

# **The Talisman**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of Rhodes University

by

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November 2012



## **Abstract**

*The Talisman* is an adventure story set in a future where much of today's cultural memory and technology has been lost. Following a hunting accident, a young man named Forest survives a life-threatening wound and embarks on a quest for knowledge.

Rising sea levels, bands of marauders, wild animals and the perils of survival in the broken world are not the only problems facing the survivors. The nature of the collapse of the society, what triggered it and its subsequent unfolding, bequeaths an existential quandary upon them that only Forest, and a rare text as old as the earth itself, can unravel.



"The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long time from now..."

– Ursula K. Le Guin



## Prologue

The flash of lightning reveals the best opening to the rocky inlet, but the wind continues to push at the boat, forcing it closer to the jagged cliffs to the south. He throws his weight behind the tiller, hauling and holding on as the waves emerge from the darkness, moving mountains backed by immovable ones. He tries to call to his companion, to warn of the danger, but the screaming wind, the thunderous air and water take his voice away.

His companion is desperately trying to control the flapping sail, the one they had half up before the gale struck, the one they had hoped would get them into the shelter of the inlet before the racing clouds and ominous darkness engulfed them. The wind swirls and hits them first one side then the other, and the waves pile up against the rocks, plunge over the gunwale, and carry the wooden vessel high above the maelstrom, and then down surrounded by heaving dark walls of water. And up again, and down.

The two companions have had many encounters with tempests before, but never quite so fierce, and never in such proximity to mountains and a rocky shore. Their first storm had been out at sea, far from land, and the size and effortless energy of the waves then had kept them busy and alert through that long day and night. By the time their third or fourth storm came they were able to prepare and manage the sails and tiller with some experience and facility.

But this night the storm had come in quickly, racing in from the north-west, trapping them against the jagged coastline and forcing them to look for a place to shelter, even to haul out of the water. The mountainous islands and narrow inlets of this region had looked very inviting and the wide, v-shaped bay they were trying to penetrate had seemed particularly beautiful in the late afternoon sunlight.

They were looking up in awe at the grey-golden mountains and the slopes strewn with flowers and greenery when he'd spotted the little house up in a dell, half-hidden by a copse of trees. Steering carefully up between the mountains seemed simple since the wind was then from behind and gentle. But as the sun reached the

horizon, and the flooded valley they were slowly moving into narrowed and curved slightly, the wind suddenly gusted.

Their boat yawed alarmingly in the slap of wind, and they turned to look out to the more open waters to see the approaching storm. Within minutes they found themselves battling to keep from the rocks frothing the water at the edges of the inlet.

Another flash and he sees a beach ahead and to the port side. He waves wildly to catch his companion's attention, and points at the spot. The water streaming in his eyes from the rain and the sea spray is cold and sharp, but the flashes of lightning and the lighter colour of the beach allow him to see enough to know that unless they turn the boat into the wind as they approach the beach they will be thrown on the rocks surrounding the sandy cove.

He wrestles some more with the tiller, throwing his whole weight behind the thrust, forcing the prow to cut into the slapping waves and the heaving sea in the direction he wants. His companion has the sail under control at last, has tied it down, and is watching the approaching waves and the sandy beach for hidden rocks and other hazards.

The cove is slightly overhung by a cliff and as they reach the relative quiet in the lee of the steep rocks the boat's keel scrapes on something hard. Then they are grabbing for hand holds as the boat hits the sand and slides around its side, the waves trying to push it further up while the gusty wind seems intent on pushing it out into the churning waters.

He leaps onto the wet sand, splashing into a wave washing up around the boat. The top of the mast is stuck in the sand further up the beach, and the push-pull of wind and water is threatening unspeakables with loud creaks and complaints. His companion has also made it to the sand and is heaving at the prow, trying to turn the boat upright. He gets to the top of the mast where it is dug into the sand, reaches under and lifts, grunting and straining as a wave shoves the boat on its exposed keel.

The mast snaps near its middle, splinters and ropes fly off, many of the pieces disappearing into the howling gale. But the boat can now right itself and they haul it up the beach a little, away from the clutching sea, into the deep lee of the cliff. The companions collapse with their backs to the hull and breath deep sighs, while checking each other for damage.

A small gash on his cheek, a deeply bruised arm where his companion was thrown against the gunwale during the first mad moments as the storm front hit them, splinters and scrapes.

He looks into his companion's eyes, and says, "Now what?"

She was always the one with the plans. She was the one who had suggested they build up the little boat they found stuck on a beach below their hunting grounds near where drowned old Brisbane lay. She was the one who scoured the few books they had, looking for guidance and information about boat repair, boat building and boat handling. She was the one with the restless heart, and the deep curiosity. She was the one who convinced him to leave their little community and sail off into the blue, looking for adventure and new places. Looking for legends. Looking for a man called Forest.

He never once regretted putting his life into her hands, allowing her to take control. He loved her, and through his respect and admiration for her intelligence and forceful energy he was happy. He had the greater physical strength, but she had the will and the ideas. Together they made a formidable pair.

Now, as they sit on a drenched beach, soaked to the very core of warmth, he looks at her, and she smiles.

"Well, big boy, first, let's get something warm and dry on our bodies, and then we can try to make a fire. I feel like some hot tea."

The rest of the night, the storm battering the landscape and the sea, they shelter in the little tent-cabin on the boat after piling sand and rocks around the hull to prevent further movement or toppling. They do not get much sleep, however. The

complete lack of movement, of rockings and slidings, sways and yaws, up and down, make them freeze in anticipation of a roll or a jump.

But there is none, no movement of deck or wall or table or shelf. It all stubbornly remains unmoving. Except a mad vibration from the edge of the broken mast in the swirling winds.

He starts from light sleep more than once through the night, hearing voices in the air, or howls, and once for certain a rumbling like the engines of old industry. But perhaps they were dreams and fancies, perhaps landslides, or ocean booming in drowned rooms beneath the risen sea.

## One

It is the dying part of the year when Forest is sent on his first hunt.

"It's a threshold of your life, you stand there ready to become a man, and a fully valuable member of Lambu. Are you willing to step forward, Forest?" These words are almost sung to him by a succession of people around the fire that night.

He knows that the time has come, he understands that the community lets young people start off in life doing odd jobs and gardening, weeding and harvesting, tanning and sewing, gathering and mending whichever of the buildings needs it most. If they like, they can start training to hunt once they reach 20 winters, before they are allowed to go hunting with the experienced hunters. Too many ill-prepared young people die or are maimed after being sent out hunting too soon. And the community needs its young people, alive and able. There are so few youngsters these days, mused Tuli often.

Forest had enjoyed the training. He found that his skills improved rapidly, he learnt very easily and smoothly, and to hunt means to wander sometimes beyond the bounds of the valley when the herds do. This he likes. His curiosity and his questions about everything seek answers beyond the high ridges that almost encircle their flat, green valley floor, called Lambu.

He remembers his mother explaining how, some time back, the community members had gathered and decided that the name was to be a compromise between Tuli's word, mlambo, meaning river, and Hanna's word, lamb, meaning young sheep. Not that anyone had seen one of them for years and years, the younger generations never.

"The sun will disappear early tomorrow. There's rain coming" says Nathan, the oldest, most experienced hunter. So the hunting group sets off early the next morning. The two grandmothers, Tuli and Hanna, the two mothers, maBongi and Lydia, the five young children and two non-hunting men, come out to wish Forest well, to send him on his way to bring meat for the fire and the community. "Hunt fearlessly, iHlati," calls maBongi, "bring good inyama for the pot, and you'll eat well tonight, my sister-son."

Forest quietly smiles an acknowledgement to the well-wishers, but feels a sense of dread, and suddenly misses his father. His gruff, yet loving manner, and his quiet strength could have reassured Forest at this time. Forest shakes his head, clearing the sadness that threatens to blind him, picks up his weapons, straightens his shoulders and, following tradition, leads the way in search of prey.

Dew betraying giant webs hangs across the morning paths. The tweet and twitter of birds flashing in the trees echo the prickly fear and excitement in Forest's chest. Rustles and scurries in the grasses and bushes have him twitching and ready.

"Breathing is the key," says Killian breathlessly at his back. She made her first successful hunt two moons ago, and is one of the best at the moment. He nods, takes deep breaths and looks for spoor.

He leads the small band of hunters up towards the lookout, hoping to see some prey from on high. The path zigs and zags up the long slope behind the ragged group of buildings to a rocky ridge. The highest point is on the edge of the ridge and above the long deep curve of the river where a pool attracts thirsty animals. The lookout was once occupied all day and night with someone to warn of approaching bands of marauders or to watch for large herds, but these days there are fewer marauders, and more abundant game right in their valley so only lovers and dreamers, or hunters and gatherers, come up here for the solitude, the view, or a way to the plateau and valleys beyond.

On a clear day, the rising ocean is visible. The long ridges of the valley protect the bundle of old buildings from the sometimes harsh winds coming in from the south and the sea. These same ridges also now seem to protect the community from unfriendly eyes, whether man or beast, roaming on the rolling grassy plateau inland.

Forest was first taken up to the high point by his father when he was little taller than a buck's shoulder. His young eyes darting from horizon to horizon, Forest saw a world stretching into a distant loss of focus. His father pointed out an old road that snaked through the shallow neighbouring valley and up over onto the plateau. There, in the distance, herds of impala, zebra, wildebeest and even a giraffe or two

could be seen. Turning to the east, they saw more ridges and valleys hidden between.

"Way over there is the Hundred Valley lookout," pointed Papa. "They sometimes exchange goods with us, but we haven't seen them in a while." He looked slightly worried by this, but smiled at his son in reassurance. "It just means we have to do more to get our food here in Lambu Valley. And you will learn to hunt soon enough."

Turning into the fresh wind, they looked towards the sea.

"When I was a kid like you, we would go down to the mouth of our river and collect shells in the pools, and dig up prawns in the mud flats at the river bank."

"Why don't we do that anymore?"

"We can't get to the rock pools from the steep cliffs, and the mudflats have disappeared under the water. The sea has come right up the gorge. It just keeps coming."

"Why, Papa? What makes it do that?"

"We don't know, my boy. Your grandmother, Hanna, remembers when there were towns still there at the river mouth, empty towns, but they have gone underwater now. And she says it started very quickly, like when our river floods and the water comes up to the bottom buildings."

Forest stared off into the blue haze, wondering.

And then he asked, "Papa, why are we here?" Looking at the mysterious distances, a soul restlessness was beginning to stir. "Where does that road go?"

His father pursed his lips and looked off into the distance. "I once went there. To a place where people can learn things. But that was long time ago. Now, I – ." He stopped. "Our life and survival depends on each one of us making a contribution according to his ability. Believe in the way things are. You are growing strong, and can be a great hunter one day."

"But, Papa," tried Forest.

"Let's get back down to help skin and prepare the meat they caught today. Don't worry about what's out there or why we are here. There are more important

things to worry about, here and now. Look, I see them moving up from the river. If we hurry, we might even get a taste of fresh liver! Come!"

"Come," Forest says to the other hunters, shrugging off the memory, and takes them back down, for his sharp eyes have spotted some impala in the shade of the curve in the river below. Their light brown coats blending well with the river bank's earthiness, the small herd calmly finishes off a late-morning drink. Forest remembers to circle round, to be downwind of the animals, and creeps closer using bushes and trees as cover. He lifts his bow.

A man with a cart had come by once. A pedlar, he had called himself. A plunderer more like, had muttered Tuli. He had bows and arrows made of "carbon-fibre polymer", and steel-alloy knives. Until then they had used bows and arrows of wood, prone to breakages, decay and inaccuracy. Their knives were old and much sharpened slivers of metal, or flinty rock shards. On seeing and testing the light, yet powerful bows, and the heavy, keen knives, the community decided to trade hard-come-by meat and greens for almost all the pedlar's stock. He had been reluctant to part with so much of his merchandise, but the sight and smell of fresh vegetables and dried meat had finally convinced him.

Forest's first bow was one he had been given when he was old enough to lift it, and he started learning to use it. It had been made of slender lengths of wood, and needed to be rubbed with animal fat from time to time, keeping it supple, and smelly. Shooting at birds, leaves, just not Granny Hanna's flowers, shooting at tree trunks marked with circles, he and his best friend, Gift, practised until they were able to hit the exact centre of any target every time. Now he had one of the new bows, a present from his father.

"This will see you become the greatest hunter of your time, Forest. Keep it safe. Keep it clean," he had said, tousling his son's hair.

Forest reaches for an arrow, notches it smoothly and breathes.

"Now remember," whispers Nathan, "if the buck has your arrow in it, you must chase it down and go in with your knife and finish it, quickly. Watch out for horns and hoofs that can injure you. Just do the job, and then let go."

Forest lifts his arms, stretching the bow, keeping still in breath and body, taking aim. The animals are raising their heads from the water. One has already wandered away from the water's edge and is standing side on to Forest, its ears flicking, the skin on its haunches twitching.

Forest releases his breath and the arrow. It goes straight and forcefully into the buck's ribs near its shoulder. The animal falls, kicking. The others scatter, small sounds of alarm too late for their stricken companion. The arrow is deep in the animal's chest and the creature is trying to get up again, but keeps falling, twisting and writhing on the ground. This is lucky, no chasing through the thickets will be needed. Spurred by cries from the hunting group, Forest leaps from cover pulling his knife out, and runs to the struggling creature.

"No! Wait!" he vaguely hears Nathan's shout, but he needs to stop the animal from running, forgets the training, the warnings of writhing dangers.

He straddles its body in an easy slide of the hips, grapples with its horns, one-handed, as he reaches down to slice the animal's throat. He feels a gush of warmth. The horns are thrashing about, but he holds on to the head, his left hand feeling the texture of the buck's hairs. He looks into an eye, wide, brown and scared. And he sees in the eye of the dying animal – in a blink – he sees and remembers the clear brown eye of Gift as he died. And his hold on the buck falters for a moment.

The horns flash sunlight and blood.

There is a warm prickling in his hands. The blood is slippery and so much. His left arm weakens its hold on the head as he sees his own blood running from his arm, running down to mingle with the dark liquid pooling on the ground.

In the struggle, in that moment of memory and the vision of two lives ebbing from their eyes, in the shifting of weight and the momentary loosening of a grip, the buck's horns swung round, piercing and slashing his bicep and upper arm. The pain is distant and demanding, both insistent and isolated from him. He gasps, wonders distractedly if the buck is truly dead, sees faces rushing at him, and blinks wetly.

He falls back and watches the reeling sky, and tries to ask something of it, but forgets what.

## Two

His head is reeling and he cannot seem to control his legs. He wants to stand up but there are faces and voices and pain holding him down. He sees a bright flash of light from behind someone's head. It draws him into its white heart and there is a rushing sound like the river in flood or the waves on the rocks at the mouth. He thinks he hears a call, like a bird's. It pulls him inwards and he senses trees moving past him. There are flashes of colour and then it is dark. And silent.

