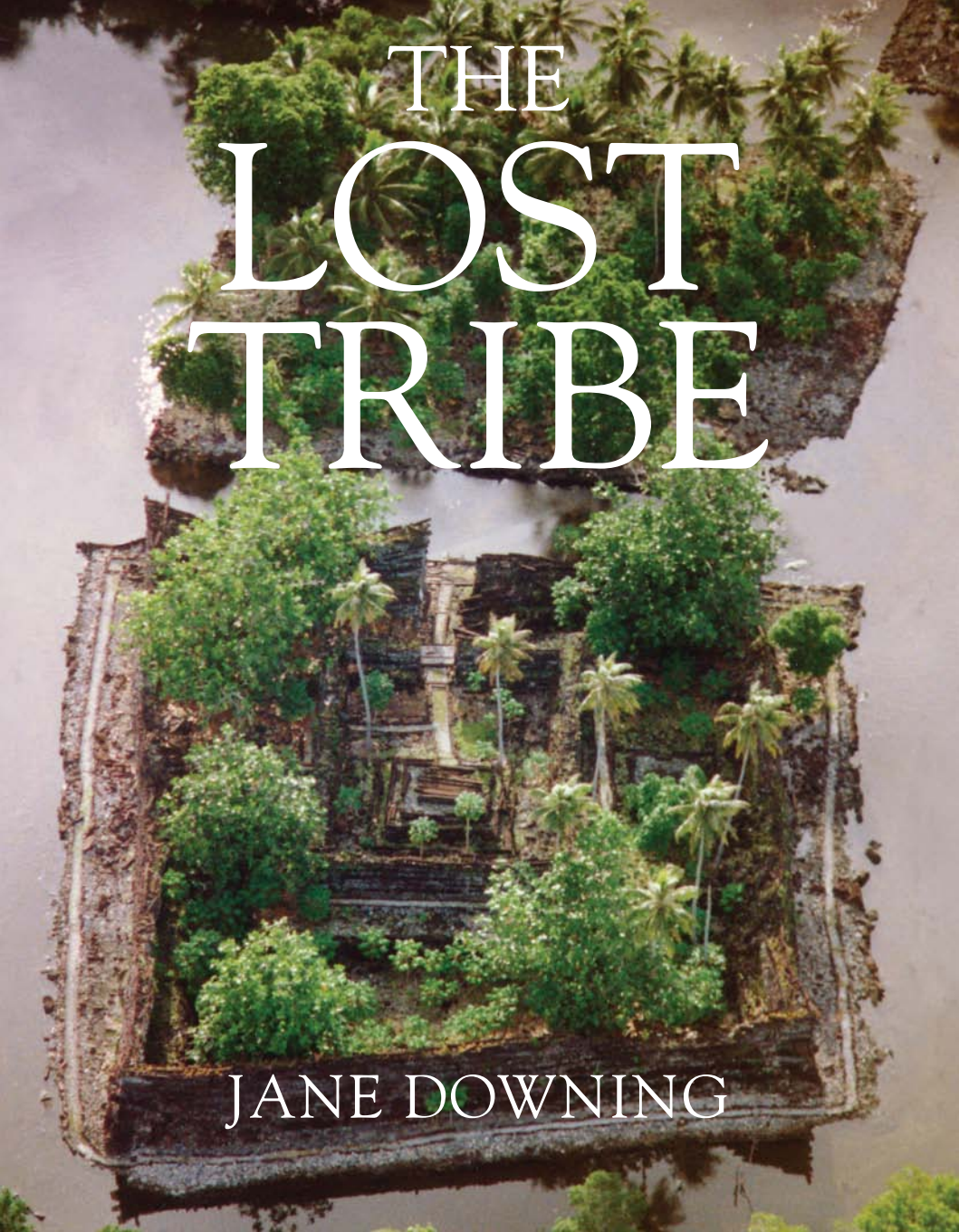
THE LOST TRIBE



JANE DOWNING

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Jane Downing

Prologue

Many reasons can be given for people turning out the way they do. Reasons and excuses. If Marianne had ever been questioned about her reticence — her caution, her adherence to the old cliché that curiosity may well kill the cat — she would have been able to cite, chapter and verse, the incident with Great-Aunt Aurora. Who knows. Maybe she had never been the bright, eager child with a storybook imagination. Labelling may well have simply caught up with reality. There is always the clever child in the family, and the sporty one, the pretty one, and Marianne happened to end up being the shy one. It could have happened when she was twelve, as a natural progression from childhood to adolescence. Or more abruptly on one day: the day she first saw the house she would unexpectedly inherit. That she inherited because of that day? Who knows. But she could have told the story, chapter and verse, if ever she'd been asked.

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When Marianne was twelve, and still climbing trees, she first saw *Abbeyleigh*. The house, which her mother reverently called the *homestead* on the journey out, had felt little like a home and had demanded good behaviour with every wrought railing and plaster cornice. Her newly widowed grandmother had returned to live there, in the ancestral home that had long been in the care of the spinster of the family. On the arrival of the family, her grandmother held court sternly inside the strict interiors. But Marianne's eyes were everywhere, and saw that the garden through the windows was one of dreams. The summer outburst of colour could not disguise the branches of countless trees reaching down in invitation. Marianne escaped adults and siblings and strictures at the earliest opportunity, hoisted her best skirt, and climbed.

Mighty trees dominated the garden but the centrepiece was the greenhouse. Marianne had never seen one before; she lived in the suburbs then and had not seen much. She knew of her own paucity of experience because the best of the world was captured by words within the pages of books. She virtually lived in the public library, and she could only hope to one day travel out from it and be allowed to witness the world's wonders. But here — right here in front of her — was a small part of the unexpected in the world, this house of glass dancing in a pool of sunlight. It was an ephemeral fairy castle, an inverted looking glass that revealed not what was, but what could be. Marianne started to move down from her perch in the elm tree. The flowers in the greenhouse below

pointed curled fingers of sulfur yellow in every direction. These must be mythical orchids, planted in Sydney but searching out the warmth of the equator, climbing like spiders upwards towards the sky. Marianne climbed like a cat down, down closer to stare at them in amazement.

She did not mean to pry, she most truly did not: she had eyes only for the orchids. She stretched out along a low limb, out from the cloak of stealth and green foliage, her eagerness to see something new casting a human shadow across the silver-shine of glass. Where, below, there had been the stillness of a held breath, there burst a typhoon of movement. Turbulent horror parted the veil of exotic blooms.

The angry eyes of her great-aunt stared directly into hers. The heat dissolved Marianne's curiosity. Leaving her a lumpen, fearful child? The shy one in the family? Great-Aunt Aurora, hollering below in the greenhouse, was not wearing her bright receiving-face nor the clothes of the morning room. Nor was the man. Eve and Adam were angry and ancient in this afternoon manifestation.

Marianne did not understand at the time what she had seen in the greenhouse, only that she should not have seen it. She fled, fumbling and falling, down the tree, away, pursued by blazing condemnations. *Sneak, spy, hoyden, perverted child, uncontrollable brat …*

The story ended. And she spent the next sixteen years being none of those things.

Then she found herself in the garden again.

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Winter had stripped the trees of their vigour and colour. Time had stripped them of their mythical proportions. The adult Marianne walking out beneath the branches of her memory's Eden found the trees beautiful, but *common-* or *garden-sized*. A natural consequence of growing up; or a natural consequence of her expulsion from paradise that day?

There was certainly no temptation in the garden. She was the timid one in the family now. She had long since lost the need to climb. She knew the wind would be stronger up in the treetops — even below, walking was to the accompaniment of its icy bitterness. She could have gone back inside of course, retreated to the interiors she had long felt more comfortable within. But there was time enough for that. A lifetime now the house was hers.

Besides, *they* were all in there, and she couldn't answer their questions about the inheritance, because they were the questions she was asking herself.

The straight black skirt she'd worn for the funeral, with its discreet back slit to allow short, polite strides was enough reason for failing to climb trees. She approached the greenhouse, in polite strides, by the path and not by the elm tree this time. The glass no longer revealed anything. Grime and murk smeared any visions of splendour. Or anything else.

Marianne felt she almost had to knock before entering. The door gave way to half-bunched knuckles. This was less of an invitation when the close smell of decay ventured out into the wider atmosphere. Her grandmother and Great-Aunt Aurora hadn't tottered very far from their beds toward the end. They'd both made it into their nineties so could be forgiven much — longevity being hereditary and relatives having an eye on their own lives as well as on the silver and real estate.

Dry, brittle fingers of neglected life rustled as Marianne pushed into the gloom. The same noise had prevailed in the church that morning: the black suits and dresses retained an over-starched rustle like outmoded taffeta, like paper cut-out finery to go with paper cut-out expressions of grief and remorse. The death of the two old sisters had been far from unexpected, still a joint funeral was a turn up for the books, and the family, with little practice in the past, had found it difficult to know how to compose their expressions at the service. No such ontological inhibitions masked the expressions at the reading of the will. *Silly old ducks*, went the eyebrows. *What had they been thinking of?*

Which, if any, of the dead plants were aspidistra, Marianne wondered, aspidistra being synonymous with old ladies. It wasn't her field. She knew a rose, but few flowers by any other name. But both the old women had liked their gardening; it must have been sad for them to watch their work wither, decay, die. And after Grandpa *went* and Celeste moved back to the family home and her spinster sister, they

would have watched each other do the same. Celeste and Aurora, as different as the night sky and the dawning day, yet dying within days of each other. How horrible to become so dependent on another you literally can't live without them, Marianne thought. Shared cups of tea, evenings by the electric bar heater, a boiled egg for tea, a bit of tatting.

Marianne knew her imagination could not equal the moments in their lives. She vaguely remembered there was something beyond tea and tatting, something exotic about the pair. Probably no mystery: no mystery beyond the unimaginable enigma of each and every life. Just a worldliness perhaps. In childhood, this garden had been as full of wonder as the Elysian fields, a world away from her backyard of lawn and camellias. Dead orchids brushed against her arm — forlornly.

Marianne moved the lifeless curtain of hanging orchids aside and all but stepped a well-heeled foot into a stagnant pond. Solid algae cracked and splashed up stinking water. Mid-stumble she reached out, and her hand found support on a statue, and her foot did not slide into the slime — until the eyes met hers. The smiling face on the stone was eroded and the crevices clogged with moss. In neglect, the smile was almost a smirk. It demanded she remove her grasp.

Marianne hurried from the greenhouse. Fleeing across the lawn yet again. The emerald algae slipped back over the water, and the shoe she left behind.

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'What is she doing out there?' muttered Richard, watching Marianne's progress from the kitchen window.

'Trying to look the part. Romantic and hopelessly bequeathed upon against the herbaceous borders,' suggested Tom.

Richard and Tom were her brothers and were allowed to be snide because, beneath the envy, they loved her.

For mousy, shy Marianne *had* got the lot. Their grandmother, to be fair, had in her lifetime been very generous to all the grandchildren. But her will, and that of her sister, were unequivocal. There was only one beneficiary. Not the oldest of the generation, nor the youngest, not the brightest, tallest, best looking nor most attentive to the needs and cares of the old women. Just Marianne.

The solicitor had called the family together in the living room of *Abbeyleigh* after the funeral, an outmoded way of going about things, but the old women had felt they couldn't be expected to move with fashion. She'd made the announcement before the teapot and egg sandwiches were completely done with. Uncle Samson was heard to call, 'What was that again?', from the back, mouth still half full of fruit cake, which he rather had a passion for and only got to enjoy at weddings — Mother and Aunt Aurora's funeral was somewhat of an added bonus. The solicitor had to repeat the news of Marianne Ladd's good fortune. Marianne made no comment in the stunned room. She was not there. She was off doing some dishes. Marianne's mother had to push her way into the kitchen to let her know.

It seemed the news was destined to be lost in the high ceilings, for the honking of hot water pipes pushed it up as it floated past and Marianne caught only half the message. But she'd inherited the lot: lock, stock and rising damp.

It wasn't long after this that Marianne was seen making her first tentative steps outside. She'd exited through the French doors that had previously seemed closed to her, over the verandah that had been the limit to friendly territory in her teenage years. Now, however, even the cold in the garden was no disincentive. The atmosphere was also chilly in the crowded living room, a dramatic drop in temperature being one of the symptoms of shock.

The contingent of cousins found her action insufferably proprietary and left the latest pot of tea to stew, all the better to stew in the comfort of their cars on the long drive back into Sydney. None of the various branches of the family tree were in need of the money, but the mythology of the family held that *Abbeyleigh* was the rich root from which they'd all sprung, the generous heart of a growing dynasty, the umbilicus down which nourishment would naturally flow — well at least a few thousand each to help with the mortgages.

Speculation on the sanity of the fusty old fossils was a central point in the heated debates that steamed up SAAB and BMW windows. Had they done it from spite? Or because of a — hitherto unnoticed — dubious sense of humour?

More closely related, and more generous in their tone, Marianne's immediate kin had scattered themselves on the

odd collection of chairs that had been relocated into the one room of the homestead for the reading of the will. They agreed on one thing: Grandma was a bit mad toward the end, and Great-Aunt Aurora, the object lesson of a spinster in a family, had always been so. 'But,' Marianne's mother added, 'perhaps Marianne does need the help more than you lot.'

Her tall and sensuous sons and beautiful Ruth were in control of life. They moved where they willed and gulped life down in huge hunks. But, where they were pelicans in their appetites, storing experience haphazardly, eagerly, in great beak-pouches, Marianne acted as if life would stick in her gullet and choke her. That it could be digested only in the tiniest of morsels. She was more timid than a sparrow. She was the shy one in the family.

Her mother could still see Marianne as a youngster. Always immersed in a book, mind absent, twirling her long plaits, refusing to have them cut as if they were ropes she could climb back up into childhood. They *had* been cut. She *had* grown up. But without ever coming home with that secret delirious look of an adolescent opening up the world for themselves. If this reticence extended to the sensuous and the sexual — oh naked bodies and looks of horror — well, it wasn't something a daughter told her mother about. But her mother wouldn't have been surprised.

This was not an outcome any mother expects from her bouncing babies. Marianne indeed had bounced as high as the rest. Maybe now though, a beautiful home and an

indigestible lump sum of dollars could offer her youngest freedom from the little cubbyhole at the university. Education was well and good, in its place, but the thesis had been scribbled on forever and her tutoring was helping others far more than herself.

'It is a lovely house too,' they all agreed. The original wattle and daub 1860s homestead was now a crumbling backdrop in a pastoral scene further out along the road, sold off with land and stock a generation before, and Marianne's house was a larger, more optimistic premises as befitted the heady days of Australian Federation. A bit of love and work would see it right. Plumbing, guttering, heating. A little more work in the garden. A swing could be hung among the wisteria again.

Marianne limped from behind her herbaceous borders then, a sorry, comical sight.

'Here comes Cinderella,' observed Tom. 'Our lucky little princess has lost her shoe.'

And why *had* Aurora and Celeste conspired to leave the family fortune to this undistinguished distant child?

Perhaps it was a retrospective bribe, as Marianne thought when she remembered the incident in the greenhouse. A reminder from the grave that the long ago liaison in the greenhouse was best unmentioned. Though

Great-Aunt Aurora's lover be a skeleton, that he should stay in the closet. Though his wife be also deceased, their offspring should not be confronted with his infidelity. Though Aurora may have been thought a dried-up, shrivelled spinster, she not have the contradiction and ignominy of promiscuity fastened to her memory. Though it be a myth, the lie of youth's sole claim to passion be upheld.

But Marianne *had* kept silent. She could have told the story, chapter and verse, but never had. So rather than a bribe, perhaps lifelong access to money and security was more a belated apology, a humble reparation to a curious, adventurous little girl who Aurora saw sitting more and more quietly in the corner during each successive visit to her grandmother. A way for a proud, spite-tongued woman to say: 'I'm truly sorry for the words that ripped at your innocent world, that took you from the treetops and planted your feet prematurely on the ground.'

Or, maybe it was none of that. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the conjectures that curled around Marianne's imagination as she stalked the garden. Perhaps, quite simply, the nonagenarians had been struck by Marianne's resemblance to the portrait of the woman who established *Abbeyleigh*, their own grandmother — and their only adventurous ancestor — Mary Ann Clarissa Purcell.

Chapter One

Mary Ann Clarissa Purcell set sail upon the vast Pacific Ocean in the year of Our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Sixty-Four. She said farewell to the bustle and noise of the Sydney waterfront as solid steamers and steady paddleboats ferried their human cargo on their journey out of Semicircular Quay to the safe harbour of homes on the North Shore. Mrs Purcell took many a backward glance at the comfortable villas above the Rocks, her own a shimmer of slate becoming more uncertain as the moments of departure proceeded with the tide, knowing that home was not to be her destination for years to come. Sadness mingled with the lowing of the dairy cows that grazed amid the construction of the colony. The breeze brushed as gently as freedom upon her bonnet and dried the tears: for she went for the love of her husband.

It was not to be forever, it was no epic adventure she was embarking upon. Brave and vain explorers had gone before, spreading their deeds and names across the map, and it was now the time of whalers, traders and missionaries,

following their sails and praying for riches, on Earth and in Heaven.

Captain Purcell was of the traders, and as honest a man as that breed produced. Not for him blackbirding, the trade in men, profit at too high a human cost. Neither did he move in the forests with the rich sandalwood trade, where £20,000 could be fetched in Canton for an outlay of £50 to the savages of the South Seas. Captain Purcell did not trade in mighty trees but in in lowly sea slugs. Bêche-de-mer, those lowly slugs — sometimes more appetisingly named sea cucumbers — when dried and cured, brought handsome profits, though not princely.

From the handsome profits came a handsome house, built of stone upon a foundation of rock as the Good Book directed, where Mrs Purcell, both the first and the second, could wait for the return of their Captain in the genteel comfort of silk and damask. The oceans stretched for years to the north. Islands scattered like moments in the journey, small and vibrant. They were a destination, a trade. Then on he sailed to the exotic shores of China, a country as vast as the seas themselves. It was an established trade route Captain Purcell followed, for China offered so much the civilised world desired — teas, silks, spices — and much trouble had been expended finding cargo to appeal to the Chinese elite in return. Trading of the furs of seals and otters died with the near extinction of the animals themselves, then the Pacific Islands offered up all a keen trader and

a finicky Chinese could desire: sandalwood, mother-of-pearl, turtle shell, edible birds' nests, and that delicacy of Chinese cuisine, bêche-de-mer. The *Westminster* left with trade goods for the islanders, time and again, and the years passed. Captain Purcell returned safely, time and again, to his waiting wife. His first devoted wife.

One day she was not waiting on the wharf; she was not waiting in the sitting room. Her Earthly wait was over. She was dead and buried and a year of letters from her husband, carried from ship to ship, lay unopened on the mantel. His long ignorance of her death was a burdensome addition to his grief. Nevertheless, before leaving the harbour again, Captain Purcell married the daughter of an old friend, a sea captain also, since retired to his family.

Mary Ann Clarissa, the second wife, was a well-educated woman — as testified by a series of governesses and two years at Mrs Rennie's High School for Girls — who had somewhere failed to attract a marriage in the years wherein she may have been described as most promising in looks and demeanour. The promise was fleeting and as she approached her third decade she remained in her father's house, teaching as day governess girls of class who would marry well and have children of their own, as natural progression demanded. There was no decision to be made when the kind and gentle widower twenty years her senior offered her his hand. Captain Purcell chose well. His bride knew her own father's life and watched her husband set sail, like him, with

equanimity. On the second passage, he took with him a finely painted portrait. On the third, she announced it need not go; she intended to come herself. No children from either marriage held her to the safety of cobblestoned streets and the brightness of gas lighting. And vivid tales induced her on.

It was unheard of, muttered the crew, before contradicting themselves with the dire story of a captain who lost his wife to cannibals — who'd mistaken her for something rather more tasty than she was. Not a word of this got to the ears of the determined caped figure on deck. Not that it would have changed her mind. On that last day in Sydney Harbour, watching the sails fluttering and dancing in the breeze, she fully intended to wander with the clouds, and make loneliness her friend.

Loneliness came, sure as the tide, but homesickness was soon swallowed up and vomited out by seasickness. The half light of the cabin, the muted, near-noise of life above, became her world. It was a suffocating cocoon, a retreat and a prison. It wrapped her up, and she rejected it in its entirety. Mary Ann Clarissa lay rigid on a constricting bunk, staring at each grain in the wood above, like stars so far away on a misty night, feeling each swell within and without her being. To be gone: to be at home or on an island at the end of the world, it made no difference. She only did not want to be here.

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Captain Purcell gave the signal for the second longboat to be lowered into the lagoon. He had gone ashore with a few loyal crew and the interpreter to make certain of his reception. Having visited this group of islands on countless occasions in the past he had learnt just one lesson: not to take anything for granted. The complexity of the savages' society was beyond his powers of interpretation, and he was a brave enough man to admit it.

Chief Utua had not greeted the Captain on the beach but was represented by his nephew, a man notable for his elaborate topknot, in this instance dyed a saffron yellow. Captain Purcell had previously had no time for the dandy, and was familiar enough with Chief Utua to know they agreed on this point. The Chief was not around to explain the surprising elevation of his proxy, but the visage beneath the topknot made adequate replies to all inquiries. His uncle — chief and master — was across the lagoon mourning the tragic death of his only son of a disease sounding alarmingly syphilitic, a fate of increasing prevalence thereabouts. There was a reassuring pile of sea slugs drying on the sand, eagerly collected by the island-men upon sighting the sails of the *Westminster* that morning. The black mass of bêche-de-mer made Captain Purcell feel safe. This was indeed his territory.

The wind rustled through the palm fronds above and caught the red handkerchief he raised. Impatience had the bulk of the crew on deck to witness the signal, and the

longboat ready. Mrs Purcell did not know if she was ready despite every wish and prayer, waking and sleeping, of the journey through. The low island had appeared on the horizon almost twenty-four hours since, a blur in the glass, that had grown more fertile in her imagination as the reality developed edges and height and surfaces: sand and palms and people. A few short minutes separated her from another world.

Old Sam steadied her over the rail and onto the ladder, a swinging descent of rope. The wind rustled through the rigging and caught the brown bell of her skirt. One hand preserved her modesty and the other her neck as she slithered onto the longboat. The wash of oar on water echoed and boomed in her head, then thudded into the sand. Water eddied about the little vessel and splashed gaily up about the sailor's stockings. Shouts came when they were a few feet away from dry land. Captain Purcell commanded the situation, though it was one beyond the ken of most ocean-going mariners. Mrs Purcell was induced into the arms of two savages. They made a seat with these arms, on which she balanced, her own arms clinging about their necks. Their skin was coarsened with salt: rough and unpolished, warm and living. She dared not look but breathed in the pagans and stared directly ahead. Thus Mary Ann Clarissa was transported dry and safe to the island of Ulanang.

What the native men thought of the first white woman to visit their atoll could not be discerned from their faces, but the other women were nothing if not bursting with

curiosity. A myth running through the community in the days of their grandmothers had told of the first coming of the pale race of aliens, men only, who marauded through the islands in need of the attentions of the gentler sex. Their need was so great that there could be only one explanation. Only on this momentous day was the basis of the myth finally, in flesh as well as mind, proved wrong. White men *did* have women of their own. One was now among them.

Women with brown skin, expanses of skin unclothed and unrestrained, young, old and ageless, appeared about Mrs Purcell as if by magic. From among the groves of pandanus, from far-off cookhouses, they came by urgent word to see. The white men must wait for their attentions today.

Mrs Purcell tried as she might to hide her fright. It was not as she expected. She had come to observe, not to be observed.

A withered hand reached forward from the anonymous crowd and pinched her lower arm. The pinched skin went whiter still. Mrs Purcell looked into a pair of astonished eyes and forgot the shock in the tweak of pain. There was no malice. Instinctively, a smile flashed between them — a wide toothless mouth and a parting of rosebud lips. It spread through the crowd and added a welcoming warmth to the artless curiosity.

'I must sit,' she laughed. The land did not feel as solid as she'd hoped. The motion of the waves had become a part of her bones, and the excitement had taken away the remainder of her equilibrium.

Her husband had not taken his eyes from her small figure in the encompassing mob. He heard her laugh and her plea, and saw a dilemma. A message went back to the ship and a chair was delivered to shore. It was set in the shade by the bêche-de-mer storehouse, a relic from a former visit. Mrs Purcell settled herself upon the straight-backed chair, the first white woman on the island on the first piece of furniture. The crowd formed a ring about her — like a crown of bright flowers — upon the ground. She realised then, for the first time, that they were not foreign. She was.

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Her appetite was exhausted quickly by the juice of a young coconut, a lumpy ball of unpronounceable starch and a key of bright-orange pandanus. Mrs Purcell's companions were uninhibited in the extraction of the strings of the pandanus fruit that became tangled in their teeth, but she, British subject, had to suffer the tightening ache. Once the subject of food was done, and since Mrs Purcell would not allow any of her court to lift her skirt, communication faltered. Relief rowed back to the barque with her.

Tomorrow, she vowed, she would get beyond the fringe — off the beach and into the minds of these fascinating people. Why did they wear flowers in their hair and so little else? What did the strange markings — like paintings — across their shoulders signify? What did they

think of the ship, the gifts of red cloth, the glass beads, of her clothing, her skin, herself?

But looking back across the waves she felt a tension in the air quite unlike the feelings of expectation only twenty-four hours before. She could see a theatre being performed on the beach, as if from the distance of the cheapest stalls. The Captain was commanding his crew back on board. The last longboat waited, restlessly fidgeting back and forth in the shallows. Gold light gilded each drop of water, each grain of sand. Seabirds screeched into the sky to announce the coming of darkness and the imperative of departure.

It was certain some of the men had had no plans to return to the barque to sleep. It was custom to seek pleasure, to reacquaint themselves with their 'wives' of years gone by, yet Captain Purcell remained adamant that they leave the island. They blamed his wife. They cursed her and felt a puritan cold laying waste the tropical night. The fires of the natives blazed brighter through the trees, mocking them. The dark bodies of the savages darkened further still. Chief Utua's nephew grew larger than life in the shadows, the villain in the staged drama, and the Captain's distrust of him magnified in proportion. The explanations of daylight failed to maintain a shine of truth. For it was not his wife's morals Captain Purcell was thinking of, but the absence of the Chief Utua throughout the day. How could he also overlook the non-appearance of the chief's close relatives and strongest warriors in all those hours?

He was being overcautious, the Captain knew, and he knew *that* was because of his wife's presence. But he could also see the valour in caution. There was no scarcity of stories concerning the fate of crew in cannibal waters, though, when a trader or whaler went missing, who was left to tell the true horror? If Chief Utua returned to the island the next day as his nefarious nephew had promised, the Captain would throw out his suspicions. But not until then.

The *Westminster*'s lamps were lit when the loaded longboat pulled to.

Supper was subdued. Mrs Purcell sat at table with the Master and the first- and second-mates and did not ask all the questions that sat impatiently on her lips. It was as if they were all listening for something.

Long before midnight the watch called a warning. There was still nothing to hear. A superstitious soul would say it was ghosts moving on the water.

To the west, the shapes of five canoes reproduced themselves ever larger. They came without torches, surely relying on the darkness to conceal their approach. The moon was their ally, but the Captain had posted an extra watch. The cannons were prepared.

'They have no business with us,' muttered Captain Purcell. Yet still they came.

Chapter Two

Marianne raised her head above the lightly lapping waves and struggled her body around into a sitting position. Pebbles grazed her knees, and then her knuckles as she tried to maintain this situation. It wasn't easy. Her tank was empty, thus buoyant, plus she'd blown her B.C. to its fullest extent to float her to the surface and couldn't remember how to release the air again. That her mask was half full of the salty water, and she couldn't remember how to clear it, was something else she wouldn't mention to Dan. She dragged the mask off and blinked into the sunlight. It had been murky below.

Her *buddy* Angela was slowly heaving her own equipment over the sandy embankment. Marianne was encouraged that she'd found someone so familiar looking, and thus trustworthy, for the underwater lessons. They'd smiled at each other a lot after the introduction, as Dan took them through the initial steps in scuba diving. Regulators, second stages, bootees, how not to die on the first day and so on.

They'd smiled at the same things, not necessarily Dan's jokes. It had all been pretty technical and off-putting even so, with no excitement in the eventual dive to refloat the spirits.

Two other heads, and lastly Dan's, bobbed up over by the wharf. That's as far as they'd got: the wharf. Just pottering around learning to breathe, to propel themselves with minimal movements, to be confident. The most interesting thing they'd seen was a nasty looking crack in one of the wharf's pylons. This was not Marianne's idea of diving in tropical waters.

The boys paddled over and they all left the enveloping warmth of the harbour water. Dan's property was bay-side, a prime spot — on paper. In reality it was a barely adapted and long-derelict warehouse on a patch of dirt. Marianne had ventured there three days earlier with her proposition.

Dan had not laughed. He'd merely observed: 'You'll have to learn to dive as the first step.'

But the first step had been taken long before.

And that first step had been as difficult as hauling all the scuba equipment out of the water. Gravity took hold of the equipment and added weight to weight. The five-kilogram weight belt of lead slabs was no longer an asset. 'Why am I doing this?' was her thought then, as it had been at that first step back in Australia.

Dan's students gathered about an old oil barrel and sluiced the equipment in fresh water. It would have felt good to guzzle the water down instead.

'My mouth's as dry as a cocky's bum,' confirmed Herbert. Marianne balked at the description. But she already had Herbert down as an arrogant — definitely cocksure — braggart who would never get things quite right. She could have been wrong in her estimation: Angela seemed to hang off his every word and was eager to pick up the suggestion. Soon they were all piled into Herbert's hire car and heading around the cape. Dan waved them off with a parting warning about their dry thirst, a consequence of breathing tank air, he explained. The temptation was to toss everything back — cola, juice, water, beer, whatever hit the mouth first. 'Be careful,' he offered complacently. They weren't. After all, Dan didn't look like a man who said no to too many beers.

'A real honey,' Angela giggled from a face propped on hands three schooners later.

Dan had the type of looks that weathered well: the sun wrinkles and sun-bleached hair, the height, the breadth of shoulders, the scar above the left eyebrow. He was intimate with the reef, with the danger of sharks, and, most attractively, with freedom.

'Pity about the wives,' chipped in Herbert.

Marianne's companions and fellow divers were all accountants, young recruits to a firm that wasn't going to waste experienced personnel auditing the government accounts of an obscure Pacific Island nation. International experience looked good on their resumes, and in the meantime, they *were* in paradise.

'Three little dark wives,' patronised the only accountant with glasses.

Marianne was their new audience and they'd got the shocked reaction angled for.

'Not all at the same time,' reassured Angela. 'Successive versions, but all from the same family they say.' Angela found the latter quite extraordinary, and Marianne put her judgment of Dan on hold.

'Then there's Mr Ninety Thousand over in the corner with his little miss. And Mr Seventy Thousand with yet another girl by the bar.'

It was some kind of game. White men, high salaries, dainty local women. Point them out like zoo exhibits. Spot the prostitute.

In the subdued lighting of the bar, open on three sides to the sea, as the sun was set to retire for the night, it was still obvious that the women in question had not been sparing with the make-up. Nevertheless, Marianne found herself balking again at Herbert's assertions. Prostitutes? She'd seen as much lipstick and blusher on a horde of chaste Catholic girls heading for a Good Night Out. She did not say anything. The three had been on the island a whole month and knew everything; Marianne had landed less than a week before. She did not want to jeopardise the night. She had found something familiar amid the culture shock, even if it was Australian yuppies.

Herbert suggested lobster. Marianne cracked mighty claws and savoured succulent white flesh as darkness painted

over the view and flaming torches and mosquito coils were lit. It was hard to believe she was there. She'd send a postcard to her mother tomorrow.

There'd been no indication that Marianne would be straight off to the islands at the first whiff of a sunken treasure ship. None of her generation had shown any interest in the detail of family history, merely laughing at the ghost ship in the Christmas myth-telling of their youth. But then, the holiday stories had divested the *Westminster* of its treasure, and thus, most of its charm.

An etching of the favourite barque of Captain Purcell, founding father and Master Mariner, had, for as long as family memory served, been a feature on the wall of the second spare bedroom. After him the family was landed. Farmers were made out of them and the call of the sea ceased to rustle in the gums. Seemingly solid Anglo stock bred and prospered in the most unremarkable fashion. Only the slightest of scandals rumoured a dubious *marrying-in*. The Captain's daughter, Ann, was saved from spinsterhood, and their branch of the family from extinction, by a man who may, or may not have had, in one degree or another, Aboriginal blood. No one wanted to say much, least of all anything definite, on the taint. It would never be fashionable

in their circles to do so, and the matrons and menfolk relied on the bones of all skeletons being white.

Then Marianne started digging around in her inheritance. Boxes and boxes of it, in, above and under the fixtures and fittings. The Depression could not be blamed for all the hoarding as the family trait predated times of economic uncertainty and Marianne herself found the disposal of things, particularly those of paper, problematic. Maybe heirs should have a bonfire steadily burning, the papertrail of life belonging to the funeral pyre. But each succeeding generation in her family had made do with a shoe box instead.

The faded and frayed once-crimson ribbon alerted Marianne to the love letters. They were in a box with a copy of *The Sydney Gazette* from the beginning of 1865. Each letter told of an enduring love. A small article, in small type, reported the destruction of the *Westminster* in a typhoon off a small Pacific Isle called Medolan. All hands lost. The love letters, necessarily, ended there.

It all seemed rather sad, in a distant, unconnected sort of way. Poignant where her own on-again-off-again relationship with her professor was pointless. Curious how clearly she saw that when they were apart. The letters to Mary Ann Clarissa blazed with honesty while Marianne was scratching around for kindling.

That made it easier to leave.

Time away from *Abbeyleigh* in the Mitchell Library made it even easier. She went there to search for answers

to questions unanswerable from the letters. In the shoe boxes, tied up with ribbon, there were many letters from the Captain to his wife and a few, close to the date of the tragedy reported in the newspaper, from her to him. Yet they were not sending their earnest communications from ship to safe harbour, Sydney. The letters came from distant points in the South Seas. Mary Ann Clarissa must have sailed with her husband, then been left on this Medolan, the island written in the directions on the discoloured letters. Medolan needed research, for where was the little isle Mary Ann Clarissa wrote from? Where, and why, had she found a home there after her brave departure from Sydney to stand by, and with, her mate?

The Mitchell library provided one certain fact. The *Westminster* was on her return journey from China when the tragedy overtook the barque. Her load of bêche-de-mer, pearls and trochus shell had been sold. For gold. King Neptune had been made a good deal richer.

Marianne was not jealous of the king of the oceans: but here she found a reason to leave *Abbeyleigh*. She was not a greedy woman either, but who can resist the lure of gold and treasure? She would stake her inheritance on a search for this century-old booty, she decided in an uncensored flash. Booty, treasure, riches — words spun in her head. All descriptions far more romantic than the reality of mercantile profit. But this was nothing to do with reality. Riches were not really expected in some castle in the sky or beneath the

oceans, of course. This was the twenty-first century. She was dreaming in no fool's paradise. But paradise … How often that word appeared as if synonymous with the Pacific.

The shell of *Abbeyleigh* felt brittle, she rattled around in it unsure of her fit, like a hermit crab mistakenly adopting a tin can as a home. Both yearned for a perfect shell, delicate and all-encompassing, waiting on a silken beach.

It was the night she rocked in Great-Aunt Aurora's chair that the decision was made. Mary Ann Clarissa was talking to her from her last letter. *The crag rises up behind the house you built me in this cocoanut grove. It shelters me from the winds, those winds that blow you across the ocean. You will be heartened that I am protected by such beauty. Green and thriving with life. It beckons me up …*

It beckons me up. The shoe box fell from Marianne's lap, scattering letters on the rug. Marianne bent forward but the chair creaked a protest and rocked her back. Wine and the midnight hour hampered a further attempt to rise and tidy the litter of paper. Rocking inevitably back, forward, back, moving and going nowhere, Marianne was paralysed. The chair could have lifted its arms in a tight embrace and trapped her no better. Those long spindly arms that could not comfort, only contain.

