community to secure their jobs. The more they search for needs, more needs appear. More social security offers, more scared and insecure we feel. Our names became a part of the invisible computer statistics. We are fish in the net, says Graham.

You wouldn't want to live without all the services, I smile.

Since government agencies take care of people, people stopped caring, Bill dismisses me. We used to rely on each other so we were good to each other. Now people don't even care to get to know each other.

I came to Lightning Ridge in 1963 as a child with my parents, Eva takes the stage. Mum suffered from rheumatism and she heard about the therapeutic artesian hot springs that just opened. Most Europeans swear by the healing power of the local bore bath. I remember a man sitting on the edge of the pool with his feet dangling in the water. The tourists asked him about mining and where he came from and if he found opal. The man smiled and pointed at himself saying: Bonegilla. I don't know if Bonegilla was his name or nationality or a place he came from. I can still see the poor Bonegilla man sitting on the edge of the bore bath there, remembers Eva.

I remember Bonegilla. It is a migrant camp near Albury, explains Sally. Most of us migrants in the fifties and sixties came to Bonegilla to be sorted out and sent where work and accommodation was arranged for us. We were all reborn in Bonegilla. We carry the name Bonegilla written on our



hearts and that was probably the only identification with Australia the man had. The man probably heard of opal on his arrival to Australia and came here. Bonegilla is the place where we slept that first night in Australia, where we first smelled the dripping and crunched the corn flakes. Bonegilla was our introduction to mutton and gravy and boiled veggies and flies and foreigners and heat. I will never forget the flies. Nobody in Bonegilla spoke English except officials who decided where we will live and work. Over 300 000 migrants passed through Bonegilla between 1947 and 1971. I loved Bonegilla. I experienced an enormous surge of optimism and hope. We left behind the terror and the anxiety, the relations and the regimes; we were free, says Sally. While I rejoiced and dreamed of our beautiful future my husband moaned about soggy vegetable floating in lukewarm water, greasy mutton, grey gravy, strange smelling custard, spongy bread, overcooked eggs, burnt toast, and lumpy porridge.

I remember the tiny corrugated tin rooms and the raindrops falling on it and the noises wind made. There was hope and excitement in the air.

I heard Barry the bus driver say the other day to some American tourists coming to town: Lightning Ridge is no longer black opal gems capital. It became a retirement village. People come to soak their old aching joints in our hot artesian baths, tells Ursula.

Lightning Ridge blossomed as the black opal town when European migrants came during the sixties and seventies. The population always fluctuated between three and twenty thousand depending on the latest opal rush, says Graham

I hear there is a new rush at the back of Grawin, says Bill. During the last forty years I've been chasing every bloody rush from Coocoran to Carters to New Town, from Nobbies to Nine mile and back again; I have been sinking the bloody holes all my life and I never found it. I am sick of rushing after the new rushes; I am sick of sinking holes and I have enough of camping as well. I booked myself into the local resort nursing home.

Rich people like to go camping once a year but we, opal miners, choose to camp all year around, says Graham. We are where we want to be; we are doing what we like doing; we do it when we feel like doing it. We chose to drop out of the city jungle and take our time to look at life.

I know that we are all a bit scared of the nursing home; of this last station. You lose not only freedom but your personality once you enter Age Care. Most people fight to the end; they struggle to keep their independence.

I am sick of trying to keep up with technology and progress, Barbara changes the subject as she tries to work out her camera; this constant race to keep up with new gadgets is killing me. Just as I learn how to work something it becomes obsolete.

Everybody has a finger on the button and the ears wired to something. We used to go bird watching and we listened to birds tweet but now everybody tweets on twitter; people don't meet face to face, they gather on the face-book. I don't understand this unreal life, agrees Ursula.

Joe often repeats the Australian saying: You can't have your cake and eat it. Although I know that he longs for Slovenia he knows that one cannot have it all.

Joe who often criticised me does not live here anymore; he is replaced by the man who just wants to hold my hand. At 83 he deserves a little playfulness; he is more at peace than he has ever been.

He accepts life and people without judgement or criticism. He keeps telling me how happy he is; how fortunate he is to have a lovely family.

I miss Joe's leadership and his ideas but I love this new Joe.

You are my angel, I love you, Joe declares daily.

I never knew how much Joe meant to me. He was my anchor, protector, guide; he was truly the wind beneath my wings. He was always by my side; he was firmly on my side; I could always count on him.

The faraway places we used to travel are gradually forgotten as we discover the life in our garden. We spend hours every day on the veranda watching birds and flowers and people passing by. The rush is over; the urgency and ambitions gave way to appreciation and gratefulness.

Joe became fascinated with lizards in our garden. He is watching their every movement; he catches grasshoppers and waits for the lizards to take them. Gradually the lizards came closer and closer until they started taking grasshoppers from Joe's hand.

We look at delicate structures of grasshopper's head and legs. We watch the bees buzzing from flower to flower; every creature knows what they need to know; they are no less and no more than we are.

Our friends are coping with their own aging. Some offer prayers for Joe's health.

Ana and Stan became pastors in a Pentecostal movement. They tried very hard to convince us to become members of their congregation. They placed hands on Joe and prayed for his health and conversion. Joe used to ridicule their faith but he lets them pray over him now.

Rudi is a Seven days Adventist and he is promoting dietary rules for Joe's health.

Marie and Lucy promise salvation and health through Jehovah's beliefs.

Max is an independent Gospel preacher bringing Good News wherever he goes. Trust in God. In the end that's all anyone can really do.

We will all be old one day if we live that long, Max jokes. He is 85 and riding his bike every day visiting the aged and the sick. He is at most funerals. Max confessed recently that he learned some bad habits in the orphanage where he grew up. Older boys did some sinful things to him and he learned to do these same abominable acts to younger boys. When he saw the light, he gave his life to Jesus, confessed, repented and made amends. I have known Max for 43 years. We talked about history, politics, philosophy and religion; when you talk to someone for almost half a century you begin to think of them as friends.

I realise that we all carried little guilty secrets as a burden through life until nobody is interested in our confessions anymore. We are yesterday's news. People these days know sins that we could not even imagine.

I admire my friends' beliefs, dedication and sacrifices. I actually admire all believers equally. I cannot say that I firmly believe in anything except in my smallness and ignorance in face of the eternity and universe. I feel like a leaf falling off the tree in the autumn; I will land where the wind

will blow me and I will feed whatever will want to suck the minerals of my body. As for my soul, my spirit? I never knew where my soul came from so the path into the unknown will not be anything new.

Joe is neither afraid nor ashamed now. I never really knew this person who was with me for over half a century until he became free to be who he really is. We are both free; we have nothing more to prove to anyone.