The hunting band fashion a stretcher for him from some nearby tree branches, put him on it and drag it back to the little collection of old houses and buildings. Forest is mostly unconscious but stirs as they stop outside Granny Hanna's garden. She is the closest thing Lambu has to a healer. She has herbs and plants that serve to fix, to appease and to heal. She has ways of love and gentleness, compassion and care that has saved some lives and helped others recover from bites or scrapes, or bad food.

Forest is put in the back room of the little house and Granny Hanna is there with warm water, cloths and greenery. She wipes all the blood away and cleans the deep, ugly gash. She brings some hot soup, and continues cleaning, and wrapping. Forest is only dimly aware of these actions. The pain and the dizziness have taken him into places of memory where joy and grief mix. And he remembers, he dreams, he relives.

In the rooms of the old house his mother lives in, he moved his bed one day because it felt uneven, and rocked when he lay on it. As he pulled it away from the wall and the corner, he noticed a wooden floorboard there, bent and loose. He lifted it carefully and peered into the dark hole. Something dimly shiny could be seen. It was covered in dust and cobwebs, unidentifiable droppings and leavings of small lives. He carefully reached in and lifted it out. It was a metal box, flattish and light. A design of something strange and unknown to Forest covered its partly rusty surface. The lid was tight and rusted, but eventually he opened it. Inside there were flat

objects, one with a leather cover, surrounding a flat, mostly light brown collection of – he thought they looked like extremely thin sheets of leather, but not; almost like some tree bark maybe. On these sheets were small markings, as if lines of ants had walked across them with muddy feet.

One of the other objects in the little box was a strange combination of shiny, clear, flat sheets covering yellow pieces of the bark sheets, it seemed. More lines of markings, and squares of dark grey and light black shades that, as he peered at them in the light through his window, resolved into faces and people and other things he had no names for. The third object seemed very old. The sheets were broken and torn in places and the scratchings were more neatly spaced, almost like the ones covered in the clear sheets, and unlike the leather covered one, where the scratchings seemed more varied and jumbled.

One day Forest would learn that he had found a journal, a book, and a collection of newspaper cuttings. But he had never seen such things before and did not understand their uses, their functions and their origins. Something about them, however, stirred the curiosity in his heart, and the yearning he felt for knowledge of before, and in general, was awakened anew and afresh.

He decided to keep his little secret. His treasure. He put it back where he had found it. Maybe one day he could learn to understand the objects.

The pain forces him to open his eyes, to look for the source of it. Granny Hanna's face comes into focus and she is smiling and saying something, but he only sees and smells the spoon she is holding to his mouth, and he slurps and some runs down his chin, and is wiped away, and more spoonfuls come. There are greens in the broth, and carrots and some peas, the tastes are explosive, and he forgets for a moment his pain. But a movement to reach for a spoonful and there is sudden blindness as the pain in his arm, all along his arm, into his shoulder and up his neck clubs him into darkness again.

In the haze of numb consciousness and wakeful pain, Forest has a vision of his father. His single-mindedness about supporting and contributing to the survival of

their little band of unlikely people always overrode his rough attempts to love Forest openly, or even genuinely praise him for the innovation of the basket woven from different coloured reeds, or the figures Forest made from the clay mud round the water spout. He misses his father, and his gruff love. Papa had gone out one night to view the stars, or go to the piss pits, and was never seen again.

Granny Hanna is helping him find a good angle, and he can see sunlight coming in the window, and then hear birds. The storm must be over. There is shouting and banging outside.

"The river is flooding again," she says as she passes him a piece of biltong. He sucks on its rich flavour, and wonders if the pain will ever go away. She is watching him as she takes her long hair up and twists and rolls it into what she always tells the children is a bun. It is an old joke that Granny Hanna has a half rabbit in her hair, and she has never bothered to explain the children's mistake, not really remembering herself what the mistake is.

"Granny Hanna," he starts, but stops, unsure what to ask. He would like to get his secret box from under the floorboard in his room, but is unsure if he can. He wants to hold his precious, mysterious things, and dream of their meaning and their origins.

"What is it, Forest?" She checks the wrappings on his arm, seems satisfied and looks into Forest's eyes. "What is it, my boy?"

"How long ... have I been here?"

"It has been almost a whole moon since they brought you back all bleeding and muttering. You have lost a part of your arm, and the infections just keep returning." She stops, turns away and chews her lips.

"Where's my mother?"

Hanna frowns and seems to want to leave, but answers, "Leeds? Um, she has been here, my boy. But everyone else also has been to hold your hand or bring little pressies. See, here is the flower that Killian brought yesterday for you. Pretty, hey?"

"Where is my mother now?"

"I don't know. She's probably in the old house." She sighs. "You remember your mother was always like this since your father disappeared. Nothing has changed."

Forest looks at the dots of light floating in the sunlight falling through the window. He wishes he could get up and move on his own again, but just sitting up like this has put a dull thump deep behind his eyes, and the pain of life in his injured arm is threatening to pierce through the throbbing haze.

He wants his box, and comes to a decision. "Granny Hanna, can you help me?"

"I can try. What do you need?"

And he explains about the floor board in his room, and the box. Granny Hanna listens attentively and promises to bring it to him as soon as she can.

"But," he pauses, "can you ... you know ... not let anyone else see it? I ... It's ... It's my ..."

"That's okay, my boy, we all have our little secrets. Don't worry. I'll go get it when everyone is busy elsewhere."

He smiles through the relief, but the pain in his arm and shoulder and up to his neck is burning and hard, and he slips into nightmares and darkness again.

The next time he opens his eyes Granny Hanna is sitting there, her long hair loose and shading her face a little, and the rusty silver box is on her lap. A small frown dances across her face as he focuses on her and the box.

"Do you know what this is, Forest?" she starts.

Forest tries to sit up, but the pain and weakness keep him flat on his back. "Not really. They're just special things from before, I think. I just hold them and look at them."

She sighs, seems to decide that the situation is not serious, and puts the box on the bed near his working hand. "I gave this to your father a long time ago. He must have hidden it."

"Where did you get it? What exactly is it?" He suddenly has so many questions, but senses that pushing too hard may lose him the chance at understanding.

Granny Hanna frowns deeply and says, "You know what? I can't remember, but I think I got it from my father, just before he died."

Forest has managed to open the box and holds up the old tattered book. Granny Hanna peers at it, shakes her head, and gets up. "I think they were called books, or something. I'm old, Forest, I really don't remember what they were for, or why they were important to – to my father ..." Her voice trails off and she turns from him, a small sound in her throat.

"Just keep it," she says. "Keep it safe. Maybe one day we can find time to sit and look at it carefully and figure it out. For now, you need to rest, and I need to get some food ready." And she leaves him staring at the ceiling as his hand rests on the old book, feeling its strangely smooth surface and the crisp whisper of the leaves of its contents as his thumb rubs its edge. Stunned by the revelations and the pain, he slips into dreams and memories once more.

Timo handed him the knife and said, "You must learn how to do this properly. Otherwise you end up with bad meat, and waste."

Timo was showing them how to bleed and skin an animal he had caught that day. "You first must hang it up. With the head down. Tie the rope around the last bend of the legs. Better to separate the legs, Forest."

"Forest? Forest, can you hear me?" Timo's voice penetrates into his dream, his memory, of sunny days of learning and fun. Forest opens his eyes and sees the clear green eyes of Timo peering into his own.

Timo had arrived one day from a place called Monument, and asked to stay. The community was a bit wary of this stranger at first, but his calm assurance and his quick ability to solve the problem with the wind pump, and the bows and arrows he made and showed them, won them over. By the time Forest was ready to hunt, Timo was a central, if not always talkative, member of the Lambu Valley people.

"Hey, what is it? You look terrible," observes Forest.

"We've been cleaning up the mess of the storm. How are you doing? Ready to get up?"

Forest tries to sit up, but the movement leaves him dizzy and scowling from the pain in his arm. His little box with its contents is gone from his bed, but he spots it on a shelf behind Timo, peeking out from behind drying bundles of plants.

"Okay, okay, relax. I wasn't serious. I thought I'd bring you some prickly pear juice."

Forest sips on the cool, sweet-sweet juice, and suddenly remembers his best friend, Gift, and a moment very similar to this. He remembers the games and the pains they had together. Born days apart and raised like brothers by the community, they loved each other fiercely and proudly. Every scrape, every tear, every joyful discovery and game was shared and remembered as they grew from energetic bratty boys to clumsy pubescent young men.

On a day of high spirits and great games, they had wandered off into the woods and undergrowth, chasing small sounds and climbing for birds' eggs. Gift saw it first, but Forest was first to cry out, as the long, slender green muscle seemed to reach out and touch Gift on the cheek.

Gift pulled away as the snake struck, but the poison was in him and his face was swollen and blue by the time Forest caught his falling frame and lowered him gently onto the leaf-covered forest floor.

Forest carried him back to Granny Hanna's place. All the way, Forest spoke gently and urgently to his friend, his brother, his soul mate. And he sat with him every moment he could, at the same bed he now finds himself lying in. Stroking his hand, wiping the sweaty pain from his swollen and bruised face, one eye shut and useless.

He remembers the moment Gift gasped, opened his brown eye and looked into Forest's blue ones, and gasped again. The light in the eye appeared to go grey and fade, and in his throat Gift seemed to try a last sound. Then the light was gone, the grip of his hand was diminished and removed as it slipped away, as Forest's friend slipped into the darkness at the end of a life.

Forest does not slip off into permanent darkness that day, or the next. His life hurls itself against the rocks of pain, into the long nights of sleeplessness. His body thrashes, throws anger and defiance at the darkness that threatens all life. And he survives. After months of near darkness, where the pain and the boredom leave his mind in a blankness, and his life in uncertainty, he survives.

Granny Hanna, now insisting that Forest call her just Hanna, is proud of her latest survivor, her latest patient brought back from the brink; not that many have returned from that edge of the unmapped. She is modest about Forest's recovery, but surely feels pride and relief that one – at least one – has survived.

He stands up from his bed on a day when the light breeze carries wafts of jasmine and freesia. The nights are less bitter, and the bright green on some trees seems to shine with an internal force. It is spring, and Forest is recovered. Nearly three moons have waxed and waned, and his life is regained. But not without payment.

His left arm is shrivelled and useless, the hand a claw. His muscles tore and the tendons snapped when the sharp, dirty horns of the buck he had killed pierced his arm. He has learned to use what small energy is left there, but merely to prop or pin down an item of food or loose clothing. Hunting and hard gardening will be difficult, if not impossible.

It becomes obvious to him that people have been speaking about it during his convalescence, but when he is finally able to walk about and assist with small tasks, it is clear to all, himself included, that his severely damaged left arm will prevent him from ever using a bow and arrow again.

Grandfather Nolan, after his accident with the knife, simply hobbled off to the ocean one day, telling only Hanna that he was too much of a burden, could not make a useful contribution and would remove himself quietly for the greater good.

But Forest is young and intelligent and, Hanna argued, maybe he could help teach the children.

"But what will he teach them?" Forest's mother demanded. "What is there to learn except how to hunt and cook food? No, he shouldn't have lived. Now he will be a burden on us all. I blame you, Hanna."

Forest knows nothing of these discussions, but is thinking about his future himself. He understands he will never be able to hunt again. And apart from gentle weeding and gathering of greens and fruits, all other tasks require two strong arms. He feels lost, afraid for his future as the possible paths all seem to end in darkness, or in doing menial tasks that only small children normally do.

One night as they all sit around the fire-pit, the topic comes up.

Hanna starts: "I think we should send Forest to that place of learning some days away, Monument, or what's it called?" She looks at Timo, who nods. "We know there are teachers there, or there used to be. Maybe he could learn a useful skill or two to bring back to us. Or knowledge about plants and animals. Maybe learn why our potatoes won't grow. He can help teach the children some basic stuff. "

Forest's mother is not interested in the discussion and gets up to leave. "His father went there, but when he came back things were different. And then he left forever. Send our son away, if you want, but don't expect him to come back." And she stalks off into the night, muttering.

Forest's heart has taken wings, while also tumbling into despair. He knows his mother thinks him a disappointment, and since his father's disappearance all those years ago, she has withdrawn into a harsh view of the world and an angry loneliness. But now he might be able to see what is over the horizon. He might be able to learn some things about this world he finds himself constantly questioning. He might even learn some things about his father.

In the end it is decided that he will set out with Timo, who knows the way and wants to see some old friends.

### Three

Timo is waiting at the foot of the old water pump when Forest comes out with his backpack and a stout walking stick. Hanna had packed some dried fruits and biltong, and the water skin is gurgling softly as he hefts the weight of the backpack into a more comfortable position.

"Ready?"

Forest nods and looks around the little collection of ramshackle buildings. Few people are up at this time, as the first light of the coming day suggests itself.

Timo studies Forest. "Have you said all your goodbyes?"

"Yes, all those that really matter."

"Okay, then, let's get going. I want to stop by the drinking pool at the river to see for some quick meat perhaps. Then we climb up and over. We can make good time in the early stages. It's open clear country."

At the pool a single buffalo, belligerent and scarred, humphs at the two humans. Timo salutes the old bull. "Well, I suppose no fresh meat for our morning's efforts then. Come, let's get up on the plateau. Maybe we can flush a reedback on the way."

They reach the top of the high look-out point, and turn to wave at the children now gathered near the fire-pit, their voices carrying in the still air, squealing and arguing over whose turn it is to fetch water. The various members now up in the early light look small and faraway. Forest lifts his eyes from the awakening domestic scenes below and out towards the sea for a moment. A blue horizon, featureless and calm it seems in the blue-gold light of the dawn. Then he faces the north, and slightly west. The narrow finger of plateau they stand on dips in a shallow saddle, before climbing to join the rolling golden-green plains beyond.

Forest is excited, and feels impatient to be somewhere else, but then he remembers some words from Hanna: "A good traveller doesn't have any firm plans, and is not focussed only on arriving." He recalls that she had been holding the old book from his secret silver box, and seemed to be remembering something, but then had shaken her head and handed it back.

He looks back at the settlement, up at the horizon, shifts the weight of his pack, turns and follows Timo.

Timo strides off over the tussocky grasses, and scattered rocks and outcroppings, following the edge of the ridge-line above the cliffs towards the plateau. Forest looks off to the left at the road and its meandering course up and out of the small valley.

"Timo, why don't we go down and onto the road? Won't it be easier?"

Timo stops and turns to Forest. "I try to stay off most roads."

The roads that are left, those that were surfaced, and have survived the onslaughts of weather and neglect, are too obvious and exposed. And there are those who use them that one would not want to meet. Human scavengers, robbers, wild creatures too. Timo points off west. The morning sun is shining on a sandy brightness of distant dunes that stretch far inland from the sea. A crossroads in that direction, near the spreading sea of sand, has a reputation as a killing place. Timo talks of rumours that a band of men there have hyenas that they use as guards, and they attack anyone coming into their little realm. And they have been getting bolder and working further along the roads, it is rumoured.