The inheritance, a homestead to call her own, solid and secure, was something for the end of a story. For a happy-ever-after resolution. But she had yet to live her life of adventure.

'I don't want to grow old rocking with you,' she sobbed in Great-Aunt Aurora's hateful chair. Yet her mind was still clear enough to see her cries as pathetic. Then sleep, heavy and claustrophobic, robbed her of the wishing.

Only the hearty tapping on a door dancing with sunbeams stirred Marianne from her cramped dreams. Her mother, soon inside and fussing life into Fifties laminex and Seventies aluminium, laughed at the notion of a treasure hunt.

'Leave it alone,' was her advice. 'And have a cup of tea.' She had the kettle on the boil and the tea bags dangling. Marianne felt she could never be so efficient in the morning. Never so practical. 'Leave this wreck in the ocean,' said Mrs Ladd. 'Legend is always more exciting than reality.'

Marianne looked at her mother, really looked, for the first time in decades. So life had failed to be exciting for her.

'You wouldn't have gone given the chance?'

'No.' But there was a pause first.

The cup of tea was exactly what Marianne needed to focus the legend into reality. Come the end of term, she would begin the search in Medolan.

At that stage, Marianne did not realise there is no need for a reason to drift to the islands. Oceania demands no rational justification, no goal or ambition, no treasure hunt. Life had

drifted in from time's start and would to time's end. So long ago it is forgotten, canoes brought a honey-skinned people who built homes and families. Then white men deserted their ships and combed the beaches, convicts escaped from Australia to sandy havens and forgot to return to the mother country. Men came to trade and stayed. In the white men's history, the South Seas had the combined reputations for promiscuity and cannibalism. Everyone wanted their pound of flesh.

Chapter Three

Angela was quite sincere when she asked Marianne to come and live at the house. Living alone with two men is not actually a widespread female fantasy; doing the dishes and cleaning the toilet for one, is bad enough. Though sisterly companionship was a feature in Angela's offer, it wasn't put in quite those domestic terms. She did say: 'It would help with the rent. And it's plenty big enough.'

Marianne ignored the Americanism and agreed. Moses, manager of the hotel and upstanding member of the church, was trying to make her room in his establishment all too comfortable. For a long-term resident he could cut rates, install a gas ring, a bar fridge, and could regularly appear with a bottle of French wine and a foot in the door. Marianne had grave difficulty working through the implications of outright rudeness and violence to his thonged foot. Colonial history and her freckled white skin conspired to doubts of cultural sensitivity. Avoidance seemed the only solution.

Moses gallantly provided the hotel van to move her one suitcase and two boxes, the latter accumulated in the week on-island. Only seven and a half days since he'd first handed her into the rusting vehicle, part of a corroding panel flaking into her lap as he slammed the door. The name of the hotel, barely discernible on that door, alone reassured Marianne of her position. Though the travel agent in Sydney had booked a single room in The Ocean View, Moses had shown no recognition of her name.

'We do have a room,' he'd offered after a brief dispute over the existence of a reservation.

A room but no ocean view. The reception faced a gravel road, and beyond that, the real Pacific. However, the rooms themselves backed into urban Medolan, a jungle of corrugated iron and the occasional banana tree sheltering there from the reflected glare of the sun. The people had crushed themselves into the strip of land rimmed on one side by the lapping waves, circumscribed on the other by the mountains. Naked crags shot up ominously. For the first time, Marianne had to consider that the world may have changed since the days of her ancestor. Nothing beckoned her up.

Politely prising away the octopus arms of Moses before unpacking into the empty house of the accountants who'd gone to work, Marianne had to acknowledge the reality her family had been at pains to throw up when trying to dissuade her from going. Medolan did not vibrate with

adventure. This was no W. Somerset Maugham colonial villa: the verandah here was a slab of concrete laid for an unattributable purpose that accidentally gained some shade from the overhanging eaves of the house. She sat on its edge and searched the ocean for a clue. A clue to confirm her presence and decant the doubts from her excuse of a treasure hunt.

Coconut palms stood in sentinel lines along the shore, littering the attempt at a garden with golden nuts. The palms were a short walk through bougainvillea and aspiring lawn, and the tides walked upon the sand beyond. Marianne had caught them at a time when they were far off. This low tide exposed the reef flat and a graveyard of history: the upended hull of an old boat, a rusted, disused anchor point, the limbs of fallen trees. Further out a second reef, the barrier reef, was a dark shadow in the water halfway to the horizon. The *Westminster* was, perhaps, a darker trace imposing itself upon the shadow. Dan had taken her seriously. So, was she really crazy to be there?

Angela explored the theme with her later over dinner. They'd planned to eat outside but dusk brought the mosquitoes and they hadn't bought the coils. They sat in the kitchen on unmatched chairs instead, just the two,

accepting the prior engagements of Herbert and Ralph, and ignoring the cockroaches. There was some accommodation on Medolan for foreigners that was indistinguishable from luxury harbourside units in any location across the world. These were, however, expensive, much sought after and further from town, in an area named — without any intended irony — the North Shore. Of this bungalow, Angela boasted a purely Medolanese charm.

She was troubled by other charms in Medolan and thought both she and Marianne *were* crazy to be there.

'What did your captain's wife say about the place? Bet the problems haven't changed,' Angela remarked across a mug of cheap Californian wine.

'In her letters she actually reserved a lot of criticism for the missionaries.'

'Yes, you'll meet the missionary types,' Angela pontificated, 'and all these born-again Gauguins.' She degraded her accent at Gauguin to leave no doubt the man was removed from the artist.

'Where are the men tonight?' Marianne asked, finally noticing where Angela was leading.

Marianne had been unaware of the significance of her shared bedroom with Angela, but was now to discover it was the result of Herbert's insensitivity. Herbert had not felt compelled to act upon the *atmosphere* that had been growing between him and Angela. Angela had felt — and felt he should have felt — that the most obvious shared-room

arrangement was between him and herself. But he hadn't suggested the new arrival have a room of her own. He hadn't invited Angela to place her pillow next to his. So, to answer Marianne, Herbert was in town at a bar, as — speculated Angela — were most of the raven-haired, almond-eyed young women of Medolan.

Never an overly effusive conversationalist, Marianne thought it best not to follow this line of disgruntlement. Any answer would put her in an awkward position, as in any friendship, of having to give a confidence in return. She was wary of revealing the exact object of her search for her ancestors; and if Angela talked of love, Marianne would be compelled to pay her with talk of gold. And both subjects would sound ridiculously embarrassing when the sun came up and the wine wore off.

In the beginning, there were volcanoes and earthquakes of more immense proportions, moved to action by other than human heartache. The landscape shifted and changed, new land erupted into substance, life cooled from the volcanic ash. Coral polyps colonised a skirt about a craggy, volcanic island, a persistent ring that survived as the island slowly slipped into the ocean. Only the highest peaks stood above the waves, enduring, and flourishing, as Medolan.

Marianne could see the barrier reef of coral polyps etched black in the diorama at the National Museum. Her class had made a similar papier-mâché model in Form Two, creatively moulded and artistically painted, a B+ piece of work, but one that, in her mind, had no relation to the Earth. The reef represented in the museum was in reality a shadowy grey in the ocean through the window behind, but the notion that she stood on an extinct volcano remained unreal. The past, prehistory, was too difficult to make sense of. She was, after all, at the museum to inquire about a much more recent event. She wanted information on early contact with the colonial powers, what she mistakenly thought of as the beginning of recorded history. Oral tradition and the continuation of life events in stories was not in the curriculum of her Sydney high school nor the Statistics Department at her university.

No one else was in the museum. The modest room thrummed only with airconditioning. Every tourist on the island did manage a visit, but there were never many tourists, and that day Marianne was greeted simply by the tinkling of a small bell above the front door and a pocket of cool air in the overcoat heat of the midday temperature.

A second diorama captured her attention after her initial examination of nascent geography and a cheerfully bright national flag. Back in Form Two they had studied the Pyramids of Egypt, Stonehenge of England, the Acropolis of Athens, the Colosseum of Rome, the rock art of Lasceaux,

Ziggurats, burial tombs, lost cities found, the bizarre statues of Easter Island, mysteries of the known world and the darker regions, but no textbook and no teacher had ever mentioned a wonder in this unrenowned corner so close to home. It was a Lost City that was never lost, but one the tour operators had yet to find. In fact, the first mention Marianne had heard of the archaeological enigma was from Dan. He'd suggested they have a dive around the foundations of the Old City at the end of the course. Old City: old, decaying, cracked. It unfortunately became confused in her subconscious down with the level of excitement engendered by cement wharf pylons.

Yet Kiti Medolan, the old, the ancient Medolan, *was* awe-inspiring. It looked more like something from a creative imagination than reality, even in polystyrene replica.

'Have you been out to Kiti Medolan?' asked an unexpected voice at her shoulder.

'No,' she had to reply after a start. 'Not yet.'

'If you walk you must go at low tide, or there are those who hire out boats for the excursion,' said the young man.

Marianne turned to him wondering if he was one of those in the boat hire business. He seemed very young, but neatly dressed and too respectable looking for a tout.

Benjamin interpreted her silence incorrectly as an opening for more information, and explained that the old city was built on a man-made island about a hundred metres from the mainland. He tried to be judicious in his use of

words, had been educated to such sensitivity, but could not eradicate the description of *man-made*. Very little was known about the construction of the site, but unless it had been angels, it was generally assumed it had been the men doing the making.

'It is not known who constructed the city,' he admitted to the white tourist. 'It was perhaps twelve to eighteen centuries ago. Rocks were quarried at three locations in the mountains, basalt being the favoured stone in the temples and the royal quarters. As you can see …' He pointed to the diorama, lightly rubbing dust further into the pores of the polystyrene roof of the central edifice.

Though not what she had come to find out about, Marianne looked back down and appreciated the choice of basalt. The black stone, when hewn into logs, had a naturally hexagonal cross-section. It was a lot more appealing than a brick.

'There are seventy-one separate structures, ranging from …'

'Well actually …' murmured Marianne, never quite comfortable interrupting and only helped to it by Benjamin's youth, and colour.

'Yes?' prompted Benjamin. As a brown man educated at a white university, he had learnt diffidence as a practical tool.

'Do you have anything on …' Marianne hesitated, realising her interest was insultingly ethnocentric, 'on the, well, the white people who came here last century?'

Benjamin smiled. His people were used to the intrusion of strangers. First, the tribe from the gods who came to build Kiti Medolan, then the white men whose pale skin, it was quickly discovered, did not make them gods. Now the strangers came by air not sea, but little else changed.

'That is my mother's area of expertise. She will be able to assist you,' he offered as he moved away, presumably to fetch her.

A nice young man, Marianne was left thinking as she waited. Then a woman, past middle-age but not yet old, appeared at the door he'd entered. A white woman, short, wiry, grey-haired, dressed in an island equivalent of tweeds.

Marianne floundered in her inability to cope with this colour business. It may have been a black and white question but there were no black and white answers. Could this woman's white blood have left no trace in her son's skin? Maybe she was a member of a religious order, Holy *Mother*, a great and respected matriarch?

'Your … the young man, thought perhaps you could help.'

Maud examined Marianne, lifting the spectacles from a chain about her neck to her eyes. The look made Marianne self-conscious, though it shouldn't have: Benjamin's mother was merely seeing another tourist. Still, Marianne felt obscurely glad the heat had stopped her from wearing make-up, as if this added to her credibility.

'I was wondering if you had any information on early traders in this region?'

'Of course. There are several books on the subject in our library, and we are fortunate to have a variety of original documents in the archives. Are you a student of this particular topic?'

'No. It's more of a family interest. A distant relative was a trader.'

'Indeed?' Maud commented, interest entering her voice.

'His wife seems to have lived on Medolan at one time.'

Maud let her glasses fall to her bosom and blinked her eyes to really focus on Marianne. 'Indeed.'

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Marianne left the museum in a state of some considerable agitation. She had come to the conclusion that she was there to seek, but not to find. She wanted the adventure, but not necessarily the treasure. Yet the museum curator had talked of treasure: the actual journal of Mary Ann Clarissa Purcell, written during her sojourn, abandoned on her departure, archived in the building behind her. It was all becoming real. If so, the *Westminster* could really be wrecked out there.

Speculating before she left Australia, her sister Ruth told Marianne she was hanging herself on the old cliché of running away to find herself. Marianne had half admitted this *was* her quest for more than what she was, what she had. But, if the Holy Grail was waiting at the end, the adventure was finite, and thus it would end. What then? She wanted the search to go on and on, with a life of its own, overtaking hers. Then she would not have to go back to her own.

It was not surprising, given her inner struggle, that Marianne almost missed Herbert and Ralph, pursuing their own adventure with somewhat less introspection than Marianne. The young women, a step behind, closely resembled, though were not, the beauties preferred by Misters Ninety and Seventy Thousand. There was something of an illicit liaison in the air around them, generated by Herbert's laugh. Marianne had heard it before, on each of the three nights in the last five that Angela had not come to bed in the room she purported to share with Marianne.

If Marianne's thoughts were perverse — finding something to fear in the excitement of a journal found — Angela's were worse. What *was* Angela thinking of? She was an attractive woman in the ordinary blonde way, yet she'd fallen in love with the type who'd never outgrown an adolescent pre-sex giggle, and who was determined to take a bite of the boy's own island fantasy.

It was not as if Angela herself was unaware of these failings. She knew the object of her love well enough to be

crying when Marianne got back to the house. This had not been a good Saturday.

'It's always the same. I was warned. It's these islands. Paradise? Just sex. Always sex. It screws everything up.'

Chapter Four

Mrs Purcell was in the missionaries' house alone. Voices murmured like mosquitoes, insinuating themselves through straw and thatch, deciding her future while she sat.

From where she sat, she could see a scene from that future, a square of life, a white woman in brown berating a brown man in very little as she manoeuvred three gaunt cows back into their corral. The man in the drama bowed his head and was silent, not understanding, or understanding too well. The Europeans had introduced the cloven-hoofed beast to the island, they hungered and marauded through the food gardens, obstinately gaining freedom from a pen of wood. The man born in Medolan was hungry too.

The glass window Mrs Purcell watched through was another introduction, a transparent memory of civilisation in a two-roomed barbarian hut. Small lizards rustled through the thatch and rigging above and a baby whimpered in a crib by the window, but neither sound obscured the words of male voices: the negotiation between trader and missionary.

Captain Purcell found the interview more than difficult. Years of contact and observation had not endeared the missionaries to him as a breed. Some were indeed sincere in their belief and endeavours to save the souls of the pitiful heathens, but he'd long decided they were misguided, narrow in their minds, limited in their intelligence, simplistic in their treatment of the converted, more inclined to punishment than compassion and, most importantly, an obstacle to efficient trading of the riches in the islands. That this missionary viewed the trading captain with matching antagonism required no comment: Captain Purcell had heard it from many a pulpit in the past. Yet he put away his pride with a prayer to God and asked the towering, black-eyed preacher to take that which he loved most in the world into his care.

That which he loved most was attempting not to listen. Mrs Purcell tried to concentrate instead on the missionary's loved possessions, distributed through the two rooms, the one Rev. Oldfield had led her into, and the other visible beyond a timber door frame and dominated by a floating gauze cocoon of mosquito netting. Beneath was a mattress filled with banana leaves. Another would have to be made for the captain's wife and she would learn to appreciate its comfort. And she would hug a feather pillow, claimed from the *Westminster*, to her each night.

Closer to where she sat were other mementoes of another world. A barometer, a clock, a meat safe, and a mirror

that fascinated the natives above all else. Were they seeing their faces in God's world?

Not all was introduced. The chair Mrs Purcell sat upon, and the table she rested her hands upon in an imitation of repose, had not been carried there, but were created out of the wood of a fallen breadfruit tree in the early days of the mission. Though a printer by trade, the missionary Rev. Oldfied took to the task of carpentry to exhibit to this immoral child-race the power of industry and diligence, setting an example — as illustration to the words he preached — to the woefully slothful indigenes. And did it not enter his mind, as he ground and polished light into the wood from which he'd take his daily bread, that God had perhaps given to these heathens too much in the way of Earth's bounty? A livelihood dropped from the trees and waited patiently to be caught in the oceans, and thus all energy was left to sport — to games of love and war. It was a slippery, too easy, path to hell. Determinedly, he taught them the way to Heaven, steep and arduous, but with God waiting open-armed at the gates of Everlasting Life. He taught through the word: the powerful word given substance in the *written* form.

In the corner of the sitting room, a corner closest to the sleeping quarters, was the Rev. Oldfield's instrument of miracles: his printing press. A new building was under construction across the courtyard to house the chattering machine, for it had arrived only recently, a little before the

last typhoon season. For the ten years before that he had laboured at learning the barbaric tongue and translating God's beautiful messages of doom and hope. As necessary had been the task of teaching the men to read. Now the Ten Commandments, the Catechism, Hymns and Psalms fell from the press in a slow torrent and were greedily accepted by the eager natives of his congregation.

Mrs Purcell had heard before of the power of the written word.

It seemed so long ago: Ulanang, that paradise with a lagoon of blood. How they had talked of it the journey through. Stories and entertainments; and not a mention since their leaving.

Captain Purcell, so he told her as an introduction to one tale, had always included among the usual trade items — iron pieces, pocket knives, looking glasses, combs, beads, and earrings, the useful and the pretty — another item for this cannibal isle alone. Discovering them both practical and decorative, these natives had a love of books.

The first book had arrived with a castaway two decades previously. Though the fate of the sailor was unknown, the destiny of his tome was a popular piece of folklore oft told to passing traders and oft rewarded with more books. The chief's wife and her two cousins were credited as the central figures in the comedy; it was they who quite misread the purpose of the book. They picked up the fat volume and ran their fingers over the strange markings

with fascination. And they ripped out the spine and revelled in the leaves, and drew them together with a length of sennit rope, reconstructing the images into delightful skirts to the envy of the other women.

Catastrophe struck with the first downpour. Those bewitching markings washed away, running back to their own world, and the three grand dames hastened back to their homes in a state of immodesty. The village laughed along with them, for it was the greatest lark. White man's tattoos may not be as beautiful or durable as their own, they decided, but they became a popular accessory. Captain Purcell had been happy to provide penny-thrillers to be cannibalised into clothing.

The clothing on Medolan, Mrs Purcell had already had time to note, was not of this provenance. There was no humour in it. Those copper-skinned men and women converted to the Church, and those fearful of the power of the white men, dressed as the mission dictated fit. Men were trousered, their chests covered, and the women were uniformly apparelled in snuff-coloured smocks and hideous coal-scuttle bonnets.

Mrs Purcell drew back from the contrast. For it was safer here. Trusting in God, and going in naivety where the very angels of the Lord and the traders of the merchants feared to tread, the missions had, it seemed, subdued the populace of many islands. Meeting the savages for the first time, in full knowledge of their treacherous and cannibal

history, God's teachers — cotton-spinners, cobblers, gardeners and doctors — had believed with every step that God would restrain the violence of the heathens. God may not have on every occasion, still the missionaries persevered. They built on the foundation of martyrs and wrestled souls from the devil.

Rev. Oldfield paced outside in time to Mrs Purcell's thoughts. Never moderate in his practice, he paced as if in a perpetual struggle with the enemy. But he listened well to the colonial Captain Purcell before replying.

A second hut, next to the new print-shop, could be constructed, given financial recompense. A fixed duration of some six months was not beyond contemplation. Mrs Oldfield could well do with help in the household.

Mrs Oldfield, now feeding the incarcerated cattle, looked across at her husband and the stranger and considered the last to be an intrusion. Life was not easy on Medolan, and this without another burden in the form of a frivolous white woman. She had the cattle, the garden, the mission work, and she had her children.

Bringing up children in God's way was so very difficult when civilisation ceased to exist outside their own four walls. Beyond her work in the Church, this was Mrs Oldfield's real mission. Letters delivered sporadically from home, well-intentioned epistles arriving along with children's mission boxes for the heathens, were hungrily awaited. Growing numbers of nieces and nephews, and a loving picture of the

family hearth through tribulations and joys were described, but regardless of the anticipation, the descriptions caused only envy and bitter anger. Her mother, her sisters, the best friend of her youth, did not understand, as if they had never tried to understand, her and Medolan. They could not see the dangers here for her own children.

News from other missions in the far-flung barbarian world was equally distressing. Trouble with children in the reports overwhelmed her. When they were older, those Christian children born and reared among the savages were irretrievably contaminated. Promiscuity infected them. If the widow of a missionary could marry a savage, and the rumours spread far that this was so, what hope for the impressionable young? Girls no better than prostitutes, boys a mother could only deny. So a wall was being built, a high wall, taller than eyes, stronger than curious prying, to encircle Mrs Oldfield's garden, a wall within the confines of the mission station. The savage life beyond held no direct fears for her, nor the hunger of the cattle for her garden crops. The cattle would all be lost, one by one, by fair means and foul, but Mrs Oldfield was not going to fail the children God left in her care.

Should she be asked about the wall by the Captain's wife, Mrs Oldfield was sure she would understand. The converted native women in the congregation understood the reason for it: the wall was built for love. Only wrong could come of allowing her offspring society with the savages, and a mother must do what is best for her child.

Mrs Purcell had been looking at the wall being constructed, but then she had turned and was looking through the glass casement at Mrs Oldfield's face, in time to see that she was considered an intrusion here. She did not wish to intrude.

'Take me with you,' she had pleaded once her husband's intention had become clear on the *Westminster*. 'I would have you and cannibals before the piety of a corralled mission.'

The Captain had been stern, and countered her objection. 'We may not find ourselves in company with their low rank at home but the missionaries are men of God and you will stay.'

How could he misinterpret her so wildly? The knowledge of her superiority in position to her hosts had not motivated her disobedience to her husband's command. She was a gentlewoman, but also a woman of compassion. She objected not, she explained, to being left with the missionaries, but to being left.

Her husband had not the words to explain himself. His love and his fear warred in his breast. He had thought to save her life, the life he loved, that night off Ulanang, but the price had been death. How many deaths?

The night stood, without the relief of time, in the Captain's mind. His wife quelled its memory with the trivia of her surroundings. But the memory would not go.

Five canoes, there were only five native proas, not large though some could carry upwards of a hundred warring men and, on long journeys, women and children too. They came silently out of the night to a cry of 'Sail ho!' from the top rigging. Mrs Purcell had listened from her cabin to the muted exchange. 'Where away?' 'Starboard bow, right to windward.' Time passing. 'Where now?' 'Right ahead.'

Movement. 'Hand up the small arms. Look alive now, look alive!'

Pistols and swords were served out to all hands, boxes of broken glass were placed in readiness should the enemy board — should they come to that they would come to broken glass scattered on the deck.

It would not come to that.

The guns were loaded, each filled with one round of shot, more grapeshot ready in the hatchways. So much weaponry for a simple trading ship. Thirty crew awake and alert, the few islanders, those from the Philippines, the Captain's fellow white men and his Chinaman cook. And the one white woman, awake and alert, his wife.

No individual figures could be made out in the darkness, on any of the vessels in the lagoon, even as they came closer together. Was it old Chief Utua and his closest family coming back to greet the *Westminster*'s arrival? Or his pompous nephew coming for a nameless, villainous purpose? No shout to identify the party, no hail of a conch, reassured the Captain straining his

eyes and all his senses. He shouted his own warnings, in English, in their language. But no reply.

The native canoes moved in formation, in a triangle of phantasms.

'What chance?' considered the Captain responsible for all the lives on his ship.

The proas were fifty feet from the ship. He thought to aim high, but his words thought better. Cannon retorts roared through the stillness. And then came the reply. The stricken cries of Sodom and Gomorrah. Or the innocents under Herod's sword.

The *Westminster* cleared the reef at first light.

At Medolan the barque waited only until a suitable domicile was erected for Mrs Purcell before returning to the whispering of the open sea. The departure was formal and hasty, watched by many eyes. Even in private the Captain could not reveal his whole heart. He could never lie to Mary Ann Clarissa but the whole truth was for his conscience alone, and it made his heart heavy.

Captain Purcell knew he was leaving his wife to protect her from the dangers he should have seen at the outset. She needed protection and he needed her to survive, for he had truly found a noble love in his ageing years. But he

did not feel noble. A plague of guilt threatened his peace. There was the guilt for placing her in real danger, and more. There was the unavoidable certainty that the night on Ulanang lagoon would have been different had his wife not been on board the *Westminster*. Would he have acted so hastily, fired so decidedly in other circumstances? No. Lives were lost in his haste to save her. It could still well have come to that, on the night, as the canoes came closer, but doubt is a powerful wedge and there had been those he'd considered friends on Ulanang.

The last words Mary Ann Clarissa heard him speak were a stilted speech of deepest devotion and everlasting commitment. She clung to them for comfort and shelter as the barque dropped from the horizon, as if it had fallen from the edge of the world itself.

Chapter Five

Marianne finished the journal account of the treacherous attack in Ulanang lagoon with a vague feeling of disbelief. The contemporary reputation of Pacific Islanders was for such friendliness, openness, indeed, such passivity. Tourist brochures boasted of these traits and she herself had encountered no hint of a warrior race since her arrival on the island. Cannibals were storybook characters and this whole tale had the ring of a boy's own adventure. Yet there was no reason for it to be an embellishment: there was no indication Mary Ann Clarissa at any time envisaged a publisher for her writing.

The writing was dense and spider-like, crawling on tiny legs across unlined pages in a leather-bound book, bought, it seemed, especially for the voyage, starting as it did the first day on the first page with little preamble. '15 February 1864. Today we sailed from Sydney Harbour.' Confronted with the vast expanses of ocean and white page, the adventurer became self-conscious and stumbled. 'I am to travel with my

husband on board his barque, *The Westminster*, it is a trading voyage, as his are, to the Pacific, for a cargo to trade in China, for bêche-de-mer which I cannot myself eat. I have begun the adventure with a terrible seasickness.'

There was no other entry for a month. Marianne envisaged a truly terrible seasickness, though an unremarkable passage without storm or mutiny could just as well explain the break. Which is just how easy it is to miscolour the past.

Maud had suggested, and it may have been patronising but Marianne admitted its sense, that she do a little reading *around* the subject, to learn to appreciate the journal more fully. That she was ignorant was readily apparent. On being handed the hard burgundy book, her first impulse was to flick and fly and know it all, at once.

'Oh dear, she calls them natives and savages,' she said, glancing from entry to entry.

'Try not to judge by the standards of ethnic sensitivity and political correctness in our era,' Maud had reprimanded. 'Your ancestor was a remarkable woman.' Maud had then made her suggestion and introduced Marianne to the archive.

There was much to read and Marianne considered the archive a refuge from the first day she was invited into the converted broom cupboard where the brooms and mops were still kept. For all the cleaning tools, Maud Jones was a professional: she had the room climatically controlled, had installed a generator for the times — regular — of power

breakdown, and white gloves were requisite attire when touching any of the older archive material. The national government saw no importance in paper and forgotten words so most of the material had been retrieved from the trash can of history, and too much had been lost to the same. Maud had a passion to balance this official disinterest, bringing a Western bias for facts to her adopted country.

Adoption was a tradition she had soon discovered on arrival thirty-two years before. Adoption of children among families, and, when foreigners turned up on their shores, adoption of them into the households of the chiefs. The castaways and runaways were treated with magnanimity, given accommodation, food and wives, while it was understood they must share their knowledge and arms with their new family, to their fullest advantage. Young men of humble background became Prince and General, and some decided to leave on the first available ship nonetheless, and to publish their exploits. Others, nameless, stayed until old age carried them off, and others still were killed for nothing more serious than chance and the whim of the gods.

Chance had put the younger Maud Jones into a family of middle rank, related to the family of the ultimate chief by calculated matrimony. Land-owners but not workers, her sponsors enthusiastically afforded the English woman the most important requirements for success: an education in their language and custom. She'd come to educate them, part of the VSO organisation, Volunteer Service Overseas,

leaving London once her husband had agreed their irreconcilable differences were just that. Being a librarian with a penchant for history was no protection from the changes in her life upon arrival. She'd cried in despair for six whole months, confronted with a classroom without books and a life without the roots and solid rocks of childhood and without any sense of which way was up. Then she didn't leave when her two-year placement at the high school came to an end. Nor two years later, though she did take a holiday in London after ten years in the Pacific. She found she could not live in England despite, and maybe because, she was terribly English.

Shipwrecked sailors were known to have gone completely native, sporting traditional tattoos and knowing the enjoyment of polygamy, but Maud very rarely sat on the floor on a woven mat, nor ate raw fish, and never wore hibiscus in her hair. She still ordered her clothing through British catalogue companies as she established her empire, and her legacy, in the library, museum and archives.

Along the way she got used to getting everything as she wanted it. She became the cantankerous crusader for tradition and culture who did not suffer fools lightly. She suffered Marianne because of her bloodline.

'She's only a distant relative,' Marianne had protested on the first day, wishing to be totally honest. 'I just somehow came to inherit the house she and her daughter built, and the money. She's just my grandmother's grandmother.'

Maud carefully explained the matrilineal line of descent followed in Medolan. Marianne could not have been more directly linked to the Captain's wife, daughter to daughter down the century. Marianne was reassured but the historian was more interested in the first daughter.

'So Mary Ann Clarissa remarried when she returned to Australia?'

'No. Why?'

The archive was a refuge faceted to every corner and layer of Marianne's new life. On a practical level, it was cool in the heat of a Pacific Island close to the equator. The airconditioner at the house growled and dribbled rusty drops of bilge but to little effect, except, inappropriately, at three in the morning when the machine would purr and an Arctic chill would grip the household.

There was only one other escape from the steamy temperatures and that was in the true paradise: beneath the glaring surface of the lagoon. Marianne stumbled and dived into the depths as often as she could and for as long as she could, never as often or long as her heart desired because her muscles protested, and she was still learning not to gulp down the air and empty her tank in the breathing pattern of an escaping maniac. The archive, in contrast, offered nine-to-five tranquillity and bodily comfort.

Having nothing to do had not been the expectation when boarding the small air flight away from her Australian routine. The archive also saved Marianne from that reality. Dan did not see searching for a sunken hulk as a full-time job and Marianne's funds did not stretch to demanding it of him. She did have a wealth of time, time in which to question her wisdom, through the lonely afternoons, missing the anchor of routine and predictability. Cut loose, she could drift onto a treacherous reef, or, more horribly, drift and drift alone in the huge ocean of the world without ever meeting anything or anyone. Alone forever. And lonely.

To avoid this, her afternoons were peopled with her ancestor, a clutch of missionaries and traders, and a parade of fascinating 'natives' and 'savages'.

And, happily, the archive was a refuge from the real people too.

Marianne was not the first person from this world, or any other, to arrive somewhere new and make a mistake in her associates. What looks familiar in an unfamiliar context can be misleading. The white skin and words flung in Australian English had become as alien as, well, as the operatics Marianne could find on television in Sydney. Herbert's *escapade* — his word — precipitated a drama rivalling any with woman scorned and love betrayed, including Act 2, Scene 1 where betrayed sets fire to dive bootees of betrayer. Marianne couldn't see the point — after all, he wasn't in them at the time.

It all seemed so childish. The unspoken recriminations festering in the palpable silences, the red-rimmed, angry-sore eyes and false bravado. Angela had flung herself into the trauma of love as if there was some safety net for failed lovers. She declared her sentiments, with witnesses, wore her heart on her sleeve and left it there to be put through the reverse cycle, wrung out and hung out. Their fellow accountant and housemate, Ralph, took the new atmosphere in his stride. Perhaps he thought women and men always acted like that.

And that worried Marianne. Perhaps they did. Was the melodrama excessively immature, or was this what was called living? She had avoided such questions in the past, learning to deal with the outside environment with a series of formulae and theorems. Impersonal numbers marched in formation, connecting, with increasing and decreasing probability, always acting in a way a rational statistician could predict. Infinity and chaos were merely mathematical constructs. Any data to the contrary she had chosen to ignore.

Given this, her own lover in Australia was an obvious selection, given proximity and the correlation of ages and education levels (she being available, younger and less educated). Their relationship was by the book. Unfortunately, the book had seemed increasingly to be one of those British university novels penned by Kingsley Amis. Only, from her side, from the position of the girl-student who this time lacked the big tits, it didn't seem terribly funny.

Any careful analysis of the relationship from the safe distance of Medolan failed to throw up a warming description: just a standing Thursday night appointment for dinner, academic discourse and disappointing intercourse. How had she come to think of him as the man she loved? Though he *had* been surprised when she left.

Whatever else it was, it had been nothing like the performance in the bungalow. But then, just when Marianne felt the climax of the drama in Medolan was due to explode and Angela's incautious actions were to be paid off with eternal heartache — Angela's life went on. And Herbert's life went on. They continued to live in the same house, travel in the same car to the same office without death, suicide or foul play. New bootees were bought and the dive course took them all deeper and deeper. They learnt the techniques of buddy-breathing and the use of CO_2 emergency lift. The sky did not fall and hearts continued to pump blood in all conditions and environs. On dry land, Marianne wondered if this revealed a terrible lack of depth in the characters of the former lovers. Or were they in fact behaving in an incredibly forgiving and mature manner? Had Marianne been overly and unnecessarily cautious in her romantic and sexual affiliations to date? Was there that safety net to catch you when you fall, that CO_2 cartridge to propel you to the surface when you fear you'll drown, that buddy to pull you through come what may?

Sitting in the sanctuary of the archive, surrounded by the ledgers of copra traders and the annual reports of the Colonial Administration, Marianne did not *consciously* decide to find out.

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Approaching from the west, the coast appeared as a continuous stretch of mangrove swamp. The trees thrived in the brackish water, protected from the stronger surf by the barrier reef. Their roots grew above the surface, arched legs, twisted and tortured into knobbly knees, spiking, kicking long straight shins up to their umbrella of green. Obscured within this screen was the destination all eyes on the boat sought.

Dan made it a habit of taking newly certified divers to the ruins. No one could come away unimpressed and the excitement rose like bubbles to motivate new groups to become students.

Becoming an official NAUI — North American Underwater — dive instructor was one of the more lucrative prongs in Dan's career as Neptune of Medolan lagoon. Everyone, local, expat and tourist alike, came to him with any concerns below the low-tide point: scraping barnacles from shipping, retrieving lost anchors, panel beating after coral collisions, leading tourists — mainly Japanese — around

World War II debris — mainly Japanese. Scavenging, scraping a living, experimenting with clam farms, tropical fish export. He took up anything that came along, which, unfortunately, was not as many salvaging of shipwrecks as would crown his kingdom with riches. He was being extra careful to deliver an unforgettable diving experience to Marianne. A pretty heiress. All heiresses being pretty in Dan's opinion.

It was still early but the sun was scorching the black fins to sizzle-touch. They lay at the bottom of the fibreglass boat along with an octopus of equipment, the names and functions of which were now more familiar to Marianne than those of most fashion accessories. The group was to dive first, while the tide was high and the water clear, then explore the ancient ruins hiding behind the mangroves with the salt still itching on their skin.

Marianne was tense. Angela and Herbert were at the stage of excessive politeness, using *please* and *thank you* as saccharine-coated poisonous barbs, and Ralph had made a pass the night before — at her. The accountants had completed their assignment and were on their way out. A farewell party was planned for that evening, but Marianne wanted to say it then, in Dan's boat. Farewell, without any see you later.

They were not alone in the boat. There was another man present. The introduction of another personality into the group, a public before whom the laundry could not be washed, should have eased the dynamics. But Marianne found this new man was unsettling in his own right.

Ewan was an experienced diver, though he made it known, without appearing to boast, that his more usual diving companions were whales. His hair was sun bleached white, his eyes ocean blue, his voice rippled across the hairs on Marianne's arms. Ewan had never been to Kiti Medolan but his travels with his whales in the Pacific had brought him into contact with its legend, and its curse.

The mangroves had been allowed to grow about the city's perimeter, its grandeur to crumble, its temples and colonnades to whistle only silence to the wind, because the people of Medolan knew not to meddle in the past. Built long before yesterday, but a long time after the beginning of eternity, it was a reminder of an era when men were gods, and women were gods too. But their children grew up to be mere mortals. It was not a tragedy the people wanted to resurrect. The place was taboo by their culture. There was no point in searching too deeply into the legendary past.

This was quite beyond the storytelling of the young man, Benjamin, at the museum: a dry narrative of rock quarries and codified structures. The ancient city was alive within Ewan's early morning story. The word tragedy hung in the air. Marianne shuddered and Ewan reached for her hand.

'But we're scientists and we know better,' she thought she heard in his vibrant voice, through the electric interference of his smile.

And on top of it all, Dan expected them to tank-up and do a James Bond backflip off the boat.

'Just let yourself fall,' advised Dan.

So Marianne perched herself on the side of the hull, her back to the vast waters, took a deep breath and tipped herself into the unknown. She somersaulted back, flying in an arc, flying through the air, flying in a world upside down, right way up, submerged.

The water opened up and sent a shock through her body.

She rose to the surface gasping. 'Let me do it again. I want to do it again!'

Chapter Six

'We must send for the doctor,' Rev. Oldfield announced when God failed to answer the humble invocations of the assembled clanswomen. Rev. Oldfield knew the healing that the doctor could perform with quinine, English paregoric elixir and laudanum were closely akin to God's miracles in the minds of the natives, and he might at least be able to save the child, if not the mother.

Mrs Purcell shadowed herself under the window of the hut, sitting on her heels, ready, for what she did not know. Rev. Oldfield had called her in the night and, with a minimum of functional courtesy, requested her presence at a difficult birth. Mrs Oldfield, his usual assistant in all aspects of the mission's struggle, was unable, indeed unwilling, to attend. Her own small daughter lay gravely ill, with a croup that threatened her life-breath. Two small graves within the mission enclosure were a testament to her real fear. Rev. Oldfield, though the father of these waifs of history, believed explicitly in the Lord's wisdom, and thus that the small white

bones of his offspring were an enduring foundation for Christianity on the island. He did not send for the doctor for his little girl, who God appeared to be *calling home*.

However, the life of the baby battling to enter the world under the thatch in the birthing hut by the shore could grow to be the kingpost of the Church. The missionary was determined not to allow God to take this babe so quickly. 'We must send for the doctor,' he repeated.

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The young woman labouring was deathly silent. Netti's confinement had already gone on far too long when the decision to call for the doctor was made. The witchery of the island birth attendant was of no service and Rev. Oldfield's experience — and he had delivered all five of his own children, dead and alive — did not comprehend the complication. Mrs Purcell had nothing but compassion to offer, and it would be three or more hours before the doctor, the only other missionary on the island, could possibly arrive. Netti's youngest brother had been sent with all haste to deliver the message to the mission station on the other side of the island, but sailing around between the reefs with no light save the stars was fraught with danger.

The congregation in the birthing hut had only to wait these impossible hours. The wait for the woman in labour

could not be imagined. Mrs Purcell felt she could not fidget away any of her own discomfort while this young woman endured so bravely.

The woman trying to give birth was well known to Rev. Oldfield by her bloodline and, to his mind, by her unfortunate marriage. She was daughter of the matrilineal head of Medolan, thus she was sister to the High Chief Lipsoti. And she was the wife, duly consecrated in his own church, of the scoundrel Ricco the Cockeye. She also had a name of her own. Mrs Purcell had asked it of a cousin in her faltering endeavours in the barbarous dialect. She was told the woman's name was Netti. This was Netti's first child, and she was very frightened.

The silence frightened Mary Ann Clarissa. Having attended the lying-in of her own mother for three successive siblings, her memory, her imagery of childbirth was the shriek of a world torn asunder, a searing, endless, monstrous keening as life is ripped from life. Netti's soul shrieked but custom controlled her tongue. Her blood was royal and she did not need to be reminded of dignity. The silence stretched. The minutes ticked by without the science of a clock.

Rev. Oldfield hunched his head down to pass out through the door, authorising his exit with the implied necessity of finding the father of the child: the Italian trader, Ricco the Cockeye. He knew to conceal his agitation in activity. If only his colleague across the island responded

with the urgency required; had his message conveyed the import? If they delivered the old woman of a healthy grandchild the conversion she had been dallying with for years would be assured. And with the mother of the High Chief a Christian, the Fight would be all but won.

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Mistakes had been made in the beginning. The assumptions formed on arrival led them down the path of frustration. The missionary doctor, by the name of Dr Younghusband, had landed first, alone, and became for a time the favourite of the High Chief Lipsoti, a bloated, witless boor much addicted to civilisation as he knew it. Clothed in a ceremonial robe — a red dressing-gown presented in jest by a passing captain but worn with unashamed pride — Lipsoti emerged from drunkenness long enough to see the goodness in the new white man's medicines. When Dr Younghusband spoke of the good of God, Lipsoti would nod sagely and mumble his one English phrase: 'That's first rate.' Yet, when the missionary spoke of the evil of the traders, the chief would look hopelessly asinine, hiding cunning eyes behind a feathery fan, an affectation he'd picked up with his dressing-gown. The missionary doctor gave him a leather-bound copy of Bagster's Bible, but the traders gave him ten sticks of Barrett's twist for

a hundred yams and blue-glass beads for coconuts. Lipsoti called Dr Younghusband to dance attendance and delighted in aping his ways. When word came of illness in the village, he would rush off, the missionary doctor a step behind, and feel the pulse of the patient. Arms became limp as Lipsoti sought pulse after pulse. It could not have been altogether pleasant for the natives who were truly sick.

Of the ways of the traders, it was the drinking that had become the rage. Rum soaked most of Lipsoti's days, but he would drink anything, down to kerosene and turpentine, and a home brew from screw-pine, taro, or the newly cultivated China bananas and oranges. When a captain in port had presented Lipsoti's wife with a bottle of Jean Marie Farina eau de Cologne, he'd promptly drunk it too.

Nevertheless, at first, Lipsoti allowed his pet Christian a site of land and leave to hold regular services. The Reverend Doctor was an educated man and quickly learned the language and many of the ways of the people. He held his evening services early so the curious men and women could return home before the coming of the darkness that made them more than ever prone to their great sinfulness, a promiscuity he was unable to adequately describe in his letters to the Mission Board at home.

One night, long after a service to a small but seemingly attentive congregation, strange noises had been heard from the open-walled church building. Dr Younghusband could not have been more aghast at the debacle that presented itself

in a ring of flaring torchlight. The two permanent traders on the island, and several of the flotsam castaways and runaways of passing ships, were in the midst of a sacrilegious jape, a sham of a devout service. With mock grave faces, they sang their hymns, the tone in the spirit of the church and with the spirit of the bottle to help with the words. 'Roll and Go from deal to Dover', 'The Bobtailed Nag' and their musical kin. Chief Lipsoti guffawed, and rolled and bobbed in the church. He had never seen anything as funny as the mummery, and did not protest at handing over his best Cavendish tobacco when the collection plate, Old Jack's hat, came around.

The scabious red-white faces registered only further derision when they realised their masquerade exposed. It was the awaited outcome: they had schemed for such a finale and the missionary played his part with fiery passion. How could he teach the Word of God, the religion of his world, when the actions of every other white man the savages saw were so directly at variance with his exhortations? He cursed them all to hell. They laughed. Were they already there? Dr Younghusband knew there could be no peaceful coexistence with this Godless refuse. He commanded them from consecrated ground with a fury that drove them back into the darkness. Then he turned to the chief.

'They must leave this island,' he thundered.

Lipsoti was not guided by God. As the liquor dried from his flesh and into his bones, he considered the

missionary's ultimatum and knew he had no choice. If anyone was to leave the island it was to be Dr Younghusband. He confidently felt his wife's pulse to reassure her that the doctor would not be missed.

And that was the mistake, the biggest mistake in the first years of the mission. Concentrating on the High Chief, believing his conversion to Christianity would move the entire population from their heathen beliefs, was the error. Had he but looked without his man's spectacles, Dr Younghusband would have discovered the true source of power on Medolan. High Chief Lipsoti's *mother* listened well. She was a practical woman. She calmed her son and merely exiled Dr Younghusband to the other side of the mountain — far enough to silence his ceaseless chatter in her house, close enough to summon in a crisis. A crisis such as her daughter, Netti's, confinement.

There were few babies born on the island. For decades the ships had brought iron and cloth — and measles and pneumonia and syphilis. Many huts stood empty of a breathing family and new children stayed safely with the ancestors and gods on the other side of life's divide. Netti's child was a most precious gift for everyone. The old woman, the matrilineal head, the would-be-grandmother had agreed that Rev. Oldfield must be summoned and, in his turn, Dr Younghusband.

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Rev. Oldfield found Ricco the Cockeye on the porch outside his store. That Ricco had captivated a beautiful woman of high rank was a surprise to both the white men. That he loved her and was horror-struck by the proceedings in the birthing hut, which custom, thankfully, forbade him enter, was equally remarkable, for he looked little like a man made for love.

When the missionary found him he was sagged over his rickety wooden chair, his hold on sobriety as insecure as the chair's on the floor. Black hair and dark eyes had given way to redness: a sun scorched, scabby scalp, which the hair had vacated; red, red eyes, which hope had vacated. No one knew what had originally brought him to Medolan. It was not a mystery; it was simply irrelevant.

At first, Ricco the Cockeye would have been classified as a beachcomber, but when mad Old Jack finally succumbed to the sickness that blew him up and ate him away, Ricco took over his store. Ricco had only slight elephantiasis himself, in his left foot, and the rum masked most of the symptoms — the fevers, the cold shivering: a memory of Italy. Ricco's nervous tremblings merged with delirium tremens, but were not quite lost. He had seen the future of the disease: Old Jack had not left his chair for the last weeks of his life, the legs on this old bull of a man becoming larger than an elephant's. He was buried in a pit, the pit of hell, with his chair, not long after Dr Younghusband's banishment across the island. And so it was left to Ricco the Cockeye to

greet the new missionaries, with a Bible under one arm. And so Rev. Oldfield and his wife first saw Ricco on the beach ten years before, on the glaring morning the Mission packet delivered them to their new home. Man and wife had each responded to the Call and had married when the new strategy of the Mission Board demanded a helpmate for each missionary. They were learning. They wanted a woman to work with the native women, an influence on those who influenced the decisions of State. The missionaries could attack the savages at their own hearths. The missionary wives would teach the women, by word and example, their new roles as good mothers and wives, and they in turn would soften and make fertile the mind's of the men to conversion. And how rewarding the souls of the heathen men.

Those ten years since the morning on the beach encompassed a profound change. A stone church now rose up from the point overlooking the pass in the reef, the very place where the heathen priests once whipped and sacrificed captured enemies to the gods. Within the church, a piece of rock upon which, it was said, little children had been thrown, killed, before bestial cannibal ceremonies, was made sacred and proudly incorporated as part of a Christian font. The few brown babies born, now wholesomely dressed, were baptised at that font.

Fully half the people of Medolan had died of horrible diseases in those ten years and Fortune had ordained that few priests of the ancestors had survived to fight on. These few

native witchdoctors still railed and wailed, but had desisted from arson on the homes of the Faithful. When a newly anointed Christian, out fishing, was speared by a swordfish, an astonishing accident, the heathen priests were exultant and fear struck many hearts. But only for a time — because the vengefulness of their native gods did not stop the white man's ships from visiting with beautiful red blankets, clothes with golden buttons, harmonicas with the sweetest music. The white man's God must truly be powerful.

Ricco the Cockeye had been reflecting upon God as he waited for someone to announce the death of his wife and child. From the darkness strode Rev. Oldfield and Ricco began to blubber, a noisy and uncharacteristic consequence of the rum, he would later claim.

'We must pray,' the Reverend announced.

'For their souls in Heaven,' Ricco sobbed.

'We must pray that they might live.'

Ricco blubbered all the more at this temporary reprieve. And he prayed, but to the missionary and not his God. Mortality coursed through Ricco's veins and he begged a favour. If they, Netti and his child, should live but he should die, he wanted them to go *home*. He wanted his child to grow up in the house of his youth, on the other side of the world, in Italy. His brother would take them in. The trader stumbled through his store to the room behind, his home on Medolan, and plundered an old, oak chest, the solid centre to his life.

''e is 'ere. My brudder is 'ere,' he said, still sobbing, thrusting a crumpled piece of paper into Rev. Oldfield's reluctant hand. The paper bore an address and the name Ricco was born to; though Cockeye suited him perfectly well.

'I beg you, Sir, I beg. My family must go 'ome. I give you my store, my land. When I die. I beg you.'

Rev. Oldfield had a higher destiny on his mind, but under the emotion of the moment conceded an oath. It was the mother and child dying, while he was sure the trader was as strong as an Italian ox and would be well preserved in alcohol for many years to come.

Mary Ann Clarissa Purcell liked Dr Younghusband from the moment she saw him. He was no longer young, nor had he ever been a husband, and he was greeted everywhere solely as *Dokta*, yet Younghusband was the name he carried through life and into the birthing hut. He smiled at the young wife. Netti acknowledged the smile with a flicker of her eyelids. She had no strength left but it was as if hope had come in with him.

He was an imposing figure, though dressed in charity suits and ill-fitting shoes sent in austerity from the Mission Board Fathers. The hut was ill-lit and an incongruous straw hat hid his eyes, still Mary Ann Clarissa knew there must be kindness in them.

The doctor examined the labouring woman between contractions, then turned to her mother, his old adversary. In the savage tongue they discussed, with gravity and respect on both sides, the lives of two people. The doctor knew Netti's life was lost. But her baby: her baby pushed urgently for entrance into the world. Nature had not allowed Netti to dilate, to provide the open gate at the long tunnel to life; and she would not survive a Caesarean section for there was nothing to help her recovery but prayer. Dr Younghusband withdrew a surgical knife from his careworn leather bag.

Mary Ann Clarissa's instinct was to turn her face away, bury her eyes deep in her shoulder, tighten her arms about her breasts.

Then suddenly a great 'cluck clucking', rising from the tongues of the relatives, reverberated around the birthing hut. Mary Ann Clarissa knew the sound from her first lesson in their language. It signified great astonishment.

She raised her head and saw. She saw Dr Younghusband had put aside the knife and was gently stroking Netti's cheek. He knew she would take no rum. He placed a cousin on each of Netti's limp arms, for pain gives strength and she must be still. Still as he thrust his arm within, forcing, driving, dragging, opening by any means possible, her locked cervix.

Netti's screams of anguish were miraculously drowned. By the wail of her son.

Chapter Seven

The High Chief's mother took the name of Sarah and after her baptism became quite voluble about the religion she had abandoned. Marianne found Mrs Purcell's journal interspersed with the old woman's retellings of ancient traditions, parables and godly wisdom, much of which Marianne quickly dismissed as 'old wives' tales'. On the 9th August 1864 Mary Ann Clarissa Purcell wrote:

'Sarah was distressed today when a hermit crab was seen crawling into her house. She bade her youngest son catch it quickly but the resulting hustle and bustle gave the little crab a great fright and it scuttled with uncommon speed out of the house again. This was thoroughly upsetting, for the belief their gods gave them warns of seeing a crab come in and go out; it is a sure prophecy that you will soon move away. Sarah commanded everyone in the room recite the Lord's Prayer as a Spiritual Protection, which we did with great resonance, it being a great favourite and the first piece taught at the Mission School.'

It seemed the white woman was spending a considerable proportion of her day with the High Chief's mother. Sarah had taken a great liking to her — and, along with the young pig Captain Purcell had gifted her, Mrs Purcell was kept about the house for amusement. Mary Ann Clarissa made no protest about this to any living soul or diary page. Her life was as circumscribed as on board the *Westminster* and she yearned for any life outside the mission compound. To be a free spirit was the preference, but if necessary, she wrote, she was content to be Sarah's curious plaything.

Mary Ann Clarissa listened carefully during her excursions to the home of Sarah, picking up words and phrases, picking up threat on the wind. She may be kept close to home, but the rest of the population showed no wish to venture far from their own cookhouses either.

She wrote about this, and about many of the stories she heard, not imagining the audience to her words more than a hundred years later. And she seemed to have an eye for the politics of the land.

She wrote of the jubilation: Sarah's baptism had been announced as a triumph. With her embrace of the Christian Church, she proclaimed God's peace on Medolan and the small isles to the west. An end to generations of tribal warfare with its intermittent and savage bloodshed was applauded, but a silence echoed in the joyful celebrations. There were some who failed to see the Hand of God in the changes: Sarah had

never before been influenced by anything but her own political acumen. Her family had held sway over the island for only three generations, fighting to this position through war. Their rivals to supreme power, barely loyal subjects in a chiefdom to the east, remembered well their own ascendancy in the past. In their hearts they harboured a dream of return to the high chiefdom that *peace* would vengefully kill. Peace would preserve individual life, but also the status quo. It was a rejection of this reassembling of the future that whispered from the east. The likelihood of war was far greater than the day before Everlasting Peace was proclaimed.

Rev. Oldfield listened not to the wind — he did not know its language — but the bickering of white tongues reached his ears. The riffraff saw only their parts in any drama, and they saw only Ricco the Cockeye in the central role throughout old Sarah's consolidation of absolute power. The wretched Italian was pulling puppet strings and making his in-laws in his own image — Christian and wealthy. With the old crone's backing, Ricco's trade would out-compete their own. The natives brought their bêche-de-mer to him, they brought their copra to him only. Other stores hadn't a chance. His marriage had given Ricco a virtual monopoly. Conniving old bugger with his Latin luck.

That there was no luck in Ricco's marriage to Netti eluded the other traders. Sarah had seen her island's prosperity disappearing in ships to foreign shores: she intended to keep the exploitation within her grasp, and contrived Ricco's

devotion to Medolan through her beautiful daughter. The rival traders with less well-born wives did not like it and threatened their own revolution, and they had guns.

Mary Ann Clarissa heard and wrote down all the rumours. About the ill-wind from the east. About the traders who were getting restless. But she did not see all the political intrigue. It was only in retrospect that the full picture could be seen. Maud Jones, finding her home on Medolan in a different century, had read the journal *and* done her research.

Up in the hills of Medolan, Maud discussed with Marianne the many and varied aspects of the political climate of the nineteenth-century Pacific. Twenty-first century independence and statehood now slowly went about its tasks in the government buildings by the shore. The descendants of Sarah were now heads of bureaucracies, ministries, the bank, indeed, the Republic. The majority of the population was Christian. Rev. Oldfield's blustering had triumphed *and* Sarah had won.

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Marianne had been doing as she was told, reading, reading, reading. Events seemed clear, but at a fundamental level, Marianne did not understand. The richness of the old religion danced in stories of creation and history — so why did these people of Medolan accept the Bible? There were

hundreds of them, on their own land, and there were only a couple of missionaries and a wife. Why had the few intruders prevailed?

The day before, Marianne had ventured into the library to ask Maud a simple question, a leading question that might lead to a conversation, and eventually, she hoped, some clarity. Maud had responded instead with an invitation that Marianne was happy to accept. She was suffering the same cabin fever as her ancestor, though with less reason. Rev. Oldfield had been at pains to keep Mrs Purcell in the compound — allowing visits only to Netti and baby David and to the command performances with Sarah — whereas Marianne had the freedom to explore the island.

Only, it was an island that would take a few hours to drive around, if there had been a road around, which there wasn't. In her hire car, what roads there were, were quickly passed, in jolting minutes between potholes. These roads passed places to eat, a very few places to shop, children, families, homes, a community. A life, to which Marianne had no entry. The joy she'd felt at the airport seeing the yuppies return to Australia — to their mobile phones and quaint tales of life on a tropical island — was diminished in the empty house bereft of the company of their voices and even their portable stereo. The touch of Ewan's hand fifteen feet below her accustomed environment, a collusive warmth about her wrist to alert her to the exquisite beauty of a blue starfish, a blue as deep and vibrant as lapis lazuli,

was just a memory of human contact. She hadn't seen Ewan since the dive and didn't know where to find him on the tiny island.

So Marianne was happy to drive up to Maud's house at six as she had been invited. It was still light and the timber house could be seen stepping out over the hill on its long stilt legs. The house, perched forward, oversaw the ocean's waves and the ethereal sunsets. The living area was fully open to the breezes. Ceiling fans caught them and cooled the end of the day. Maud was taking tea when she arrived, though she offered Marianne something stronger before dinner.

Mary Ann Clarissa, too, often found herself taking tea. Dr Younghusband had first introduced it as a beverage to the Medolanese, the white men who'd come before only having a mind for intoxicants. There was great hope in the civilising influence of tea. It excited the tastebuds, it was liked and once liked it would be desired, and one must work for that which one desires. Work was necessary for trade to gain the fragrant leaves, cultivation of sugar was needed to sweeten the brew. Then there were teacups and saucers to be purchased, the china to be cleaned, properly cared for and stored away in cupboards, and a table and chairs to sit upon to drink it. Desiring a cup of tea was one simple step from gentility and salvation.

'But it can't have been that simple,' protested Marianne to Maud's extended thesis on the introduction of tea-taking to the island. 'We have sushi bars and Vietnamese

restaurants all over Sydney and we're not flocking to the Shinto religion or Buddhism, or …'

'It was not simple, no. They were not a naive child race as the missionaries made out in their reports and tracts. They thought very carefully about the white man's words, and particularly his goods,' Maud responded. 'Imagine …'

Imagine working for everything there is: food, some clothing, a thatched hut. There was little of it, but each item was a result of visible labour by the community. Imagine the arrival of ships, first one, then many, ships as big as floating villages. Out of these hulks came tomahawks, knives, beads, calico, steel needles, thread, pipes, tobacco, things the people had never dreamed could have existed. It was a miracle that these white-skinned people could have made them. Imagine these white men coming to stay on the island. They did not labour in the taro pits, fish in the oceans, nor did their women slowly weave their clothing. These men, these traders, wrote on a piece of paper and waited, and by magic a ship would bring food that didn't have to be grown or hunted, cargo with strange looks and sounds and smells. Harmonicas, gramophones, printing presses, tea. Where did it all come from? The white men were not gods, just humans like themselves. They had seen them: idle men, drunken men. Around them must be some invisible cloak, a shield of power. Where did that power come from? Their God?

Imagine thinking deeply about this as the moon passed each phase in the heavens. There was a secret, and maybe the secret was in the white man's book. The Bible.

'They learnt about Christianity and adopted that religion to gain the secret that would give them control of the cargo, the material goods that, they believed, would make their lives more comfortable.'

'Well, they must have thought some missionary had torn out the page in the Bible with the secret on it,' was Marianne's only comment. Maud laughed, though Marianne had offered the remark seriously.

'Clothing, like tea, was another avenue to salvation the missionaries tried to use across the Pacific. Really, in many ways the missionaries were more naive than the heathens in those early days,' Maud continued.

Marianne listened as the sun slipped towards the horizon in a fanfare of colours. She was feeling naive, because her heart still did not understand.

The missionaries wanted the nut-coloured bodies clothed for overtly puritanical reasons, Maud tried to explain. Covered women were more wholesome; better. Further, however, sewing the calico into smocks, laundering the dresses, shirts, trousers, jackets, caring for and maintaining the civilised wardrobe of a Christian family, took time, time in industry and not mischief; and the native women were far too inclined to mischief.

While their men may have taken to sporting a naval jacket or drill trousers as a symbol of status, many of the women, at first, showed more wisdom. They wore the clothes only in church, quickly pulling them over their heads and fleeing in warm-skinned freedom once the service was over. Just as Sarah, when Mrs Oldfield did not accompany Mrs Purcell to tea, would shift the teapot and pink flowered cups from the table onto the floor and Mrs Purcell would sit cross-legged in the island way while the hard chairs stared emptily over the defection.

'They were pragmatic people.'

'Are you saying the people down there,' Marianne pointed to the flickering lights of the town below, 'don't actually believe in God?'

'You really have thought about this, haven't you?' Maud questioned back, her impression of the young woman improving with acquaintance.

'Why *are* they all Christians now? There are more churches down there than McDonald's back home. Why? I mean, surely the missionaries thought it was because God spoke to the converts. God made them Christians?' Marianne floundered. She hadn't thought of God existing since Sunday school, which she'd made increasingly successful efforts to wriggle out of once puberty hit.

'Maybe God was here all along,' suggested Maud, dinner temporarily losing to philosophy. 'God split into a

myriad of gods and ancestors. Maybe they used different words to describe the same underlying spirituality. Consider one of the old stories of creation. Your ancestor found it intriguing. You haven't finished the journal, have you?'

'Not yet,' Marianne admitted, then quickly tried to excuse her lapse. 'The writing, it's difficult to concentrate on too much of it at a stretch.'

'Yes. You will enjoy it more as you read. Mrs Purcell gave the first known written account of the Sky Myth. She had a theory, you will find her treatise later. Of this story she only states: *it is curious*. She is not the only one to find these islands resembling the Garden of Eden.'

Maud handed Marianne a version of the myth in a high school primer, to read while she went to prepare dinner.

The Myth of the Sky

On the other side of yesterday the sky loved the world and stayed close, kissing its cheek to the treetops. It was a beautiful world of sunshine and indulgence. The people spent their days in pleasure for the sky accorded them all they needed to live — warmth and shelter, and food. Men and women and children knew the taste of yam and taro, breadfruit and pandanus and coconut, the richness of fishes and crustaceans, the freshness of each through every season, yet they laboured not for this, neither cultivating the earth nor fishing the vast ocean. All that needed to be done was to reach up and break off a piece of the sky. It would taste of whatever was desired. Truly these people lived in paradise.

In those days of the sky's bounty there was but one rule: that this gift not be squandered, that no piece of the sky be left on the rubbish heap.

Duly the people of Medolan took only what they needed from the sky. They spent their days weaving mats of intricate and exquisite decoration and telling tales of great embellishment. Until one night the woman Veta became greedy.

There had been a celebration with happy feasting for the elders, but after the festivities had ended and everyone had returned to their own household, Veta continued to dance and sing joyfully. She desired that the fete last forever. As she spun around, she plucked down a piece of the sky to savour the many and varied foods her cupidity lusted for.

After but one bite the foolish woman realised her error. She had feasted all night and could not eat all the sky she held in her hands. She tried. She took another bite and, frightened, another bite, but she had taken more than she could ever keep down. Far, far more than she needed.

In terror, Veta ran to her household, shook her man from sleep, confessed her mistake. He loved her and wanted to help, but he too had indulged himself at the celebrations. He could take only one bite. They appealed to their two strong sons, but neither could they consume the wanton pickings of their mother.

Day was beginning to dawn and Veta still had a piece of sky larger than her hands. She ran to the edge of the water, to the edge of their beautiful island, and hid the wasted piece among the roots of the mangroves.

Light did not come that day. The darkness of night was consumed by clouds blacker than itself. The storm was the anger of the sky: thunder shook the very trees, lightening slashed through the people's sight. The sky's fury excited a fear that had never before been felt by the people of Medolan. They knew the meaning of sin.

When day finally came to the island they looked up and were amazed. The sky had taken itself away, far away, above their heads. Far, far away, out of their reach.

From that day the people had to labour with their own hands for the substance of life. All for the greed of one woman called Veta.

Chapter Eight

Marianne was at Kimba's when the call came through. A crowd of people descended for breakfast at Kimba's each morning: the pancakes were great, and available to even the latest riser. Dan's transmutable household was difficult to organise at any hour and he had become renowned for his business breakfasts across the speckled laminex. He had business to discuss with Marianne, though he would not have been going into quite so much confounding technical detail if he'd known the state of the woman's mind; and body. The phone call cut him off mid-flow, and he was sorry to waste his impressive research.

Marianne had heard about the proton magnetometer and the side-scan sonar device with forced attentiveness. She did not fully understand, as it was not fully clarified whether Dan actually had either of these detection devices, the one picking up on concentrations of iron — nails, fishhooks, anchors, pipes, the fittings on a wooden barque — the other scanning beneath the water for solid objects — the remains

of such a barque — like an ultrasound defining the embryo in the womb.

'Your hulk wouldn't have an iron hull, too early,' regretted Dan. 'Make it a lot easier to locate. Could have a copper sheathing though, which would give us the outline of the ship. If it's under the sand, the wood could survive pretty well too. Sand keeps the marine borers off a good feed.' He never stopped in his own good feed as he waffled on over the pancakes.

Modern technology aside, most of it inappropriate to the conditions in developing countries anyway, Dan was actually relying on age-old techniques of wreck detection. It was slow work, sitting around having a smoke, maybe a beer, skirting the *Westminster* in ever smaller nostalgic circles of questions and reminiscence, the old Medolanese fishermen huffing about the state of the world, the price of tinned tuna, what it was like in their grandfather's day, the ships that came in then, the state of the fish supply, the convenience of tinned tuna, which would remind them of the story of a trader on the islands to the west who discovered how to appease the God of the Volcano, a bumptious, rumpusing fellow, erupting in anger when the villagers failed in their delivery of coconuts, but quiescent and amiable when they took up the vast quantities of tinned tuna the trader sold them, which would bring them back to their bumptious grandchildren's love of tuna, how little of it they pulled in from the oceans, how much from the tin can, the things lost,

the Church, the things gained, those who came, those who left, those who were wrecked. It wasn't called gossip. The people of Medolan had refined it into an art form.

Dan told Marianne little of what he'd discovered from these sources, and even less of what was relevant. And then the telephone operator tracked her down and the *Westminster* was sunk, again.

When the young waitress summoned Marianne to the telephone by the cash register, Marianne knew she should be startled, but life was revealing itself to be overflowing with surprises. It was the fact that it was her mother's voice on the telephone line that left her dumbfounded.

'I've been trying to ring all weekend. Are you okay?'

All weekend, and on Monday morning, when she still wasn't home, the Telephone Exchange had hooked Mrs Ladd through to Kimba's.

'I'm fine Mum. Everything's great. I've never felt better.' It sounded so false. Yet till a moment before it had never been so true. Now she felt like a four-year-old who had been found out.

Everyone must know. Medolan was only a small community; she might not know them but they knew her. The exchange knew she was having breakfast at Kimba's, so

they must know why her mother had been unable to contact her for two full days, and nights. Where she had been. With whom. Dan no doubt knew. Everyone in Kimba's knew. Everyone except her mother, and considering her concerned voice, even she probably suspected. Marianne looked over at Dan as he attacked yet more pancakes. She could imagine how he, beached in the Pacific from the Midlands, would describe her activities. There was no other way to describe them. She'd been out bonking.

Marianne was mortified. A queasiness rose in her stomach to acknowledge the island audience. Could nothing be a secret?

Not that she regretted what she'd done, her limbs were too sated, her mind too languorously weary from the hours when her mother could not find her. After all, it wasn't as if there had been any choice in the matter. To bonk or not to bonk had never been the question. The path was preordained. Was this what everyone meant when they went on about true love? Ewan had walked into Maud's living room and that, in the words of any poet, was that.

Marianne's mother was in truth asking more about her daughter's physical rather than moral wellbeing. The postcards and short notes home were well received, but the name Medolan was cropping up elsewhere with worrisome frequency. It is an unarguable scientific phenomenon that once the meaning of *dilatoriness* is learnt while doing the crossword, it will pop up in the novel being read, and in the

Sunday editorial. Similarly, all countries are mythical until you know someone living there. Thus, Medolan, having grazed Mrs Ladd's consciousness, was almost nightly on the news. Medolan was real, and prominent on the weather map just about every time disruptions in atmospheric pressure occurred.

'But it's not even the cyclone season yet,' assured Marianne. 'They call them typhoons here, and the season, if anything happens, which is most unlikely, is more towards the end of the year. Okay?'

There was little else to say long distance in the breakfast rush. Marianne really wanted to turn around and shout an explanation to all the dark faces and flower-crowned heads, to somehow convince these strangers that she was not *like that*. She didn't do this sort of thing at home, nor was she merely one of the white parade in history, leaving their civilised inhibitions on the other side of the world to drown themselves in the indulgences of the flesh, in alcohol-soaked carnal buffoonery on the moment of disembarking in Paradise. She was not part of a pattern, she was Marianne, an individual, in a new, in a unique situation. The wellness in her heart would not be there otherwise.

Marianne could voice no justification, only send bland reassuring words to her mother, hang up, and ask for the bill.

There seemed to be no price to pay for her time with Ewan. Something perfect had miraculously materialised in the centre of her life. Nothing had come before; it would go on forever. No words described it, but words flowed ceaselessly from their lips, one to the other, words without inhibition dancing like dust motes in a ray of sunshine called love. Love: a word that did not itself need to float in the air currents.

The size of Medolan ensured that they would meet again, it was only chance that acted the scene over dinner in the hills. The early part of the evening had perplexed Marianne: first, her talk with Maud about the power of inflexible, chauvinist missionaries to convert a country; then there was the arrival of Benjamin, kissing Mother on the cheek and asking where Mama was. Which was followed by the appearance of Rebecca Kadu, similarly greeted with a filial kiss. Rebecca was at least dark like her son, and Marianne fully expected an explanation of a father to arrive when she helped Maud set five places at the table. Marianne, Maud, Rebecca, Benjamin, and Father makes five? Instead, Ewan walked out of the dusk, his hair made angelically golden in a pool of electric light.

'Marianne,' he said with unmistakable pleasure in his voice. 'I hoped I'd see you again. Did you enjoy the dive around Kiti Medolan? Fantastic experience. Fascinating, truly fascinating.'

Ewan charmed everyone. He had a question for, and a shared interest with each of his companions, reflecting himself off them as an intense, focused, brilliant and passionate man. Marianne watched his intense, focused, passionate blue eyes as Benjamin introduced him to his mothers. Maud Jones, Curator of the National Museum, and Rebecca Kadu, Director of the Community Health Centre, meet Dr Ewan Mitchell, here to anticipate the arrival of the whales.

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Benjamin and Ewan had met in Hawaii several months before and struck up a common type of relationship between men. No information of a personal nature passed between them, yet they called themselves friends on the basis of a shared love of Oceania and all its wonders. A conference on the historic importance of whales to Pacific Island economies brought them together among a strange mixture of biologists, historians and economists. Dr Ewan Mitchell was an expert on sperm whales, while Benjamin Kadu was fresh into the role of expert on Medolan, then on his first excursion into the world upon completing a degree in prehistory in Australia. Neither looked the part: Benjamin, young, his face soft and clear and honest enough to sell soap; Ewan, tall, athletic, godly, unimaginable locked

in a library among books and dusty knowledge. And neither had a beard, the identifying badge of a scientist.

They'd sat on awkward metal chairs in an under-filled auditorium and talked excitedly at each other about Medolan. Benjamin spoke with pride about his home island, Ewan spoke with envy. He was going to be there the next spring, come what may.

A week after the full moon in late spring, a wonder of nature explodes in tropical waters. At this moment the coral reef, a seemingly lifeless formation of rock, reveals itself alive — living animals, not fossil or stone. Life continues with procreation, and all at once the coral regenerates itself in a festival of spawning. Millions upon millions of eggs and sperm burst from their polyp parents, popping out like balloons, rising in pink and white to mist the waters.

It happens every year. Every year the sperm and eggs send a massive pulse of protein into the food chain. So, more plankton. Dense schools of them that do not mist, but fog the ocean. So, more plankton feeders, more fish-eaters. All in a frenzy of delighted feeding.