"We will stay away from the roads, but nearer Monument I want to cut across some forested areas and maybe use one of the old old roads. It must be hundreds of years old this one road. All broken and crumbled in places, but still clearly once a road."

He turns once more to follow the ridge-line, and steps into his walking rhythm.

They make good time in the clear morning. The grassland with its shattered rocks and solitary trees is easy to negotiate, and there are good lines of sight in every direction. Spring colours are popping from the ground, and the winter-yellowed grasses are suggesting green. As they approach the end of the saddle, a mountain reedbuck bursts from cover, but is already well out of bow shot. Its round white rear flashes provocatively as it crests a rise, pauses to look back at them, frozen against the horizon for a moment before plunging into a thicket of yellow daisy bushes.

Timo decides to make straight for the deep blue line of ridges to the east of the plateau. They walk quietly over the rolling hills and through the shallow hollows. There are herds of zebra and wildebeest far off to the west and north, and Timo points out some giraffe at the head of a small valley, grazing on some acacia trees. The tall animals are graceful and gentle in the bright sunlight. Forest and Timo take a break near a little stream, and the calm presence of the giraffe with their wide-ranging viewpoint reassures them that nothing dangerous is nearby, for now.

As they set off again, Timo leads them up a steep bank on the far side of the stream. Near the top of this he gestures for Forest to be quiet and to keep his head down. Timo crawls up to the top of the embankment and slowly looks up over the edge. He looks from one side to the other, and again, and after a seemingly long wait, gestures for Forest to follow him, slowly and carefully.

As Forest reaches the top, he starts to understand Timo's caution. A road crosses their path at the top of the bank, its crumbling edges eaten by rain and vegetation. The surface is a dark grey, almost like stone, but flat and a little sticky. There is a faded marking down the middle of it as it curves off to the left, while to the right it snakes up a long hill. Forest thinks for a minute they might follow it up. But Timo is already across and ducking into the bushes on the other side. He hisses at Forest, beckoning to him to get off the exposed road top. And they continue on their way through the trees and undergrowth, hidden from the potential danger of the open roadway.

They reach the relative shelter of some rocky outcrops in the late afternoon and set up a small camp in a narrow cleft of rock. While Forest gets the fire going, Timo goes scouting for some fresh dinner meat.

Later, over a roasted rabbit, Forest asks Timo, "Why did you come to Lambu Valley?"

Timo chews his food quietly for a moment, swallows, not looking at Forest. "I wanted to see a bit more of the world, I guess."

"But you've only seen our valley and I suppose all that's in between."

"Ja, but, ag, it's not all about seeing the world, it's also about finding a good place to live. Where we are going is not so nice."

"Why are we going there then?"

"It's the only place we know of with books and information and learning. People come from all over to pick up information there."

"What are books for?" Forest feels that he should know this, remembering Hanna's vague words.

"Books? Oh, they're just the things we get the information and learning from often. Have you never seen one before?"

"I – "

Timo holds up his hands and makes a squarish shape with them. "They come in many different sizes, but they are like this and made of paper."

Now Forest is feeling even more lost, but since Timo is being so talkative, he tries some more, "Paper?"

"Ag, man, you really need to see the things to understand. I can't believe you've never seen these things before. Didn't someone at Lambu have any books or paper?"

Forest reaches into his backpack to find and pull out the silvery tin with the mysterious objects inside. "Is this what you're talking about?"

Timo looks into the opened container and his eyes widen. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it when I was a kid. I've kept this a secret ever since. I... I suppose I just wanted to have something special of my own, for a change."

"Yes, those are books. That one with the leather on the outside looks like a kind that people used to write in. And the other stuff looks like they were cut out of a thing called a newspaper that people used to read to find out about what was happening in the world every day."

Forest opens the leather book to show Timo the writing inside. But Timo has turned away and is fiddling with the fire.

"Put that away now. Maybe you can learn some new things at Monument and then you can figure out what it's all about. And, for now, just keep that all to yourself."

"Why? Now that I've shown you, I realise that I shouldn't have kept them secret. I might have learnt stuff about them before. Hanna has seen them, and said

that she'd got them from her father and had then given them to my father. She also said I should keep it secret."

"There are some people who have a bad reaction to such things. Some will want to destroy them, others will want to take them from you."

"But, why?"

"Trust me, where we are going there are some people who have terrible ideas about knowledge and what books can teach us. It frightens them."

Forest nods. "Is that why you left?"

Timo looks up at Forest, a sharp expression on his face. "Not completely. There are some people there who are just crazy. Not always dangerous crazy, just full of stupid ideas and bad memories."

"Are there people there from before?"

"One or two only, I think. And they're the ones who are sometimes most crazy. Think about Hanna. She's from before, right? Wouldn't you say she's a bit crazy?"

Forest thinks back to his time with Hanna during his recovery. She seldom spoke about her memories of before, and would shut up in confusion if Forest's curiosity about that subject surfaced in conversation.

Forest nods slightly. "What do you know about that time?"

"I wasn't born in the before. My parents ... my mother was pregnant with me when everything fell apart. They were both quite young at the time and it was a very difficult period. Suddenly nothing of the before, the healing arts, the technology, the transport, was available or worked."

Timo seems to hesitate, as if making up his mind to speak. He pauses, looking at Forest. "My parents were the ones who kind of established Monument. They started the learning there, and the collection of books. But some of the people who came were bad people, you know, skebengas, and some of what my folks set up has since been destroyed or pushed out of people's minds."

"Is that why you left?"

Timo thinks about this for a bit, poking the fire.

"I left for a couple of reasons, I guess. Some because of bad people taking charge, but also because I ... well, I'm something like you. I'm curious about the

world and wanted to have a look at things myself. I wandered around for quite a while before coming across you folks in the valley."

"Why are you going back there now, apart from showing me the way?"

Timo snorts, and looks at Forest, measuring the young man's intensity against his own, "I guess, maybe, I'm hoping that things have improved again there, and to see some old friends."

"What about your parents? Won't they be there?"

"No, they died before I left."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Were they very old then?"

"No. Look Forest, let's not talk about this now. I think you need to see the place and the people for yourself and then we can talk about it all again sometime, maybe, okay?"

Forest accepts this and busies himself with rolling out his sleeping mat and they begin settling in for the night. The fire is between them and the opening of the cleft, and they feel safe enough to sleep, although Forest keeps a hand on his knife, just in case.

The next morning is fresh and chilled until they find the sun. Its light is scattered by clouds, and the wind is calm and almost balmy from inland. The landscape starts to become more hilly and forested as they head east and slightly north. The going is much slower as they work through the low scrub and thorny bushveld, and pick their way over rocky jumbles and around steep declivities. By mid-afternoon there is a high ridge off to the north, its rocky head grey and steep, its slopes and ramparts dark with forest and shadows.

At the top of a hill they pause for a snack and sips of water. To the left of the high ridge there is a deep cleft and a grey strip of road can be seen dipping into and through it. Timo wants to go a bit further east before heading north, and knows of a dry cave not far off.

"From there we can get up the ridge and over to Monument all in one morning," says Timo.

When they reach it, the cave has signs of life, human life, a small fire-pit and some wood stacked in the back. There is a view over the rolling hills and plains they have spent the last two days traversing, and a glimpse of the sea far off in the early light of the sunset.

Forest once again starts a fire, while Timo goes off to hunt. They are both hungry from the up and down of the day's hike, and the dried fruit and biltong seem to have no more flavour and leave the stomach grumbling. The flames are just starting to leap and lap on the larger logs when Forest hears a strange yip and a giggle. And a cold prickle runs through him.

It seems to be coming from the forested slope that drops away from the front of the cave. He is not sure, but it sounded like a large jackal or maybe even a hyena. He stands up and reaches for his walking stick, listening carefully for any further sounds. He can now smell something too. A strong animal reek is being lifted to him by the light evening air rising from the hills below. He catches a brief look at a large brown and spotted coat sloping off through the trees. It seems not to have smelt him, or the fire, but rather something else further down the slope.

Forest hopes Timo is not down there. He seems to remember that the hunter went up the slope behind the cave, but that was a little while ago. He thinks to maybe call out, to warn Timo, but realises that might disturb his hunting, or alert the hyena to his own presence.

"What are you so tensed up about?" Forest spins around, a gasp in his throat. Timo has climbed down the back slope, and he has a duiker flopping around his neck.

"I heard something down there, and saw a bit of a brown spotty animal walking down the hill. I thought maybe you were down there too, being stalked by whatever it is. A hyena, I think."

Timo throws the duiker down near the fire and comes over to Forest. He looks down the slope and sniffs the air. "We'll have to be careful tonight. Take turns keeping watch and keeping the fire going. For now, you can prepare the duiker, I'll get some more wood. I just saw a whole lot while bringing that little oney back."

He turns to look down the slope again, and then heads off up slope. "Keep your back to the cave and the fire between you and the edge. I won't be long."

By the time Forest has bled and skinned the small animal, Timo is back hugging a huge bundle of dry wood. He puts some green leaves on the fire, saying, "That should help mask the smell of fresh blood for now."

They share the liver, as Timo helps Forest with the rest of the gutting and quartering of the creature. The rich bloody flavour of the warm liver gives Forest a boost of energy and suddenly he feels less fearful. It may be a long night ahead, but at least they have some fresh meat and a dry sheltered place to rest in.

The night is clear and there seems to be no significant wind. Forest sits staring into the fire, thinking about what Timo was talking about yesterday. He wonders about the place they are going to. Will he be okay there? What if things have gone really bad? He felt earlier that Timo was holding back of course, but why? Why is everything always such a big secret?

He must have dozed a bit in the warmth of the fire because suddenly he is awake and there is a many-toothed mouth flashing in the firelight. He senses in the quick moments that follow that Timo has woken up, grabbed his knife and is fumbling to find his bow and arrow. Forest surges to his feet, a roar of fright and threat erupting from his throat.

The hyena giggles and backs off a bit. It seems to be alone. This one looks extremely thin, and desperate. It starts circling the fire to get at the meat or the men, or both. It is huffing and yipping, and looks ready to lunge at any moment. Forest holds his walking stick ready, either to swing at the wild animal if it leaps, or to poke at its mouth and eyes. He hears a sound from behind him and an arrow sings through the air near his head. It misses the hyena by a hair.

Suddenly the animal leaps at Forest, its mouth open and lips pulled back to show rows of yellow teeth. The carrion stench is powerful. Forest swings his stick at the animal. It catches the wood in its mouth and snaps the stout stick. The shock travels up Forest's arm and he lets go. He ducks away from the fierce animal and stumbles over some rocks at the edge of the cave entrance.

There is a quick yelp and a roaring crackle. Timo has grabbed a burning branch from the fire and has brought it down on the head of the slathering creature. As Forest struggles to get to his feet and turn to face the action, Timo pulls away from the momentarily stunned and cornered hyena. Forest has his knife ready, and since the animal has its back to him, he leaps at it and tries to plunge the knife in somewhere. The hyena senses his approach and starts to swing around, but Timo has another burning piece of wood in one hand and his sharp-pointed knife in the other. He swings the flames up at the hyena's chin. It pulls its head up and away from the bright burning. Timo sees the throat of the animal suddenly exposed and stabs his knife from his hip, up and under, as the animal lunges at him.

Timo grunts as the weight of the hyena knocks him onto his back. It does not move. The tip of Timo's knife is sticking out of its left eye, having come up from under its jaw.

The first light of the new day is being heralded by twittering from the trees as they set about clearing up the mess. After they skin the hyena and take the inedible carcass up to a rocky outcrop some distance away, they look at each other and start laughing. They are both covered in blood and filth from the fight and the struggle. Forest suggests that they stay there for the day and dry out the skins a bit more, maybe find a stream nearby to clean up. The day looks to be very windy and high clouds are wispily racing across the blue sky. They head back down the slope from the cave until they find a stream. Its clear cool water pools in a green hollow and they strip and dabble in the water washing away the grime and gore.

Timo's tightly muscled body is a rich light brown, while Forest's clear white skin seems to glow in the green mossy light. Golden hairs on Timo's chest and arms catch the dappled sun and Forest's attention as he splashes water over his own, hairless chest. Timo pours water and rubs Forest's back for him and when Forest turns to return the favour finds Timo grinning foolishly at him while trying to hide his aroused manhood between his legs.

Within moments they are grappling and groping, fondling and fiercely holding on. All the years of Forest's adulthood, Timo had watched him. Forest too, had an

eye for Timo. His calm green eyes, his tousled golden mane, and his strong arms had often caught Forest's attention. But they had never thought to test, or enquire after, their inner feelings. And Forest had had Gift to play with and be with, until his death, and after that he had not thought to revisit his emotions, or to expect any further joy and companionship of the sort he and Gift had had.

Timo in his turn is relieved to have got this deep feeling out in the open. And his hopes for the future take a new turn, as he imagines a life no longer alone and lonely. He holds Forest's head between his hands and, looking into his eyes, kisses him deeply. Forest rests his hands on Timo's chest as they sink to the mossy floor of the hollow and explore at length and in detail the passions and pleasures of each others' bodies.

## Four

The view as they crest the ridge makes Forest stop. A huge block of a building, like a giant square rock, stands on a hill below them. From their high vantage point, they can see a stone and sharpened-log barricade wall that seems to surround the grey-brown, windowed fortress. And beyond it, in a bowl of hills, a ruined town.

After the terror with the hyena, they are relieved to finally have the option of shelter again. The high heathland around them as they descend from the crest of the ridge is gentle and slopes calmly rather than steeply like their morning's climbing up from the forest. Timo had wanted to find the old road, but it was too far to the east, he had realised, and they could just as easily climb up the side of the ridge to the crest.

Small flowers are visible everywhere, pinks and oranges, purples and yellows. A butterfly, black but for rows of white dots, stripes of blue, and bright red swirls dances from flower to flower. A quail startles them by bursting out of the underbrush, squealing, and flapping madly, to land not far off and disappear in the tan and green grasses and leaves, leaving them laughing.

They come to another road, but it is in sight of the building's ramparts and deserted, and they walk along it for a while.

As they get closer to the big square building, there is a deep resonant sound, a horn call it seems, and Forest sees two golden-brown animals emerge from the barricade and come bounding towards them. They have long loping strides and their pink tongues dangle over rows of sharp teeth. They bark, like jackals, but deeper and less whiney. The two fast-approaching creatures remind Forest of the slathering hyena, and he freezes.

Timo grabs Forest's arm and says, urgently, almost under his breath, "Don't be afraid of them, they're dogs and will smell your fear. If you put your hand out and let them smell you and speak very softly and gently to them, like I'm doing now ... you see, he remembers me."

Forest does as instructed and one dog sniffs his hand, and thrusts his nose in Forest's groin, its tail waving from side to side. Timo laughs, rests his hand on Forest's shoulder. "You certainly get the sniff of approval! Come, let's go meet the people."

Three figures, two men, a woman, have emerged from the barricade and are waiting for the dogs and the two humans to get closer. They all carry bows, and one is notching an arrow. Timo holds up his bow and knife, gesturing for Forest to display his weapon.

"It's Timo, and this is Forest, from Lambu Valley."

The person now aiming his bow and arrow calls out, "Where is his bow, why won't he show us his weapon?"

"I have no bow. I cannot use one. I...", Forest holds up his weak and damaged arm. His hand slightly clawed, but mobile, opens towards the armed man. He flushes, feeling pathetic and suddenly sad again about all that had brought him to this.

And the man lowers his bow, looks to the woman, who strides forward and grabs Timo around the neck. "How are you, you old rascal? Still wandering around looking for trouble, I see."

"Yes, I still wander, but as for trouble...I try my best to stay away," grins Timo, uncertainly, slipping out of the woman's grasp. She is a big woman, strong arms, large breasts, thick legs. Her dark skin and long braided hair seem to absorb the sunlight and her thick lips are slightly parted over wide teeth. Her voice is deep and carries out into the clear air of the day.

"And who's this handsome young man you bring for us?" She is looking Forest up and down, appraising his height, colouring and shy, blue eyes.

"Barb, this is Forest, he's here to learn whatever he can to help his people." He looks at Forest, adds, "Our people."

Barb steps forward to Forest and puts out her hand, as if she is reaching for something. Forest – unsure of the gesture – stands glancing at Timo for guidance and finds him greeting the two men and stroking the dogs.

Barb drops her hand and says, "Welcome to Monument, Forest. We will see what it is you can learn here," and turns away to call the dogs.

They approach the huge grey-brown rock of a building. Forest can see how some parts of it seem to have fallen, and the openings are mostly covered with wooden boards, but here and there light reflects off what can only be rare glass. They enter through wide openings. Timo is chatting to some of the men and women who have come out from somewhere inside the building, and Barb has disappeared. Forest follows Timo and the others down wide stone stairs into a vast inside space, flights of stairs half-hidden behind low walls rise up on either side, almost up to a round opening high above their heads. There is a fire in the centre at the bottom of the wide stone steps, and some people are cooking or preparing hot drinks, or just sitting chatting.

Forest looks wide-eyed at the tall walls of the building, a cliff inside. The hypaethral space has green smudges of moss, and hanging plants. A small bright bird darts in a shaft of sunlight high up near the opening to the sky. He looks around, sees glimpses of doors on one side and windows on the other that look over the broken town below where roofs are shattered and gone. He walks over and looks down and out at a place that was alive in the time before. A tall stone building seems to have lost part of itself, something slipped and fell, leaving a jagged ruin. There are trees growing from walls and foundations, and roads overrun with green.

Back around the fire there are many figures and faces in the fire-lit, glancingly sun-lit gloom. He has never seen so many people before, and is unsure of what to do, or say. The people are of colours and types he has never seen before. Most of the people at Lambu were dark-skinned and curly-haired, apart from his father, himself and Timo, that is. Here there are a few more people like him, and like Timo. There are two people who have an almost yellow skin colour, eyes that are differently shaped, and straight black hair. There are people with long braids interwoven with brightly coloured materials. Many of the people seem to be young, energetic; a few seem to be older, like Barb, but even they are full of life and energy.

Forest is both excited and daunted by all these strangers, their odd words, their accents.

Timo remembers Forest at his back and turns to him.

"We're going to share a room down that side there," he points off to the right of the fire, "but first let's introduce you. Everyone, this is Forest."

"Are you on sentry duty yet?" asks someone.

"We just arrived, Loyi, we haven't even put our stuff down yet. Why?" replies Timo.

"No, we all take turns and since you're new here, you will have to do the dog hours shift."

"I'm not new here," protests Timo archly.

"Ah, but he is, isn't he?" she counters, inclining her head at Forest.

As Timo continues chatting with his old friends, Forest looks up and around the space. He notices a man watching him from a place halfway up the inside cliff. Forest turns his body to get a better look. Blond curly hair hangs from behind the man's ears. He has turned his head and seems to be talking to someone up there with him.

Forest realises that the flights of stairs he saw earlier must lead up to where this man and his companion, or companions, are. He glances back at Timo, who is deep in discussion with a couple of people. Others have wondered off, now that the new sentinel hours have been finalised, and some others are sitting chatting on the other side of the fire.

Forest decides to see what is up the stairs. He climbs the broad stone staircase from the fire, turns to his left and climbs a few more wide stone flags, again left and a narrower and longer and somewhat steeper staircase presents itself. Forest sees the man, suddenly near the top of the stairs. The man beckons to him.

Forest looks back and around, no-one is in sight. He is aware of the fire area down to his left, and voices echoing softly from there.

He steps forward and starts to climb. At one point he finds a level space of a few paces, before continuing up. He realises that the man had been standing here

before, looking down over a parapet, through some hanging plants, down into the fire pit. He turns from the deep view and continues to the top of the stairs and turns right into an open space.

There is the man, and another. They smile at Forest.

"Welcome" says the first man. He looks to his companion, who smiles again, his bright square teeth flashing from his very dark skin.

"I'm Forest, fro—"

"Yes, we know," says the first man, smiling. "I'm Matt, this is Thando."

"Can we show you around a bit?" asks Thando. "We've lived all our lives here."

"Thank you, yes, this building seems bigger and bigger the more I see of it," grins Forest.

"Well, come," Matt turns, Thando follows gesturing to Forest. Matt continues, "Let's start at the bottom and work our way up; but first we must get to the bottom." As he says this his eyebrows raise slightly and a small smile plays at the edge of his lips. "Are you ready for some fun?"

They walk deeper into the building, to a broken shiny, metal door. Forest realises with a shock that the small room he thought was through the door has, in fact, no ceiling and no floor. There is a set of stout ropes hanging down the centre of the square column, and one of these ropes has loops of thinner rope hanging off its broad braided surface.

Matt reaches out, grabs a loop, threading his hand through and around it. He steps out into the void, his foot, to the instep, slipping through a lower loop. He swings over to the central ropes and starts sinking slowly down into the lower levels. There is a loud, rhythmic clank-click from somewhere high up the shaft.

Thando indicates to Forest to do the same. "I'll bring up the rear," he says. "I'm the heaviest, and so the minute I step on, we'll start moving quickly."

Forest hesitates, wondering which foot to use. His one strong hand and arm will manage, because he noted how Matt did it only one-handed, with the other arm hugging the thick rope lightly. Forest grabs the rope securely and steps into a loop. The rope swings wildly and he feels a panic in his chest.

"Stop kicking, Forest," calls Matt, now two man-lengths below him.

He calms his legs and the swinging slows. He stands more firmly in the loop, and suddenly they are dropping breathlessly into a small darkness below, as Thando adds his weight above Forest.

The clack-clack is now faster from above and Forest notices that dripping buckets are rising as the three of them drop.

"Get ready to jump, Forest," shouts Matt. "Just watch me, and do the same but not on top of me."

Forest hears a soft grunt and Matt is off the rope and landing on what look like old mattresses and cardboard. Another grunt and he rolls onto his knees.

Forest almost leaves it too late, but the rope's descent has slowed and he lets go and slips his foot out at the same time. He brings his feet together and bends his knees to land and rolls.

It is just like he and Gift practised for hours, sometimes from a fallen tree, or from the top of the rainwater tank outside Hanna's garden. Once they daringly and stupidly tried it from the river bank, but the soft sand slowed their fall-roll only enough to drop them softly, yet thoroughly, into the water. Luckily, the croc was nowhere nearby that day.

Forest rolls and comes to his knees. Thando has landed and lies catching his breath. There is a final loud click as the rope comes to a halt.

Thando eventually gets up and says, "So, here, just below us, are our water tanks. We collect the rain water from the upper deck, and also we get some water from the spring up the valley." He gestures vaguely.

Forest asks about the buckets, why there are no buckets coming down. Thando explains that every time someone uses the ropes like they just did, the noise of the ratchet at the top alerts people in nearby rooms and they go to the shaft to collect whatever they need. The empty buckets are brought back down and reattached at the end of each day.

The two men show Forest various rooms and spaces as they climb back up from the deep places of the building. Some of the rooms are where things are stored, in others there are a few people busy with various tasks, some familiar to Forest, others incomprehensible. There are people preparing animal skins, making clothes and footwear, there are people looking after small groups of children of various ages. Candle-making activities take up one very smelly space, animal fats being boiled down for the purpose of indoor lighting, and there are soaps, not many, for those who wish to be clean.

In one space near where they had jumped onto the well rope, there are heaps of objects very much like Forest's special secret. He walks into the room with his mouth agape. Books are piled everywhere, and sit in rows on shelves along the walls.

"This is the library, and these are almost all the books we have managed to find and rescue over the years," says Thando over Forest's shoulder. Forest is stunned into silence as he reaches out to touch some of them. He now has a word for them, but now also there are countless questions. What are the marks on the inside and what are these objects for?

Thando grabs a book from a pile. "See, this one has pictures to help with designing new ways to filter and process water, I think," explains Thando, opening the book and showing it to Forest. "What do you think the language is though?" continues Thando.

"I –," starts Forest, uncertainly.

"Can you read?" asks Thando, suddenly looking at Forest carefully.

"Um, I... Wha–, um what is 'read'?" manages Forest, a little overwhelmed by the sudden excitement and confusion roiling behind his breast-bone.

"Aha!" Matt has come into the large room now too. "You have a new student, Thando." To Forest, "Thando is our reading instructor. In fact, he taught your father all those years ago when he was here. Did he tell you?"

Forest is momentarily confused. "My father?" He had forgotten that small bit of family history, he had forgotten that his father was once here too. And now he

realises that his father could read, but chose to be incurious, or perhaps only uninterested in what books might provide. Why?

Matt has not noticed Forest's confusion and is continuing. "He will help you get up to a useful reading level in no time, then you can read any or all of these books if you like. Hey, Thando?"

Thando nods thoughtfully, watching Forest.

The rest of the tour is a blur as Forest is shown the remaining rooms and spaces. They end up on the upper deck where a sentinel is watching the open grasslands to the south and west, and another is looking out over the ruined town and the valley to the east and north. The sun is just starting to set and the few clouds have become washed with colours.

"So, how about you start with me in the morning?" suggests Thando.

"But, I must do the dog shift every night it seems," answers Forest.

"Oh right, well, then later in the morning once you've had some sleep?"

"Ja, that would be very good. Can I learn about plantings then too?"

"Not until you've learnt to read, or unless you go to Tai's planting classes. When are they again, Matt?" Thando has his arm around Matt's shoulders as they watch the sunset turn the blue-grey clouds and the air around them pink and orange.

"I'm not sure, but we can sort that all out this evening over supper. And then maybe you should get a bit of a sleep before your shift starts," says Matt to Forest.

Forest nods and looks out over the town, and up at the bright clouds, the excitement in his core making him smile and feel like dancing, but the shock of the reminder of his father has left him with a bit of hollow sadness too. In any case, at last, he can learn things about the world and the collapse and the before and – he will be able to read his special secrets perhaps and the mystery of those objects may be explained.

Barb is sitting at the fire when Forest comes to get some warmth before going up to do look-out duty. His dream of moments before still worrying at the edges of his memories. She greets him warmly and pours him a mug of steaming bush tea.

"How are you settling in, Forest?"

"Um, yes. Fine. I'm most excited about learning to read. Thando is going to teach me."

Barb nods working her jaw a bit, seemingly mesmerised by the fire.

"What about the bow-making, and food production and storage? Reading may have its uses, but it doesn't feed anyone."

He hears his father in those words, but is older now, and stands on the edge of many mysteries, many discoveries.

"Ja, I know. I just ... well, I hope I can read about some new things that could help us. Maybe understand how to improve our plantings, or about the world out there," he pauses, "and maybe learn about the before..."

"The before!" she spits. "Nothing useful except tools and weapons can be had from before, Forest. There is knowledge that is dangerous." She shakes her head, looks up at Forest and smiles slightly, shyly. "I'm sorry, you can read and learn what you want, but I don't think you'll find anything in the stuff we have. Everyone who's come here to learn things has wanted to find that out. Especially the ones who lived through the collapse."

"But, I didn't. Neither did my parents," says Forest gently.

"Well, I did. And most of us still alive are getting old now, and things start fading and flashing back from – from ... before." She stares at the memories in the fire.

"Barb, what *do* you remember of the before?" ventures Forest.

"I was young, very young. Too young." Her eyes wander into the distant corners. "There was some celebration of something, and everyone was having such a party. Us children thought it great fun. The adults were crying and laughing all together, and some just sat silent, staring at nothing, smiling."

"What were they celebrating? Can you remember?" Forest's eyebrows crease above the query.

"Not really ... it was ... like ... they had all just been given the best gift, or like they'd killed an elephant together. I don't know." She looks around, and at Forest. "Things were not all broken, like now. Those things there made light, and water came from those pipes in the white rooms." She closes her eyes, and says wistfully, "There

was music, just playing from all around out of ..." She frowns slightly, and opens her eyes.

"I also sometimes remember how, later, we all had to go to get a ... um ... a jecton. I remember a line of people, and then we came into a place, and they put like a sharp pin, a jecton, into my arm." She winces quickly. "But it came out again, and then later ... a lot of people started getting sick and going to sleep."

Barb sits back, sighs deeply. "It seems like a dream, actually. Maybe it was. I only remember pieces and they don't all fit together. I was young, remember."

"By sleep you mean ... dead?" asks Forest.

"Yes, my boy. I mean dead. But at the time I remember thinking they were all sleeping, and I went out and played for a bit with my puppy." She ruffles Mutt's sleeping form beside her. "This is one of her great-great-great whatever grandpups."

"But, what happened then? What did you do? Surely you realised they were not going to wake up?"

"Forest, *that* period of my life I do not want to talk about. If it hadn't been for Timo's parents ..." She breathes sharply out through her nose and stands up. "It's time for your duty at the top deck." And walks away from the fire, up the broad stone steps and out into the darkness.

## Five

The shapes on Thando's board are beginning to make some sense after ten days or so. Forest is learning all sorts of other things too: thatching, soil science, companion planting, water distillation, rope making, but the most frustrating and rewarding of all his lessons is the reading. Thando started by showing him, and making him copy, long lines of waves, circles, loops. And explaining that each of the shapes that emerged unique and consistent could represent one or more of the sounds of the spoken language.

Forest started memorising the various shapes, all 26 of them, and found that some were easy to remember, but that a few confounded and got confused. Some shapes were so much alike in some ways, circles with tails that went up, or down, behind or in front. Four such shapes, letters, were making it into his dreams to dance with all the other memories of his daily lessons and growing friendships.

"Bee, dee, pee, kew," intoned Thando. "That's their names, but their sounds are not too different from that: buh, duh, puh, kwuh. Come on, Forest, this is the easy stuff."

And Forest concentrated more, got up early to practise and pout the sounds while writing them in the dust, or the sand, or the cool ashes. And in the space between new moon and full moon, he thought he had it, he felt he knew which was which, and he saw the spoken sounds in the written letters.