The year before, in late spring, two sperm whales, a mother and child, had been sighted off Medolan. Directly off Medolan: within the lagoon. They had risked their lives passing through the barrier reef, risked beaching in shallow water or on the fringing coral, these huge whales who could dive down two kilometres. They had come for food, for the spawning feast.

In that one season, for Ewan and his whale-watching colleagues, Medolan had become legend.

The legend of whaling first entered popular Western culture on the back of Moby Dick, but by the time Captain Purcell was setting his wife to safety on Medolan few whaling ships were his companions on the wide seas. Just years before, in 1859, far away in Pennsylvania, the first oil well was dug, directly saving the whales from extinction. The five hundred American vessels cruising the Pacific in search of whales to keep the lamps of North America and Europe burning bright, had no more need to follow the migratory mammals, to Japan in spring, to the Arctic in summer, marauding the equatorial line throughout the winter. The blue of the ocean could once more be seen as the white of their canvas sails was forever furled.

Medolan had been lucky. Whales had only rarely come their way, and without plentiful whales in the vicinity few nineteenth-century whalers negotiated their way past the barrier reef in search of wood, water and women. These were the refreshments seamen needed, and desired, after an arduous life of drudgery and tyranny before the mast, often in the whale's head up to his hips in liquid oil, the stench rising from the tryworks where blubber boiled. It was no wonder the island coconuts tasted of lotus and caused the men to forget home.

Some islands saw as many as fifty whalers in harbour each year, trading iron for coconut, fruit, poultry and pork, bringing the popular tinder boxes, stone lighters and grindstones, taking eager young islanders on board to see the world. And leaving behind mobs of deserters.

Lovesick sailors, bewitched by the warm copper skin of romantic adventure, abandoned their ships and their lives. No qualms in leaving behind those monotonous weeks with needle in hand darning the sails till they were but a great patchwork, then the sudden terror of a moment with harpoon in hand as a whale of gigantean proportions approached. The captains resisted the defections, when they were not abandoning ship themselves, still the seamen would run away by any means: by night, in flight, paddling ashore in the captain's bathtub.

The trader, Old Jack, long before elephantiasis had bloated him stuck in his chair, had come by whaleship to Medolan. He found life as an intermediary in trade with other visiting ships more to his pleasure. He found his four wives more to his pleasure, and quite forgot the one waiting for him in Boston. His drunkenness and violence were tolerated, for the wonderful goods the ships brought were fast becoming necessities. It was thought Ricco the Cockeye had come the same way, sick of the sperm oil, casked and stored, only to be transhipped in the Sandwich Islands so the voyage could go round again, eighty-six more barrels a whale, year after year. On other islands the names, the identities of the

deserters were lost to the past. They were men who could never again be traced and there were so many they simply became known under the one name of beachcomber.

Marianne was thinking of Ricco the Cockeye. He was just one in this pattern of deserters Benjamin was describing over dinner. Yet in Mary Ann Clarissa's journal he was an individual, a scoundrel, a sad old man. A loving father.

'Whatever happened to Ricco and Netti's child?' she asked across to Maud. 'Are his descendants still about?'

'Oh no. The son, and his mother, went to Italy. A remarkable turn of events for these islands.'

'Rev. Oldfield actually did what Ricco asked?' Marianne was surprised. Netti had told Mary Ann Clarissa of the request but the latter gave the opinion in her journal that Netti's son, in the matrilineal line and in the holy design, was too important a figure for the missionary to allow to leave the island.

'It is all in the Year's Report of the Colonial Administration. The British brought in an administrator after the typhoon of '64 and he was absolutely meticulous in his bookkeeping. At first.' The islands have their effect on everything, even the stiff upper lip of the Brit: the Year Report of 1866, two years on, plunged to a few paragraphs

and the administrator was relieved not long after. Yet, in that first year he had even listed the address of Ricco's brother when detailing the legalities surrounding the change in ownership of the trade store. Only the report was clear, it wasn't Rev. Oldfield who'd carried out Ricco the Cockeye's behest. It was Mary Ann Clarissa Purcell.

It was then Benjamin who voiced his thoughts aloud. He tried hard to keep within the archaeological past of his country, but on this still night found himself fascinated by the strands of history that reached down and entwined themselves into the present.

He mused: 'Now that we have Mrs Purcell's family here,' he smiled at Marianne, 'I wonder if the descendants in Italy can be traced.'

'I should try to contact them,' suggested Marianne, though only half seriously, in the ebb and flow of late-night dinner party conversation.

'You should,' agreed Ewan. 'And then you can wait for a reply while I wait for my whales.'

Chapter Nine

Mary Ann Clarissa cradled Netti's baby in her arms as Netti busied herself with housekeeping: first shaking the sleeping mats to free them of dust, then spreading them over the scatter of coral surrounding the house to expose the must and mildew to cleansing sunshine. Mary Ann Clarissa sat in Ricco's second chair, which Netti had kindly moved from the porch down to the edge of the breadfruit grove to better catch each soft breath of the breeze. Netti's gentle kindness eased Mary Ann Clarissa's loneliness; her need for loving warmth. She missed her husband more even than she'd anticipated, far more than she had from the safe moorings of Sydney Town.

Anxious eyes looked first to the harbour each morning, but a ship had yet to arrive with any word from Captain Purcell. There was no packet of letters with the fond words he had promised. All the while, Mary Ann Clarissa dwelt in the memory of the last days on the *Westminster* and what she believed was his abandonment of her. She had

bundled together a sheath of letters beseeching his quick return and handed it to a Captain Hayes of the trader *Host* to carry on, to leave in Guam if her husband was not encountered before. The *Host* had been gone from Medolan three weeks since and no other European sailing ship had ventured into the lagoon. And now Mary Ann Clarissa was leaving Medolan harbour, retreating one step away from the hoped-for arrival of her husband's letters of explanation and consolation.

Baby David dropped noiselessly into sleep, his dark eyelashes sweeping down upon flushed cheeks. He had a mop of dark curls over pale skin and a softness that dragged deeply within his godmother's chest. Mary Ann Clarissa had promised him succour and guidance before the font, and then found herself envious that he was not her own — that God had not made her more than a godmother. As she approached the middle of her third decade, she felt more regret than hope. She prayed for acceptance of her lot, yet the prayer that went unsaid was more heartfelt: the prayer for a child.

Sarah's youngest son, Jude, entered the trader's clearing to announce the time for departure. Netti's eyes shone to see her little brother. Like all families, there were sibling loyalties and sibling jealousies. Jude was her favourite, quite everyone's beloved — except that of the eldest child in Sarah's family, their oldest brother, the jealous High Chief. Lipsoti had lately come to call himself King in the way of the Bible, but had yet to be saved by its word. Sarah's

admonishments had failed to move his feet into the Church, and in a fit of pique Sarah had announced she must therefore remove herself from her son's pagan practices. She must go to the other side of the island. Now was the time to depart.

Rev. Oldfield followed the royal discord warily. That he had come so far and achieved so little astonished him. He could not have done more to attract High Chief Lipsoti to God's call. Enlisting Sarah's advocacy was to have been the final step in his pursuit of this one soul. Yet the Chief resisted with a satanic obstinacy.

Latterly, the missionary had sermonised urgently on what the Church would *not*, rather than would, do for Lipsoti's Kingdom. 'We teach only loyalty to you,' he assured the fat, drunken chief. Yes, the Church supported the existing government and *would not* interfere in political wrangling, for did not the Bible say: 'Fear God and honour the King.'

'That's first rate,' was the King's invariable answer before returning to his fermented kava and bottled gin. He knew he was not his mother's favourite son. He promised himself that only the youth of his mother's favourite saved him from violence.

So Sarah said she had no choice. She said she must go. 'See, that little crab knew,' she'd whispered to Mary Ann Clarissa.

Jude took the sleeping David from Mary Ann Clarissa's arms and carried him into the store, to deposit him safely under a canopy of mosquito netting. The white woman followed to wish the baby's face one last goodbye, her bare feet a twinge at each step on the fragments of wave-polished coral that paved the area around the household. She had not toughened to new customs, bare feet included, however much she tried. Jude rushed back to the chair to fetch her shoes, which Rev. and Mrs Oldfield would not, after all, like to see her without.

Jude spent his days in such little attentions to her. His English was very fine and she was pleased to have him as unofficial interpreter. And his character was beautifully sweet, like his sister Netti. And if that wasn't enough in her loneliness, his childish curiosity could enliven sad moments. As they waited for Netti to gather a tribute of bully beef and canned milk for her mother's journey, Jude asked with grave formality if he may, with due reverence, be allowed to touch the good lady's arm.

'It is soft,' he laughed, as if he were expecting instead coral as smooth and *hard* as the pebbles beneath their feet.

They left the trade store with the goods and joined the party of travellers near the shore. Though it took her from Medolan harbour and a first glimpse of the white sails of hope, Mary Ann Clarissa was gladdened to be included in the migration west. She would be the first white person in living history to see the ancient city.

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Mrs Oldfield listened mutely to her husband's raging over Sarah's departure. It was so long since she had surrendered her own will in the marriage that arguments failed to form on her lips, only inarticulate bitterness. She could never consciously acknowledge her husband's irrationality: she must trust him as she trusted in God.

The abject weariness of early pregnancy and the fatigue of fighting the grief for her latest, lost child had smothered her concern. Let the old woman go — the children demanded her attention, there were the impudent native girls to train in laundry and household duties, a perpetual stream of them as one after another absconded to a life of carnal sin, plus the cows were not thriving, and the Mission packet had not come for close on twelve months, an eternity without mail, while leaving the stocks of civilised food despairingly low. At thirty-six, Mrs Oldfield was in a tunnel, a long, dark, airless passage that her husband could never enter, nor take the time to peer down. He was too involved in the implications of the voyaging canoes standing ready on the shore.

Sarah would depart for Kiti Medolan that day with only Mrs Purcell by her side to guide her in her new faith. Mrs Purcell was the new pet, as Mrs Oldfield once had been. The new white woman had become the constant companion in the hut, patiently sewing gingham into dresses for the royal lineage as Sarah and her sisters sat smoking their small clay pipes. And now they were going — going with God,

it was true, but without the missionary. Converts from the lower orders, the faithful through the years of persecution and conflict, were all but forgotten to Rev. Oldfield's obsession for the souls of the nobles. Sarah's soul was a jewel in the crown of the mission, but he feared it could shatter as cut glass under the ancient influence of that impenetrable heathen domain to the west.

Neither Dr Younghusband nor Rev. Oldfield had visited this smallest of villages despite numerous attempts through the years. They, individually and together, had circumnavigated the island with firm resolve and the seeming goodwill of the guides, but had failed to locate the settlement. They'd scaled the craggy mountains and penetrated the jungle interiors of the island, yet one square acre remained only in their imagination. It was as if the world beyond conspired to keep it that way. The past dwelt in that city. Or it might only be legend.

Though Sarah and her entourage were yet to leave, Rev. Oldfield had already devised another plan to deliver him to the ancient city of Kiti Medolan. He spoke of it, and his missionary wife failed to point out the contradictions in his ravings. He said his stratagem would enable him to join Sarah's party later: after he had sent a message, as he had done in the past. The message would be written on a piece of paper and Sarah would ponder it, and then he would be sent for to explain the words. It mattered not which words, only that *he* was needed to read them. That Sarah's people were

no longer illiterate heathen to be so duped eluded him. He remembered only the early days on the island and the stratagem's first success, a fretful moment when Chief Lipsoti threatened the lives of a family he'd made his enemy.

Those were dark days indeed. Rivalry over the attentions of a particularly attractive young wife of a lowly member of the village had descended into a cannibalistic frenzy of depravity and aggression. Rev. Oldfield heard of the menace from an informant in the royal household, an old woman whose friendship Mrs Oldfield had secured. The heathens used their own method of communication, a language in folded and knotted leaves of plantain, which Dr Younghusband had adapted and Rev. Oldfield adopted. Instead of banana leaves they used small bottles of medicine. If a crisis erupted, the old woman was to send to the mission compound a particular medicine bottle to be filled, an innocent enough action in a tense royal household. The signal arrived in the mission at a time of its own crisis. Mrs Oldfield had taken to childbed, to be delivered of their first, lusty son. The Reverend could not — even he at this moment — hurry away to diffuse the murderous intentions of the Chief.

In his place, the missionary sent a large imposing piece of parchment, boldly covered in black, rounded words. Lipsoti was astounded. He examined the paper closely and consulted widely. The beachcombers, a few of whom were literate, were wisely in hiding until the Chief's fury abated,

so only conjecture explained the missionary's message. It gave the missionary time to get there himself.

His diplomacy on his eventual arrival saved the family, though Lipsoti could not be dissuaded from strangling the young woman who had resisted him.

And the words he planned to send to Sarah now? Rev. Oldfield planned a verse. 'I shall light a candle of understanding in thine heart, which shall not be put out.' On that long ago night as he had been delivering his son, he could think of nothing so grand. He could only send that which was at hand, the beginnings of a letter to the Mission Board listing the household requirements of the mission in the coming year. The spades, the fowl, the underclothes.

In that coming year, and all the years since, the missionaries — Rev. Oldfield in the capital, Dr Younghusband across the mountains — had laboured hard. One important aspect was teaching the savages to read, ultimately to read the Words of God. The younger boys, like Jude, had been particularly eager. Education was the perceived road to the white man's power. So now they could read any decoy the missionary cared to send. They had a sophistication the Rev. Oldfield was loath to acknowledge.

If, on entering Lipsoti's hut a decade before, he had been martyred — as was the expectation of many — those would have been remembered as his days of glory. His bravery would have been remembered, immortalised. How difficult now the years, the perseverance, the work never-

ending. His mind struggled in a quagmire of his own past and the world's history.

Many months had gone into the preparation of the two canoes, a fact no one questioned when Sarah *impetuously* decided to withdraw from her son's recalcitrance. One had been made ready with fresh ropes spun from coconut husks, and a new sail woven in the traditional way from pandanus, even though canvas was available at a price. The other was completely new.

The canoe builder had decided upon the breadfruit tree more than a year before. If ever a large canoe is required this will be my hull, he had muttered on passing the tree almost daily. It was a big hull, the centre gouged and scraped from the mighty trunk once it was felled and stripped. In times gone by, with axes, planes and saws made only from clam shells, this could have taken four, five months alone. The canoe builder used instead the new iron tools and the work flew. But not all things could be hurried. For three months, the wood of the hull had to be left to dry. Only after the wait was the outrigger crafted in utility and beauty.

It rested above the high-tide mark, shy yet eager to meet the waves. Gaily coloured feathers and coconut ribbons decorated its first voyage, each ribbon tied with the sacred knots to bring luck.

Assembled around, standing as straight and proud as the palms they stood beneath, was close to the entire community. Among them, Mary Ann Clarissa was suddenly nervous at the sight of the vessels — large canoes, but so unlike her only other sailing experience on the decks and in the cabins of the *Westminster*. She kept one hand on the solidity of her portmanteau with its treasured load of journal and writing materials, and few clothes now that she had dispensed with her petticoats. King Lipsoti was sitting on a fallen tree trunk as on a throne, gazing nonchalantly at the clear horizon where his own black clouds and thunderous temper loomed. His mother so publicly withdrawing her support was a gross humiliation. Strength was only in the family. No individual survived alone.

His mother arrived when the sun was directly overhead. Her figure was beginning to bend with the years and she leaned heavily on the arm of Rev. Oldfield. Whether she was saddened by the departure was impossible to tell; she had simply made known her intentions and the world obeyed.

As requested, the missionary went forward to bless both outrigger canoes and make supplication to Heaven for a safe journey. A hymn floated on the eddies of heat as a path of coconut fronds was placed before each canoe. Slowly the women of the village, until that moment prohibited from construction and preparation, pushed the vessels down the ramps of foliage, sending them seaward, sending them slithering to the last unstoppable plunge. The water parted to accept their bulk.

The crowd exhaled as one. The outriggers bobbed majestically: no devils pulled them beneath the surface. They were ready.

Mary Ann Clarissa was placed in a position by the mast of the largest canoe, on a safe platform that stretched across the waves to the outrigger. Twenty-five others, with their belongings and tributes of food, filled the remainder of the space. Carefully each sail was raised into the lazy wind. Enough to take them away.

The sails would be taken down when Kiti Medolan was in sight. Slowly, reverently, they would then paddle to their destination, giving the village and the ancestors time to prepare for their arrival.

Chapter Ten

The sting had come at the end of the dinner at Maud and Rebecca's. Rebecca brought out a tray of coffee and imported chocolates, the latter as heat-affected as everything else in the country.

'Our island is not good for all the many things foreigners have introduced for us,' she commented, sitting herself beside Marianne. They had moved out onto the verandah; the mosquitoes were fewer after the fever of dusk, and the stars were legion.

There was a squareness about Rebecca Kadu's body, and a roundness about her face, but her mind was pointed and sharp.

'Our island may not be good for many of the introductions,' she sighed. 'Only, like the chocolates, these are too often the things we have taken to.'

Rebecca was concerned with community health. Her community had survived the epidemics of smallpox, influenza, measles and syphilis against the most dire predictions at the

turn of the last century. Travellers then had claimed to be seeing the last of a race. Across the Pacific photographers recorded the faces of a dying people. Death rates were too high, birth rates too low, was the perpetual lament. Closer to home, Mary Ann Clarissa had written of the paucity of births, the wonder of Netti's child when there were so few.

'But now we are told we are too many,' Rebecca explained. 'We devour white flour, white sugar, white rice, white cigarettes and suffer white diseases like diabetes and cholesterol and high blood pressure and heart attacks, strokes and cancer. And on top of all this we are having babies. Oh the change — oh so many babies!'

Marianne had seen the babies, everywhere.

'We need help,' inserted Maud.

Marianne had been looking across at Ewan and Benjamin at the time, one a foot taller than the other, both lost in debate, and, at first, missed that *she* was being asked to help.

Like her ancestor, both arriving for just a short stay, Marianne felt herself being drawn into the life of the community. Without intention, or plan, or knowing where it would lead.

If nothing else, it meant waking up in the morning with something to do. It meant waking up *early* in the morning.

In the early mornings, when the sun had barely woken — and neither had the populace, strewn still on sleeping mats across the island — Medolan shimmered and murmured, brightness muffled, and all the more beautiful for it.

So Marianne arrived at the Community Health Centre on a morning that felt brand new. She walked toward the building as her watch pronounced eight o'clock, beep, beep, and, still being hung up on Western concepts of time, was the first to arrive. A large padlock fell back heavily on the door, thumping dully in the quiet.

As staff and patients began to shuffle in over the coming hour, Marianne had time to consider what she described to herself as classic Medolanese architecture. The style relied greatly for its inspiration on sheet metal and corrugated iron, all the better for catching the rhythm of tropical rain on the roof, yet fatal as a flying guillotine in a typhoon. The building could not have been built for its advertised purpose of a health centre: it had the feel of a well-intentioned squat. The cement floors were uncovered except by sand hitching in on thongs and sandals, and the windows were high and small so that, in a country where power outages were more common than airline flights, electric lights were necessary at all hours of the working day. The only brightness was from the posters, walls covered to within a bare inch with them. Posters for diabetes, for HIV and AIDS, breastfeeding and better garbage disposal, proper exercise and blistering photos of the more pussy

consequences of unprotected intimacy. Pictures speak in many languages, but the texts were mostly English. The only posters in the local language lacked the vibrancy and immediacy of the others for they were entirely black and white. One of the many problems.

One poster by the door advertised the afternoon schedule of clinics. They looked disconcertingly ominous.

Monday	Leprosy and TB
Tuesday	Diabetes and Hypertension
Wednesday	Family Planning
Thursday	Child Health
Friday	Youth and Mental Health

The latter was an unlikely partnering to Marianne's mind. But it was the first day of the week that held her attention longest. Marianne made a note to let Dan know Monday afternoons would *always* be great for a dive.

It was still Monday morning and Rebecca Kadu's most pressing problem was the imminent arrival of a trio of eminent men. With white contact, the world had brought a new dimension in disease, then followed-up with international agencies of expert advisers on these diseases. Over the years funds had arrived, funds had been spent, more funds were requested, and now the experts were coming to have a look.

'They speak a different language,' bemoaned Rebecca, and she wasn't referring to their variously accented English.

The World Health Organisation and the United Nations Population Fund spoke solely in statistics, finite malleable numbers quite divorced from people — and suffering. Marianne's commission — the hook baited with dinner and chocolates the previous weekend — was to force some statistics from all the numbers in the Family Planning Program, a program the centre hoped would look more successful than the image of abounding children on the drive from the airport would allow. The pay was modest, a local rate one-tenth of what her white skin could normally command, but the local people were expected to survive on the local rate, and the money would pay for a few extra tanks of air on her continuing explorative enterprise with Dan.

'And it should only take a week or so,' Rebecca, as the director, said firmly. Though, within the notion of Pacific time, Marianne was unsure exactly what that meant.

The sight of a filing cabinet, a box of index cards and a small pocket calculator frightened Marianne. Faced with Rebecca's departing back — and not her reassuring face — procrastination seemed a viable option, so Marianne let herself drift into the morning's health promotion session. As a familiarisation exercise, she explained to all the staff who would listen.

Mornings were less structured than the afternoon clinics. There was a jovial, playful mood among the women, mostly young, who came and went. In fact, a game was in

progress when Marianne made space for her feet among the shoes politely left at the door as custom required, and leaned herself against the left doorjamb of one of the larger rooms.

Some reluctant volunteers from the audience, still giggling behind their hands because of the co-option, were divided into two appreciably unequal groups and stood within chalked circles on the floor. Four women settled themselves in one circle while ten women, like a gaggle of birds in the bright plumage of their frocks, jostled for elbow space in the other. Each ringleader of the groups was then handed a heavy cake bearing the misnomer of doughnut. The four women munched away, happy now in their role-play, while the ten scratched together the crumbs that were their share. There was a general hilarity in the audience as the actors returned from centre stage. Whether they would take the message home, that fewer in the family meant more room to move and more to eat for each, was questionable.

'If only they saw it as a more serious dilemma,' commented Rebecca as she rejoined Marianne, leaning on the other doorjamb. 'We have a poster of the entire island sinking under the weight of overpopulation but no one believes it. God will care for his chosen people. Someone will come up with more doughnuts, a bigger house …'

'At least you're targeting young women, giving them time to make a choice.'

'Time? Not one woman in this room is childless. We start early in Medolan, I'm sure your statistics will confirm

that. And until recently someone usually did come up with the extra doughnut, the roof over the head for each child.'

As the teenagers continued to add humour to the debate, Rebecca told one version of the country's story.

It was twenty-six years before, when the young woman was fifteen. She lived in a small village on the northern cliffs of Medolan and made her first visit with her church youth group to the bright lights of Medolan town, where there was not only electricity but ice-cream. All the youth, everyone to the age of thirty, wanted to attend the annual Church Youth Congress, but as she had a beautiful voice she was one of the lucky ones and was included to sing in the choir.

There was strong competition between the youth groups around the island. Their hymns and psalms challenged each other even as they praised God. So she set off full of joyous anticipation; and it was very exciting. Bunked down in the rooms of the high school, this girl met so many new friends she was in heaven. The weather was sultry, the communion and fellowship heady. There was considerably more congress than the Reverend and his organisers expected.

The family conferred privately and decided what should be done when the newest member of the lineage

arrived. That the child keep her child was never discussed. Her aunt Rebecca was in her thirties and childless; she must have it.

Rebecca was not married, either in the informal traditional or the consecrated Christian way, nor did she plan to be. For many years she had lived in a house with the British woman the family had adopted, a woman who was called her sister. When she and Maud were told of the family's determination they shrugged at the inevitable. No one in Medolan remains childless.

Hence Benjamin came to be their much loved son.

Marianne's reaction to the biographical account was typically Western.

'What about his mother?'

'Which mother?' asked Rebecca, momentarily confused. 'Oh. He sees his birth mother at weddings and funerals and the first birthdays of the new babies. All the family events.' The young woman had grown to be a good mother to her five children, conceived at a more respectable age. There was no shame in the earlier event.

But life was changing. Grandmothers and aunts and older sisters were less willing to become mothers again. The concept of the nuclear family was gaining credence in the

nuclear age. Whereas more than a hundred years of Christianity had done little to change sexual morals, the market economy and the essential dollar were disrupting the social fabric. The woven pandanus mat of family life had become frayed.

'Which is not entirely true. Each of us likes to see our time as *the* era of transition. We all think tradition stretched back forever unchanged until we came along,' added Rebecca with an arched smile.

Each and every generation believed this truth. And, furthermore, the international agencies responded to the argument of current cultural disintegration with sizeable inflows of that essential dollar.

Marianne could not tell when Rebecca was serious. She was articulate and her own devil's advocate and she had a sense of the ridiculous Marianne could not resist responding to. Rebecca was quite unlike her *sister* Maud.

The politics of family planning threatened to drown Marianne when she wasn't in the waters of the Pacific. When in the water, Dan danced her around every shipwreck in the lagoon and on the barrier reef. Reports of just the right size wreckage were pouring in, he confided. They saw an American fishing trawler, a shipping container, a Japanese coastal defence gun, and an incongruous ambulance of

uncertain origin still sporting a hazy red cross. Each had formed a symbiotic life with the world of the deep. The metal and wood and rubber and rope were truly acculturated as steady support for abundant, lively coral growth; or as cavernous home to iridescent fish, moray eels, sharks; or as an integral element in the reefscape. It was as if they had always been there. Marianne began to accept that any trace of the *Westminster* may now be as unrecognisable as a foreign interloper. Time, and Medolan, would have assimilated it as one of its own.

Central to the politics of family planning were the politics of contraception. And that threatened to confuse Marianne thoroughly when she was not in bed with Ewan. When in, Ewan danced her around the Earth, to the moon, along the rings of Saturn, and far beyond the solar system itself. It wasn't something Marianne felt she needed to analyse. They were so alike in their responses that she knew they were the definition of compatibility. The files at the Community Health Centre were page after page on the human failure of a family planning policy, yet the first night with Ewan proved the potency of respect and caring. She'd offered him a lift from Maud's home, down to his hotel, and he'd accepted on one condition. Marianne found herself blushing though none of the other diners could have overheard the exchange. And she accepted; a forthright man can be very seductive.

In his hotel room, all her senses were seduced, but for all that the soundtrack of an ad reeled itself through her brain. 'If it's not on, it's not …'

'One second,' he'd whispered in her tingling ear.

While he disappeared into the cupboard-like bathroom, she scrambled for her handbag, which hadn't made it very far into the hotel room. Inside, in a side pocket with the prepackaged sewing kit also never used, was The Condom. Her sister Ruth had slipped it in there at the airport. Marianne had protested but Ruth insisted, telling her to call it sisterly concern. The condom looked far from sisterly, until Ewan came back to her embrace with its twin. They laughed. It was a New Age romance. Of equals.

Not a mention of this was made in her letters home. Something held her back from putting the word *love* in black and white for all time, and she knew she was right in not committing herself to paper. Maybe she realised because she was spending so much time among paper, the files of the Health Centre, the records at the archive. Letters last, to be read by posterity. Lasting love should be its own testimony. A sixth sense — commonsense — helped her see that true love looks nothing but ludicrous confined within words like *true love*.

So it was not doubt that held her back in her letters. There was no doubt of that.

Her mother knew anyway, of course. Though Marianne's paranoia from Kimba's had abated, her mum

could tell what was going on. It was in the tone of the letters, the cheerfulness and inconsequential detail. The only question her mother had was who Marianne had fallen for among the forest of names — Dan, Ewan or Benjamin?

Chapter Eleven

The old woman Dinah took her grandson by the hand and walked from the palace. He alone brought sunshine into her days, for her children were divided and she grieved for the future they would create.

Dinah's son had built the palace for her, but his generosity was built upon the suffering of others: years of slavery and eventual death for his subjects. It was not as the gods saw fit. Hence his loins were blighted and his lineage failed to flourish.

Dinah's daughter, however, had married a mortal from across the water and given birth to a new tribe of strong and wondrous daughters. What Dinah's son feared most was that his sister bare a son. Upon the rumour of the birth of a boy he'd sent his most loyal officers to put to the sword all babes-in-arms across the water. Dinah knew God would not allow her son his own offspring after this abominable sin of infanticide.

Then the little boy she now led down to the shore was found one day by her maidservant. 'Come, come,' she had cried and they had waded deep among the roots of the mangroves to the

small raft securely wedged there. Swaddled upon the raft was Gilead. They were all astounded but Dinah knew he was a great and generous gift from the Land they had left and the Father they still loved. She adopted the child as a grandson and raised him in her own care as Prince.

At the shore, Dinah sat Gilead beneath the pandanus trees that fringed the beach and would shade his wait. She left the little figure and walked calmly into the sea.

The waves of the incoming tide washed about her old body, relieving the aches of age, helping her cast off her old wrinkled skin, just as a lobster casts off its shell for one all-new. As a beautiful young woman, Dinah emerged, leaving light footprints in the sand.

Gilead saw her coming toward him and cried: 'Where is my grandmother?'

'It is I,' laughed Dinah. 'Take my hand and we will go home.'

'You are not my grandmother,' wailed the little boy, shrinking back from her touch, hiding his angular body behind the branching trunk of the tree.

'Do not be afraid, my sweetest child,' cajoled his grandmother. 'I am young again and can live with you forever.'

'I don't want you,' spat back the bitter mouth of the bewildered boy. 'I want my grandmother. She is old. She has wrinkles. She is full of love.'

'I am full of love.'

'I will not come with you.'

Nothing could persuade Gilead that the beautiful woman before him was the person he loved so dearly. He cried for the old woman to comfort him. She entreated him to accept her in her youthful guise. The old woman would soon die and leave him with grief, but time meant nothing to the distraught infant. He only knew now.

Dinah turned and walked back into the ocean. Her decision was made. Her old skin entrapped her limbs and slowed her steps once again.

Hobbling up the beach she called to the boy. He ran joyously, immediately, and threw himself into the arms and smell that were the essence of his grandmother. She would live on through him without the gift of immortality.

Maud could never decide whether this story was meant to be told with a heavy heart or a joyful promise. What good was immortality without the love of your family, it implied. But did not great minds quest for just that eternal life Dinah handed back? Did we pamper our children beyond reason?

The gift of immortality had been withdrawn for all time. From the moment of Dinah's decision, the people of Kiti Medolan had begun to die even as the mortals across the water.

Maud came back to the story again and again as she attempted to structure the history of Medolan into a publishable manuscript. The legends of Dinah and Gilead were the beginning, if she dared claim them as history.

The claims writers made of the Pacific Islands were myriad and often ludicrous, leaving Maud to wonder at her own sensibilities. Journalists came for a week and wrote reams of articles; they went on organised tours and wrote fat books that found publishers and a readership. Yet the longer *she* stayed, the harder it got. Truths slipped and floundered in time. The shining truth of casual acquaintance was lost, the surety of the journalists' assertions were more clearly recognised as their own white guilt or black fantasies. They all came to see Maud Jones when they came to Medolan — no research is complete without the expert's view. They came like parasites, sucking out her wisdom to put into print.

Maud did not allow much bitterness in her life. She didn't have the time, for she wasn't immortal. But neither did she feel old. The messages from the mirror meant little, only Benjamin was a gauge for the passing years. His boyish face was now a man's, his eager run had slowed to a walk. The years he was away — the anticipation of which had dampened her spirits — had flown, and he had returned from his studies. Even sorrowful time passes. She loved him, but would she give up immortality if he asked?

Benjamin was special. His intelligence was innate and he had learned tolerance. He had chosen archaeology without his mothers' prompting, and though Rebecca had once imagined a doctor, she too was proud of his dedication to his country, its past and present. He advocated preservation and understanding, the power of education, the beauty of his

culture. And all at such a young age. Benjamin was twenty-six, a youth by the definition of Medolanese culture, until his thirtieth birthday would usher him into full adulthood.

The Australian woman seemed to agree with the cultural definition, Maud could see. Marianne had dismissed Benjamin, having classified him somewhere as *too young*. Without it having to be spoken, Maud could see how it hurt her son. Something inside Marianne attracted him, something beneath her shell of lacquered maturity. He was young but she appeared to be unnecessarily old. To protect an underbelly of innocence from the knocks and bruises of everyday life?

At times, Maud found Marianne very like her ancestor. Maud had studied the remarkable journal over and over, gleaning the facts, the details, the stories that were part of the history of the island and, in the process, had come to befriend Mary Ann Clarissa. One day, one distant day, her ambitions included a desire to edit the woman's writings. Another publishing goal. Unfortunately they — the journal and the attached treatise — belonged not so much to the State of Medolan as to the Head of State. The President, personally, as current lineage head and direct matrilineal descendent of Sarah, was heir to all her riches. This included all the papers, documents, books, collected articles, everything acquired by and left to his ancestors. He saw no value in these particular goods and loaned them to the archive, but if he did see the hint of even the slightest monetary return,

their status could well change. Protective legislation on items of historic value was a first stage to preserving the journal for all, and the lobbying had already begun.

How the journal had made its journey through time and into the possession of the High Chief's family remained mysterious. It was not an item a Lady left lying around. A journal travelled with her along with her handkerchief, and why it didn't return to Australia in Mary Ann Clarissa's care was never stated. The last entry voiced only plans for the ascent of the craggy mountain behind the mission, now, perhaps not coincidentally, called Purcell's Rock.

'Sarah's youngest son Jude has agreed to be my guide,' the journal stated.

And then, nothing.

Through Maud's research, however, an outline of subsequent events had emerged. Two days after Mary Ann Clarissa's last journal entry, the strongest and most devastating typhoon in Medolan's recorded history carried property and livelihood and life away with ferocious winds and furious waves. The *Westminster* had been one casualty of this simply named 'Typhoon of '64'.

Yet Mary Ann Clarissa had made no mention in her journal of the return of the *Westminster* and her husband to Medolan. He could only have sailed into the lagoon the day she'd climbed Purcell's Rock, the day she was not there to greet him. He'd sailed to his death in the face of the typhoon, perhaps thinking he and his crew had more chance

of survival on the sheltered side of the island than trapped between the hazard of the fringing reef and the treachery of the barrier reef near the township. His vessel sank within sight of land. There were eyewitness accounts in the British Colonial reports, which were Maud's last contact with Captain Purcell's widow.

Delving into the records of the Mission Board had been a futile endeavour. Maud's applications to the archive of the missionary society were solicitously dealt with but of little use. Her high hopes for Dr Younghusband's letters, if not journal and more academic notes, were frustrated in the first return mail. Though Mary Ann Clarissa had made repeated mention of Dr Younghusband's erudition, admired his mastery of the indigenous language and retold some of the folktales and legends he had collected, and entertained her with — including the germs of her own treatise — all written record was gone. Everything had been destroyed by the Mission Board, without apology. Dr Younghusband had been summarily recalled after his scandalous behaviour was discovered and all trace of his work was erased lest his deeds contaminate his words and poison the Cause. Maud could imagine him, an exhausted, disillusioned man, eking out his days in some small, nameless American town, working as a bank clerk, or another position well beneath his education, ostracised from the Church, unable to preach, desperately lonely. But not regretful? But with his writings destroyed, his friendship with Mary Ann Clarissa would never be told in his hand.

The letters of Rev. Oldfield — however copious and extant — were equally useless to Maud's research on Mary Ann Clarissa, or, as he referred to her, Mrs Purcell. He believed deeply the rhetoric of his superiors, on Earth and in Heaven, and wrote voluminous testimony to The Struggle. The savages were stupid as death, indifferent as the grave, poor and filthy people, untidy, and therefore unhappy and in need of his teaching. His God of Unity, Love and Omnipotence relieved them from the terror of superstition, filling their deep want of human spirit so his converted Christians were happy, fearless and, of course, intelligent, and their children, the few in the blighted time of fruitless union, were thankful and merry. Everyday life eluded Rev. Oldfield's pen except where it hindered the advancement of the Church. The royal intrigues of Sarah and Lipsoti threaded like the plot of a bad soap opera through the first two decades.

Within this, Maud found only two references to Mrs Purcell in the missionary's writing: one of her arrival, one of her departure. But then, mention of his own wife was almost as rare. She featured by implication in the mundane shopping lists and at the births and deaths of their children, and was mourned on her own death, as Beloved Helpmate. References to a second wife, selected and sent by the Board, were equally scant.

That Mary Ann Clarissa was the first European in her time to see Kiti Medolan should, Maud believed, have found a mention. However, the tyranny of the written word was

clear: not only what is written, but what is *not* committed to words. With the invisibility of Mrs Purcell and her vivid account of the ruins of Kiti Medolan, the myth of a missionary miracle was allowed to prevail. Within months of her own arrival, Maud had heard how the walls had come tumbling down: the walls of Kiti Medolan as evidenced by their ruinous state for any visitor to see today.

As the story went, pursued by the Truth of the first missionaries, barbarians and bestiality fled, finding last refuge in the ancient and corrupt city of Kiti Medolan. The death of the High Chief there, the evil King Lipsoti, was a sign from God. On the seventh day after Lipsoti's demise, on the day his body was to be sent to the Island of the Dead on a magnificent canoe, Rev. Oldfield took the cross from the altar of the stone church and led his people in seven open boats around the city on its isolated island. They circled seven times, the congregation all the while singing hymns of praise to the Lord as a background to the missionary's invocations and exhortations to the heathens to give up their evil lives. As they came to the gates for the seventh time, a conch shell blew out in wild trumpeting. The Christians were amazed. The clamour was the signal of the commencement of Lipsoti's final journey, but instead brought Kiti Medolan to its final moment. Even as Jericho fell in battle, so did the walls of basalt shatter into prisms of defeat.

It was wonderfully symbolic, but totally, completely and inarguably untrue. The misguided Rev. Oldfield could

not, in this case, be blamed for perpetrating the fable. He made no claims in his letters, and in fact revealed grief at the passing of Lipsoti, whose soul he always believed he was close to claiming. As for fact: Lipsoti died within sight of the mission station. He had never lived in Kiti Medolan. When Mary Ann Clarissa journeyed there in 1864, in the entourage of Lipsoti's mother, the ancient city was already anciently deserted. Its walls were picturesque ruins — her sketches of them were very pretty. No one in the village on the main island's shore could remember a time when the basalt edifices were inhabited. They were complacent in their thatched and woven huts and told elaborate mythologies of a race of foreigners — of the lineage of the great Dinah and her grandson Gilead — who built the city. When the Spanish first began to make contact in the seventeenth century, they thought these gods had come again. They performed complex rituals of welcome to greet the tall ships, but these white ghosts from the sea were quite stupid and no answering rituals were forthcoming. It didn't take much to work out these Spanish weren't gods.

The next foreigners just brought God. The missionaries: a new era in the history of the island, a new chapter in the book.

Round and round the evidence of the past twined, like the threads in an elaborate tapestry, the design of which was not clear as threads unravelled, frayed, were cut through. But no, Maud assured herself, the evidence was more substantial

than mere threads. It wasn't a pleasant picture being embroidered, but a memory of real people and events. In fact, the evidence was three-dimensional, like bricks. Bricks piled up, some mortared firmly together, some stacked precariously, to construct a house. As more evidence emerged, the house was extended, sometimes needing massive renovations, sometimes fundamental work on the foundations, often a change of wallpaper, a repositioning of windows, a softer light. But still there was always that hole in the roof needing repair to keep out the rain of doubt with its rising damp, fungus and mould. A wall listed sideways, all the things not mentioned piled up against it, threatening to bring the whole house of history tumbling down like the walls of Kiti Medolan.

The interior of one room had been shaded recently a more sorrowful colour with the letters Marianne had brought with her. For all Maud's deep acquaintance with Mary Ann Clarissa, the woman's husband had been a shadowy figure. Now she could read the letters he'd written her. They were unmistakably love letters. They weren't gushingly poetic, they were not overtly sensual, but they would have been great comfort in the loneliness of a loved one's absence. Maud was heartened to find the Captain a good husband, not an impersonal figure. His mourning over the deaths off Ulanang — his firing of the cannons into the night to protect his wife — was strangely touching. After all, massacre was a common device with his peers.

It took some time for her to pinpoint the real sadness in the letters, a poignancy quite beyond the sentiments of glad companions parted. It was something Marianne could not have known when she read the letters in Sydney — could not have known without the journal, the journal that said so much, pages filled with significant ethnographic detail alongside the hopes and thoughts of the writer. The journal that made *no* mention of receiving these very letters.

Maud looked at the journal again. On that last day she made an entry, before the typhoon, Mary Ann Clarissa once again lamented the very lack of word. Each ship that made landfall was a source of hope, then a disappointment as no letters from her husband were on board. She continued to misunderstand his motivations for leaving her there, and was beset with feelings of insecurity and abandonment. He had temporarily abandoned her, yes, but only for the most noble of regard for his fellow man, be they savage or not. Mary Ann Clarissa, Maud was certain, would have understood his dilemma once she had read these letters. But Mary Ann Clarissa could only have read his explanation *after* he was dead.

On Maud's historic timeline, events played a musical chairs of sequencing. Mary Ann Clarissa departs the village to climb a mountain, just because it is there. The *Westminster* arrives in Medolan, its Captain comes on shore to find his wife gone, just for one day, one fatefully coincidental day. Wind and wave blow ill. He leaves for the sheltered side of the island, going to his doom. A bundle of letters, from the

Captain to his wife, arrive, tragically later — most likely on another trading vessel the *Westminster* had met in a far away port, one with an earlier arrival in Medolan anticipated. This method of transferring letters between ships was common before there was an established postal system. There was a certain fatal romanticism to it all that was popular.

Maud was not a romantic. The events and emotions of those few days were one weak gust to the typhoon itself. But Maud was now interested in consequences: in the appearance of Marianne with these letters. There was a mystery here too. Another piece of information Mary Ann Clarissa failed to record in her journal, or in the last letters never sent, was the coming of a child. Yet the widow's line continued to the present day.

Maud didn't think she'd tell Marianne. She'd given her complete access to the archive: let her discover the inconsistencies for herself. And the implications. Maud wondered if Dr Younghusband was implicated.

But then Maud went back to the legends of Dinah and Gilead. The oral traditions, modified over telling and retelling, probably held as much truth as any written record. Whoever was totally honest in their journal, after all?

Chapter Twelve

Jakit opened its arms to Sarah and her entourage with a ceremony of welcome befitting the rank of the most noble woman in the land. Coronets of rich flowers ringed every head, a great feast filled the bellies of the whole village. Sarah said this is how taro and yam should taste, while her host, the chief Re, marvelled at the texture of bully beef as if it had appeared from the sky itself.

The village of Jakit, the sleeping place, was aptly named. It lay beyond the world dozing, not yet woken to the nineteenth century. Yet life within was vital, strong and abiding, just as the heart and lungs and nerves of a body function even as the sleeper dreams.

'This is how it was in the old times,' Mary Ann Clarissa was told proudly on arrival. The natives, she found, had a nostalgia for the time before alcohol and civilisation — so they and their gods protected this one region from the corruption of the visitors from outside time, even as they themselves, when in Medolan, consumed great quantities of the corruption.

Mary Ann Clarissa sat during the welcoming feast with Sarah's nieces and second cousins, who tradition called Sarah's daughters. There was one who was so highly pregnant a second place would be needed on the return journey, and there were two who had followed behind the main canoe in a small dinghy, menstruating women not being allowed to jeopardise the safety of the voyage by sailing on the canoe. Mary Ann Clarissa had said nothing of her own situation, half fearing the canoe would sink for her transgression of their superstitious custom. They'd arrived without mishap nevertheless, to sit well fed in the main feasting hut.

It was a beautiful place, a large, airy building by the water, tall, on stilts to allow the breezes to work all around. The thatch rose to a tip, like a triangle, granting a loft to imitate the heavens. Starlight twinkled through the straw and reeds onto the crowns and coronets. The daughters presented Mary Ann Clarissa to a crowd of faces. She met only women, for the men had gone on to revels only their gender could enjoy, the older women observed shrewdly through a young interpreter. Mary Ann Clarissa knew it must involve the fermented fruits of Medolan, the colour of the skin of no matter in the likings of men.

Looking beyond the star-glow of coconut lamps, Mary Ann Clarissa could almost see tranquillity resting in the shadows. The curious eyes of the Jakit women were wide with

questions but they lacked a judicial expectation of her answers. A wantonness crept upon her. She could say *anything*. She could do *anything*. No! The wantonness was in the others, in their copper-coloured skin, sinful and corrupt in a natural state unhindered by clothing, she assured herself.

But clothing was a mark of shame they told her. To wear it they could see only one reason: to hide an awful deformity. They were proud to display their beautiful tattoos, their badges of maturity and rank. But what was the deformity the white woman sought to disguise with a shroud from her neck to her toes?

She had been asked before but had always preserved her modesty. A star above winked. Mary Ann Clarissa hesitated, then quickly lifted her skirt. The white flesh of stockingless legs filled the eyes of the women. Shrieks filled the hut. Shrieks of laughter.

Mary Ann Clarissa joined them with a liberty she would have found astounding if she'd been a small observer in the rafters, like a gecko cognisant of the morals of the world.

Eyebrows lifted, cheeks twitched and the corners of mouths contorted in an unspoken language Mary Ann Clarissa barely understood existed. Her only facial expression could be a bemused smile.

Her smile lasted as she explored the ruins of the ancient city over the coming mornings.

Sarah was spending the days in much more talk — catching up on the affairs and intrigues of the west. Mary Ann Clarissa was not needed. But left alone she was not lonely. For the first time in her life, she sensed the power in the notion of freedom. Freedom to explore, to seek, to find her own curiosity. Curiosity in abundance: where had this ancient city come from? Who would conceive a city of such magnitude where God had created no land? Did winged gods, angels themselves, carry the basalt pillars? Or was it built upon the backs of slaves and the suffering of the oppressed?

The rhythm of the tides conspired with Mary Ann Clarissa to accord her freedom of passage across to the city of Kiti Medolan. For three mornings the water rushed away, as before Moses at the Red Sea, and allowed her to cross to the legendary monuments without the aid of a boat or the company of strangers. And on only one of those crystal early mornings did the white woman meet anyone but ghosts as pale as herself. The city whispered and rustled with memories that gave her no fright, yet two brown bodies entering the temple where she sat sketching brought her to her feet and her journal thudding with her heart to the stone floor.

But it was only Jude, and a cousin with the exuberance of a young dolphin. Later, under the tutelage of Dr Younghusband, Mary Ann Clarissa realised the bravery in

their appearance. Kiti Medolan was not expressly forbidden but there were not quite forgotten taboos and no one went there by choice. The gods protected the ruins and the savages knew not to meddle in that which they did not understand. Their own craftwork was deft, their huts large with skill and beauty, still they could not imagine the physical construction of this looming, timeworn neighbour. Kinship with the past had been lost. Another race — a jealous race — owned the ruins.

'This is the temple,' Jude told Mary Ann Clarissa. For all their fear, they allowed themselves the secret of a furtive knowledge.

Mary Ann Clarissa had known where she was sitting. The carved edifice spoke a language intelligible through time and culture: the temple was central, it was bigger, taller, more elaborate in its embellishment. The symbolic equivalent of the stone church in Medolan. Moreover, stone figures squatted at the temple's core. Some towered over her, some she could look in the eye, a few she could lift from a crumbling pedestal, and she dared to try while the two boys hid nerves behind jolly laughter.

Nature wished to reclaim the intruding basalt rock. Nature pushed the roots of mangroves into the foundations, seeded palms inside buildings, forced creepers and flowers to paint over the black of basalt, to twist and entwine, insinuate and slowly drag the city to effacement, and, maybe in the future, to complete erasure. It was so very grand Mary Ann

Clarissa lost her use of words and could not describe the city to her journal. She instead took to sketching, dredging into lessons at Mrs Rennie's High School that had long since been overtaken by the brambles of her own nature.

As the heat became fierce, scorching and curling the edges of her page, Mary Ann Clarissa would leave Kiti Medolan, scuttling back across the reef flat like a hermit crab, even as the tide washed back in, separating the past from the present. She'd enjoyed the chatter of Jude and his cousin, which had erupted from long thoughtful silences, but they'd only come once, inhibited after that by their own daring. Thus she was alone on the third morning when she came back across the reef and re-entered the long, deathly silence of Jakit.

No children played around the stilted feet of their homes, there was no rhythmic pound of pestle against breadfruit in preparation of the midday meal. The canoes lined the shore as they had when she left: none had gone out for fresh fish. The only visible sign of life was a mother sow snuffling with her squat offspring in a heap of rubbish. No one was hiding, but they stayed well hidden in the shadows of their homes.

With quickening step, Mary Ann Clarissa approached the hut that had been assigned as hers. Life stirred within, and she felt she could breathe again only when a figure stepped from the shadows into the sunlight. Relief flooded her as the sun's rays suffused around him. She was unspeakably glad to see his white face.

'They sent for me last night but I am come too late,' revealed Dr Younghusband.

'Someone is dead?'

Fear had taken an old man, a cousin of Sarah who had long been dying. Not his fear, but the fear of his family. They'd felt the spirits of the dark world close and piled upon him, each obdurate in their need to say goodbye with a caress and an embrace. They'd smothered him, quite unknowingly, quite literally.

'He is dead now most assuredly,' confirmed Dr Younghusband. 'Come inside from the sun. The air is like a flame to breathe and it is the family we must save our prayers for now.'

The quiet of Jakit echoed the quiet of the grave. The village would stay its lamentations except for one hour of every day, the hour of his death. For one cycle of the moon, through that set hour, plaintive weeping would urge the gods to kindness. But for now the silence reigned

Mary Ann Clarissa followed Dr Younghusband into her hut. He had set a fire and over it boiled a billy of water, adding

to the heat of the day but promising the refreshment of mellow tea. In his medicine bag he always carried a caddy, two tin mugs, and a tinder box, the ingredients of many an introduction to God's Word. From the bag, Sarah had earlier received laudanum and assurances of God's love, for she had been frightened enough by her cousin's approaching death even to send for the missionary doctor who had long been kept from this village. She'd feared, she said when Dr Younghusband was led to her, that the old man — dying in the thrall of heathen beliefs, dead in an unconsecrated grave — was lost to her. She had nothing to look forward to but Heaven and Life Everlasting *without* him. And then, without *all* of her unchristened family.

'There is no reason that she will not regain her equanimity tomorrow,' assured Dr Younghusband, his concern flying away from death. He was there, finally, and his curiosity could not be confined one moment longer. 'But what of Kiti Medolan? Fifteen years the legends have excited my intellect. Tell me, you have seen the city …' He had wanted this moment as ardently as Rev. Oldfield, still confined to Medolan.

They talked through the afternoon. Mary Ann Clarissa found the kindness in his face came from tolerance in his heart and was glad.

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Days merged. Mornings were spent steadying the missionary's measuring stick as he mapped out the ancient city in exact detail. Floor plans; the dimensions of over-large basalt pillars, larger than himself, heavier then he could accurately calculate; notes on the state of decay — all went lovingly into his book while more delicate sketches of the relief work decorated hers. The statues in the temple, unknown elsewhere, unimaginable in the pagan faith of Medolan, inspired them both to hours of replication on paper. Dominating eyes stared unflinching. One giant face laid prostrate by time had the look of Sarah on the one morning Mary Ann Clarissa was asked to visit with her. The look was subdued. So subdued she had said nothing to stop the missionary exploring her legendary beginnings. Jude's lips stretched into a slight smile on one of the smaller stone figures. The past was not so far that blood could not bridge time.

Then, when the heat overcame enthusiasm, Dr Younghusband would row a small craft back across the strait and they would climb to the waterfall.

Jude showed them the way. He guided their path and listened intently to their conversations. While they were in Kiti Medolan he attended his mother — and his family attended him as she now spoke openly against Lipsoti and Jude was perceived as her rightful heir. But when they returned to the main island, he became their welcome companion. Sweat prickled Mary Ann Clarissa's back and Dr Younghusband's breath grew laboured on the climb to the

glade, this garden that could only be as Eden. Once there, all discomfort would be forgotten, for God's hand in the beauty of the landscape was an elixir for the soul. The water fell in steps, cascading over rock until it rested in a tranquil pool. Mary Ann Clarissa wrote there too.

'There is a tree here I would have in my home at Christmas if life could be but transplanted across the oceans. Flowers grow upon it in the likeness of candles, standing tall and red from a petal base. They could light the Nativity with their radiance. Where will I be at Christmas time?' Had she a premonition? She wrote: 'The peace in the waiting of these days can surely not last.'

A midday meal was served to the company of visitors each day. All the outsiders, including the white aliens, would gather in the feasting hut. There, one day, Mary Ann Clarissa's peace *was* broken. A stone fell into the tranquil pool and she could no longer see the surface. She was the observer; she was capsized and almost drowned by the waves; she was the stone.

Sarah's pregnant niece who had accompanied her on the canoe was not at the meal. It was not right to speak of such matters in mixed company, nonetheless Mary Ann Clarissa asked expectantly of the new baby.

'There is no baby,' she was told tersely. No further information was forthcoming. She enlisted Dr Younghusband's aid, but he was told the same. There was no baby. Mary Ann Clarissa became agitated. Everyone had been anticipating the pleasure the arrival of a child would bring in these times, Netti's child being the only offspring in the family in too many years. What had gone wrong? A terrible labour, as Netti's? Surely then Dr Younghusband would have been called? There were too many questions. Mary Ann Clarissa rose as if to go. No one stopped her. So she left to find the mother and child.

A quiet voice restrained her once she was outside. Jude spoke quickly, explaining as much as he, not being female, could. His cousin was not in the village, he said. Birth of course followed the patterns of the past and she had gone to the birthing hut with her attendants. It was a private place on the shore some distance to the north. He had listened to the morning's talk, the expectation of the delivery, and only as they gathered for the meal had the sad news rippled through the community. It would be the only time it could be mentioned. Now there was no child.

'But why?' Mary Ann Clarissa demanded. 'Dead at birth? Surely then the child should be mourned openly.'

Jude did not meet her eye as he continued. The child's legs were turned, twisted so he could never walk, never be a man. The birth attendants followed custom as they knew they had to. The boy would be buried. He would die. He would never have existed.

Mary Ann Clarissa turned to the north, looked along the pristine white of the beach. She was not thinking clearly, she imagined only the warmth of a child's body. She ran. She lifted her skirt and though she had never, never run in all her thirty-seven years, she ran then. Her shoes flew into the weed at the high-tide mark and the sand scoured her naked feet. Her heart pumped wildly into the heat of the day. Sweat cloyed and smothered her. But she was tireless, for she ran in anger. And she ran into anger.

The childless mother was within the birthing hut and would stay there for weeks of cleansing. Only two old women stood outside and they repulsed the mad white woman, at first truly not understanding her frantic pleas.

But Mary Ann Clarissa did not need their replies to her entreaties, nor any directions.

A freshly dug mound of sandy earth heaved itself into Mary Ann Clarissa's awareness. A grave, silent, done. The anger and indignation of the attendants could not hold her back. She fell to it, digging, grubbing up the earth with bare soft hands, digging up the baby, its skin as soft as an angel's. She lifted him, held him, imagined, imagined with all her prayers she felt a heartbeat.

'*I* will have you, I will adopt you, I will care for you, I will love you,' she moaned.

She would have loved any children a husband brought to a marriage, but Captain Purcell brought none. She would have loved any child of her own, but God granted her none.

She would have loved this child, dark-skinned, dark-eyed, malformed and foreign. But he was dead.

Chapter Thirteen

Mrs Purcell's fury at the inhumanity of the people of Medolan protected her from their returned condemnation. Reading the entries for the following days in her journal was painful. She had not before presented herself as a woman who could harbour such emotions, emotions of such intensity. She'd refused to understand the silence of the people on the matter; she would not let go of the idea of giving the baby a proper Christian burial. And her wrath turned on Dr Younghusband when he refused to perform this ceremony. The missionary's cry for an understanding of the heathens fell on stony ground. Mary Ann Clarissa wrote that she did not care about the feelings of the natives now they had revealed themselves to be so profoundly without feeling. She did not want justifications: she would not believe they *could* not give this boy the status of a baby, a human, for it would be too distressing for them to consider him so. She refused to understand Dr Younghusband's descriptions of the custom, though she recorded what he said in her journal: that

no baby was a full member of the community until their first birthday. Too many died before that anniversary, the necessity for infanticide was too great on a small island. Indeed, during periods of their history only three children were allowed to any common woman. More would have been a problem to the entire community, a problem to feed, a problem in time of crisis. You can only run with a child on the back and one in each arm. Any others would have to be left to die.

'But this man purports to be a man of God, come to spread His word. Let God judge, not he. He should spend his time teaching, not cavorting on some ancient acropolis. He should …' Mary Ann Clarissa wrote on and on. The beauty of the waterfall glade no longer insinuated itself into her pages. Did she go there? Her descendent imagined her suffering the stuffiness of an enclosed hut, cramped and hot, pulling the space around herself like a hair-shirt. Allowing nothing that would make her feel better.

Then *events*, as Maud referred to them, fortuitously — though not for everyone involved — overtook Mary Ann Clarissa, propelling her away from Kiti Medolan and the man who'd fallen, seemingly irretrievably, in her esteem.

It was difficult, from the culture of the early twenty-first century, to understand Dr Younghusband's great crime over the dead child. The relativism of morality was, in many quarters, now accepted without question. A crime of tolerance, Marianne dubbed it after a spirited discussion with Maud and Rebecca.

Each had read Mary Ann Clarissa's journal, the same words in the same personal handwriting, but they had not read the same thing. The missionaries had looked out into the heathen world through an imported glass window, and each of these three women looked at the historic record through her own window of bias.

Marianne, try as she might, could not comprehend such agony over the death of a newborn. Motherhood was not ticking like a time bomb in her psyche and, without the biological clock or the feel of her own child in her arms, she was without compassion for the childless woman. She therefore thought there must have been something else — something more — upsetting the writer into melodrama. As if there could be anything worse than the death of a child, any mother could counter.

Maud, though, was concerned with Dr Younghusband's role in the drama and decried the permanent destruction of his record by the Mission Board when he later fell from respected elder statesman to son of Satan, not only in the eyes of Mary Ann Clarissa. What had shaped his transformation over the years? Mary Ann Clarissa's description of him in Kiti Medolan resembled in no way the fiery preacher stumbling upon the drunken beachcombers and Chief Lipsoti in mock worship in his first church in Medolan. That early history of Dr Younghusband's arrival as first missionary on Medolan was told in Rev. Oldfield's journal on his own arrival. Rev. Oldfield referred to the

righteousness of his fellow missionary who was exiled over the mountain for interfering in Lipsoti's fun. How, in this exile, had he learnt tolerance? Isolated from everything familiar: what had it done to him?

And Rebecca threw her hands in the air over the entire library of white pronouncements on life in the South Seas. Infanticide? Where did these misconceptions come from? Abortion she could accept, it still occurred. No laws advocated it, but there were also none against it, and everyone who needed to know, knew it was done at the hospital. Older women, when pressed, would talk mysteriously of traditional ways — dances and chants, special places, a sharp rock by a particular stream, throw-away lines about red-hot coconuts. It all depended on the questions asked, and who did the asking, Rebecca was certain. Yet white men sailed in for brief refuelling of coconuts and recreation, and sailed out with an encyclopaedic knowledge of custom and tradition. Rebecca's credulity did not stretch to their findings published in black and white, but more white than black, more about *them* than her ancestors. Her people were good God-fearing people with an overreaching love of life: they could not ever have killed babies. The Captain's wife misinterpreted a bizarre episode, extrapolated rules from exceptions, revealed a hysterical nature — her own.

Rebecca told Marianne that this was just one classic storyline in the compendium of myths, this idea that the savages murdered their own children by burying them alive.

The variation to the tale had the mother tying the screaming, always screaming, child to a raft to set it to sea. Anyone who knew Medolan history recognised the raft; it was the baby strapped to it who had been misrepresented, the legend garbled by a particular Catholic priest at the beginning of the century.

The legend this Catholic priest failed to accurately record was in fact from the days of Dinah in the legendary past. A decree had gone out across the island. A rival to the patriarch had been born, but he did not know where, and ordered the death of all newborns among the people of his dominion. The families wept but could not resist the power of the spear and club. Only one loving and hopeful mother set her son to sea on a raft. Medolan had their hero Gilead, not infanticide as contraception.

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Marianne loved the now regular evenings up in the hill-house deep in discussion with Maud and Rebecca. Benjamin and Ewan were usually there too; others came and went. The food was indifferent but the talk far from mundane. Marianne learnt to express her own opinion, learnt to speculate and find opinions she felt she wanted to be her own. Looking back, as she often did in the years to come, those evenings had the lilt and flow of legend themselves. Times of nostalgia and fuzzy surfaces. Though

they talked so much about the past, it was overwhelmingly The Present, with capitals and *best days of your life* in graffiti over the top. From then on the smell of a mosquito coil opened a gold-and-tear-lined box of memories.

She'd sit with her limbs curled into one of the cane chairs scattered with frangipani pillows. Not any chair, invariably she'd sit on the chair she came to think of as *my chair* — the one by the table of murex shells, white, spindly skeleton shells like the bones of their conversations, displayed to entrancing effect on black velvet as rich as the night sky.

These curled limbs had never felt so easy. Exhausted from days of real work followed by afternoons with Dan, hours of fresh air, sunshine and a water wonderland that was now alive with a foretaste of Ewan's body. Not that they ever touched in public, never openly acknowledging their passionate devotion. To do so would have been insensitive to the culture they enjoyed hospitality within. Medolan was a land of lust, a country where carnal pleasures were rarely denied — like any other — yet a wanton display of hand holding or worse was severely frowned upon.

Marianne and Ewan laughed at the restrictions, but obeyed. Standing by him on the verandah, leaning over a map, or clearing the table of dishes, her hand would ache as she held it from brushing his beloved skin. There was the thrill as fingers accidentally touched, but then agitation as the curve of his cheek rounded in a smile she could not kiss,

his brow creased in a frown she could not smooth away. But again, behind it, there was the certainty of his lips on the nape of her neck. Later he would unfasten her hair, tied away from the heat, and fan the tresses slowly, then lift them again to kiss the lobe of her ear, and down, nuzzling her neck, caressing her shoulders, slipping his hands ahead of his lips. A gentle unhurried possession.

Marianne would fall, after, into the sleep of the blessed, Ewan curled around her back, his breath, as soft as butterfly wings, on her skin.

It was no wonder she listened to the convictions, arguments and dogma of those around her and found a deep well of tolerance in her soul. From the position of happiness, understanding was easy. Understanding, but not of Mary Ann Clarissa. She felt no sympathy for her ancestor, raving in her journal, going on and on about the heathens and their evil ways. About Dr Younghusband and his unchristian acceptance. From where Marianne sat, comfortable in *her chair*, tolerance was no crime.

It was also no wonder that in the days that followed the refuge of the archive became a cage. Which she avoided. Marianne had begun living her own life and lost interest in Mary Ann Clarissa's. The only writings she saw for a time

were letters from her mother. *Abbeyleigh* had been flooded. The gutters had not been able to control the flow during a storm, but, everything taken into consideration, there was little damage, and then only at ground level. The big box of papers neatly organised at the foot of the rocking chair were a stuck and prostrated papier-mâché sculpture from a lost world and would have to be destroyed, as they probably should have been long ago. The storm was a freak, but you can't trust nature, her mother mused with a touch of mock despair.

While her mother was left to mop up the mess, nature worked for Ewan. His whales arrived. The reef had exploded with procreative life, mesmerised by the moon into spawning the bait in a great trap, a web of sperm to catch a chain of life that ended with the hungry sperm whale. She came again, remembering the passage from the previous year, bringing her baby, many tonnes heavier and all the more hungry.

Ewan was thrilled despite the implication that the state of the ocean and the food chain was letting the whales down elsewhere. Save the whales was a catch cry, at first a call to save them from the evil hunters, but now the enemies and threats abounded beyond the outlawed whaleships. Shipping traffic, pollution, development near their feeding and breeding grounds, the over fishing of the krill and fish they survived on, and the still unknown effects of greenhouse warming on the polar food chain were all implicated. The world was not as it should be when a mother must risk everything and take her offspring from the familiar to foreign shores.

Each morning Ewan had made a pilgrimage to the cliff overlooking the feeding ground of the year before. He would drive north, and then return with no whales to report. One Sunday morning he didn't come back at the normal hour and Marianne paced the house waiting, wondering why waiting was such a difficult thing to do. Had any woman, for it was women who waited most, perfected it as an art? She imagined a Chinese woman in repose by a lotus, feet bound, eyes down.

For such a small island, Marianne had not explored all it had to offer. She looked out the window again and again — expecting Ewan's car or the promise of it in a sound or an approaching cloud of dust — and saw instead beyond the road were the mountains and paths she'd never followed. She waited. She remembered Mary Ann Clarissa's waiting. She imagined Mary Ann Clarissa's eyes perpetually searching for a sail on the horizon. So she had a kinship with her despite everything …

After an hour, time she could quite easily have spent happily busy except for the waiting that puffed itself up to fill any space, Marianne left the house. A phrase from Mary Ann Clarissa's last letter had entered her head where it circled like a predatory mosquito. *The crag beckons me up*. The crag did not beckon Marianne up, but to kill the waiting she went anyway.

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Tourists were encouraged to climb Purcell's Rock for the view so she took her camera, along with a bottle of store-bought water and her waiting. A fifty-minute walk from the bottom, advised the small brochure picked up on arrival at the airport eons ago. A palm tree against turquoise water was pictured on the front. Marianne drove down a dirt track, following the rough map in the pamphlet, but distrusting it as the road seemed to lead into someone's backyard. It did and it was. An old woman shuffled out of her plywood and sheet-iron abode, smiled a tooth-gaped greeting and extended her hand. Only one dollar to climb. The traditional owners had now decided to make some profit out of the land countless foreign trespassers had exploited for a hundred years.

Marianne unfurled a dollar bill from her jeans' pocket, a green worthless looking American dollar, and handed it over. As receipt she got a vague wave of the same gnarled hand in the direction of a small break in the foliage.

'Up, up,' croaked the woman, walking slowly away on legs that had no envy for the younger pair. Climb up there for fun? Fools.

The narrow path through the undergrowth seemed, at first, to lead away from the summit of the mountain, leaving Marianne a dollar poorer and no happier. Water from a night shower pooled in muddy ruts. Her feet slipped. Whose idea was this anyway?

A great banyan tree sugar-coated with climbing bougainvillea stood in mighty splendour ahead: the end of

the track. But then a sturdy branch pointed to the right and a path opened up, a path wide in comparison with the initial stretch, a path wide by any estimation. It climbed in great swaths, zigzagging through a jungle of leaf green and bird chatter.

They made their own music, the birds. Marianne could not see them, and the one glimpse she caught of a winged creature was almost certainly a bat. But they kept her company, singing a symphony round and round in her head, speaking to her calf muscles, tightening them into an allegro grip.

Bushwalking had been a big thing in her undergraduate university days. It was the environmentally sound thing to do, the marker of a student who had escaped the *dags*. Marianne was persuaded to go, once. She wore her walkman, as did everyone; they were another marker, thankfully thrown away after a few years of popularity. And she strayed behind, unfit, calves aching, Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9* in her ears, swirling, spinning, serenading, softly falling to seduce, capturing her soul. Magic rustled in the Australian bush on the wand of the orchestra. *From the New World*. Could it open a new world to her? At the cleared picnic area, a shallow youth with dishevelled hair longer than her own asked if she wrote poetry, then proceeded to read her his. She hadn't been into the bush since. No wonder her calves complained.

Purcell's Rock was not colossally tall except to those on the path up. Marianne puffed loudly, frightening lizards on

bark, butterflies on leaves. She almost emptied her water bottle, thirst an excuse to stop often, and coincidentally an effective means of lightening her load. She regretted the camera — it grew so heavy.

Then the rock touched the sky with a stony summit and the camera was no longer regretted. Medolan lay in sanitised glory below, a dainty matchbox town clinging to the edge of the land. The sea was all around, vast and inviting. Marianne's breathing slowed to normal and, from her initial dead stop at the top, she found the energy to walk around the summit.

The best view was from the mouth of a cave carved into the rock by nature millennia before. There were no trees to block the panorama and the cave offered cool shelter from the sun so close above. That's why the Japanese chose it for their gun.

One mystery was explained. So it was the Japanese who had cleared the path, the better for hauling almost twenty tonnes of lethal metal up the mountain. More than seven tonnes just for the barrel, each of the mountings and base weighing more than five tonnes, all dragged, physically, by Japanese soldiers on a slope Marianne found formidable with a water bottle (plastic) and a camera (compact).

The Japanese were on Medolan only a while. Long enough to live a little, and die. The land the old woman below thought she owned had been fought over with great bloodshed by mighty forces who had hardly acknowledged

her existence. All foreign intruders believed the reputation of the natives: that they didn't respect property or possessions. That they were pilfering tribes of thieves and looters, that if the Angel of the Resurrection ever came they'd steal his trumpet before he had time to blow a single toot. The angels didn't come, only the missionaries who took prime land for their churches, the traders who took land to establish plantations, and the Japanese who proposed to pinch the lot. And the pot kept calling the kettle black and the foreigners kept coming. The navies of Japan and the Western Allies played tug-of-World War II, claiming islands across the Pacific, losing them again as the rope was pulled powerfully the other way. It was all in the pamphlet with the cover of the deceptive paradise palm against sand and sea.

War was so stupid, sighed Marianne.

Saturated with the view — even the most glorious view becomes less captivating upon familiarity — Marianne turned to poke around the cave. Corrosion was destroying the gun Allied artillery had failed to harm, the gun that had not stopped the Allied invasion. All that energy hauling the stuff up the mountain wasted. Energy that could have been expended in more useful pursuits. Like perfecting ways to make love to and pleasure their women, perhaps.

Graffiti on the walls of the cave demonstrated the common man's agreement with her. In several places, etched deep in the stone, were upturned triangles, balancing on one point, a line passing from top to bottom. The symbol for

a certain, desirable part of a woman's anatomy, she'd overheard Benjamin explain to Ewan one evening over a towering pile of photos from around Medolan.

Running her finger over the seemingly ancient pornography, the rest of Benjamin's explanation intruded. This was a symbol used by the people of Medolan, not the Japanese. And really, her grandfather's spluttering about the war now uppermost, could a Japanese soldier be so undisciplined as to perpetrate graffiti of any kind, let alone erotic?

But it was no good. All thoughts to distract herself led back to Ewan anyway. Even, most particularly, erotic graffiti. He should be home soon, surely. She must hurry.

Leaving the cave, she saw a dark smudge beyond the barrier reef. The *Westminster* in the deep? Impossible. Only squinting through her sunglasses made it clear. The smudge detached itself into smudges: a pod of whales, some large, some small, a family of females and young. They were waiting. Ewan's pair had risked the reef and the rest would await safely outside for their return.

So his waiting was over, and her waiting too. Marianne fishtailed down the path, war forgotten. Ewan was home when she got there. He met her at the door.

'They came!'

'I know, I know,' she laughed as he tussled her to the floor and stopped her bourgeois protests about the bed. It was slightly uncomfortable, and completely unprotected.

Chapter Fourteen

God truly worked in ways mysterious to his servants, believed Rev. Oldfield as he listened to a delegation of his converted natives at the gate to the mission compound. Dis-ease had hung about the village of Medolan after Sarah's decampment and now it had descended, with violence.