"Reading whole words and sentences and, finally, books, is the way to improve," instructs Thando, handing Forest a little book with pictures and colours. The pictures were drawn for children it seems. Strange blue creatures, yellow and purple striped landscapes and jumbles of letters, words, sentences. "Go on, see if you can read that," urges Thando, pointing to the front cover.

"Oh, tee plaaa-kess –"

"No, no, no, remember that the tee and the aich together make 'th'," Thando's tongue thrums sibilantly against his top teeth as he thrusts his chin at Forest, "and a see before an eee is 's'."

"Oh yes, sorry ... 'Oh, the ... pla-ces ... you'll ... go'."

"Indeed, young man," Barb is standing in the doorway. "But right now I need you to come and help me."

She turns and strides away. Forest looks at Thando, who nods his permission. He has to run to catch up with Barb.

"I need you to settle an argument between me and Timo," she explains. "He says that I'm making it up, but I remember it clearly."

Timo is sitting outside, frowning into the distance over the overgrown, shattered town. He turns and stands as they walk up.

"Why do you want to involve Forest in this? You don't need to get involved here, Forest."

"I'll decide who gets involved. You have accused me of lying, and not for the first time," Barb's voice has become cold and threatening. "I do remember why you left."

"I wasn't here then, so I ..." says Forest uncertainly.

"Yes, I know," says Barb, "but you know Timo, and he came to your community from here. Surely he told you why?"

Forest looks at Timo. "He only said he wanted to go and see the world a bit, and then liked our setup, and that's all I know."

Barb persists. "He didn't tell you about his parents? How they tried to rule this little place with their books and their ideas?"

Timo gives an exasperated sigh. "Barb, you are twisting the truth there. They weren't trying to rule anything. They just wanted us to know things that could save us and help us survive. They lived through the nightmare when everything went wrong. The madness of the people left behind in the chaos. The dead bodies rotting everywhere and the aggression that came out in people and how that led to more deaths and more destruction than they thought was necessary. That's why they started collecting the books and stuff from down there." He gestures at the town. "They were just trying to save something, to make people believe in goodness and peace again. To learn things that would help them."

He pauses, takes a deep breath after that uncharacteristically long speech. "And then you – you..." He trails off, shaking his head. Barb is stony faced and silent.

Timo looks at Forest and says gently, "How about you and I get back to Lambu? I've had enough of it here."

"But I've just started getting into the reading. Thando says I've been his fastest learner ever. I want to read, Timo. Please don't do this. And whatever this is about between you and Barb, I'm sure you can work it out. But I don't think I can help you. Sorry, Barb." He turns back to the building and his learning, finding that his hands are shaking and he feels almost like crying, but takes a deep breath and raises his head as he walks back into Thando's classroom.

"Oh, the places you'll go," he reads, "by ... drrr. seuss." He looks up at Thando who is smiling, and shaking his head.

"That dee ahr means 'doctor'. It's an abbreviation," explains Thando. And continues by telling Forest the meaning and background of the two unfamiliar terms. Forest listens, rapt, absorbing the ideas and concepts rapidly, voraciously.

Some days later, Timo and Matt take Forest on a small excursion down into the derelict town. They prepare carefully, making sure that Forest understands the dangers of the place. There are wild creatures of all descriptions lurking in the crumbled, melting buildings, and the buildings themselves hold dangers, walls fall over, remnants of roof slip, holes and sunken drains open up unexpectedly. As they make their way down the hill through a place that Matt refers to as Bots, but why he cannot explain, they find an old stone stairway. It ends at a small, decayed road, and some old stone and concrete buildings, some roofless and melted into the landscape, others showing small vestiges of the proud beauty they held when intact. Rock and stone and some of the wood used in these buildings seem more resilient than the concrete and other materials.

They make their way through trees that are aflame with flowers, the ground beneath them strewn with discarded orange-red petals and dotted with bright yellow flowers. Scents and colours caress their senses, and the day is bright and warm. Forest is lulled by the beauty and strangeness of the deserted buildings and the fecundity of life that has taken over. And so he almost fails to see the puffadder to the side of the path they are following through the grasses. He immediately leaps at

it, bringing his stick down on its broad head, for it looked to be preparing to strike the passing foot of Timo. Timo exclaims at Forest's sudden movements with the stick in his direction, and starts to admonish him, spots the now wriggling, practically headless serpent, and laughs in relief instead.

"Thanks, my love, that was pretty damn close. I owe you one," he says and pecks Forest on the cheek.

Matt, who was bringing up the rear, missed the snake incident and only sees the moment of intimacy.

He smiles broadly at the two men, and says, "That's a relief to see. Thando and I were wondering if you two had something going on."

And he reminds them to keep this from Barb. She seems to think that the idea of two men, or two women, having sex and living as a unit is a waste of time, pointless and even downright wrong. People need to be making babies, and no such thing can come of the kinds of relationship that Timo and Forest, or Matt and Thando, have. Matt explains how all the men have been approached by Barb at one time or another with a certain offer of intimacy. And to reject or rebuff her has led to expulsions, even the suspicion of a killing.

Matt stops suddenly, looking at Timo's thunderous face.

"Sorry, boet, I forgot about Alex, your pa."

Forest looks from one to the other, confused. Timo takes a deep breath and forces a small smile. He reassures Matt that it is no problem, and turns to Forest.

"Way back, when Barb tried to seduce me, my father walked in, and they got into a massive fight. He accused her of being completely without any sense of boundaries, and she accused him of being a bossy prick."

Matt says, "That was the beginning of the ousting of Helga and Alex, Timo's folks, and the rise of Barb, wasn't it?"

Timo nods. "And so, when Barb was found to be sleeping with many different men, my father really lost it one day."

No one knew for sure, but while out on an excursion much like theirs, down into the old ruined town, Timo's parents were ambushed and killed. When their bodies were eventually found, scavengers had destroyed any clues as to who or

what may have killed them, but suspicions and rumours hung like a cloud over Barb and her then lover, Jake. He had been a ruthless killer or butcher in the before, and his relationship with Barb was one of convenience and mutual masochism. His cruelty was well known, and Barb had used him as a blunt weapon on more than one occasion in her quest for control of Monument and its people.

"What happened to him?" asks Forest, looking at the ruins and overgrown buildings around them, fearing for a moment that this man may still be lurking somewhere nearby.

"When you live dangerously and brutally, it's only a matter of time before something really dangerous and brutal happens to you," says Timo.

"He was killed on a raid he led to a small settlement up in the mountains to the north of here," supplies Matt. "Only Barb mourned the loss."

By now they have emerged from the Bots and nearby buildings and are picking their way through bushes and grasses covering a wide road where rusty hulks are half-concealed beneath greenery or fallen walls. Matt explains how old maps they have in the library called this wide stretch High Street, and it seemed to have been a main area of the town. At the end of it a stone building stands, barely. Forest recalls seeing a picture on one of the walls in Monument showing a tall, spike of stone on this once proud building. It was taller, more imposing and symmetrical. Now the tapering tower is a pile of stone and metal off to one side, and the innards of the building lie exposed to the blue sky.

"This was called the cathedral," explains Matt, "but we can't seem to understand what its purpose was. Some sort of gathering place, is the best of the suggestions, but to what end, we don't really understand. And those who lived before can't remember."

Timo recounts a theory his parents had, that it was a very old building where people came to pray to somebody who lived in the sky, and where a leader would exhort them to be good people, and follow rules laid out in a book. They have a copy in the library, Matt supplies. A strange and confusing book, made up of various stories and rules for living that many people seem to have believed in and followed.

And this building, this cathedral, was a place where like-minded people gathered to take part in rituals and discussions about the book, or life, or something.

Forest finds himself reciting a line Hanna sometimes used: "Ritual is the husk of true faith." And he suddenly saw why she said that, what it meant and why it had occurred to him now. People seemed to have ritualised their lives in the before, either because it allowed them to follow certain patterns of behaviour that were preset and therefore had preset and predictable outcomes, required very little thought or energy, and were comforting in a crazy world, or, because the faith, the beliefs, they held could not stand up to too much scrutiny and so could be hidden in ritual.

Hanna had always suggested to the people of Lambu that trying to explain and understand the world through direct observations and thoughtful responses was better and more useful to survival than imagining what the reasons for things were. Trying to live by rules and rituals from an ancient past was pointless; the here and now were all anyone had, and one merely had to live there in the middle of it.

"Do your work, then step back. The only path to serenity," as Hanna often used to say as they worked in the hot sun down the rows of carrots and cabbages.

Matt and Timo have started wandering off down past the fragmented remains of a once great building. They are looking for signs of life, animal or human. Since the chaos and falling apart, towns like this have been taken over variously by packs of dogs, vicious and indiscriminate, or by vicious, indiscriminate bands of men intent on taking, destroying and humbling anyone or anything not to their liking or tastes. The people of Monument have been trying to keep their little town free of such incursions, but since no one lives down here, regular patrols of the town are needed. And occasionally, books, tools, even weapons are found newly revealed by the collapse of a wall or the crumbling of a building's infrastructure.

On this day they find nothing more interesting than an old vehicle. It is standing against a wall inside a recently exposed room of what was once possibly a house. Two wheels, a narrow seat and a strange mechanism of chains and metal bars.

"A bicycle!" exclaims Matt, and lifts the object out into the light. He sits on it, straddling it and shows them, with much hilarity and not a few falls, how it was supposed to work. But the wheels have a broken edging and the rust prevents it from moving too fast or smoothly, and they leave it behind as they make their way back, through the brightly coloured Bots and into the relative safety of the imposing fortress on the hill.

Forest does not have to do lookout duty in the middle of the night anymore since two new people arrived a few days ago, so he eats quickly with the rest round the fire and excuses himself. Timo has an early duty shift at the barricade, and should be out there already, so Forest has their room to himself for a while.

He takes out his silver box, lies on his bed, and opens it up. The mysteries of it are becoming clearer to him day by day, but there are many words and ideas that he is struggling with. The leather-bound book, or journal, is the most difficult to read. The handwriting very jumpy and sometimes inconsistent.

He has studied the map of the world in one of the classrooms in awe and found names and places on it that he has started hearing and reading about in the journal and the pieces of old newspapers. The stories seem to be about various big events across the whole planet. Stories and ideas that he struggles with.

He takes out the little old book that he has only looked into briefly before now and studies the front cover. "T-aaa-ooo t-e ching," he says. And frowns. These are not words he knows in his language, nothing special there as he has been finding out every day, but these words do not even feel right. He opens the little book and starts reading: "For - word. Foreword." The word's meaning is a little clearer, and he reads on, slowly.

The words he encounters are simple, and the ideas are complex in ways that Forest finds familiar. There are phrases and lines he recognises, but he cannot be sure. He remembers Hanna's words, as he reads: "A good traveller has no fixed plans." And he stops and stares into a distant memory and feeling. A sense that the people of Lambu seem to embody the ideas of this little book with its strange words and symbols on its cover. That Hanna somehow helped to instil the ideas or feelings

of this book into the fabric of life in Lambu valley. And he remembers Hanna's response to the little silver box and this book, her blinking confusion and grasping at an elusive memory. Her decision to let him keep the box was probably more out of a sense of its importance than out of a concern for its dangers, which she seemed to have forgotten or misplaced in the mayhem of memories in her head.

Forest begins reading and sees that this little *Tao Te Ching* is truly a treasure, and he wonders why such a book is not in the Monument library.

When Timo comes in much later, Forest has fallen asleep with the book beside him. Timo quickly and gently covers him and the book, and climbs in with him, blowing out the candle and sighing softly as he rolls over and heads for sleep.

In the morning, Forest is up first and silently gets dressed and heads out to get some tea. But Timo is awake and calls to Forest as he is leaving.

"Listen, I— I just want to say that, well, about the other day with Barb. I don't really want to leave, I just don't really like being near Barb very much. There's — there's stuff in our history that's complicated and ugly and she — well, she's a bit confused and — well, I suppose she's getting older and wants to keep on top of things here."

Forest listens, nodding. "Should I be more careful around her? Or just stay away from her like you?"

"No, no, it's just something that's between me and Barb. I —," he looks away from Forest's worried expression. "Maybe one day I can explain it better, but — well, for now, let's just get on with things here. Okay?"

Forest nods again.

"Are you enjoying and learning useful things? Apart from the reading, I mean?" asks Timo.

"Oh yes, there's so much that we can find useful back in Lambu. But I think it might be sometime before we can go back. I want to get the reading to a good level, and then maybe do some looking in the library myself. For— well, for stuff about before, and the collapse and what actually happened then."

Timo smiles wanly, shaking his head. "Be careful there, Forest, somethings are best not known. For your and all our safety. Look, I know you think I'm being mysterious and all that, but somethings are always going to be like that and you must just accept it. You certainly can't change anything."

Forest nods carefully, and turns to leave.

"One more thing, Forest." Timo has got out of bed and is pulling on his pants, casually. "Try not to show anyone your little books."

"I was thinking of showing Thando..."

"Don't, not yet, maybe never. There are some people here, I'm not sure if Thando's part of it, but there are some who take books from anyone because they say they are trying to make sure that all the knowledge is shared. But I know that some books and stuff have been destroyed and the people who were keeping them were punished, or worse. Please be more careful, okay?" He smiles at Forest.

They go to get some tea and check the rosters for classes and duties for the day. Forest decides to spend the day with Timo instead of attending classes, and they swap duties with some others so that they both end up being lookouts over lunchtime.

It is a clear, sunny day, and the late winter air and the light and the sharp horizons are a rare delight. Timo installs himself at the north-east corner of the roof area, and Forest walks around nearby, enjoying the warmth. Traditionally, the lunchtime lookouts get their lunch after their two-hour shift, so they are both a little hungry, and surprised, when Barb suddenly appears, carrying two bowls of stew.

"Thought you guys might be hungry, and so I brought this up for you before it's all gone," handing them the bowls.

Timo nods, Forest thanks, and they wolf down the venison stew, while Barb keeps talking. She wanders through various topics: the weather and the crops, and then almost by accident starts in on explaining why she wanted, wants, to know why Timo left. Timo sighs heavily and turns away.

Forest is again conscious of a frustration in Timo's behaviour, a kind of despair at the single-mindedness of Barb's enquiry. It seems to him that Timo knows

the truth, and believes Barb should too, but her questions and comments reveal that she may not, or that she may have forgotten, or have some hidden agenda.

Barb keeps on about it. Forest feels unable to assist, but wishes he could help resolve the issue. So he tries, "What all do you remember about that time, Barb?"

"Oh, all of it. We had been trying to get a herd of elephants driven to the edge of the old quarry over there." She points. "We thought that some would fall off and die or be severely hurt by the fall onto the sharp rocks below, and then we'd have meat for many many days. Everyone got involved. Timo's mother waited near the lip of the quarry with some others to make loud noises to keep the elephants from escaping the trap. As the herd got closer, an old female broke away and charged them, but turned aside at the last minute and fell into the quarry."

"Barb, how could you—?" interrupts Timo.

"I'm telling this story, you weren't there, alright?"

"But neither were you!"