Chief Lipsoti had taken to the bottle and refused the missionary entry to his presence since the departure. He'd spent more of his time in a stupor than not, but still Lipsoti could not prevent his mind picking at the sore of his mother's treachery. His siblings were pus oozing from the disease, suspect and alien. Did Netti and Jude deserve the love his mother denied him? Did they have Sarah's support? Who envied his temporal power? Who was planning his death, to usurp his throne? Round the befuddled maze of his mind, delusion wound and mistrust stalked, sustained by gin and sycophants.

Then the spirits stopped flowing. The square faces of gin bottles mocked him emptily from the floor. Ricco the Cockeye was to blame, the fornicating husband of his sister, the father of his mother's grandson. That child was the threat. The child was the next generation, and their strength. His own children rated as mere rats in the corners to his family. So to Ricco's he went: to visit the supplier of gin, the supplier of children of dissension.

Though the Italian trader heard the riot of drunken rage outside his store, he had no time to feel the terror his fate deserved. When the High Chief demanded more gin it was to the severed head of the white man. Murder dripped blood into the cracks in Lipsoti's power and he jeered against it, taking his want from the store and taunting the blank eyes of Ricco the Cockeye to require payment of him now.

Netti and her child fled and the crime crept into the ears of the village. They were a moral people despite the warnings on sea charts to beware of perfidy — to sail past the thieves, the cannibals, the savages — to sail on to safer waters. Only a few rampaged on the instigation of their King. It was a majority voice that sent a delegation to the missionary, for his and his God's aid. They banged loudly on the securely locked gates of the mission compound and Rev. Oldfield understood what had to be done. That this coincided so flawlessly with his desires was a sign of God's understanding. Rev. Oldfield had found his excuse to follow Sarah and trespass in the legendary realms of Kiti Medolan.

He *had* to inform Sarah of the violence. He must go to Jakit, beside Kiti Medolan, and bring back the moral force of the community, the power of the life-giving mother: Sarah.

Rev. Oldfield was not pleased to find Dr Younghusband already in Jakit. Among all the emotions of jealousy and rivalry, there were practical concerns: he was immediately forced to defend his arrival to his fellow missionary. He told the news of the violence in the capital.

'Frightening,' sympathised Dr Younghusband.

'Extremely so. Dangerous. And uncontrolled violence on the streets.'

'So Mrs Oldfield and the little ones are still there, they did not leave with you?'

Rev. Oldfield did not understand irony, yet once again knew he'd lost an exchange with Dr Younghusband.

Sarah responded more satisfactorily to his news. She listened, and then she prepared to return with vigour. The whirlwind of preparations gathered everyone up.

Mary Ann Clarissa was glad to be gone. She was insensible to much that was going on around her. She did not know how profoundly she had breached the custom of the land in her attempts to save the crippled babe, how easily she too could have met the fate of Ricco the Cockeye. Only

Sarah's patronage kept her safe. And did Sarah protect her because of her own new Christian values, or because she knew to protect the wife of a sea captain who may at any time return with his opulent — and well-armed — ship?

So Sarah and her entourage, the missionary Oldfield and the sad-eyed white woman left Jakit with little fanfare. Mary Ann Clarissa said no goodbyes. Most particularly to Dr Younghusband, who was returning to his own mission. She took her few possessions, and her precious journal, and climbed once more onto the largest canoe wishing only for strong winds to carry her back. They did not come.

It was not a season of plenty — the fishermen had come back too often with a diminished catch. The beasts of the ocean, too, wanted. They were hungry. A group of sharks swam huge, seemingly idle circles around the flesh-carriers as they struggled without the wind. Beasts following instinct. Mary Ann Clarissa watched them without interest. She imagined them there only because of the instinct of curiosity.

The idle seas becalmed the canoes. Finally sails were furled and wide paddles lowered to continue the journey. The soft slap and wash of the oars in the water hummed a lullaby. Mary Ann Clarissa sheltered under an incongruously bright parasol and listened as time stretched.

Slowly, a louder, fiercer rhythm subverted the cadence of the oars, breaking the harmony into a discordant rumble. Coming toward them from Medolan was another canoe. Grand, black feathers waved from the top mast

denoting the High Chief's presence. With due respect, Lipsoti was going to meet the matriarch and bring her home.

The sun was beginning to sink then. Mary Ann Clarissa'a parasol was folded. Dusk, feeding time on the reef platform, approached. The sharks swam in less huge, in less idle circles as the two forces wove a map of greeting around each other.

Traditional compliments skipped like stones over the level sea, Lipsoti praising the gods for Sarah's safe return, proposing they sail to Medolan as one. The symbol of unity was not lost, but that he intended to join his mother on her vessel — and his disrobing to swim there — brought a cluck-clucking to the lips of those crowding the canoes. Black fins above the blue peaked like waves, moved like the tide, coming in.

There was a smack as the water parted to Lipsoti's naked body, and an echo, a clapping, as eight men dived into the shark-full water around their chief.

Mary Ann Clarissa was pulled back into a sitting position when, in dismay, she attempted to rise. Her cry, 'The sharks!' died on her lips. It is a woman's lot to be required to sit quietly and watch history unfold, unravel, haemorrhage.

Swimming slowly, regally, Lipsoti never faltered.

It took only one tentative attack. Only one drop of blood. The blood enticed the other sharks closer, summoned them slowly, inexorably. And then, suddenly. In a frenzy of hunger. One by one the loyal subjects abdicated their personal safety to the King's control. As the circle around

him grew necessarily smaller, King Lipsoti swam on, and finally boarded the main outrigger canoe. Three of his eight men also climbed out of the crimson water.

The sharks followed the fleet silently to the harbour. Their victims had been silent in their death. The returning party was silent. There was nothing to say. The canoes paddled slowly to the shore of Medolan village.

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Madness stalked all around. Violent madness. And within the confines of the mission compound, madness lurked too. Rev. Oldfield closed the gate on their return, and acted as if all was normal.

This day Rev. Oldfield's oldest surviving son turned five. To commemorate this the missionary ignored the events of dusk, lit the lanterns and presented young Samuel with his own copy of the Bible. It was a rich, leather-bound book passed from father to son, one strong hand passing it into the shell-white hands, outstretched, of the small child. The weight took the child by surprise. It took all his strength not to drop it; and Samuel knew it was a precious burden not to be taken into his grasp lightly.

Under the eyes of his parents and the miscellany of mission inhabitants, young Samuel dutifully opened the thick, thick book. Pages crackled at their first turning

and the distinctive smell of a new book assaulted his inexperienced nose. But it was the words within that made him cry. Word chasing word, in line, verse, chapter, in columns from top to bottom, small and tight and never-ending. So, so many words. To read them would take until eternity. So the child cried. Huge sobs gulped back then bursting forth; tears, each holding its own disconsolation in the bounds of a drop, over spilling onto those fearsome words.

Rev. Oldfield ordered his eldest son's silence and turned from him. Mrs Oldfield made him sit and read to her. 'I shall put away childish things,' he read, and gradually the noisy sobs ceased, as long since the laughter had.

Madness.

Only the next morning did Rev. Oldfield venture out again among his savages. There was madness still in the air. The missionary carried it like an aura. For when he should have despaired, Rev. Oldfield instead gained an ebullience and tirelessness from the crisis around. His energy was indefatigable.

While he had been on his diplomatic mission to Jakit — to return Sarah — Medolan had not waited. In the days after Ricco the Cockeye was butchered, death had visited many homes. On his orders, Lipsoti's heathens fought against the Christians, and the supporters of Sarah were forced to defend themselves against Lipsoti's bloodthirsty band. Peace was no longer proclaimed, for did not the nations of the

Old Testament avenge themselves? Wasn't it written that the enemies of Jehovah would be overcome? The spectre of civil war peered from the darkened shadows and corners of thatch.

Then Sarah and Lipsoti were carried from one canoe and set on the shore in one moment; and Jehovah knelt before the son, Jesus Christ. No more the God of the Jews, an eye for an eye, revenge for John the Baptist's severed head on the platter. Rev. Oldfield called his Christians to pray.

They came and congregated in the stone church. The stillness in the church — the imputed presence of God — shook Mary Ann Clarissa, who had watched the madness in silence. As a witness to the horror of the previous days, she had not known how to react, so she hadn't reacted. Now a trembling was starting in her hands and tacking through the storm in her heart.

The congregation too was silent as they waited for Rev. Oldfield to mount the steps of the pulpit he'd handcrafted himself. On the face of the pulpit was a carving, and when the sun shone full upon it, it transformed from a landscape of lights and shadows to a triptych of Jonah. Jonah falling from the ship, Jonah in the whale, Jonah saved by the Glory of God. The missionary's talents in woodwork lay more in the functional, but his panel had been a great success. Jonah had all the elements of a gripping story, the whale an immediately memorable allegorical symbol. And it reminded the natives of a parable of their own. Their story was about the fisherman who

defied the Chief's command and went out in his canoe during a sacred ceremony. A storm enveloped him, coming swiftly, unexpectedly from a high point in the sky, blasting him from his outrigger and into the mouth of a whale. His family thought him lost, but before the mourning period was done, the barely breathing fisherman was vomited up onto the barrier reef and found by the Chief himself. Long had he cried in the belly of the whale, but the gods were merciful and he was permitted to live and tell the village of their greatness. The gods are merciful, the story said. *God* is merciful, the pulpit said back. Rev. Oldfield too sounded, astonishingly, merciful.

'For it is written in the Book of Ecclesiastes 3:1–7,' thundered Rev. Oldfield as he entered the pulpit. He had translated the beautiful words and thrust them upon the ears of his converts. Though they were spoken in a different language, Mary Ann Clarissa's kept time in the English of her Sunday School where she had first learnt them:

'*For everything there is a season and a*
time for every matter under Heaven —
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to keep and a time to lose,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time to keep silence and a time to speak.'

'It is time to speak,' roared the Lord's representative in Medolan.

'To speak of love and forgiveness.'

Parables of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, illustrated his sermon, glorifying the Christian responsibility to show concern and caring for their enemies, to understand past wrongdoings. To show forgiveness of sins.

'Say with me the Lord's Prayer,' he commanded and the congregation did so: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

There was only one enemy, and he was Satan.

Satan it now appeared, lived in the east. Disunity in Medolan was a hard-shelled turtle turning to display its fleshy, vulnerable belly and the chiefly family to the east who aspired to ascendancy were loath to pass by the unguarded animosity between their rivals. So the turtle struggled back over onto its feet. Lipsoti swore to turn his back on intemperance and handed to Rev. Oldfield, bloodshot eyes to the floor, his favourite club and two spears. The missionary would use them to fashion a communion rail for the church.

Mary Ann Clarissa was not with the heart of the congregation, nor did she care for the politics of the island. To her it was not time to speak. She stared into the mouth of the whale. It was time to weep. Yet she could not. She was thrown up onto a reef of despair.

As the days of peace followed, nervous hour after nervous hour, Mary Ann Clarissa realised there was so much she did not understand. Jude had been teaching her the Medolanese language, and she was a credit to her teacher, so it was not these foreign words she found so perplexing. It was Rev. Oldfield's words buzzing around her head like mosquitoes. And like mosquitoes, she wondered, when would their bite come? Surely there would be a sting to this announced *peace*.

There was so much she hesitated to label hypocrisy. 'All the children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of thy children,' spoke the missionary as he quelled the feud. Yet Mary Ann Clarissa did not see peace in the eyes of his own children. She saw Samuel's stricken face on his birthday, the Bible in his hands.

And then there was Ricco — though she did not see, or want to imagine, his stricken face. 'The memory of his life is fragrant,' boomed the Reverend as he buried Ricco the Cockeye. Yet she knew the trader's hygiene had never been so in life, and, a week after his death, fragrant was an eccentric word to be chosen. Netti had gathered the correct leaves and filled the corpse's orifices to preserve him for a Christian funeral, still the burial was a relief. Were people only truly appreciated, as part of the scented garden, after death?

And always in Mary Ann Clarissa's troubled, questioning mind, there were the sharks. She did not understand, though in this case, she did not have to wonder where their bite would be. The five men were not buried

with Ricco; the lagoon was their last heathen-rest. The display of loyalty was vivid: *Look, I cannot be usurped. I have obedient servants willing to lay down their lives for me. Without question.* But Mary Ann Clarissa did not understand the demanding of such loyalty, nor the acquiescence to it.

Mary Ann Clarissa saw the pit of human cruelty open perilously before her and found no support. She did not understand and was shocked that her reaction to Lipsoti's power was not shared. Rev. Oldfield had announced to his wife his amazement at this example of noble self-sacrifice in the midst of a savage heart.

Her life was fragments, falling stray and disjointed. Around her, the visible, odiforous manifestations of death clung to her like a burial shroud. 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved!' thundered Rev. Oldfield. All she understood was that Captain Purcell must come and save her.

Chapter Fifteen

The combined leviathans of sperm whales and the United Nations conspired to separate many hours in Marianne and Ewan's day, which was no longer *their* day but now *his* day and *her* day.

Marianne figured it was something whales couldn't avoid — taking loved ones away from you, that was. They had an established reputation for it. Like taking Jonah from his family in the Bible, and the fisherman in the local story she'd been told at the Health Centre over a morning tea of doughnuts.

Ewan's new companions *were* beautiful. A few days after the arrival of the whales he'd found time to take her to see them — to show them off. And they'd performed gracefully as only eleven tonnes of blubber and the largest brain ever can. With the calf learning by example, the whale took over the lagoon with her happy, full-bellied antics. The risk of coming into the lagoon was well paid for with as much as mother and child could eat, and, as a sperm whale could

eat more than a tonne of krill and squid a day, that was plenty.

As Marianne stepped from the car and approached the edge of the cliff — the best vantage point for gawping, and already clustered with sightseers — the mother whale exhaled a high jet of water as if in greeting. Ewan claimed the breath, really a mixture of air, water vapour, oil and mucus, smelt horrible, like sump oil and rotten fish. But science could not touch the poetry of the whale's exuberant gesture. The mother whale disappeared, briefly, before bursting through the crystal water, leaping, breaching, waves laughing over her as gravity brought her back down. The perfect display charmed the audience, so for an encore, or self-satisfied applause for herself, she lifted her tail fluke in the air and slammed it down, once, twice.

'Perfect,' exclaimed Ewan with proprietorial pride. 'Did you see the markings when she was lob-tailing, the nicks on the trailing edge of her tail fluke? They're like our fingerprints, or a mugshot of our face. They identify her as an individual. Only her history caused just those cuts and scars.'

Marianne could not be jealous, though she recognised love in his voice.

He was talking about tracking them, the mother and her pod, but not relying on tail flukes like rear-bumpers. He'd use a VHF tag, implanted to send radio signals back.

The object of his concern didn't seem to be going anywhere much, except back to feed. Swimming slowly —

there was obviously no rush and they were not a speedy species, seven kilometres an hour being flat out — she led her child toward the cliff face. What Marianne had taken to be the shadow of the fringing reef, fell into their gaping mouths. The darkness was the amassed bodies of a million sea creatures, feeding on a trillion smaller sea creatures, feeding on plankton, and now the big mother of them all had come to tea. She simply scooped the clouds of krill up and gulped them down, a lesson her daughter had learnt well.

Awe was the overriding emotion on the cliff top. The pageantry was majestic, noble, awesome. And awful? Perhaps the trio of reef sharks nibbling across the edge of the multitude fed Marianne's growing identification with the prey while the others around her saw only the viewpoint of the anthropomorphically esteemed whales.

It could not have been termed a feeding frenzy. Frenzy implied agitation, an over-excitement. Here, calm balanced on the breeze: the big feeders simply took what was there.

Fundamental questions about the meaning of life came to Marianne there on the cliff. Things like the meaning of fairness and justice. Like the forms of violence in the process of oppression. The answers seemed quite simple. This was a fish-eat-fish world — and she knew she would always feel like one of the little fish.

She said she was happy to leave the whales to Ewan in the coming days. He said he'd be lucky if they stayed a couple of weeks.

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Stories increasingly upset Marianne too: stories about little fish getting done over by the whales and sharks of the Church and State. A heightened sensitivity almost forced tears to her eyes in the case of one old man who Mary Ann Clarissa wrote of in her journal, which Marianne had returned to in Ewan's absences. The incident was coloured by the dissatisfaction in Mary Ann Clarissa's own life. Her tone a mixture of tears and anger.

In the library, Marianne read of this old man whose wife had died. They were newly converted Christians so the Rev. Oldfield visited their home to comfort the widower. The old man keened over the corpse, and it, the corpse, she, was laid out on a woven mat, grey hair carefully combed down her small body to her waist. Beside her was a plantain-leaf basket of food, choice morsels of lobster and cooked pandanus and arrowroot. The old man had set it there himself, for, should his wife's spirit come back, she would be hungry.

The missionary accused him of this heathen practice and, at first, cowed and frightened, the old man avowed the

food was put there only for the cat. Cats had been introduced to Medolan only in his lifetime but were common enough around every rubbish heap. Their normal feed was there among the rubbish, or scratching in the thatch after rats. They were never so thoughtfully offered delicacies. Rev. Oldfield challenged the old man into a confession, and his superstitious custom was consequently severely punished. The old man was put to heavy labour along with other law-breakers, building a new, wider, flatter, more easily passable road to the church.

The literature Maud had been giving Marianne abounded with examples of similarly inhumane treatment. The converted were treated as little more than cattle, wives torn from their heathen husbands, treasured hair cut and sold off to finance the poorer missions. And the abuses showed only one pattern: the power of the mighty over the rest, white over dark, missionary over converted, chief over subject. One chief agreed to go to school but would not countenance any commoners surpassing his learning. Those who did lost their heads.

The old man in Mrs Purcell's journal did keep his head. There was always something worse: the grass was often a lot browner on the other side. It was a common argument, Marianne had used it on herself often enough. No right to complain, look at the women in sub-Saharan Africa. It never worked for long. Like any drug, the good-feel couldn't last

and she was left with the aftertaste of guilt. Guilt that she still wanted more even while others had so much less.

But what did Marianne want, she asked herself as the days passed? In them she was assailed by an overwhelming weariness. She was plagued by this sudden over-sensitivity. She cried at the inexplicable. She was getting as teary as her ancestor sounded. And she didn't know why. Maybe she was coming down with something. No, she just needed more sleep — that was all — she reassured herself.

She wanted to sleep next to, not just with, Ewan. This was love deepening from lust.

She had so much to look forward to, she assured herself.

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Ewan had his whales, Marianne had the United Nations. When the officials from the world organisation were ushered reverently into the Health Centre, a popular song — the poetry of her generation — was annoying her. It couldn't be turned off, as it was in her head. Eurythmics, 'Don't mess with the missionary man'.

The WHO and UNFPA hadn't made it into mainstream music lyrics, only acronyms and polyester shirts. They were big men, these experts on women's fertility. They came from the Netherlands, Sri Lanka and Tanzania, though

more recently from airconditioned headquarters in Fiji. What they came for eluded Marianne as she sat in the second row of civil servants and health workers and pretended to listen eagerly to the reciprocal speeches and the welcoming song — could that really be to the Eurythmics tune?

This latest in the deluge of foreigners could not be quickly condemned for simple exploitation. They didn't fill their suitcases with copra as they left, only handicrafts for family and friends. They demanded no land, nor drift-netted the sea. So what was it they wished to produce from their intrusion? The whalers wanted oil for lamps, candles, for soap, even margarine and ice-cream; and the whale's baleen for brushes, umbrellas, corsets; and whale's teeth for ornament and scrimshaw; and whale meat for the gourmet market. These three world-men got only a nice report.

Marianne had actually enjoyed playing with the figures that supported this document like the baleen spokes of a lady's parasol. Some of the numbers her calculator had flashed in green light were difficult to credit, until Rebecca took her for a walk through the maternity ward of the hospital. Nearly seven children for every woman in the population translated into Melia, aged twenty-two with her sixth child, and Ruthi, aged thirty-one suckling her thirteenth. The reality did not shock Marianne as much as she thought it would. The smell of the babies was so sweet and the family conditions were not so very foreign. She was

delving into unrelated reading matter in the television-less nights and recognised the conditions were reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century-before Sydney of the Ruth Park novel that sat on the floor beside her bed.

The numbers Marianne worked on, which were supposed to be about service delivery, were also reminiscent of fiction. They had more to do with creation than procreation. Hundreds of boxes of condoms were sent out to the Health Clinics in all the villages, but how many sat in locked filing cabinets congealing? Usage calculated as the number of boxes sent sounded impressive only on paper. And the controversial Norplant had caused its own data crisis. Four match sticks of slow-releasing hormone were implanted into the upper arms of a substantial number of women, but no one had recorded the number who returned for the reverse procedure long, long before the five years were up. Only the figures on the surgical methods performed at the one hospital were in any way accurate. No man *ever* offered himself up for a vasectomy. And the ultimate operation for the woman wasn't much help. A tubal ligation to stem fertility was usually contemplated only *after* the arrival of the nearly seven children. Were they trying to make up for lost time — reacting against the dearth of births Mary Ann Clarissa described, Marianne couldn't stop herself wondering.

The UN experts accepted the report. They were *not* like the whalers and traders of old. They were, in a way, more like the old missionaries. They were selling a new creed.

Live in the way of a small family and the kingdom of Earthly comfort will be yours. Yet, as bureaucrats on a pension scheme, these particular representatives up from Fiji lacked a true crusading zeal.

Maybe, it crossed Marianne's mind, they just wanted their own lucrative position in the new world empire. But she checked herself. Then surely they would have pursued banking as a career.

Three days of reverent ushering followed the initial briefing. Meetings, feastings, exchange of information and propaganda, presentation of some very attractive new posters for the walls of the Health Centre. Programs were opened to the funding-body-in-triplicate, counselling sessions, the weekly clinic. They got to see everything barring the examination table. During a guided tour, one young woman in the prenatal class smiled at Marianne as if she was an old friend. But it took until the last night of the UN visit for Marianne to remember who the lovely young thing was.

The plane took off back to Fiji and the staff of the Community Health Centre were commanded by their director to her favourite drinking spot to celebrate. Marianne hadn't been in that bar since the departure of another flight, the one with Angela and the boys gladly removing themselves from the lascivious isles. The woman learning about childbirth, the one with a friendly smile, was remembered suddenly as none other than Herbert's fantasy incarnate. Had Herbert left a legacy?

There was a table of newcomers over on the reef side of the bar, Australians judging by the accent as they tore themselves between complaining about the mosquitoes and admiring, in clichés, the approaching sunset. That was Marianne only months before. She shuddered at the thought.

Tables were shoved together to fit all the health workers. Rebecca congratulated her team with wit and sincerity. Another five years of funding was secured, thanks were owed to … Marianne heard her name in the list. She had been accepted beyond the fringe of Medolan society. She was no longer an outsider like her compatriots at the edge of the room. The warmth of belonging was more heady than the tequila sunrise and the Medolan sunset.

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Ewan picked her up at the bar. A full moon transfigured the dirt road into a river of gold carrying them on a chariot to the sea. The magic was irresistible, the glowing silver face of the moon beckoned them not home but to the cliff top. Rosa and Tilly, as the whales had come to be known in the popular vernacular, were at peace, their square heads bobbing gently with the current, their skin smooth and lustrous to the eye.

He'd spent the day diving around them, with Benjamin as his buddy. They'd carefully attached the VHF tag to Rosa's hide. It may be smooth and lustrous to the eye, but Ewan was quick to dispel any myth about silken skin.

Marianne sat with him on the mossy edge of the cliff, alone with the shadows of the palms, and Ewan talked on about his whales. Marianne only half listened to the detail, thinking instead on a tangent. Mary Ann Clarissa's journal bulged with detail: there was one incident with Dr Younghusband that popped into her mind — an anecdote he'd told her from his first difficult years on Medolan. A tale about spirits.

Spirits inhabited the island side-by-side with the savages and Dr Younghusband tried his utmost to evict them from the treetops, the rocky outcrops, the caves, the reef-flats, from the sky. And from the rainbow. The rainbow was a gaily clothed spirit passing by, the legends said. Dr Younghusband assured the people of Medolan that the spirit would not return. He sent off to the Board a request, and the letter was answered on the next Mission packet. With the glass prism the Mission Board sent, Dr Younghusband showed the elders, men and women, how to make a rainbow. He reduced a rainbow and a spirit to a lump of glass and refraction. The natives were truly amazed, and a little frightened by his power. And when the rainbow graced the sky again there were no joyous shouts of greeting to an old friend. The mystery had been stolen by science.

Kind of like the detail Ewan kept offering. Scientific facts to dull the enchantment of the legendary whales below.

Marianne draped her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder. He was now talking about beaching, the horror of strandings, laid up in shallow areas, exposed to the sun and wind, facing death if not returned to the vastness of the sea. Marianne did not mind his, yes, boring flow of facts. In a perverse way, they endeared him to her. It is easier to love a man than a hero.

She turned to lightly kiss his neck. Ewan moved closer and whispered.

'Very few people have been lucky enough to see them mating. Huge animals, how would they?' Ewan kissed her nose. 'One report — well both whales dived beneath the surface and started to swim toward each other.' His fingers trailed across her cheek. 'As they got closer there was a great burst of speed.' His other hand stroked the nape of her neck. 'They came together, belly to belly,' his chest weighed upon her, 'clasping each other and rising, like a rocket.' He lowered her back to the ground. 'Straight up and down, breaking the surface, parting the water.' Clasping her, parting her blouse. 'Then they separated, falling backwards into the water.' Marianne and Ewan stayed as one, drinking each other's skin through their pores. 'Falling into the water with a mighty splash.' The whispering stopped. There was a deep silence. Time moved

only with the fingers of the palm fronds above, real sky dusters, touching the universe.

Then a rush of air shifted the fronds, sweeping them away, allowing the face of the moon to smirk down. Exotic blooms parted to angry eyes that were seas on the moon surface, seas of ill will.

Ewan moved, initiating more.

'I can't,' Marianne panted, wrestling Ewan off. She knew it was silly, but she'd seen Great-Aunt Aurora and the naked man in that moment. *Doing it* in the greenhouse. She didn't want to be a puritan going on about four walls and decent beds, so she said nothing. Still the moment caught up in the whale cycle was gone.

'We're outside. I can't,' was all she said.

Yes, she sounded like a puritan and Ewan didn't look pleased. Maybe she shouldn't have pushed him away. Who knows the consequences of any actions, and reactions.

Chapter Sixteen

If Mary Ann Clarissa had been asked the worst thing that could happen after the events of the return from Kiti Medolan, she could not have imagined anything worse than the waiting. The endless waiting. The absence of activity. This society had revealed itself in her eyes to be violent and callous, but an imagined cannibal feast at the gates of the mission could not have been worse than the waiting.

Human flesh tasted like pig. So she was told, tale-telling being the scale of each day. Mary Ann Clarissa refrained from pork, fatty, pale, unctuous meat with an aftertaste of brutality, though it was the only alternative on Medolan to the flesh of the sea, and considered by most a more worthy meal.

The boars and sows had survived somewhat better on introduction than the missionary cattle. They'd taken to the hills on the first occasion, becoming feral, seeming as native to the forest as the people who hunted them. Many were the stories of their dominion over the hinterland, of travellers being forced to flee the sharply pointed tusks of a lone boar,

or the teeth of a wrathful sow in defence of her stubby piglets. Fear compelled women into trees, climbing being the only thing the monsters could not do. Climbing had once been taboo for women too, but the environment from which that prohibition had come had transformed into something better, or something worse.

Prohibitions new and old fenced in the days of the white women. Mrs Oldfield maintained a belief in the rules as essential to their security and their souls, and Mary Ann Clarissa complied as the dictates were a mirror to her memories and fears. It was worse than the cabin-fever of the constriction on her first arrival, for now she *feared* to go out freely into the village. Yet still she felt that something, a right she had never been aware of, or a gift she had not appreciated, had been stolen from her when she was told so adamantly that she was not allowed.

They spent their days together, the wives who had followed their men to the South Seas. One, Mrs Oldfield, was becoming bigger with child, the other, Mrs Purcell, was daily smaller with grief. Both were diminished by the oppression of the heat. The mercury in the thermometer moved little, day or night, month to month, but the air sucked in a claustrophobic humidity that could not be escaped as closer and closer the Christmas season approached.

Mary Ann Clarissa would have built a tower from which to study the horizon, had she been a man. Instead, she stood at the mission gates and imagined an armada of

tall ships, her oasis in the desert of isolation. But there was never anything there.

Closer than the horizon, in the shallows, the savage women relieved their days with the refreshment of the lagoon. Young girls frolicked, older women waded knee deep and sank into the blissful bath that drank in their aching fatigue and gave them instead mellow sleepiness. The relief of splashing half-naked in the lagoon was another prohibition for all Christians. Mary Ann Clarissa was forced to lift her eyes beyond the idyll and ignore the shouts of holidays past as she and her sisters galloped into the surf.

She remembered the cape sweeping away from her. She remembered jetties, and gay and lively paddlewheelers and sailing ships; the happy confusion of carts and carriages, mountains of bales, the wool and the wheat awaiting a journey on the sea; ribbons on bonnets, starched collars of shirts; familiar smells; and the feel of her brass doorknob under her hand. She had stood, as she did now at the mission gate, at the parlour window, imagining emerald jewels of islands in a turquoise sea. Wanting to journey there. When she got back to Sydney Town she would never, never leave. How much better the unsatisfied longing than a shattered dream. She wanted her house, wanted the noise, the crowds, to be able to move among people who did not watch her every move and gesture. She looked out into the future, before returning to the other woman she shared her days with. Mrs Oldfield could hardly bring herself to look so far.

The white women shared their days but not their confidences. They kept counsel only with God. Rev. Oldfield was absent. A tour of the other villages — to give breath to fledgling churches, succour in the fight against evil — was long overdue, and no longer a duty he could turn his notice from. He said. He had gone first inland, over the mountain, exhorting the white women to stay only in the village. He would have confined them to the walls of the mission had he not relied on them to continue, with energy and enthusiasm, God's work.

The unrest *was* over. Lipsoti was quiet, Sarah too. Only Netti lived with the terror in the present — remembering Ricco the Cockeye's decapitated head staked at the door, seemingly leering, but silent. She was speechless, failing to comprehend why she still lived when her husband did not. Still always fearful. Mary Ann Clarissa encouraged her and the child to stay within the mission, opening her one-room hut to them. Netti was scrupulous in her consideration of this small space. Mary Ann Clarissa had no complaints of her company. She loved baby David. And none of them could go home.

The store had been ransacked during the troubles and Ricco the Cockeye's empire was stripped of most of its wealth. In the mission, because of the lateness of the Mission packet and their reliance on the traders, they were forced now to drink barley, roasted, ground, rendered palatable with treacle, for the want of tea and coffee, which had all been

stolen along with the alcohol, tobacco and bully beef from the store. The building itself had been torched, razed to a checkerboard pattern of stumps. Down on the shore, his small bêche-de-mer manufactory remained intact, but without life. When next the trading ships arrived, they would be disappointed. They would have to wait because the boiled and dried sea slugs previously sorted in sacks had succumbed to the flames and their living relatives were at liberty to glide where they would on the sea bed.

Mrs Oldfield daily tried to excite the natives to continue the business. The holothurians, the tradable bêche-de-mer, were one of their few sources, along with copra, of income. They represented money and trade goods to encourage a civilised lifestyle. They were labour to educate the men from heathen mischief. But without the regular reward of Ricco's trade goods, her words were in vain. The coming of the next trade ship to purchase their bêche-de-mer was as far off as eternity in their minds, as much to be relied upon as Heaven.

When and if sails appeared on the horizon the men would be quick to dive by the reef and pluck up the slow-moving slugs, clean them of sand and gut them of their writhing mass of entrails. Only then would the great iron kettles be kept boiling, shrinking the animals in successive salt baths, until they were small and hard and ready for the curing houses. Ricco's extant curing house was extensive: three layers high of bamboo racks, situation for fire beneath. Far more sophisticated than using the sun to roast

the shrunken delicacies. The savages, though eating most everything from the lagoon and ocean, had no interest in the gelatinous slug. The holothurians were for the sons and daughters of the Celestial Kingdom alone, and the sailing ships wanting to carry them to China, and the Chinese in other shores, would have to await the heathen's time. Mrs Oldfield would never understand the true power of the savages: to act in their own time.

Netti seemed to care little for her son's patrimony and said nothing of the land and manufactory belonging to him. But neither did she take herself back to the house of her mother. Retreating to the mission, distanced from her family, the only part of Ricco's last testament she pondered was his compulsive whimsy to send her home. To Italy. Netti sewed diligently at the feet of the white women and listened attentively to any mention of life beyond her one small island world.

The climate and the company stifled. Women sitting, waiting. Sewing, waiting. Knitting, waiting. In the heat, in the custom she had been raised with, Mrs Oldfield took up her needles and knitted neat little bonnets and petite bootees, steadily, in perfect, even tension, in defiance of the tension and anxiety at the coming of her next child.

Indeed, hope flowered anew in her heart as the foetus vibrated her belly with determined kicks. Her jealousy of the rich and independent and free wife of a Captain was mitigated with her own, perceived, good fortune in this child. That Mary Ann Clarissa had passed from being favourite of old Sarah, as Mrs Oldfield had before her, was, in the event, as nothing. For what value was wealth and time and favouritism in the face of the creation of a new life? Mary Ann Clarissa offered her time to do the chores of the house, and Mrs Oldfield deigned to accept more and more, her pride now strong enough to survive necessity.

A duty Mary Ann Clarissa gladly adopted was reading with Samuel so his mother could take his young sister through the more rudimentary primers. They read the Bible. It was his only book, and he ached to demonstrate himself worthy of the birthday gift.

He started at the beginning though the pages further on with his own name at the top were a grave temptation. But his father expected him to start at the beginning, and he read for his father's approbation.

Mary Ann Clarissa had not turned to Genesis for many years; it was like rejoining an old friend on an exciting adventure. She would sit with Samuel in the late

afternoons, in the corner of his walled-in garden, beneath a small banyan tree, locked in a circle of shade. They sat side-by-side, backs cramping as they bent over the truly tiny print; tiny black words imprisoning larger-than-life happenings that their eyes alone could liberate. Mrs Oldfield would not permit them to sprawl more comfortably on the ground: sitting on anything other than chairs was another prohibition. So from their civilised straight-backed chairs, they read the words of another civilisation ousted from the Garden of Eden. Paradise was far from that corner of Medolan, further than the Medolanese sky that had taken itself out of the people's reach, but not their sight.

Young Samuel struggled through killing and begetting, brightening at the familiar story of Noah, who had previously entered the nursery on a kinder ark. One story that stayed with Mary Ann Clarissa after these readings with the boy did so for the opposite reason to recognition. The story had not been repeated from the pulpit or in the picture books to gain general currency. It was something that had remained hidden, giving Mary Ann Clarissa the feeling it was something she had discovered.

This was a sad story within the larger vibrant saga of the birth of Israel, which all Christians *did* know. Jacob, known as Israel, was the father of twelve sons, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel that populated the Holy Land. And, so it was written, Jacob, famous father of twelve sons, also had a daughter.

Jacob had married two wives: his beloved Rachel, and her sister Leah, who had tricked him into a wedding first. The daughter was the child of this first wife. And her name was Dinah. Dinah. Mary Ann Clarissa was arrested there. It was the same name she had heard in the myths of Medolan. How could this be?

In the story she read with Samuel, the biblical family travelled into the land of Canaan, and Dinah visited with the daughters of that land. When a prince of Canaan saw her, 'he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her'.

Mary Ann Clarissa was caused to shiver in the heat, the response of a daughter in a strange land. Samuel asked for an explanation to the words and she found she could not give it. She suggested instead that they finish for the day and sent him to help his mother fetch water from the well.

With the boy gone, Mary Ann Clarissa continued to read, finding no further reference to Dinah beyond the reactions of her family to the violation. The foreign prince loved Dinah, she read. He desired to marry her, but he was a heathen, an uncircumcised male. He would be circumcised, he said, and was. Nevertheless, her brothers, Simeon and Levi, would not have their sister dealt with as a harlot. They slew her Canaanite lover and, for good measure, all the men in his city. Dinah's brothers found a place in history, she but a mention for her ravishment.

Not so the Dinah of Medolan myth. Mary Ann Clarissa had listened to those tales with great interest. This Dinah was

the mother of their lineage, a strong woman, indeed once a goddess. Here were different depictions of a woman, but in the stories, read and heard, there were universal themes of rivalry between siblings, of battle for land and dominion. There were acts of bravery, contests of good against evil, searching of the godly in quest of God. Elements all twining their way through the Bible and the stories told to her by Dr Younghusband and Jude in the glade by the waterfall.

Mary Ann Clarissa turned from these thoughts. Dr Younghusband the storyteller was central to the memory and Jakit was a place and a time she wanted in the past, further away than history or legend. Further than paradise.

Dr Younghusband's name could not be avoided so readily. Rev. Oldfield returned from his tour of the island with nothing but this name on his lips. His outrage roared beyond his delicacy in the presence of the frailer sex. His colleague's promiscuity was an offence against God, and Rev. Oldfield took it personally on His behalf.

Visiting the mission to the north had not been an expected stop on the itinerary. But God had told him to go and guided his footsteps.

The village was quiet when he'd arrived. Rev. Oldfield had not known its distance and had camped the night before

only a half-hour trek around the coast. He and his followers started with the sun and arrived among the scatter of huts as the gulls screeched day's beginning from the cloudless sky. Near-naked natives directed him to a wooden house on the far side of the settlement. The church itself stood brilliant on a hill, sentinel to the sea and the people's lives. But the missionary had decided to live closer to his flock. The squat house was protected by no walls. Nothing protected it from prying eyes.

Rev. Oldfield walked in upon Dr Younghusband still deep in his slumbers: and closer to his flock than propriety and the canon allowed. The woman slipped swiftly from the house as black clouds of wrath darkened the day.

Mrs Oldfield was disbelieving at the telling back in Medolan. It was unthinkable, therefore it could not happen. She knew it happened elsewhere, but surely it couldn't so close to home? Dr Younghusband's defence — that the doctor felt himself to have been married to the savage temptress for three years, having come together in the eyes of God — was swept into the pit of his sinfulness with derisive laughter. The missionaries were as firm as the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, were in their belief that marriages between the races could not occur. Dinah, poor defiled woman, and Dr Younghusband, lonely tempted missionary, were not permitted wedlock. The doctor was an outcast. He was not a man the heathens could look to as a role model in Godly ways.

Mary Ann Clarissa had no sympathy for the doctor, smarting still with the anger at his lack of sympathy for *her* in

Jakit, and the bitter memory of the dead babe in her arms. But she hesitated.

For Mary Ann Clarissa listened to the self-righteous retching of her companions and was sickened. She could not, even in her mind, *defend* her former friend's actions, but neither could she join his assailants. Months of wasted, waiting time, listening to their catechisms of hate and resentment, sent her to her own questions, sent her searching for her own answers. She'd had enough of their railing against heathen and beachcomber and trader and the dreadful Papists who sailed just beyond the horizon waiting to invade. She could no longer listen to their satisfaction at God's presence in their lives, His loving, guiding hand that assured they could do only good; that all they did could only be considered good.

The perfidy of the heathens had become too great to pursue. It was beyond her ken, a brick wall that absorbed her blows but never shook. The buried babe and the ravenous sharks were too difficult to remember, but not so this perpetual hatefulness of her constant companions. They were Christian, they should know better. Their sins were therefore greater? She felt her anger turn on them.

Yet Mary Ann Clarissa had no voice within the walls of the mission, no voice for her anger. She had only her journal to herself. In this, her only privacy, she retaliated, savaging the very core of the missionaries' dogma. She fought against Rev. Oldfield's pride, his conceit in his conversion of

the unbelieving heathens to the Faith. Within the pages of her book, Mary Ann Clarissa made the bold contention that he had converted no one: that the people were closer to the genesis of the religion of the one true God than the vicar of the Church could ever allow.

Turning her journal upside down, she wrote her treatise with vigour and venom, starting at the back of the book, moving forward, through time and space and over the vast ocean.

Chapter Seventeen

A Treatise on the Lost Tribe of Israel

> 'And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.'
>
> Isiah 11(XI)

I have travelled 'the islands of the sea' and come to rest on the shores of the 'isles far off' (Jer. 31(X)), living this day amongst the dark-skinned heathens.

The land is of Paradise; within there is 'every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food' (Genesis 2(IX)) and without, 'the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life' (Genesis 1(XX)), even unto the great whales.

God's creatures are immodest. As Adam and Eve after the Fall, they have sewed leaves to make themselves aprons, but scant is this covering and vexing is the sight of corrupt flesh in a world of Nature's beauty. Their base and profligate lives turned my heart from them at the beginning. The vanity and self-righteousness of the men of the Church, the missionaries who have come from afar, turned my eyes from them. Until the words of their old people opened my eyes to their true nature.

'Tis a sad remnant of God's people waiting to come home. Lost; lost in sin and savagery; in the worship of spirits and ancestors; a lost tribe. If we but looked, a Lost Tribe of Israel.

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Look: look first at the Holy Book of our ancestors and our Church; look at the people of God who were scattered and dispersed, those that are called today the Lost Tribes.

Jacob who is called Israel, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, spread his seed unto his wives and their handmaidens and was thus blessed with twelve strong sons, and they were given the names Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher, and Joseph and Benjamin. To the land the Lord promised them, the sons and their progeny went, to the Kingdom called as their father: Israel.

But they forgot the Lord, even as He brought them out of the servitude of Egypt, even as they were His people. 'Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of His sight' (II Kings 17(XIIX)). By the hand of Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, the tribes were deported beyond the great river of life, the Euphrates.

What has happened to the tribes, now Lost?

Have these tribes of the chosen people of God not returned within the fold of His Almighty Love and Protection?

They have not been forgotten; the Bible promises their return to Palestine. But have they still renounced the one true God, worshipping other gods; impure, unholy, unforgiven, unworthy of Jerusalem?

Some say they are led by Gog and Magog, oh fearful names! They, the royal rulers of the tribes, the kings in the mountains. But fear not, it is also said, for the tribes were contained. Writers, as Godfrey of Viterbo and Rudolf of Ems, talk of the wonders performed by Alexander the Great, King of Persia. So it is written, he came upon the tribes and saw them worshipping other gods. He built a wall around their wickedness, with but one Gate. Brambles grew quickly to hide them from the world and trumpets resounded upon the wall, and the tribes believed themselves to be always guarded. But owls came and built their nests within the trumpets, for they were but instruments that found voice with the wind, not man. The owls quieted those

trumpets and the tribes escaped. They now go by the name of Tartar, tribes still wearing the feathers of owls in their caps as thanks to the services of the birds, wildmen yet to find peace.

So here are the Lost Tribes, found.

And yet, does not the Bible call to the isles far off, the islands of the sea? Lost here also a Tribe? Yes, I say, yes!

I listened and saw before me the evidence and was persuaded. For all who know the Holy Books, and the wonder of Genesis, it is testimony that cannot be ignored.

A child of Jacob, who was called Israel, has been lost, the tribe forgotten by all but God. His hand guided them, shaping their history, and the miracle is discovered.

They have not Scriptures, for they have not writing. Thus their holy words are not on sacred pages but on the tongues of the wise ones; and they will tell you their tales. I heard them as fable, legend, fiction, until the truth was revealed.

The savages live in rudimentary huts of leaf and wood, but they led me to an ancient city beyond the imagination of today's builders, the edifices likened only to the vestiges of the civilisation of Egypt. The city is constructed upon land that the very people created, it is of buildings tall, temples towering, a thing of stone to last the millennium. Each block

is as large as I, or larger still; they come from quarries far hence. Look about this primitive land without beasts of burden or the science of mechanics. Did the blocks fly here to Kiti Medolan? Ask the savages and they will talk of the lineage of Dinah, and them you will know. For did not Jacob have a daughter to his twelve sons? Should we forget Dinah?

Dinah and her tribe left Israel. They are gone from the Scriptures, we do not know when, we do not know their sin, or their intention, but they came far, journeying over the vastness of the world's oceans to this mountainous island circled by a defence of treacherous reef. The savages of Medolan witnessed the arrival of a Tribe with skin as pale as the sand and thought they came from God, gods even themselves. And the Tribe left the mystery of a vast city to remind us even unto today.

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Look: look now at the chronicle of these people, and know they were people of God: their lives of the Old Testament, their stories told only by tongue generation to generation, becoming lost in the lines of the narratives of their ancestors in the Holy Land, and emerging as a saga we must credit as truth.

Dinah came with her people and her two children; they saw the land was beautiful, even as the Garden of Eden, and ended their migration. The dark-skinned sons and daughters of

the island were amazed. The foolish among them attacked the sailing craft of Dinah and were repulsed by a great storm of fearful thunder and deathly lightning bolts. The aggressors drowned with wild screams as the coming Tribe lost not one member to the ocean or the murderous hands of the savages. The remainder of the savages fell back in confusion, and thus came the Lost Tribe to the nation we call Medolan.

It is said Dinah was blessed with but two children; and she loved them both equally; and her heart was sore that they could not love each other.

Dinah had first a son who was given a strong name to fit the strength of his limbs. His name was Sham, which means mighty. A daughter was then born to Dinah; and she was as strong as her brother, and was called Medola, which means, in the language of the heathens today, loyal; and 'tis the name this proud nation took to itself.

They could not live together and only the wisdom of Dinah arrested bloodshed and fratricide, setting apart by distance the same jealousy that had Jacob's sons fall upon their brother Joseph. To Medola, she gave the land with verdant growth and wondrous cascades, and to her son, Sham, she gave the power of a city of great beauty and might, a city built upon its own island of rock.

Sham sent his dark slaves to the quarries; they laboured hard in the heat of the land and they brought him building blocks of startling shape, as a crystal with six equal sides, to build his palace and the homes of his people, and a temple to the one great God who had guided them safely to this shore. But Sham saw his own might reflected in his great city and became vain unto himself and built many temples and forgot the Lord. He worshipped idols and images of stone and grew corrupt with his own might. His days were spent with the degradation of beverages of intoxication and sins of the flesh. Dinah cried to the Lord in prayer but her son called her slow-witted, saying she lived in a past that was forever gone, ever forgotten.

Sham feared but one thing, and that was the descendants of his sister. His own wives and handmaidens and the women of his pleasure, none gave him a child, but the land Medola inherited was fertile and brought forth abundant fruit. Even as her brother lived in a Sodom of his own making, like the brother of Abraham, the sinful Lot, she, his sister, followed only the paths of righteousness, as did Abraham before her.

Medola was taken by the chief of the island, even as her mother had been taken by a prince of the Hivite; but now Medola was strong and made him as her husband. And their children were many, half of the old tribe, and half of the Lost Tribe newly come, and they had the strengths of both, the weakness of neither. Sham saw and was dismayed. In the night, he sent forth a band across the water and they cut the throats

of the children and left the blood on the boats of his sister to say they would come again to any child born of her womb.

Dinah wept to Heaven. She knew God would never grant her son children for his sin of infanticide, and her lineage would die even after the Lord had protected them in the journey across the whole world. But she came one day across a child, tightly secured on a raft, floating on the mangroves by her palace. God had answered her plea and sent a child direct from Heaven.

She named him Gilead and brought him up even as a prince in the household, and loved him most dearly of all.

Gilead grew tall and brave under the watchful eye of Sham who came to love him also and called him son. For many years a peace was between the land and the great city.

But the tribe of Medola prospered not and was sad. Only in the heart of Medola did hope live, for she knew Gilead was of her womb and was proud of his manliness even as she had loved his small face at birth, as she tied him on a raft and sent him on the sea; for death was certain had he stayed, and fate kind on the waves.

Still the depravation of Sham knew no horizon. He treated his slaves with a wicked cruelty while Gilead looked into their eyes and saw beyond their dark skin that they were man. His heart was with them, and the more with one young maid. Sham desired her as his own concubine until one night Gilead set her on a canoe and sent her away. Sham grew angry, calling him traitor, so he must also flee for his life.

Gilead knew not where to go but crossed the water to the island and stumbled upon the mean and lowly house of Medola, who was his mother, and they saw each other and were glad.

But the days knew no change. The first people of the island lived under the domination of Sham, commanded to toil, to build ever higher temples to his whim, and the kindred of Gilead's father were anguished for the freedom of their brethren in the city. Gilead determined to cause a force to rise up and do battle with the evil that was there.

And that he did, taking 333 men to conquer the bastion of the stone city. Their canoes were so great, with conches upon them with a noise so dreadful that the ungodly thought it was a beast coming across the water and out of the night.

It was a beast of miracles, with 333 the number of its load, and fire in its hands, and before it the very walls of the city crumbled.

The forces encountered each to the other in mortal combat, even the women joining the fray for the sake of the children. The moon passed beyond the horizon and the sun shone its light upon the field of blood.

In the darkness, the forces of Sham knew their city well, the invaders fought only in the dark. They would be overcome and desired to retreat, but brave Gilead stood his ground. He stabbed his spear through his own foot, cleaving it even into the wide street approaching the Great Temple. Past him his soldiers dared not retreat; for

their admiration turned them to greater glory; and they were victorious.

Sham and his most loyal followers were given the great gift of mercy, such was the goodness in the heart of Gilead. They were set upon watercraft and exiled from their city and the fruit of the bounteous land. Only God could follow their course upon the Earth.

But Gilead could not rule his people from the corruption of the city of Sham, and, in the manner of the walls falling before him, the great buildings began to crumble away, and the idols to wither and fade. Gilead took his grandmother Dinah and went to a more hospitable point on this island and built upon it the village of the Loyal Well, and there they prospered, Gilead in wedlock with the maid he had saved, dying, still brave in advanced age. And always they remembered the Lord who watched over their conquest.

Here it is I now sit, in that village, now named for the mother of the warrior, Medola, as is this island nation. Medolan is as bounteous as the history relates, and the evidence of the history is as numerous as the seashells upon the shore. See it in the names, for does not the youth who taught me the language of the land, that opened the history

to me, go by the name of Jude, after his ancestor in the Holy Land, Judah? And does not that ancient city still stand, a ruinous testament to the battles of yesteryear? And does not the society, even to this day, abide by the inheritance of that time? Land and property and the leadership of a family goes not from father to son, but as Dinah passed all to Medola, over her first-born son Sham, so does the lineage pass through the daughters.

And have these people not remembered the Lord? Time allowed the untamed land its grasp on the understanding of the savages and they have misremembered God's omnipresence by giving name to Him in the tree and the waterfall, the lagoon and the craggy mountains, a host of titles for the one true God. Yet they never more, as did the wicked Sham, carve upon stone images and idols, for it was forbidden. They have waited for the Lord to return and have recognised Him with love on His arrival.

Missionaries have even now carried the written Word to this shore and the eyes of the savages have been opened, opened wide to a dim memory, and been amazed. The missionaries have not brought with them a new Glory, they have not converted the savages from Heathenism. They have been but the instrument of God to return His people who are close to His Heart and His Way. These new men of God, the missionary men, are no Holier than they, for they were God's children from the first.

The Lord has not forgotten His Lost Tribe, born from a child of Israel, and guides them back, for:

'Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles far off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.'

Jeremiah 31(X)

Chapter Eighteen

The roar of the plane came muffled through the trees from behind. Just as suddenly, the sound was gone, though the aircraft itself only then came into view: a white capsule that grew smaller in the blueness of the sky for what seemed an inordinately long time.

Marianne looked very cool and comfortable in her usual chair, in the house in the hills, almost as if she hadn't noticed the plane take off. Benjamin watched her with a veiled intensity and felt something akin to relief; and a resurgence of hope. Ewan had left him in little doubt that he had *moved in* with Marianne. But now Ewan was gone, which left a void, an opening, a space by Marianne's side. Benjamin had anticipated this moment and how he could possibly step into this space — without a descent into romantic tackiness. He'd anticipated this since the first night he'd brought Ewan home for dinner and found Marianne there. He'd watched, and then he had been forced to wait as Ewan mesmerised the woman Benjamin unhappily

found himself in love with. But now, truly, Ewan was gone in the plane that was a spec in the distance and Benjamin had to assess the void in Marianne's live, and her reaction to it. A common affair, he decided, could be easily consigned to the past tense. If Ewan had, however, been a grand passion, it would be a disaster for his chances. Yet as Marianne sat in his mothers' lounge room, her emotions appeared engaged only in very ancient history. Benjamin took hope. The fragile skin beneath her eyes was dark and weary, but her brown eyes did not have the look of a woman in love who had just been abandoned. Not that Benjamin knew what that looked like. It was something, however, he imagined was immediately recognisable: his mothers had forced him into reading novels at various stages of his inquisitive life.

His mothers and Benjamin had all become used to having Marianne about in their home. Saturday morning was a ritual, adopted from various cultures, of a late breakfast and coffee that lubricated the notion of ideas and philosophies. The mundane was relegated to the working week and this was not yet the Sabbath. Whatever the Sabbath actually was. The missionaries had revealed such a passion for tenaciously observing the Christian Sabbath through all dire circumstances and Maud found the reality ironic. Mortification would have rocked the original faithful band had anyone among them discovered they had gained a day on their journey out, and thus had long celebrated on the wrong day entirely.

Marianne laughed at the story when Maud shared it. She had a clear, unassuming laugh. She had an unassuming nature, and, at times, Benjamin felt his mothers assumed too much of her. Rebecca had invited her to stay on at the Health Centre, even though the United Nations had *been through* — quite pleasantly and not like a dose of salts, or Dr Younghusband's raspberry vinegar, as had generally been expected. A real data collection and retrieval system was on the Christmas wish list and Rebecca knew Marianne could deliver it better than Santa Claus. Marianne had not said yes. Neither had she said no — obfuscating with her own mother's expectation of a family Christmas at home in Australia. Yet Rebecca had gone ahead and arranged terms and conditions with the government paymaster.

And Maud assumed Marianne's interest in the long dead Mrs Purcell would match her own, as they trampled over the subject of her great Treatise on that morning Ewan flew away — a morning when Marianne should have been thinking only of the departure, but acted as if she did not know.

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The fundamental question, Maud believed, did not concern the Truth — for how could that concept ever be adequately confined — but whether Mary Ann Clarissa actually *believed* what she wrote in her Treatise.

Marianne had taken up one of the murex shells, running a finger to the points, stopping short of the needle tips that could so easily prick, so easily draw blood. The Truth? She'd read the Treatise only the day before. Had her ancestor believed what she had written? She listened. Maud was in full flight.

The Lost Tribes, though missing in time and space, were not lost in obscurity. The Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints, somewhat coincidentally, had them popping up in the Pacific. Indian tribes had the honour. Red Indians or Red Jews, it was all a bit much, contended Maud, when the findings had their foundation in a literal interpretation of every word in the Bible. Mary Ann Clarissa in her Treatise professed to take the legends literally, just as the missionaries did their creationary world of Genesis, yet, had she not heard the depth of variation and complexity of the Medolanese storytelling? Neglected in her written version were different aspects thriving in the story-lines that survived in oral tradition: unchristian elements describing Dinah and her lineage not *of* God but *as* gods themselves. There was the story of Sham in defeat, transformed into a deep-blue fish and diving into the ocean. And then the one about the city being built not on the slavery of the indigenous people, but by magic, the blocks of basalt flying into place at Sham's command.

Mary Ann Clarissa, it could be argued, had manipulated the oral tradition to fit her thesis. But had she

ever heard the other elements Maud was assuming she'd deliberately omitted?

There was one last part of the Dinah story most obvious by its omission. Rebecca demanded permission to tell it, and Benjamin, having heard it from boyhood but not inured, crossed his legs in anticipation.

Gilead, hero and saviour of the people of the island, grew old, for even gallantry and a heroic life is no protection against age once his grandmother had relinquished immortality. When he saw his death was coming — a slow death without dignity, a wasting and degeneration, with senses impaired, his will no longer his to command — Gilead took himself to the ancient city.

'Hobbling, or at least limping, one presumes, after that spear through the foot during the great battle. A streak of masochism in our man,' interrupted Maud before urging her friend to the point.

Trees now grew from the very foundations of the houses and temples of the old city. Roots uprooted rock, roots of strong palm trees, young and vigorous.

'Go on,' cried Maud, impatient with the nature study, and Marianne held her breath for the suicide.

It was worse than she thought.

Gilead flexed one such young coconut tree, bending it to him. He bound his penis to the trunk with a length of sennit rope, and released the tree. Bravely he suffered an excruciating death.

Marianne groaned and put aside the murex to better bury her face in her hands. How much of Gilead they got to bury was a moot point.

Benjamin had to laugh at Marianne's consternation. 'No one would ever have dared tell this Mrs Purcell such a story,' he argued. 'Just the word penis? Imagine *her* consternation.'

Did women in 1864 talk of such things? Would Dr Younghusband have told Mrs Purcell, would Jude have told her? Maybe she had been ignorant of the unchristian aspects; maybe she had believed in her own Treatise.

'The whole truth is after all in what we are told *and* what we are not told,' Benjamin mused.

'Is there such a thing as the whole truth?' questioned Maud, and the conversation threatened to tumble into a familiar groove, only Marianne spoke up, the blush fading back from the dusting of freckles.

'But the stories *are* remarkably like those in Genesis — Abraham and Lot, the evil of Sodom, the Moses components, Joshua and the battle of Jericho. And then there's the coincidence of the name Dinah. She really is in the Bible too. And who could have built Kiti Medolan? I've seen it …'

Coincidence, or cannibalism from the Bible at a later date? They argued back and forth, none entirely believing any position they proposed, willing to be their own dissenter. The ways of knowing the truth of the past were a labyrinth,

more complex than the Minotaur's. The written word was the thread — laid to aid a way through. But words could be duplicitous, even those committed to black and white. *Ah, was there any way of knowing?* they would each, Maud, Rebecca and Marianne, despair at different times in the morning. They fought against the limits while nevertheless acknowledging that they would never be able to know the *full* truth, the *whole* truth, of the time when missionaries instructed the savages of the Pacific in Jewish history and ceremonies, and sketched the wanderings of the Israelites, the form of the Ark, the battles, the heroes. When the very same men then recorded the legends of the self-same savages. Legends that could have been adopted, adapted, or were fully independent.

Or was this not a human process at all, was an argument the group of friends had to consider — if they couldn't keep God out of it. Were the legends — Biblical and Medolanese — all narratives given life through Heavenly intervention? They left that one bobbing in the air like an abandoned balloon and moved on, for Benjamin seemed impatient with them. *Forget the past, what of the future?* his pacing seemed to spell out in the stride of his personal Morse code. Yet they kept going back, as Benjamin tried to sit still awhile.

'So did the natives only tell the exploring white men, and later Mary Ann Clarissa, what they wanted to hear?' asked Maud. 'Or did the outsiders only hear what their bias

allowed through the convoluted channels of perception? Or did they hear it and only record what they wanted to record: the great editors of the written word?'

The only story-line from the Bible that had never been touted as a Medolanese original was of a virgin birth. It could never find credibility in the ethos of the lush volcanic island. That was Rebecca's final contribution, she declared. Maud wanted to pursue the storytellers not the stories and maintained that the Treatise simply illustrated Mary Ann Clarissa's remarkable existence. She was a white woman daring what was seen as the darkness of the heathen Pacific more than a hundred years before. And she dared further to dwell outside the confines of her education — to see a woman, Dinah, as a central figure in a drama. She dared this in a time when men were men and acted upon the world, and women waited and applauded. Feminism hadn't been invented, the inverting of fairytales was unknown and unthought of. This was, moreover, a time when God, the Father, ruled supreme. Yet she had dared, as well, to complicate the strictures of God's word as revealed in the Bible, *and* to presume His complicity in it all. 'She was a *special* woman capable of anything,' said Maud.

She eyed Marianne. And now, she wondered yet again, how did there come to be a descendent line of this special woman, this widow? How is her descendent sitting here possible?

Every family wants to be rooted in a unique personality, and, if a noble or a convict was not to be found,

a special woman as Maud described was tempting. Marianne was in awe of the discussion, but Mary Ann Clarissa's great-great-granddaughter saw a little more peevish humanity in this seemingly remarkable woman's actions. She asked: 'Mary Ann Clarissa had surely written the Treatise because the missionaries got right up her nose? It was a bit of therapy, a primal scream against her boredom, her fear, her waiting.'

Benjamin could only watch as the women examined history under the microscope of their curiosity, framing it larger than life. Early in the last century, the magic lantern had brought slide pictures of the Gospels and the civilised world to the islands. It was a device of the Vatican missionary organisation, the oddly named 'Congregation of the Propaganda', headquartered in Rome. They'd sent it out with their Catholic missionaries, latecomers in this region after the London Missionary Society. The lantern lectures were hugely loved, but one night a small insect inadvertently sauntered across the lens of the projector, to be projected onto the wall. The audience of heathens fell about in awe at this gigantic monster. Now more than ever Benjamin wanted the bug back to its real size. For all his love of history, he wanted it back in the past. He could well be the direct descendant of Jacob, and Abraham before him, but that morning he was more concerned about his own life, and how he was to woo a woman when his mothers, who had taught him so much, had neglected to teach him how.

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Marianne had to leave the discussion and the remnants of the late breakfast. She had to leave the past for the present. She had no idea things were coming to a head — that this was anything more than a normal Saturday. She simply remembered an appointment for another of Dan's wild-goose chases.

As her proficiency under the water had increased, her admiration and enjoyment of its riches multiplied a hundredfold. She would miss this most of all when she left Medolan. Not the searching for ancestral gold: she'd have to tell Dan soon that his amateurish and extravagant efforts to drag her around the reef after a shadow were becoming as transparent as the bright sea. What she'd miss was the sensation of floating weightless, timeless, like a whale. Or, in an image more secure and safe and protected — like a child in the womb, a warm, salty and exciting womb.

Dan was not on his wharf when she drove in, but then, he was always late, running on his own version of Pacific Time — relying on his conman charm, and getting away with it. So Marianne walked to the end of the dock and idly watched the breakers on the outer reef. They towered, like snow-capped versions of the mountains behind her. Then they plunged unexpectedly with earthquake ferocity. Odd: the snug lagoon had also adopted the rough and abandoned demeanour of a reprobate. Dan was beside her suddenly.

'What on Earth? Haven't you listened to the radio? Get home Marianne. Batten down the hatches.'

Marianne could only stare at him blankly.

'The typhoon. Get in and secure yourself against the typhoon.'

Dan took only the time to direct her to the relevant shop for plywood and nails — with which to batten down the windows rather than the hatches — and sent her on her way. She picked up the urgency in his unusual directness and the absence of a prolonged gossip. She didn't know if she should panic.

Mild panic, the island version of the January sales, told her she was at the correct store. Everyone needed wood to save their windows in the typhoon. And they needed more wood each time a typhoon wandered their way because, in the interim, the plywood boards inevitably and without pause became the new extension. Marianne joined the queue for her share of the sheets of wood, learning a little from the others there about the impending tempest. It was going to be Big was the consensus. There'd been warnings all morning on the radio. It wasn't her fault they'd let Benjamin play CDs all morning — something of the classical guitar — nor that the radio in the hire car was purely decorative, but she felt quite put upon that she was the last to know. She wanted to go through life prepared. She bought a hammer at the shop too.

The road was then a slow stream of pick-ups and sedans tottering homeward with their turtle shell of wood strapped atop. The road seemed longer than it ever had before. The house at the end of her journey was very quiet.

'Ewan?' Marianne screamed through the rising wind, banging on the door, then the windows with her fist. When no reply came she started *battening* alone. She dragged the wood from the car and she shouldered it upright to the window jambs. The hammer was heavy. She banged furiously, nail through wood.

She didn't know typhoons could blow up so unexpectedly: unexpected to anyone who didn't know the signs to predict them.

Where was Ewan, hammered through her head as she got on with the DIY. Not up on the cliff, surely not. Rosa and Tilly, his precious whales, had left without mishap the day before. Did he know about the typhoon? Was he safe? Come home Ewan, she murmured as a liturgy until the physical strain of boarding the windows panted hot, extinguishing air through her brain.

The last sheet of wood was heaved from the roof of the car and dragged to the furthermost side of the house which, like the road, had never seemed so big. There were two windows exposed for this one last sheet. Confounded and motionless, whole seconds passed. Marianne could not choose between the two. The atmosphere loomed in on her. She would have as soon thrown down the wood and left both windows to their fate, but, sensibly hammered a defence for one. The closest.

It was dark inside the house, with the daylight shut out and the electricity first victim of the winds. The beam from Marianne's underwater torch searched for the hitherto *quaint* gas lamp — which Herbert and Angela had found hilarious and would never appreciate with the plentiful supply of electricity in the Sydney suburbs. There was also a box of candles, which since last use had become a nest to brown pellet cockroach eggs. Once the lamp and the candles were lit a seance of light brightened the living area.

Only then did the white of the note distinguish itself from its dim surroundings. It was on the table, pegged down by a preposterous crystal figurine of a whale and calf — a gift, the note from Ewan said. The note was simple, but could have been reduced further. To one word: goodbye.

Marianne held the candle closer, as if stronger light would illuminate another meaning in the note, one which her mind could more readily accept. Then she didn't have to react because of the knock at the door.

That would be Ewan, of course, cried her mind, staggering from the precipice of abandonment. She wasn't registering properly, it was the exertion, the humidity, the typhoon. Ewan wouldn't leave with just a note. He wouldn't leave while she was out. He wouldn't leave.

The typhoon was *not* some physical manifestation of the furious storm that could be her life.

The wind flung the door from her hand.

'You'll have to move the car from under those trees, too many flying branches,' started Benjamin, before seeing her face. It was the look, the one from the novels he'd known he would immediately recognise.

Chapter Nineteen

'The crag rises up behind the house you built me in this cocoanut grove. It shelters me from the winds, those winds that blow you across the ocean. You will be heartened that I am protected by such beauty. Green and thriving with life. It beckons me up …'

Mary Ann Clarissa could not go on with her letter. Her words were but little clouds of hope skirting the black horizon about her. Her letters to her husband disappeared without trace over the edge of a flat Earth and only a pitiless wind returned, sweeping even those smallest of rose-coloured clouds away. Nevertheless, she preserved her dignity in her letters and held herself from complaint, never to worry the Captain with her despondency. Only on this day, on Christmas Day, she had not the heart for the evasion and placed the letter to one side. If only she could escape, rise above the insobriety of the village, climb closer to God, up to the very top of the crag. There she would be beyond

the suffocating strictures of the mission station and the company of the unforgiving martyrs. There she would have the finest view of the ocean that alone linked her with her husband and his barque.

Rev. Oldfield said it was impossible. This friendly mountain above the harbour was too much for the delicate constitution of a woman — the rigours of life in the Pacific outpost counting as nothing in testimony to these women's courage and strength. The view from the crag beckoned the more for it being forbidden. Forbidden fruit?

The vagabonds of the world knew nothing could be forbidden them, and the noise of their revelry penetrated the mission. Netti and baby David ducked into Mary Ann Clarissa's hut, if not to completely escape the uproar, then to ease the discomfort of its intrusive noise with their friend. All the white men of the island, traders and beachcombers, assembling from the furthermost villages, were honouring her murdered husband. Ricco the Cockeye: their very own martyr.

The missionary, that morning, had been delighted at the congregation of white faces among his dark converts, having faith that the Nativity had brought a reconciliation between the ungodly and the Church. His sermon boomed over his Christians and beyond the open walls of the church building to the heathens gathered curiously outside. He spoke of God's intervention in their lives and urged them to love the Lord.

Only after the Church service did the vagabonds set about their real purpose: to flaunt the new law against alcohol, a law constituted by Sarah in good faith and Lipsoti in great pain. The vagabond white men downed great jugs of what they archly called the communion wine and, without sobriety, they lost all caution, believing themselves not above the law but the law itself. Ricco the Cockeye's fate was ennobled to martyrdom and the King Lipsoti ridiculed. They thought him tethered by his mother, and she in her turn was made harmless by Christian principles. Indeed, they thought little and consumed ever more gin and rum, sherry, porter and brandy.

Rev. Oldfield was not as gentle Jesus on this, His day of birth. Gone was the missionary's *time to speak*, his time of forgiveness. He had slipped back to his old ways, to the Old Testament. He was the wrath of Moses before the worshippers of Baal. Mrs Oldfield invited herself into Mrs Purcell's room, bringing her children and her Bible, and the women sang pretty carols to raise their spirits and free their souls.

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On the second day after, Mary Ann Clarissa had to escape. The crag beckoned. She responded and was quickly rewarded: even at the commencement of the path the view spread more sweeping and bold. The village, straggling at the

land's edge, was behind them, and could be forgotten. Mary Ann Clarissa smiled at her guide. Jude turned, an overly big iron cutlass in his hand, in readiness to hack their way up the rarely traversed path.

Morning had barely turned its warm smile on the world, making promise of ardent temperatures and an arduous climb. Life had barely stirred on the sleeping mats and pillows below: they'd left early to escape both a climb in the midday heat and the mission's ill-tempered proscriptions.

Mary Ann Clarissa had chosen to believe only one interpretation of the missionary's restrictions on her movement. His words could only mean she was not to venture out *alone*. That would be her excuse on return, for he did not know she was gone. She had company here, she was not alone, she would say, and she had the support of a pillar of the church in this — for it was Sarah who had allowed her to flaunt the restriction. The attempt at the adventurous ascent was possible only with her youngest son, Jude, as escort and guide. He was not there to guard her. Mary Ann Clarissa denied this role. Rev. Oldfield might think he denied the women freedom of movement as protection, but she could not imagine danger to her own person. Thus Rev. Oldfield could only be denying her freedom purely because of her womanliness. Women were expected to be content with domestic details, the fine sketches, softened watercolours of wild flowers. Only men were allowed to paint upon the grand canvas of life, to view the sweeping landscapes and all creation.

Sarah said she had climbed the crag often in her youth. Netti had taken Mary Ann Clarissa to tea at her mother's household the day after Christmas. Netti — not so brave nor innocent as Mary Ann Clarissa — did not venture anywhere alone. Nor did she leave the mission compound in the company of her half-caste baby. Her mother had the appearance of an old woman and professed regard for her children and her grandchildren, but Netti knew Sarah to be as a sand shark: quiet in manner, yet able to attack with a vicious ruthlessness when angry. Since Ricco the Cockeye's death, Netti had felt the gods angry with her and hoped only that the Christians' God was stronger to protect her fatherless child. He was left at the mission.

On that festive Christmas visit, Sarah had sucked purposefully on her clay pipe, sitting in a new gingham blouse that was not as beautiful as the tattoos that adorned her skin beneath.

'Go up,' she'd urged the white woman, ignoring her own recalcitrant daughter, who again that day had refused to come home to Sarah's household to live. She'd commanded her youngest son to accompany Mrs Purcell, calling him repeatedly her *favourite* for all to hear. Lipsoti's spies carried word back as the family masqueraded as sleepy, harmless sea creatures.

So they obeyed. They started the ascent, Mary Ann Clarissa and Jude.

A screech of birds swooped skywards. Few words passed between them, Mary Ann Clarissa and Jude. He was rarely so silent, usually wishing to practise his English, eager to teach his language, always with a new thought upon his lips, another question about her world that needed to be answered. Now he pushed forward, into a tunnel of green so close the sky disappeared with the birds.

'We are still on the path?' inquired Mary Ann Clarissa as the undergrowth became ever more dense.

'You need water, come,' was his answer, and they pushed on until an ancient breadfruit tree barred their way. Branches like withered arms and gnarled hands reached out in the character of an old crone. Her spirit was still about but she did not show herself to the Christians as they greedily scooped cool, clear water from her belly.