"Where was I then? I remember it very clearly. Anyway, the rest of the herd came on up to the edge and stopped. Something made them realise what the situation was, I suppose. The rest of the hunters and helpers came running with their noise-makers and weapons, Timo's father arrived just in time to see Timo's mother being pushed. Over the edge."

"Barb! My mother did not die there that day. It was someone else who got pushed. As that woman fell, she reached for my mother and she caught and held on for as long as she could. In the muddle no-one else had seen what happened. Until it was too late. She couldn't hold on long enough."

"But, she died with your father," Barb is adamant.

Timo is leaning over the parapet, his head hanging from his shoulders. His whole body is tense and taut.

Suddenly, he turns on her, a fierce look on his face. "Stop making things up!" he shouts. "You weren't there! You were with me. You— you were— you—"

He stops. His hands are shaking, there is a fleck of spit on his chin. He pulls himself up and takes a deep breath. "No, I know how they died, Barb. And so do you, if you are honest about it. And — No." He shakes his head. "You are telling things that

other people told you and making as if they are your stories, your memories. Why? Why don't you just share your own memories? I'm sick of this."

He walks off muttering, to the farthest edge of the roof, where the small dam lies blue in the narrow valley below, surrounded by flocks and rafts of white lilies. Barb is frowning and turns to leave, pauses, says, "I do remember these things. I'm not taking other people's stories."

Forest realises she is not really addressing him. It seems like she is trying to convince herself, reassure herself of her memories. She disappears down the ladder, still frowning.

Forest turns to look for Timo, unsure of what to do. Timo has walked a circuit of the roof, and is approaching Forest. He offers a quick, almost shy smile. "Sorry about that, Forest, there's so much all confused in her mind. I didn't mean to lose my temper like that. I just – I –. Ag, there's so much confused in my mind too, I suppose, but at least I have my own stories, my own memories."

Forest nods and asks, "How old is Barb?"

Timo is startled by this idea. "What? Why?"

"I just thought that maybe as an older person she might be losing her memories and, like you say, trying to make up for that loss by taking other people's memories as her own."

"That does make some sense. I don't really know how old she is. None of us really worries about that."

"How old are you?"

"I– I'm not sure. I was born in the middle of the collapse, but I haven't thought about how long ago that was. How old are you, Forest? Do you know?"

"We counted the winters in Lambu, and I have seen about twenty-two of them, I think. I was thinking about it when I saw that new couple and their two children, and how they were celebrating a birthday for them. And the children were congratulated on being ten, and twelve. It was a strange idea they seem to have kept from before, even though they did not live then. When I asked the father about it, he shrugged and said that was what they always did in their community up in the mountains. They

celebrated everyone's birthday on the day in winter when the sun started swinging higher in the sky again.

"I now understand years better, and know that that time when the sun changes its swing through the sky was called the solstice. Anyway, I was thinking about that. And Thando was talking and showing me some stories about families from before. And how there was sometimes a grandmother or grandfather, and that they were really old. Sometimes unable to walk or anything. And I wondered if maybe Barb was getting like that."

"Well, she certainly is not so old that she can't walk. But maybe her memories are getting confused."

## Six

Barb avoids them for the rest of the day, and during the evening meal sits apart from everyone, head down over her food. Forest decides to speak to her. She looks up as he approaches, and smiles wanly.

Forest does not ask his usual questions this time, instead he wanders over ground that is familiar and normal. The crops, the water supplies, the reports of roving bands causing trouble. These and related topics are safe and simple, to get her relaxed and receptive.

She talks in great passionate waves about the crops that are beginning to produce and about the hunting skills that Forest could learn. She showed him a spear not too long ago, and this simple innovation, to Forest, has changed his role and allows him to throw this seemingly obvious weapon. The people in Lambu had never thought to innovate because they had their powerful bows and sharp, strong arrows. He has been practising with the spear, but not as much as he should be, chastises Barb.

They talk of the herds that flow and flock on the surrounding rolling hills and valleys, and how the dangerous animals, lions, hyenas, the occasional leopard, are growing in number too, possibly threatening the small human population.

Forest has recently learnt from Thando and the books about the very earliest settlements of people, thousands and thousands of years ago, and how they also had to battle to survive in the face of aggressive creatures intent on eating anything, and the relentless march of diseases and death that these people from before the before were constantly having to deal with.

Barb is knowledgeable about many of these stories and ideas, and shares some useful insights about their current situation. She feels that as long as they can keep looking to improve their hunting and food-making skills, they as a group should be able to survive.

"But so few people are having babies," she laments.

Forest stops for a moment to think about that, and then realises something, and asks her, "Do you have any children, Barb?"

She laughs and looks at him carefully. "Do you want to have some? We could try if you want."

Forest's eyes go wide and he laughs, but in a snorting, unsure way. "I'm not sure about that. Aren't you too old to have children though?"

She looks at him, calculatingly, and replies at length about a time long ago when she tried to have children, but none survived the birth, if they got that far. Some women are not built for childbearing, or there is something about the world and its brokenness that does not allow them to have children, she suggests.

Forest nods, and seeing that Barb is smiling and open again, asks, "What do you remember of the early days here? The time after the dying and the collapse of things?"

Barb hesitates for a moment, but perhaps because she enjoys his company, and because she finds the question non-threatening, she answers. She talks of the struggles to be safe from the chaos, hiding in her bedroom, under the bed with her puppy, scrounging for food. And she tells how Timo's parents and a few other, older people had rescued children, like her, and had come together here in this building to discuss ideas and plans for their future.

The early years were a struggle to adapt to the rapid deterioration of the various support systems of the world. Water supplies, energy to power lights and vehicles, food stores, all these staples of a civilisation disappeared and stopped within months of the mass deaths. People who would normally have maintained, monitored or supplied these basics for comfortable existence were dead, or fighting to survive and protect themselves from others. The animals that people had kept as domestic food sources or companions were captured and eaten. They were docile, unafraid, and edible. Husbandry of these creatures was not considered in those chaotic times, only the ease with which they could be approached and slaughtered.

Barb's eyes fall on her sleeping dogs as she squints into a past already misty and fading. She looks up at Forest, smiles thinly, adds, "You're lucky to have been born when you were. Things are much easier now."

A few days later, there is a horn call from the top lookout. Everyone stops what they are doing and makes ready to find out if it signals a visitor, a hunting call, or an attack.

Forest cannot see anything from the library's few windows, so he heads outside. The people milling at the entrance seem excited and happy as he stops someone to ask.

"It's the caravan," he learns.

From time to time, over the years, this sizeable group of merchants arrives, and spends a few days trading and exchanging goods, gossiping and socialising.

Forest looks out to the barricade, his eyes wide. An elephant stands there, surrounded by strangely dressed people. The creature is covered in baskets and colourful objects, and a swarthy man with a long, dark beard sits atop it. As the barricade is opened wider, the grey behemoth is led through, pulling a wagon. The wagon clanks and rattles over the ground and Forest sees steel pots, metal objects and tools, cloth and countless other things dangling from or piled high on its wooden frame. More carts follow, pulled by people and a fractious-looking zebra.

Barb is standing smiling up at the bearded man, her dogs whining and barking in excitement around her legs.

"Mustapha," she calls, "you are still alive. Welcome back."

The man slides off the elephant's neck, and Forest realises he is a giant, towering over all the people now milling around. He has glittering gold in his ears, and on his wrists and fingers. He embraces Barb and, gesturing expansively at his crew, he booms:

"The caravan has returned from the west, and has wares and news."

Over the next days, Forest meets various members of the caravan, including the booming, jovial Mustapha. They bring foods and products that people are making in the mountains and valleys that stretch across many months' journeying between Monument and the western ocean. They set up bright tents and little stalls of their merchandise outside the main entrance of the building. And Forest and the others of Monument wander around, dazed by smells, intrigued by objects.

Wild-tasting cheeses, preserved meats, stewed fruits and pickled vegetables. Bags of rice. Salt. Spices. Sheets of metal, stout planks of wood, nails, hammers, tools of every description. Heavy rolls of cloth, raw cotton, smooth silk, knitted items, capes of soft leather, shoes, sandals. Hats. Drums. Pictures and drawings. Found objects of uncertain use. Old gadgets and devices from before. Books.

Forest spots the small collection of these and excitedly peers at the titles, hoping there is something new and interesting. But he finds only novels he has read, or handbooks they already have in the library. He looks for the stall owner, to ask if there might be others he has not put on display. The book dealer is none other than Mustapha.

"No, my boy," he guffaws. "Not many anymore. You have them all here, I think. But can I interest you in some wine?" His words have rolling 'r' cadences.

He hands Forest a skin, liquidly sloshing, and gestures for him to drink. A richly pungent, dark flavour flows into his throat, and he nearly chokes, but manages to swallow in a flood of involuntary tears.

The big man takes the wineskin, upending it over his almost toothless mouth. Some of the deep red liquid spills down his beard, and he wipes his hand across his mouth, and laughs.

Mustapha takes Forest with him as they wander through the happy throng, explaining the origins and uses of some of the items in the stalls they pass. The elephant has been placed in an area away from their crops, and is gently shoving bundles of grasses into its mouth. Forest is intrigued by the large animal and asks Mustapha where it came from, how is it so gentle and cooperative. He learns that it was a bargaining piece, a trade item, in negotiations with Barb many years ago. It was a very young creature then, the only survivor of a hunt that Barb had orchestrated. Mustapha had hand fed it and taught it to pull small carts, then wagons. "Only I can control it," the giant explains. "And this gives me great power. Thanks to your leader. Where is she, I wonder?"

They find Barb crouched over a litter of puppies, oohing and aahing.

"Ah, madam Barabara," Mustapha calls, adding syllables and bubbling r's.

She stands and smiles, almost shyly, at the big hairy man.

"For you, I bring new babies, new blood for your animals. You like, yes, no?"

Barb nods, and turns back to the squealing creatures.

"I'll take these." She scoops three squirming fur balls up in her arms and raises her chin as they all try to lick her at once.

That evening there is a bonfire and dancing. People are sampling the wine, and plotting how they might start making it. Laughter and jovial screams pierce the drumming and the thudding of feet on hard ground. There are aromatic smokes and juicy smells floating on the night air. A clear voice is raised for a moment in song. The words are unfamiliar, the tune haunting and quietly happy to Forest as he sits sampling a spicy kebab.

Nearby, Mustapha is sitting with his back to the night, a group of children seated cross-legged at his feet, adults sitting variously propped or upright on logs and rocks nearby. He is telling the tale of their latest journey.

It is a rambling account. There are blood-filled, screaming battles with wild animals; there are clashing and bashing encounters with hijackers, with ambushers, with treacherous villagers. There is a story he tells of a new place, off the southwestern tip of the land not yet drowned. A country has been declared, and has raised a flag. A small, island nation calling itself Cape Town Table Republic has taken root on the slopes above its lost city. It has gathered resources and power, and governs the islands and surrounding seas with boldness and force, audacity and pride.

Mustapha tells how he stood on a high promontory at sundown, looking out towards the west, seeing lights come on all over the distant, steep-sided isles. The shallow, encircling sea, which has buildings poking up everywhere, is said to be infested with giant sharks, and the inhabitants of the islands shoot at anyone unknown daring too close.

Forest listens raptly, like all the rest of the Monument band, as Mustapha regales them well into the night. The fire is replenished and the wine is refilled, and there is more dancing, and giggling, as three of the travelling girls – Mustapha's daughters it is made known – do hand twirls and belly jiggles wearing nothing but gold chains.

The younger Monument men bark and bellow with jokes, and a brave one tries to join the dancing girls, shedding his clothes and looking silly without the glitter of jewellery.

A young travelling merchant, hot-blooded and jealous, intervenes and, for a moment, there is the threat of knives and blood.

But Mustapha and Barb move between them, calm returns, and the night is over.

The next day is to haggle, and to finalise deals, for the caravan will move on again the day after, at first light.

Monument has honey and biltong, mielies and fresh apples. From the quarry, they have stone and sand, the latter attracting a high value after Mustapha's story last night of a glass maker in a long valley a month to the west. Weapons of varying range and skill requirements can be found in Monument's arsenal, but Barb limits their sale to a few redundant items, being the controller of arms. Candles and soaps, creams and unguents, make up the remainder of what they can offer the nomads.

Barb's deal with Mustapha for the puppies is secret, but both look pleased when they emerge from his garish tent. There is a long line of requests for one or other of Mustapha's daughters, but none of the potential suitors are accepted, and that is even before they can ask the father. The girls are left helpless with laughter when the failed dancer of the night before offers his every possession while shuffling forward on both knees.

Timo exchanges pelts for a strange object that allows him to see very far. A relic from before, an artefact of the ancients, it seems to Forest. Timo shows him how it works, and the magic of seeing a distant shape made clear and distinct and seemingly nearby sends him scrambling for the library to learn more.

The last night of the caravan's stay is again a celebration and a feast. Most deals have been mutually and happily concluded, and the mood is jolly and expansive. Forest and Timo hook up with two travellers who also seem to be partners, and they wander off into the darkness to smoke, drink and fondle. There is a moment of fear, of uncertainty, as a strange hairy mouth covers his, but Forest

feels Timo's hand holding his tightly and decides to relax into the moment, to enjoy the sensations and the sense of release.

They end up, just the two of them, replete, on their bed, dawn's first bird calls echoing through the open window.

## Seven

Forest looks at the group of people in front of him. They all look at him, some with a measure of awe, others with a barely concealed boredom. He is to teach them about circadian cycles and the passing of years as measured in tree rings and moon cycles, sun returns.

When he and Timo arrived here a year ago, he was curious and deeply naïve. His rapid and, to some, frightening facility with reading, and his endless curiosity about all things meant that he was able to reach a level of knowledge that most took many years to achieve, if at all.

He looks out the window down to the small dam and wonders when Timo will be back. He is feeling restless himself and misses his family and friends back in Lambu. Timo had come to him one day about six months ago, and after a long circular discussion, had told Forest that he could not stay any longer. The tension between him and Barb was too much and he was thinking of two options.

"How much longer do you think you want to stay here, Forest?" Timo had asked, holding Forest's head against his chest.

Forest had not been able to give a useful answer, being unsure. He was learning and was enjoying it more than anything.

"Well," said Timo, "I could go with Juju and Loyi and them. They want to explore along the coast to the east. See if there is anything new to be found there."

Forest held Timo for a long time that night, whispering in his ear about how much he would miss him. Timo held on to Forest, but said little.

In the end he had left with the others to explore the coastline. Their departure was at first resisted by Barb, then actively discouraged, and finally sulkily ignored once it was clear that her will was being disregarded.

Forest's rise to being a teacher had been somewhat unusual, but Barb seemed to like him, and his quiet and intelligent ways made him popular with everyone.

He had been reading his secret papers and journal, and the revelations that had been coming to him were hard to understand at first, and finally deeply shocking and upsetting. But he followed Timo's advice of not showing anyone else, and managed to keep the secret hidden.