The rainwater from the catchment drowned their thirst, and trickled through their fingers, splashing, baptising their clothes, his calico shirt, her light smock. They could only smile at each other, like two truant schoolchildren.

'Wait, I'll find the path,' suggested Jude, and Mary Ann Clarissa settled herself on a twisted stump of tree in the small glade, the daughter of the crone-tree come to a bad end for disobedience.

Flowers, delicate white stars and flamboyant tapering candles of purple and red, feigned to be sources of light while the glade remained shadowy with the sun shut out. It was a darkened world of tiny creatures, creeping and crawling and

flying. Something small landed on her arm: a fly with no wings? No, a fly with transparent wings, only the smallest, most delicate of veins discernible. Mary Ann Clarissa looked through it, and tried to look through to her own heart. Did she too have invisible wings with which to fly?

A noise tore her from her reverie. Another presence was there. She was not alone in the glade.

'Jude?' she called. The figure by the water catchment raised its head to snarl at her. She could not move for fright. But the ogre stood back down into a wild goat and shambled away.

'Jude?' she called again, to reassure herself of her voice, and while she waited she remembered the stories of the wild, wild pigs, and the legends of evil spirits, and the admonishments of Rev. Oldfield. She would not admit any rightness in his proscriptions, but she would have happily followed Jude anywhere when he did reappear, his strength becoming her strength.

Mary Ann Clarissa could readily imagine Jude as a descendent of the Lost Tribe. His carriage was upright and fine, his features clean and even. He was healthy and good to look upon. Now his hair fell in black waves below his broad shoulders, later, in the heat, to be rolled into a topknot and secured with a small branch — which would cause him to look taller, and he was already tall for his people, even among his siblings. Altogether he had the bearing of a Biblical figure. She compared him with David, also

a youngest son with a beautiful countenance. He was not yet considered a full-grown man by custom, nevertheless, like David, he was a young man who could fell a giant as terrifying as Goliath, a man brave enough to lead an army into battle, and strong enough to be made King.

His mother would have him so. First Christian King of Medolan. Mary Ann Clarissa felt a joyful pride in knowing him.

The way was long and onerous, scorching in the direct sunlight, close and breathless among the overhanging growth. Steeper and steeper climbed the path as all sight of the world below was lost. Her steps fell shorter, her breaths came closer. There was nothing to be seen behind, no end to be seen in front. The flimsiest of dress weighed as chainmail about her shoulders and legs. She imagined there were bats from the high branches come down to enclose her face in their wings.

She did not have invisible wings. She could not fly. She was used to sitting each day out in quiet activity. The walks to the waterfall near Kiti Medolan had tested her strength, and were nothing in steepness to this mountain. She was a woman who would not admit any weakness, but her stamina was ebbing fast. Too fast.

Her mouth was dry, she could not call out. Her chest heaved, rising and falling too quickly, shuddering, faster,

fearful that the next breath would not come. Then the next step could not come. She fell to the soft littered ground, one hand grasping and tearing at the harshness of a tree's bark, the other pressed terrified to her heart as it thudded out of her chest. Fearing breathlessness, she continued to gasp too quickly, too urgently. Jude's hand appeared, disembodied, to cover her mouth.

A terror overwhelmed all her senses. She had trusted him. But he was a savage. She was alone. Now. She was cut off from civilisation. She was foolhardy, stupid. He would kill her. Or worse. The smell of his skin enclosed her.

Jude held Mary Ann Clarissa gently to prevent her from clawing his hand away. He knew what to do to control the erratic breathing that was exhausting his friend. His people had a way among themselves to cure frantic breathing, and he did not know why the white woman panicked so at his hand. He had to hold it lightly over her mouth to control the air, to ease the great gulps of hyperventilation. It would calm her out-of-control breathing if she would only let it. He knew it was safe when her rigid body collapsed into his and the wetness of tears touched his chest.

They rested for as long as the sun held reign in the highest canopy. Thus they gained the summit of the rock

only when the fiery ball had begun its afternoon descent through the sky. Once on the plateau, an unexpected high wind blustered about their weakened bodies. Palms bowed low around them, losing fronds and fruit to the gale, the ground already a battlefield before the approaching storm. Black clouds hung too close above as a wall of rain moved in from the distance. It was a wall as solid as those of Kiti Medolan, flying like the basalt blocks as the gods constructed the city. But it was a wall not come to construct. Below, more images of destruction assaulted their eyes. Great waves flung themselves over the barrier reef, crashed into the fringing reef, levelled themselves on the land, levelling the land.

Jude pulled Mary Ann Clarissa back into the shelter of the trees, dismayed by their ignorance of nature's design. 'Hurry, to the village,' was his only advice.

But they stood, a point of stillness as the typhoon spun its might toward them.

'We have no time,' stated Mary Ann Clarissa, clearly, strongly. 'Is there anything closer?'

'We have time,' reassured Jude.

'We might have time. But we do not know.' They both knew the risk was there. But was it safer to stay?

They forced their way out of the trees to a view of the village: so small, so vulnerable.

'There is a cave,' decided Jude.

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Mary Ann Clarissa was aware of how the mission would interpret her prolonged absence. A night alone with a savage!

In the balance was life or reputation. Reputation as decided in the minds of the civilised white community. But what was the good of civilisation — it was the savage Jude who was resourceful when nature refused the cultivation of humankind. It was he, who finding the tinderbox wet, used simple sticks to create a fire. He who left the muffled silence of the cave to find breadfruit, picking it from the ground where all the fruit would soon lie. And he who prepared it, dividing it with his cutlass and roasting it until it was made edible. She could only accept the food and thank him when he punctured the eyes of a young coconut and urged her to drink the cool water within.

What thoughts they had as they moved about the cave, he attentively tending the fire, she running a finger over long forgotten rock engravings, could not be shared. Intimate thoughts form in the mother tongue and are difficult to translate.

Chapter Twenty

A depressed brown had crept into all other colour. Blooms were snapped, scattered, and dead. The trees that somehow remained standing had been dashed with salty water and their green burnt away. The groves of breadfruit, coconut and banana were a shambles. There would be no harvest for the typhoon had brought all the fruit down, to glut and then to rot. Only the heart of the island, the mountainous land of the interior, throbbed with any natural rhythm, and so too, though the devastation was all but complete, the minds of the people survived on some ancient fatalistic stoicism.

Though she'd read the old reports on the Typhoon of '64 describing all this, Marianne could not imagine the real extent of the devastation. She sat in the dark of her house with an endless supply of crackers and canned tuna. Her depression drained her energy, leaving none to strip back the barricades on the windows, while the electricity authority in its own shambles failed to reconnect an exterior energy supply.

The worst of the twenty-first century typhoon was that forty-eight-hour period without power. It was a calamity out of proportion to a storm that unexpectedly did a dog-leg north-west of Medolan. There was slight flooding in the low areas, from huge waves agitated by the strength of the typhoon a hundred kilometres out to sea, and the ground was littered. But this was a few volleys of grapeshot, not a war.

The devastation from the typhoon of 1864 far outstripped the aftermath waiting outside her door. Marianne found it difficult to believe life continued after it. A tidy God would have allowed no survival, bundling the whole episode into a small package and flinging it neatly into one paragraph of history. But life straggled on through flood and famine and pestilence, and if Marianne could have brought herself to look outside at Medolan a hundred-plus years on, she would not have found catastrophe's leavings. Medolan had survived. And flourished and thrived.

Whether she could survive Ewan's departure was a question she kept scrambling toward and stumbling off. People talked about transforming experiences, the caterpillar to the butterfly, but conveniently omitted the reality of the process. Wrapped in the cocoon, as Marianne was in her boarded-up house, the caterpillar turns to complete mush: collapsed, squashed, formless pulp. Marianne was that mush. She didn't want to spread her wings. She just made herself more sodden with tears.

What had she done wrong, was the constant, tortuous thread. She had accommodated herself to his every need. Only once had she pushed him away. Up on the cliff. Put off by her puritan spirit — mindful that intimacy outdoors can be spied upon. Oh, Great-Aunt Aurora's disgusted face! She should have remembered earlier the lessons of her youth, she chided herself, and that she was the shy one in the family, the quiet one. That it never did to be too curious. Adventures weren't for her. It was time to go back to form.

But what if *she* had done nothing wrong? The thought entered through a small chink of anger as she tried to find where he'd left the extra batteries. Had he taken them with him too?

Only then did she realise she knew more about whales than the man himself. All that talk — mealtimes, sunny-times, night-time, pillow talk — and she could more accurately distinguish a baleen whale from a toothed whale than a promise from a lie. Had he made any promises? No words stood up in memory, only caresses. No disavowals, but no future plans beyond today. Which was yesterday now, and gone.

There was one species of whale she remembered him describing. A slow swimmer, it came close to shore with a rich load of baleen and oil and a propensity to float when dead. All very convenient for whalers. They were called Right whales: right to kill. She was a right one. An easy prey. A right idiot.

So much for the lessons from Angela and Herbert. You won't drown, dive right in! Fine, if your heart is not as big as that of a whale. The sperm whale — a giant — grows so big only because it is supported by water. It can't support its own weight, and out of water it will die, its internal organs crushed. Out of the supporting waters of love, Marianne was crushed, her heart wrung out and flattened.

Ewan *had* talked of beaching. Could it have been a warning: that he needed the vastness of the oceans, he couldn't be brought to land? But her anger was growing. Anger, a survival instinct, rejected any such softening, oblique excuses. After all — here she was remembering all the useless facts — only the male sperm whale has teeth.

When the lights went on she wasn't ready for them. Illumination wasn't going to come with the flickering globe, it was just an intrusion from the outside, the first indication that the world had not ended simply because she had a broken heart. The phone rang soon after.

'We've still got to find your ship,' Dan joked down the line. 'Come and have that dive, it's only a few days postponed.'

That ship, the barque *Westminster*, went down in a real typhoon, a devastating, crushing typhoon, not like the non-event they'd just had. Real tragedies only ever happen to some-one else: in the past, on the other side of the world. Or was there no such entity? Was it only distance and words that made a tragedy so? And the same for romance?

Marianne stopped wallowing in whale analogies, and went for the dive.

Captain Purcell, along with his wife, misjudged the atmospherics of Medolan that day in 1864, though how much this impressed upon their fate cannot be known.

The descent down the crag, a tumbling, sliding, scramble, though even more difficult than the climb up, would not have taken as long and the black clouds and aggressive winds that frightened were merely first messengers of the devastation to come after many tense, waiting hours. Mary Ann Clarissa and her guide Jude *could* have returned to the village. They stayed in the cave instead. Below natives clung to their homes, their bodies the anchors to walls and roof — but their weight was insufficient. Houses collapsed, huts disappeared across the island. In every village, death was arbitrary. Mary Ann Clarissa and Jude survived, many below did not.

Only a short time after Mary Ann Clarissa turned away from the sweeping landscape and moved into the shelter of the cave, the *Westminster* wove itself as a black smudge in the canvas of the scene. As she sheltered safely in the cave, her husband landed on Medolan. He stayed but a moment, a blink in the eye of history. Discussions with the

native pilot, several beachcombers and a petty chief — and discounting the words of the pompous missionary — convinced him that the safety of his ship and crew would be better served to the leeward of the island where it would be sheltered from the strongest winds. The lagoon was said to be deep enough to sail between the reefs, the fringing reef and the barrier reef. There was no sense in regaining the open sea through the foaming passage. And so the *Westminster* set sail with her crew and small cargo of gold coin.

In China, Captain Purcell had not sold his bêche-de-mer and pearl for trade goods as was his normal custom. He had decided to give up the trader's life and exchanged them instead for their worth in gold. With it he could immediately retire to peace and safety in Australia. Safe with his wife. Together, there would be the hope for a family. But the ship did not gain the shelter of calmer waters. Only God can know the chances of survival in staying, the chances in going.

Choices were made; and their consequences had to be accommodated.

When the winds had blown the world away, Mary Ann Clarissa slipped and crawled down the wreckage of the once dense wood. She could see the spire of the church in the distance, built high for that reason, and felt all hope was not yet lost. God had not forsaken them.

It was an illusion. There was no village and, at the foot of the swaying spire, was the rubble of the church.

Mary Ann Clarissa and Jude parted for the last time to pick their way individually through the debris and relics of the life they'd known.

The missionary family were at the cemetery. The smell of freshly turned dirt lingered, a trace amid rotting fruit, rotting life. As Rev. Oldfield turned to Mary Ann Clarissa a gentle hush of breeze wrapped them all up, and as it let go, the spire of the church finally fell in upon itself.

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Many ships entered Medolan harbour in the months to follow: traders, a government supply vessel with a new colonial administration, and finally, the Mission packet. On the opposite tide, native canoes left to the west where the devastation, it was rumoured, was to a lesser degree and the famine gnawed more quietly at the population. Sarah sent Jude in one of the departing outriggers. There had been a murder attempt on King Lipsoti's life, frustrated only by nature and the deathly winds, and Jude, for all the clever absence Sarah had contrived for him up on the mountain, found himself suspect and no longer safe. One life was no less sacred for the horrible losses in the storm.

With no rival to the highest position in the land — with King Lipsoti the only son remaining — the political situation was less awkward for the arriving governor, and the

not one, but two traders who set up their representatives in replacement to the all-but-forgotten Ricco the Cockeye. The natives had only the sea left to exploit, and the new traders paid fairly for bêche-de-mer, pearls and trochus shell.

Nothing and no one is entirely forgotten, and Netti remembered her husband's gaping mouth, his twitching decapitated body. She knew her family on Medolan. Sarah was an autocrat, and her new faith could not soften her: God had made Sarah what she was, and so He would forgive her also. Netti's brother Lipsoti did not have even this understanding. So, when her mother's favourite was forced to forsake Medolan, Netti knew she herself had only one choice. She wanted to go on the Mission packet. From the Sandwich Islands she would go to Italy: she would take her child home.

Rev. Oldfield was not going to be persuaded despite his long ago promise to the baby's Italian father. Little David was most symbolically a corner foundation to the new church he was building with a vigour born of calamity. Yet seven months later Netti and David did board the Mission packet. With Mrs Purcell. Getting them on the ship had been a contest of legendary proportions and, in the confusion of the last minutes, all Netti's possessions and another smaller bundle were left on the shore. The journal, securely wrapped in the bundle, was only missed later.

Dr Younghusband was not allowed to remain on the island after his disgrace. Even his qualifications and the need for his skills to combat the disease and ill health that would

not let go of the congregation, were not enough to persuade the missionary society to let him stay. He was herded onto the packet, shunned by the religious leaders aboard, a silent passenger they could not ignore but would not acknowledge.

To the scandal of all, he helped deliver Mrs Purcell of a baby in Honolulu harbour. As a birth present to the little girl, he plundered his anthropological collection and gave her a statue. He'd taken it from Kiti Medolan. It was not much bigger than the baby herself, and had a sweet smile.

No evidence of any of this could ever be found, not even in the depths of the oceans.

Dan, as usual, had a pair of paying guests along for Marianne's post-typhoon dive, never letting a chance go by for a little extra money. They were a Japanese couple who'd spent the first four days of their holiday caught by the weather in a hotel with some loud American tourists, and now they wanted to dive, deep.

'Your ship's on the barrier reef near Kiti Medolan,' Dan announced confidently. 'Stands to reason. It's more sheltered over on that side, it's where I'd head with a typhoon coming.'

All his other dead-set locations had been equally logical. After this one last dive Marianne would tell him they'd be giving up. She doubted if she had the courage to confront

his duplicity. She'd enjoyed all the futile dives and the money she handed over had never seemed like hers anyway. It belonged to those funny, old women. She hadn't earned it. Though there was still a bit in the bank, she'd use finances as her excuse to stop. An excuse, not the truth, because she liked Dan.

And, if she decided to stay, she'd dive for pure pleasure.

This was pure pleasure. The morning was beautiful. A big broom had swept out the cobwebs of humidity. She'd been able to leave the house without the feeling of being mugged. And the name throbbing through her head every second was not mentioned; Ewan's departure nothing to comment on in the constant comings and goings of white skins in the Pacific. Dan and Ewan hadn't liked each other. That observation was like a refreshing, soft and beautiful breeze.

Dan's outboard puttered along, avoiding the flotsam and jetsam of the storm — coconuts, and fronds, branches, the occasional tree trunk. When a glint of alien basalt towered among the mangroves, Dan anchored in the lagoon.

As they suited up, a debate started in the background. The Japanese woman was pregnant, only a little, but then, you're pregnant or you're not argued her partner. For once, Dan recommended caution: the effects on a foetus of diving were unknown.

She looked slightly forlorn as Marianne tumbled freely into the delicious water, but her hand was proud on her still flat stomach.

The jealous underworld allows no other thoughts except of itself. The excitement of the reef gobbled up Ewan and weariness and babies and human affairs as Marianne followed the other two divers down the anchor rope, then, like manta rays, belly to the sand, away from the coral. Visibility was somewhat lowered by the turbulence of the recent weather. Sediment hung in the water like a dense school of fish. It clouded their vision and the sun was already weak at the depth: but the shape was unmistakable. A darkness in the sand. A hull about a hundred feet in length. Three of the ribs stretching like fingers for a hold on safety as they slipped further from the reef.

Dan gave a thumbs up. He had to be smiling around his regulator. Marianne was.

Chapter Twenty-One

The fan spun crazily on the backs of her eyelids. A million revolutions later and Marianne had to give up the pretence of being asleep. Her hair brushed the pillow in a deafening crackle as she tried to surreptitiously glance at him. Benjamin wasn't pretending to be asleep: his breathing came steadily in soothing rhythms. An irresistible urge to reach out and stroke his cheek had her hand stretched before she resisted. She couldn't disturb his peace; or she'd disturbed it enough already.

Marianne hadn't thought, and now had time to do nothing but. The exhilaration of finding the *Westminster* had intoxicated her, and no matter how deeply Dan put his foot in it, the wonderment at life's lunatic logic spun her round and around.

Dan had known the barque was there the whole time, or at least soon after a few beers with a couple of fossil fishermen. An exploratory dive later he was sure he had the right wreck. The half-buried skeleton hull, sand scoured into a graceful figure, plus the algae-covered anchor placed it in the right era. Then a chain, some bolts, a stray nail, a scatter of cracked china made in Staffordshire, some bone buttons, a knight and a bishop lost from their chess set, a thimble and a sperm whale tooth etched into scrimshaw, added the human dimension of the nineteenth century. There were no other reports of late nineteenth-century shipwrecks in the lagoon to compete with the identification. It had to be the *Westminster*.

The staged discovery with Marianne was perfect. She came up, half fearing nitrogen narcosis had blurred her understanding. But as she sat in Dan's boat holding the handle of a mug her ancestors would have drunk from, she flew.

'Perfect,' she kept saying. Perfect this, perfect that, perfect everything.

'Perfect timing,' he agreed. 'The storm moved the whole tub down the slope further, uncovered it more. The bugs will start eating it now, but you got the perfect view.'

'You've been down before? You saw it before the typhoon?'

He wasn't the kind of man who could lie straight out; weaving misinformation was more his line. He covered himself with belated candour.

'Weeks ago. But the gold was never there.'

Marianne didn't look disappointed. The gold meant the same to her as it had to the villagers who'd scavenged it, in the generation after the ship was wrecked. They'd relied on trade then, a twist of tobacco or a length of calico was the going unit of worth. It took time for the islanders to adopt the use of gold currency, to understand the secondary value of money. But the coins, washed up in strong tides, made beautiful ornamentation — shining, glittering, jangling necklaces. Finding something she knew was wonderful — the past — was reward enough for Marianne.

'Besides,' reconciled Dan, who very much appreciated the secondary, real value of money, 'your relatives were insured. I checked. They were paid out. Anything we found would have been the property of the descendants of the then owners of the insurance company.'

Marianne just laughed and hugged him. She laughed and hugged the Japanese couple, and when she got to Maud's house to share the wonderful news it was Benjamin who opened the door. So she laughed and hugged him too.

She hadn't been thinking. She'd shut Bejamin out when he'd come to help before the typhoon, sending him away with the storm, preferring to cocoon herself in her house

alone with the monstrous ghost of Ewan. But after the dive she was flying, and when the hug became an embrace that lingered overlong, she did not pull away. And when his hand cupped her chin like a question mark her eyes answered *yes*.

The problem was, she liked him very much. Even as he gently stroked the unclothed curves of her shoulder, as his weight warmed against her, she knew the *yes* was from an ignoble base in her mind, that the thrilling sighs of her body were a betrayal of her broken heart. She liked him, she didn't want to hurt him with something as undirected and unpredictable as a rebound.

Yet fate had inconsiderately brought her to the house when neither Maud nor Rebecca could possibly be home. It was Tuesday, and they were, of course, at work. Fate put Benjamin there instead, and only for the briefest of moments. He'd spent the morning, like every able-bodied young man in town, with a broom, sweeping debris from the airport runway so Medolan could be reopened to the world. He'd come home to shower. And showered Marianne with honest kisses. And had they been less exciting for their sincerity?

Marianne's gaze caressed his now sleeping form. Copper-coloured, honey-coloured, nut-coloured, none of the traditional descriptions harmonised with the warmth of his skin. Why, she wondered as tenderness entered her heart, did women have to fall in love with everyone they slept with? Why, in feminine mythology, was it easier — more fitting — to adore than be adored? Would she, could she, fight it?

So the last days since Ewan's abandonment were not going to transform her into an independent, free-spirited butterfly, fluttering delicately away from the past. Any transformation would have to be more accurately likened to the physiology of a snake, shedding its old skin, shrugging it off to reveal a clean, sparkling, better-fitting new skin, but essentially the same old snake there inside.

She slithered out from under the sheet, stooped to retrieve her dress and left Benjamin's room.

He'd thought she'd come to get the letter. She went to find it where it lay unopened on the desk in the lounge.

———

Writing to Italy was a forgotten incident in the insanity of meeting Ewan; already her mind had slipped the word insanity for passion. Having no crystal ball to the future, Marianne had used the address of the museum for any return mail. Then, she'd reasoned, Maud could gain from any reply should Marianne herself be gone.

Marianne looked for the letter Benjamin had mentioned in the tumble toward the bedroom. Only one explanation for a letter from Italy existed: it was almost as unbelievable to have found the family of Ricco the Cockeye as to dive around the reality of the *Westminster*.

Marianne picked the letter up off Maud's desk tentatively and went to sit on the edge of the chair she called

my chair. She neatly slit the envelope. Crisp airmail pages fell out: the past invaded the present.

The letter in passable, idiosyncratic English, was from a great-great-grandson. It was long and exuberant and full of detail. Netti's voyage to Italy was a family legend. He knew the names of all the players and was enchanted to correspond with the descendent of the good Mrs Purcell. She was cast in the role of fairy godmother in the tale. Mrs Oldfield, though wife of a Christian missionary, was the evil witch. The missionary himself had lost all eminence in the fog of oral tradition as the two white women fought an epic battle to give the native mother and child a berth on the Mission packet and safe passage from royal intrigue.

She was a princess, he explained. Their ancestor Netti was of royal blood, and her evil, cannibal brother was King. He was crazy, a monster. But there was another brother, a man beloved of all, deserving of the throne. The prince's name was Jude. When he was spirited away, the princess knew she must save her baby son. But Mrs Oldfield was a jealous woman. She had lost her own son Samuel in a horrible typhoon and had made a virtue of suffering. Christ's suffering made all suffering valuable, she raged, as she denied Netti the comfort of peace. Blessed Mrs Purcell saved her, claiming Netti as her maid to the Captain of the ship and so smuggling her away from unhappy Medolan.

Riccardo's brother welcomed her and his nephew. This was David — my great-grandfather, crowed the letter proudly.

Netti loved her new home, taking to the Roman Catholic religion as quickly as the missionaries always feared their congregation would fall to the other side.

The family prospered and was fruitful, David growing into a fine man and father of a large brood. How happy they all were to hear from Medolan. Maybe one day he would visit.

Marianne finished the letter and smiled at the image conjured of a large brood: a gaggle of plump, dark-skinned children posed in front of a Fiat Bambino perhaps.

This picture was vivid. But another was fading. Her mind's picture of Jude changed surprisingly in reading the account. The brother. The Prince. The man. It shocked her. Jude was described as a *man* worthy of the throne. Funny how she'd always seen him as a boy. The mistake was in the words. Mary Ann Clarissa had referred to him throughout her journal as Sarah's youngest son. Youngest: young. An illusion. She herself was the youngest daughter, and hardly a child.

As Marianne tried to get the letter back into the envelope, the pages refusing to fold as precisely as before, she found the photograph. The group wasn't a dark-skinned family around a small Italian car. They were in front of a house. And they were all as white as she was.

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Maud and Rebecca would be home soon. Marianne could not move from her chair, though whether she wanted to stay was uncertain.

She had betrayed their hospitality, using their son when she did not love him. What did that mean in the early twenty-first century? Nothing to some. Something surely.

Would she stay? Could she leave?

Coming to a new country had been to dive into a new environment as different as the sea to the dry land. Like when learning to scuba dive, she'd needed to learn a new way to move, even how to breathe again. After some floundering she'd felt comfortable, suspended, supported. But, no matter how at home she felt in this chair, no matter her ancestry, she would always be an outsider. For all the diving, she could never be a fish.

Marianne was snared in a huge black hole of not knowing which way to go.

There were things she missed about Australia, but did they simply boil down to the background noise of a cappuccino machine?

And to the things she missed she had to add the responsibilities she could not ignore forever. A thesis she'd loved for a long time, which should be finished. Staff and students expecting her to return to a job. A house that needed new guttering and new carpets to make it a home to survive any flood.

Abbeyleigh was a solid legacy from Mary Ann Clarissa. The original homestead could even have been built with the insurance money: built in the lee of the *Westminster*. The house was hers as much as the story she had discovered in Medolan. Mary Ann Clarissa spent just a short period of her life in the Pacific, what was that against a lifetime in Australia? What weight of importance did her descendants owe it? How to compare the effects of a sudden — brief — eruption of a volcano with a millennium of stability?

The volcano explodes, but life goes on: the erosion of living.

Mary Ann Clarissa, all those generations before, had to leave. Medolan could not offer her a future. It had been blown away. Dr Younghusband was forced out. Jude was secreted away. What had happened to Jude? Reports had blackbirders plundering the islands to the west frequently. Men were sold in exchange for muskets and knives, calico and tobacco, a heathen existence for slavery on a plantation in Queensland. Certainly, Jude had not returned from the west. He was never again a part of the political life of Medolan, remaining only an obscure footnote in the chronicle. Rev. Oldfield wrote of the ageing Lipsoti being succeeded, down the matrilineal line, by a syphilitic nephew. For the Oldfield's were the ones who stayed. That was their strength. They never gave up. The heathens of Medolan were not converted in one eruption of faith, but a hundred years later all the people on Medolan were Christian. Time has its own rewards.

Marianne juggled time. She calculated dates as she sat. Numbers were her *thing*, but she had been blind. Her ancestor had been childless when left on Medolan, and her husband drowned before any chance of a happy reunion. Yet Marianne was here to discover a chain, a bloodline. Where had it started? She calculated from the day of the typhoon — the day of her husband's death — to the day of the Mission packet's departure. Had Mary Ann Clarissa run out of time and given birth to her baby before she got home to Australia? Or after? How she had cried in the pages of her journal for the bustle of Sydney and the familiarity of her house, yet she'd purchased a property and moved into isolation. There were no photos, only a distant clink of family skeletons, and now Marianne's pale skin that freckled in the sun.

Without Mary Ann Clarissa's journal there had been nothing for the family to suspect. The secret had never been told but now it was discovered. Marianne had not meant to pry, she most truly had not.

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Maud had been using Mary Ann Clarissa's journal to illustrate events beyond her life as a trader's wife in the Pacific. Her writing added colour to the dry bones of dates. Maud dipped into the ethnology of real life, the techniques in the cookhouse, toilette and etiquette, details mostly

missing from the what-I-did-when-I-got-there of its contemporary accounts. Maud dipped into the journal and pulled out authenticity to enrich her own book of history.

A copy of the manuscript was spread on Maud's dining room table, where she would have sat, even through the typhoon, working diligently, illuminating history by the glow of kerosene lamps. It, the book, was beginning to resemble a coherent whole, Maud had cautiously boasted a week before, before so much else had got in the way of Marianne's memory. Now Maud felt compelled by a pile of insentient paper to set it to some conclusion. As if the past had a conclusion.

But even as Maud had boasted, she'd been honest in acknowledging that though her history approached a coherent whole, it was an inadequate reflection of the past. As if the past was ever coherent, or whole? Marianne realised this had been a warning. Even with her new insights, there was no way Marianne could know exactly what had happened in the past, no matter how much she wanted to, no matter how much she thought she did.

So the past was not going to make it any easier for her to decide what to do today. And tomorrow.

If only she could act. The weariness of the last weeks kept Marianne in her chair. Over those weeks her body had been sending messages her mind had chosen to ignore. For all her hanging around the Health Clinic and the ebb and flow of women coming for prenatal clinics, she'd picked up

little about the symptoms of early pregnancy. She patted her still flat stomach and wondered. Had Mary Ann Clarissa felt so tired as she boarded the Mission packet? The arrival of another life had its own logic: a cutting off, an opening up. A decision itself, a kick of new questions. Marianne knew she was named for her ancestor, knew she looked like her. Knew there were parallels. But she was the reticent one in the family, and the other was the only adventurous ancestor. The parallels would never meet, never converge as one answer. In the end, what had bloodline to do with her, with her identity, anyway?

How curious, discovering this new source of blood running through her veins was. There is an attraction in all characters who are *larger than life*. No one really wants to be ordinary. If only she could inherit the bravery and might and godliness of the Lost Tribe, and a little of the strength of Mary Ann Clarissa. And yet Benjamin was the son of Maud and Rebecca for all his bloodline across the island. How much did blood mean now, and for future generations? Did it matter that Benjamin, and herself, could be descendants of the Lost Tribe, when they were all meant to be God's children?

Marianne looked across the reef. 'The past was full of warning, the present solemn with responsibilities' — and how did Rev. Oldfield end his New Year Sermon for 1865? Yes: 'The future is big with hope.'

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When younger, Marianne had read books for inspiration. They were a gateway to a more exciting world, through which she was determined to pass. Then, somewhere close to the beginning of the adventure, books and the written word become a protection, a substitute for experience itself. They weren't the world: they were a walled garden; very pretty but a prison nevertheless. She'd moved from story to story and from book to book, her academic farce to her Pacific idyll. What now? She knew the key to her future was there, just didn't know which way to turn it. Which page to open at.

Mary Ann Clarissa *had* turned the book upside down and started to write. Whether her treatise was tenable wasn't even a question her descendant now wanted to ask. People have been making up stories to make themselves feel better since the beginning of time. And would continue to.

All those stories — what would Marianne's heroes in her favourite books have done? What did Mary Ann Clarissa do? All Marianne wanted was to be her best self. If only she knew how that person would act.

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Benjamin appeared, framed in the doorway, wrapping a lava-lava about his waist and shaking off the drowsiness of the afternoon.

'You're still here,' he said quietly when he found her in her chair.

Marianne fought the power of the past and the written word. The history of Mary Ann Clarissa alone showed the confusion words can create.

She and Benjamin could have a scene of swaying palms and a sympathetic moon like any in a bygone era. Only the metal around the tree trunks to deter the rats and the rap music wafting on the breeze from the cable MTV next door would be theirs. But why not the romance too?

She could do whatever she wanted.

'Yes, I'm still here,' she replied to Benjamin.

Marianne could write her own story. She could do anything, and she could change her mind as well.

Epilogue

Ann leaned into her mother's arm as she stumbled through the words in the book. She got nothing but praise as the story of Jesus — his name the easiest word in the passage — unfolded and the children were brought to him to be blessed. Mary Ann Clarissa kissed the bowed head at intervals, shifted the child slightly to relieve the weight on her arm; but never regretting the weight.

The verandah caught the sun in the late afternoon and was a welcome escape from the chill of the sitting room, and the stuffy activity of the kitchen where the fire blazed and cook was at her busiest, and not always her most cheerful, preparing dinner for the family and the station hands. Mary Ann Clarissa had suffered through the winters thinking them unbearable when she'd first returned, but found, with time, that a body could get used to most things.

A sound that was becoming familiar as the years went on, raised the pair to their feet. A tall man leading a wagon made his way slowly toward the homestead, his birch switch

beating against his leg in time to his steps, his crimson turban an oasis of colour in the greens and dun of winter.

The arrival of the Afghan hawker, bringing cloth and fancy goods and gossip from the city, was always a welcome event. Work ceased as he spread the verandah with the tawdry and the marvellous, and the women of the station gathered to purchase items and dreams of life in distant corners far away. Silks from China, china from the wholesalers in Redfern, umbrellas against the rain, and parasols to protect from the punishing summer sun. Ann played with one of his spinning tops, watching the colours go round and round and around.

There were few visitors from far away. Mary Ann Clarissa's parents would entertain their daughter in their brick home on Rose Bay, but they never came to the property. They never came because they refused to acknowledge the child, the curse on the family. Yes, a curse they called her, those rare times they spoke of her existence. And should an acquaintance be so impertinent as to ask, Mrs Browne intimated barbarity and rape, tragedy and a blighted future. Yet from the moment Mary Ann Clarissa had seen her daughter's face she'd known this was no curse, but a gift. Mary Ann Clarissa's parents would not see that Ann was tall and strong, with a fine nose and huge inquiring eyes, and skin warm in an embrace.

One day Ann would ask about the colour of her skin and Mary Ann Clarissa knew she would lie and make excuses about her first days on Oahu, in the far away Sandwich Isles.

She'd blame exposure to the sun. Anything to protect Ann. Not because she wanted to hide the knowledge of the truth itself, only to save her daughter from others' unjust responses to it. From her husband's letters, precious in her room, she knew he would have been proud to have a daughter. She persuaded herself that he would not have begrudged her his name. With that hold on love she could persuade herself that Ann's origin did not matter.

After her furious Treatise, Mary Ann Clarissa had believed in its truth. She'd ignored the myths that did not accord with her theory of the Lost Tribe as the root of the Medolanese people, she'd ignored any contradictions. Only later did she doubt. True, it is difficult to doubt anything defined in black and white on a page. Once committed, words take a life and meaning of their own: so the Treatise stood firm. But its *significance* was opened to many questions. This was the matter of her doubt: did it matter from whence the people found God, only that they found Peace in their understanding? After writing the Treatise, Mary Ann Clarissa denied the importance of the source, of the origins. She held onto the strength in the ancient stories, the lessons they taught, the guiding light her Bible could give in those darkest days before Ann came — but she denied anyone's domination of them as their own history; as their own tool. All were worthy to gather up the crumbs under the table.

The hawker shifted his wares into better light, haggled gently and went to feed his horse while the women made

their final selections. Cottons for the cook and the housemaids, an extravagantly pretty clock for the sitting room, the spinning top for Ann. They were all voluble in their thanks, for his time and his courtesy, and called for his quick return as he loaded up his wagon and headed back to the dusty track.

Ann chased with his dog until her short legs and the garden boundary held her back. They startled a flock of galahs, this little band, and the birds rose up in a screech, spiralling around in censorious circles. But Ann didn't notice. She was bent down, collecting flowers and anything else that caught her eye. She waved a fistful of wild flowers wildly and long at the receding dust cloud of the hawker's wagon. Then the child turned and skipped towards the homestead, scattering daisy heads on her footsteps, pausing to shower first the ornamental fountain and then the small statue from Kiti Medolan with petals, before turning towards the paddocks once more. She was like an exuberant chick wanting to fly. She ran barefoot towards the sinking sun and Mary Ann Clarissa watched her small figure until the golden light hurt her eyes.

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