One of the first things he spent a lot of time learning about was the cycles of days, months and years. He found that years were measured in many different ways by different cultures, but that the sun's position in the sky at certain times, when it rose or set, was always the signal of a new year, or new season. The passing for these could be counted in the cross-section of a tree's trunk, and seasons were signalled by animals coming or going, by plants flowering or fruiting, by the natural rhythms and returnings of life and death.

He learnt that the moon's cycles were like a woman's and that the year contained just a little more than twelve swellings and fadings of moonlight. These things he learned in the library, from Thando and others. But the journal in his silver box taught him something completely different and new. And the newspaper cuttings in their plastic sheeting revealed other and important things.

Of course the big question on Forest's mind, as always, was about what had happened, what had caused an entire, modern and rich society to disappear, to collapse, to die. Why did so many people die so quickly? And why are all the coastal areas flooded and flooding? Why did the sea start rising? Were the two things connected?

What he learnt was that the problems with the sea had been a growing and slow-creeping issue for quite some time before. From what he could glean from his sources and those in the library, he discovered that the whole world was seen to be warming, and causing the ice and snow in various places to melt and add more liquid water to the sea. Some people thought it was part of a natural cycle, others believed that the activities of people were causing it, that the uncontrolled burning of oil and gas was heating the air and the water.

In the end, there was a gigantic, natural event. Something unforeseen, something catastrophic and independent of human action took place, and the rising of the seas became an incontrovertible fact.

When Forest first read about this event in old newspapers he had to study the large map of the world to find the places and especially the epicentre where the trouble started.

Most maps put the white continent of Antarctica as a mere edging of the seas in the south, but he finally found a more comprehensive map in a large atlas. There he found Erebus, the most active volcano in Antarctica. Erebus formed part of a long string of volcanos, spanning half the world from the far north to the frozen south. Many of these cracks where the earth could spew its liquid innards were hidden deep under the ice and snow of the winter continent, while others formed mountains and islands surrounding and piercing the vast ocean called Pacific.

And then, on a date some many years ago, Erebus erupted, violently, viciously and continually. One or two fissures under the ice opened and hot magma came up and out. The ice of millennia past and the snow of the season melted and ran off into the sea in a rapid flood. Large pieces of the blank continent were shattered, and vast sheets and towering mountains of blue ice slipped into the troubled sea.

According to one account he read, a giant wave was released, and travelled the world, destroying cities and towns too close to the coast. And the sea rose rapidly and destructively behind it. It seems that enormous cities in all major areas were caught off guard, or the people could not get out in time, and many many people died in that first wave. And the sea kept rising.

But, before and during all this mayhem, a far more interesting and strange event was taking place in the halls of learning and research.

A drug was being developed. A medicine of profound significance and far-reaching consequences. In laboratories around the world, medical researchers had been working on the mysteries of a group of cells belonging to a woman who had died many years before. The cells were called cancer and continued living and growing after killing the woman. This disease, this cancer, had been killing and maiming old and young for thousands of years, and very little was effective in preventing its inevitable victory. And so people wanted to find ways to stand against this killer, to understand this implacable enemy and so overcome it.

The journal that Forest was slowly deciphering belonged to one of these researchers, he eventually worked out, and the various ramblings and ponderings of the writer were sometimes completely meaningless, but sometimes instructive and, finally, shocking and unbelievable. For he found an account of the discovery of a drug to inoculate everyone: every single human being on the planet could be treated quickly and effectively against the scourge of cancer, as the newspapers put it.

"Cancer dead, scientists triumph!," a headline shouted.

In the newspaper cuttings, he found stories that supported, confirmed and redetailed the writing of the journal, and the writer in turn would sometimes discuss and rant about the shallow, meaningless commentary and the ignorant, jubilant headlines.

"Forest, are you okay?" asks one of the students, watching him staring out the window.

"Oh, yes, sorry, just thinking about ... about stuff. Sorry, let's get started."

Later that day he is sitting in the sunshine, near the crops, contemplating the new growth and the quiet sounds of insects and birds. The cycles of life and the growth and death of these tiny lives seems to mesmerise him, and he fails to notice the approach of Barb.

She greets him quietly, perhaps picking up on his meditative mood, and sits next to him, watching the light on the shiny leaves of a bean plant. They remain silent for some time, each watching their thoughts and the quiet busy-ness of the field of food plants.

Finally, Forest breaks the stillness. "Barb, how old do you think you are?"

"I don't know, Forest. I've lost count of the number of winters and summers I've lived through."

"Can you maybe guess? Make an estimate?"

"Well, I suppose ... "

And she sinks into a concentration of muttering lips and furrowed brow. But shakes her head eventually. "No, I don't know. I can't keep the numbers and times all together in my head. Why?" asks Barb, noticing his slight frown.

"I'm just trying to get an idea of how long ago the breakdown happened, and how long we, I mean all of us, have been trying to live in this broken world."

"Are you still on about that? Really, Forest, after all these months you still haven't got bored with that stuff?"

Forest looks away over the gently swaying mielies and replies that yes, he is not bored with it at all. He does not have all the answers yet and there is much to discover. And there is a lot he has found in his private reading, but he says nothing of this to Barb. He holds his knees to his chest as he tells her that he knows about the seas rising, he knows what happened there, but that there is surely more to it than that.

Barb counters with her usual rejections and sermons about survival and living in the present, dangerous moment. And so they part ways, unsatisfied, each worrying at ideas that raise cloudy questions with no clear answers.

Timo returns a few days later with some of his friends, and there is much joy, but also some consternation and sadness that two of their people decided to stay at a small settlement along a great river, a river called Kaai. The fishing and life there was good and comfortable, tells Timo. And they bring back news of a different sort too.

People there have started building boats. A man from before was teaching any comers, and together they were building a fleet of small fishing and exploration boats that used the wind to move about. There was wonder and excitement in his voice as he told of a day they went sailing across the bay, and how dolphins swam ahead and beside, and the blue sky shone into the clear blue-green waters where fish and glimpses of colours and flashes of silver told of the presence of bountiful life beneath the glinting sea.

Forest is glad to see Timo again, glad to see him passionate and inspired again. Timo hugs him hard when they get back to their room, where Forest has spent so much time alone lately. They talk well into the night about all they have done, seen, learnt, experienced, holding each other in the dark. But Forest keeps silent

about the one thing, the big unfolding story of what caused the collapse, the deaths and the shattering of civilisations.

His continued reading of the journal, and his supplementary searching through the few old newspapers in the library have begun to reveal some uncomfortable facts.

The next day he finds some time to carry on reading the journal, carefully and with a dictionary close at hand to help explain the tricky words he encounters. The writer has been going on about the international group of scientists who have been studying the cancer cells with a view to finding a permanent cure for that disease. He rails against the impossible claims by a laboratory in Korea, he records his mixed feelings about the claim being backed up by other laboratories, including his own research group. But he feels that the sudden rush of excitement needs to be tempered by serious testing and field trials.

Forest barely understands parts of this, the unfamiliar words are in contexts that are unfamiliar, and the background to the science is something Forest has only managed to scratch the surface of. He does, however, understand that the discovery or creation of a vaccine to eliminate cancer would be a major achievement and would save millions of lives around the world.

And the newspaper headlines of that period in his secret stash support that idea. The world was joyful, and impatient. The scientists were mostly wary of moving too fast, but also clamouring for recognition of their individual contributions. Money was constantly being discussed. Forest found that idea in one of the approved books in the library and Thando patiently explained as best he could what it was all about. Money, a strange concept, fuelled and fanned the world of before. Funding for research and the development of medicines to save lives was a particularly complicated, confusing and incoherent issue where money dominated and determined all outcomes.

Forest read of big companies that produced medicines, and controlled many parts of the world as a result. He came to understand that the research into cancer, and the discovery of a vaccine, were events that people all over the world found

shocking and exciting, and that governments, the leaders of the nations of that time, were placed in difficult positions. As ordinary people clamoured for the medicine, the companies fought over who must pay for the medicines, and everyone argued over who should get it first, or who should get it exclusively. Some thinking was that only those who could afford it should get it. The rich people, those with all the money, were particularly adamant that they be provided with the vaccine as soon as possible. The poor, and their supporters, felt that those without money, without the resources to live healthy and protected lives, should be given it first.

In the end the vaccine was made freely available and distributed world-wide. And that might have been the end of it and the world would have carried on happily, free of one more killer disease. But there was more to the vaccine, and it was the writer in Forest's leather-bound journal who knew more and had studied certain aspects of the medicine that were ignored by the big companies and governments.

Two things happened. The vaccine and its special package of disease and antibodies seemed to mutate, change and grow different attributes once a certain critical number of living creatures had been injected with it. The writer used mice to test the vaccine under certain conditions. These mice were sometimes only one or two, in isolation, and carefully watched for reactions and responses to the medicine. But at one point he had over a thousand mice injected, and all put together in a large enough area. And that was when things went wrong.

Every single mouse became desperately ill, and most of them died, suddenly and seemingly in excruciating pain. And the survivors? Not many of them. Out of the 1000 or so mice in the experiment, only two survived.

Forest looks up from his book. There is a commotion at the central fire pit, shouting and calls. When he gets there, he finds a group of people gathered around someone lying on the floor. Timo is not in the crowd and Forest pushes through to see who the injured person is. There is blood on his chest and his breathing is ragged and bubbly.

It is not Timo. It is Juju. He slipped while collecting some honey in the nearby gorge, and fell some distance onto a sharp rock and a small dry tree. His chest has

been pierced by a wooden stake, and no one wants to remove it for fear of what might follow.

Forest sits next to Marie, the resident healer, and hands her what she needs, or calls for what she softly asks for. She is quiet and methodical. Timo comes to join them, holds his friend's hand. Juju is mostly unconscious, but at one point he opens his eyes and looks keenly at them.

"I don't want to die. Not like this. Help me," he manages.

Marie shushes him and strokes his forehead, her own head bowed. Death once again stalks the community. People are subdued, Loyi inconsolable, Barb sullen. Timo sits with his old friend for two days, dribbling water into his dry lips, and talking softly.

Juju dies in the night, and the wails of Loyi and others keep the rest of the Monument clan awake and thoughtful. Each person thinking about their own death. Will it be gentle, will it be rough? Will it be sudden, or a slow decline into painful, endless darkness?

Forest escapes the general sadness, and the memories of Gift's pain-filled end, by burying himself in the journal, where death is also a theme, but with a detachment in its telling.

The death of all those mice in the writer's laboratory is carefully documented in the journal. Each small autopsy revealed the same thing. Cancer, massive, virulent and deadly, had killed the mice. The vaccine developed from the long-lived cancer cells of a dead woman, the vaccine that cured and prevented cancer in the people tested, the vaccine and its DNA fingerprint had a fatal, unpredictable flaw. It had, of course, been thoroughly tested, but always on smaller groups of mice. But with larger groups, once a certain number of subjects were infected, injected or dosed, a particular rule and set of cascading rules came into effect: the hosts developed cancer in nearly every cell of their bodies and quickly fell under its relentless ravages.

And the survivors? What of the few survivors?

"Forest? Forest!" Timo is standing over him. "Quickly, put that away, Barb is coming to talk to you."

Timo slips out, and Barb stands looking around the room uncertainly.

"I had a dream, a kind of memory ... thing, last night," she begins. "About ... before, about the collapse, about what happened."

Forest is standing now, looking at her. He steps towards her and looks deeper into her eyes, as she tells her story. And it is the very story he has been studying, the story he has been seeing from the largely emotionless position of a scientist.

The people were given the injection to protect them from, and cure them of, cancer, Barb relates, although she uses naïve words and concepts. Thousands and thousands of people in the town below came to be injected. Large meeting halls were turned into clinics for a moon cycle, allowing all and everyone to come and receive their injection.

Barb remembers only the local events, but Forest finds he can fill in certain global details now, in his own mind. All over the country, the continent, and the world similar scenes were played out. Most people were happy and calm, although in some places fanatics, or people of certain faiths and belief patterns, protested, boycotted, and bombed. Forest remembers reading: "It is not God's will," in a bold headline. And there were some people who chose to wait and see what happened, choosing to stay away from the clamouring crowds and furious fanatics.

Barb recounts that a number of days after most people had been injected, the first signs of rapid illness and death were too few to be generally noticed, but soon the numbers grew. People started collapsing everywhere, many people looking sickly and grey, and then suddenly sitting, lying or falling down to die within hours.

The pain was sometimes dulled by nerves already consumed by the cancer, a virulent, deadly, indiscriminate malignancy. But for many deaths, the noises and cries of pain that they made echoed across the darkened town. Eventually, with cars silent and immobile, bodies lying randomly strewn, some bloated and smelly, others open and broken by scavenging creatures, eventually, it was over.

The people who did not get injected were few – so few really, in the end – and they did not last too long in that putrid and silenced world. Their infrastructure and

lives were shattered. They might have fought and bickered themselves into extinction.

"They might have moved off and found others. We never found out," Barb stops.

"But what about you and some others who got the injection? You survived, you are still alive and strong and healthy, all these years later?" Forest hopes she has the key, the single truth of it all.

But she answers in vagueness again. The clarity of her dream, her memory, her recollection, is fading and she looks out the window at some flowers below and turns to Forest, blinks a few times and takes her leave.

He almost follows her out into the sunshine, but intrigued and driven pulls out his book again and continues reading.

The deaths were visible and ugly. They were plentiful and painful. The mice died in much the same way that Barb described the people dying. The researcher tried to warn the other researchers, but the lead group in Geneva ignored him. He tried to contact newspapers with his findings, but they also ignored him, thinking him a crackpot, a fringe fanatic, a fraud.

The two mice who survived the onslaught of the cancer injection showed every sign of good health. Their blood tests revealed no trace of anything cancerous or deadly. These small rodents, their little lives normally subject to death through old age or experiment, seemed to have escaped that fate.

At first Forest found it difficult to follow what the man was writing about at this point. But, after revisiting, rereading, researching in the library and thinking, he began to see that the researcher was also struggling to understand, grappling uncertainly with the things he was witnessing in the lives of the minute animals.

The two surviving mice, normally short-lived and fragile, became robust, healthy, and carried on living way past the age that creatures of their size, metabolism and circumstances usually did. Eventually, one was caught by a cat after the researcher set it free in the gardens of the laboratory, on a whim, a romantic

fancy of its liberty and longevity. The other, he euthanised, autopsied and studied carefully.

Its cells, its life force and being were suffused with rules and instructions for living, and adapting, changing to suit the circumstances. These cells resembled, yet surpassed, the deadly, long-living cells of cancer first used and adapted for the vaccine. The vaccine that killed millions and billions of people across the vast world bestowed on a few, a minute percentage, the gift, the curse, the doom, the blessing, of life eternal, or at least geologic in span and arc.

Forest looks up from his reading. His vision is blurred and broken for a moment. He looks at the shapes and colours and dynamics in his briefly indistinct view, seeing shapes of cells and strands of instructions spiralling through. As his sight clears, he stands at the window and watches a sunbird, flashes of green, red and deep purple on its chest and neck. He studies a patch of fast, wispy cloud in the patch of blue sky visible through the trees and shrubs. And he finds in his mind an understanding, a fusion of colours and movement, a melding of ideas and images. He sees the great place, the edifice, of history, like an impressive entrance to a vast palace of knowledge, while the future is through a grand archway, leading to a place of endless, unknown possibilities.

He sees that the ages of people alive today are such that the collapse was not just years or decades, or even a hundred years ago; it seems that it has been centuries of living in a broken world. Barb is strong and healthy, yet well over one hundred years old, perhaps. Hanna, Tuli, Thando, all of them older and healthier than anyone from before. Forest, blinks, thinks, and realises that he has just begun.

He turns the page in the journal to see what else the writer had to say, maybe how long he survived, how the journal and box came to be at Lambu, perhaps.

The writing is different on the last few pages. In a different colour and texture of lines, the letters are neat, rounded figures, exactly like the way Forest has learnt to write from Thando.

The words are simple, and the sentences long.

*I don't know why, and I can't seem to find the truth here in my heart, but I find that I need to express myself. I need to let the words and feelings that are turning and frothing in me, I need to let these out. After reading all these difficult words in my grandfather's journal, and after the long days behind and before me, after the struggles we've had, and more strife and difficulties to come of course, after all of this I must talk, I must let it out.*

*Talking to Lydia is useless, she is singleminded, and I don't think she would understand the full impact and meaning of everything I have discovered here. My mother, Hanna, is having problems remembering things sometimes, and she has already told me everything she knows about her father, the scientist, the researcher, the one who discovered and tried to warn about the dangers of the cancer vaccine. I cannot think of another person here in Lambu who would understand either. Perhaps at Monument, but that is days away. And what about their reactions?*

*So I write my thoughts and feelings here, here where my grandfather recorded his discoveries and despairs at the folly of science and the madness of governments intent on controlling and justifying their control through false information.*

*It would be impossible to undo all the damage now, but the world is already old, has had many deeply damaging and impactful changes and will surely survive this one too. But the people, the huge numbers of people who suffered and died all because of a desire to avoid suffering and death. The waste of it all. But that is all in the past now, the world has changed, there are now so few of us humans left, and the struggle, the dangers make us vulnerable and unable to rise above the daily striving.*

*I will write here to try to face the fear and the anger and the frustration I feel at the way some people played games with life, and life won, but the people lost something, everything.*

*I don't want to live forever. I find that idea scary and already I feel bored and tired of the life we lead. I cannot see myself carrying on indefinitely into the future, facing memory losses, losing friends, family, and children to poisons, plunderers or*

*pure bad luck. I don't want to be left alone perhaps one day, unable to remember anything and with no one around to help me, or guide me back to a place or a time or a memory.*

*I see how Hanna sometimes loses her line of thinking, and looks off into a distant idea, trying to find the memory. I find the idea of a mother, a strong and capable mother like she has been to me and others here, I find the idea of her losing her mind too much to bear. And it is possible that the same problem waits for me and all of us far enough into the future.*

*My son, Forest, my son. His life is still fresh and full of discovery and joys, but he too will find a day when the endlessness, the long long stretch of days and months and years before him, when that all becomes tiresome, boring, fruitless and empty. I cannot bear to see that happen.*

*But what can I do. I will not take the lives of others, nor will I warn them of the fact of their eternal lives. How can I? It is almost too much to understand and accept myself. No. I have lived enough. I will find a way to escape this all, one day soon. Perhaps like Nolan, I could just walk off into the sea, or whatever he did in the end. Or I could throw myself off the cliffs at the gorge, or I could feed myself to the croc.*

*I am laughing at these thoughts, but a laughter that is without joy, a laughter at the silliness and the uselessness of my little life in the face of a giant world that will kill so many of us one way or another. And here I am contemplating the best way to do it myself.*

*Will those who remain, will Lydia, a woman I have loved and who has given me a strong son and a good life for a time, will she survive me going away? Will Forest? Will the community? Am I just being a selfish old man with a headache to want to leave this all behind?*

*These words I will leave here, at the end of my grandfather's words. Perhaps one day, far away in the future, perhaps someone will find them, these words and the stories in the papers and the little book of wisdom. Perhaps who finds them will have found a way to cope with the everlasting life in a world of dangers, perhaps who finds them will need to remember, will need to understand, will need to be freed by the knowledge. Like me. The knowledge I now have about the world has freed me from*

*the daily effort to keep on, hoping for a peaceful death one day. I cannot free others, the effort may tear us all apart. And what I most dislike is pain, the pain of a long, boring, effortful, pointless life leading nowhere.*

*It cannot continue like this. I cannot continue like this.*

Forest rocks back, his throat is tight, and he feels prickles of tears and pain in his eyes. The words of his father. The final words of his father.

His father had known. He had learned to read, to write, and he had read the journal. The journal had been his grandfather's, Forest's great-grandfather, and that man had been the researcher, the writer of the truth behind the collapse of a world, the deaths of millions, and the truth of a new people born to live long past the normal length of days and years of the old world's people.

And Forest sees things differently now. Different ideas and hopes and dreams drive his being. He cannot accept the despair in his father's view. He cannot allow his own life to be taken by boredom and fear. He thinks of his future. And he sees how a life that is long and healthy could be a life of endless new thresholds to cross, of knowledge to gain, of sights, sounds, smells, tastes to discover. Of love to have, to make and to share.

And he can write, record, and thus remember.

He finds Barb at the edge of blue, throwing sticks for her dogs out into the dammed water. He watches her for a moment, wanting to leave her with her joy and canine companions. But the male of her trio sees, or smells, Forest and comes bounding up the slope, dripping, tail wagging and tongue hanging in happy greeting.

Forest flops down on the grassy bank nearby and ruffles the dog's ears. Barb comes over and looks down at him.

"You okay?" she asks, and sits beside him.

Forest nods. "I've been thinking about what you told me, and I wanted to ask you something, but..." he trails off, unsure of the direction he can take with her.

Barb is patient, but somehow intrigued and curious. "What is it?"

Forest begins by talking about books, and the things one can learn from them. The memories they hold for anyone who cares to read them. He ranges over some of the safe topics of weapons and food production that the books have taught them, and he asks her why she does not read, or will not.

Barb is quiet for a moment, sighs and answers. "I struggle to remember things, Forest, this is true, but what is in the books are not things that were ever in my memory and so I don't care to have them."

Forest nods, and tries. "But why don't you write down your own stories and memories so you can remember them later by reading them?"

Barb frowns, but only slightly. She is somehow taken by the idea and scratches some images, or maybe half-remembered words, into the mud at her feet. Seemingly trying out the suggestion. But then stops, looks up at Forest and explains that paper and writing instruments are scarce and quickly used up.

But Forest is ready for that and shows her what he has been working on, what he has brought for her. He has sheets of leather, finely scraped and smooth, lightly weighted and strong. A mixture of ashes and charcoal, plant juices and water in a small jar, and the glossy wing feather of a hadeda complete the collection of objects he has prepared. And he lays a sheet out, dips the quill in the black liquid and writes his name on the smooth material. The letters are uneven, and the ink runs a little from the first stroke of the F, but it stays on the sheet and stands indelible as Barb runs her finger over the smooth leather under where the name is inscribed. Forest holds out the quill for her.

"Go on, you try it." And she tentatively scratches a B on the sheet. As she finishes her name, she looks up at Forest, her eyes filled with tears. She is smiling and suddenly laughs.

"This is so easy. Why didn't we think about it before?" she says.

Forest shrugs. He knows from his reading that people throughout history have sometimes overlooked innovations or simple solutions to things, often because the way they had always done it was enough, sufficient to meet their needs and get the job done.

He thinks about the community of Lambu, who had always had bows and arrows, and so did not think to look for, make or invent other weapons and hunting tools. But now, he had one that he could use, a spear, a throwing weapon that could be tipped with blackened wood, stone, or metal, and only required one good arm to launch. Forest could throw it over a reasonable distance – not as far as an arrow could fly, but good enough if one got close enough to the target. He had brought down a small bushbuck only a few days ago and the sense of accomplishment, and belonging again to the band of hunters, broke the sadness that had lurked in his heart since his near death from the first hunt.

Barb gathers up the sheets of leather and the jar and quill. She stands, thanks Forest and strides off, her dogs bounding along behind. Forest sits by the dam for a while longer watching the swift birds swoop over the water for a drink and insects. A fish jumps out in the middle of the blue and a group of impala emerge from the woods on the far side of the water. It is quiet and cool in the early twilight.

Forest hears footsteps through the leaves behind him, but does not turn to see, for he can smell. The scent of a man whom he loves and knows well, whom he has grown to respect as a calm and centred person, who loves him in return and who shares his restless curiosity and desire for knowledge and truth.

Timo flops down on the grassy sward next to Forest, leaning in for a quick peck on the cheek.

"So, what did you say to Barb? She's all beaming and chatty. Calm and confident almost."

Forest looks at his friend and partner, and says, "I gave her some sheets of leather and stuff to write, and suggested she could record her memories there and reread them when they seemed to be slipping. She is already changed by that? I hoped it would give her some hope, or a chance to redeem herself even."

Timo is cautiously approving, rests his head on Forest's outstretched legs, looks up into his eyes and says, "Come, let's go home. You've learnt to read, you have a new weapon, and new skills and ideas from these people. Let's get back to where we can help our people."

Forest looks into his lover's green smiling eyes. And nods.

## Eight

Timo is eager to leave. He is up and packed long before dawn, and eventually shakes Forest awake as the first glimmer of light is announced by chirping birds. They have a quick hot tea at the central fire, shoulder their packs and climb up the broad stone steps towards the growing light of the new day.

Barb is waiting for them outside. She is holding a large basket, covered with a blanket, and quickly puts it down as they walk towards her.

Timo is working his tongue over his teeth. He looks down at the ground, avoiding Barb's gaze.

"I wanted to catch you before you left," says Barb, tentatively.

Forest looks at her, at Timo, and decides to relax.

"I have something for you, Forest," she offers. And uncovers the basket, revealing a puppy, one of her latest litters. Its ears floppy and brown, its feet large and ungainly, its eyes almost blue, yet brown too.

Timo wants to protest, and looks at Forest in preparation. Forest ignores him and scoops up the warm, soft, wriggly bundle. The furred face licks Forest's nose, and its tail wags rhythmically. Barb looks on smiling. And tries to get Forest to stay. Explaining how his classes will be missed, and he will be missed and he will always have a place here. Timo finally can take no more.

"Barb, please, leave us alone. We want to go and you have no power over us."

Barb looks at Timo at last. She tries to smile, but the effort reveals the falsity of it. The last couple of moons have been very difficult for her as her control of the people and procedures at Monument slipped. She had been in two or three confrontations with people who claimed she was lying or making things up, and she was clearly taking other people's ideas and memories as her own. Since Forest gave her the idea about writing her memories some ten days ago, matters had improved slightly, but the legacy of her controlling nature and confrontational approach could take a very long time to erase.

When Forest went to her a few days ago to tell her that he and Timo would be leaving, she had been quiet and almost sulky. Now she was shy and sad. And Forest hoped that her struggle would lessen and that she would learn to ride on the flow of memories as they came, as they went, and as they grew more overlapping and confused. And perhaps she would write more of her memories, when they were clear and so regain control of her own life, and some respect from the community.

Timo turns away, snorting, hefts his backpack and starts moving towards the opening in the barricades. Forest hesitates with the puppy in his arms. Not sure if he should let it walk along with them, or if he can take the basket. Barb looks at his friend's retreating back, and shrugs, turns to Forest and helps him decide by taking the puppy and putting it back in the basket. She loops the leather straps over Forest's arm. The puppy is still small enough that the basket is not too heavy, nonetheless Forest is surprised by the weight of it.

"Wha—?" he starts, but Barb shushes him and waves him off.

"I hope you'll come back to visit or teach again one day, Forest," she offers. "Maybe come and get a new companion for the puppy when he's all grown up?" And then she is striding away towards the building, calling her dogs to her as she goes.

Forest catches up with Timo, who has already crossed the surfaced road, and is heading up the gentle, grassy slope, retracing their path when they first arrived.

The bright sun catches flowers and insects in the tall grasses, and the blue sky arches over the bowl of shattered buildings below and the squat block of Monument. Forest looks back at his home for the last year or so, and waves at whoever the sentry is, watching them leave.

Timo watches this gentle leave-taking and says, "I'm sure you'll be coming back someday."

And they turn to watch the path before their feet leading homewards.

They pass the cave where the attack happened, seeing remnants of fire, but it is still early and they press on, hoping to make it to the first river crossing by nightfall. There, near the old bridge, is a shelter of concrete and stone, where they can spend the night.

Forest lets the puppy out and watches its curious sniffing and joyful, trustful wagging investigation of the campsite. A name has not occurred to him yet, but he knows one will, eventually. In the basket he lifts the old blanket out. And sees treasure. Barb has put a few books in the bottom. Completely against her own rules, she has removed some books from the library and let Forest take them.

At first he worries it may be a trick, a way to get him caught and brought back to Monument. Then he realises that the books in the basket were never in the library. They are new to Forest, who spent hours going through the collection at Monument. These books are ones Barb must have kept aside, kept secret, and now has decided to give them, or maybe loan them to Forest.

They are about weapons and food, and about useful skills like making candles, weaving, thatching, boat building. The weapon that Forest has lately been using is described. Now he can show the people at Lambu, teach them about other weapons that they may find useful. No more bows and arrows only.

Timo returns with an armload of wood, raises an eyebrow at the small pile of books.

"Barb hid them in the bottom of the basket," explains Forest. "They're ones that weren't in the library. They must have been her secret stash. There's one here about weapons that is almost the same as the one they had in the library."

Timo glances cursorily at the objects and continues with fire preparations.

Later, as they get comfortable for the night, the puppy tucked up with Forest, Timo asks, "Do you think she has been keeping them for a while, or just recently?"

Forest has no way of being sure, but guesses that maybe it was fairly recent. As her memories became confused, she must have felt the need to keep up her knowledge of various basics.

"How much do you remember of your younger days, Timo?"

"Oh, I don't know. Bits and pieces, I suppose. Nothing like what I remember about yesterday, or last year."

Forest wants to tell Timo about the discovery he made in the journal, but is unsure about the way to handle it. He looks up at the night sky and thinks that he

cannot keep this incredible secret to himself forever. But also he feels afraid of the knowledge and what it might do to people. Knowledge is power, and power makes people do terrible, selfish and dangerous things.

He falls asleep with a wet nose tucked under his arm, and thoughts of a future with long trials and heady joys.

They set off early in the fresh green light and make the crossing of the first gorges and road networks in bright sunlight and a warm breeze from inland. From a high point Forest spots a flashing off the sea, and thinks he can make out the plains and the ridges where Lambu is. There is a smoke rising, black and ominous in that direction and he points it out to Timo.

"I can't be sure, but maybe that's in the valley before ours," suggests Timo, but frowns into the far-viewing instrument for a good while.

That night they are exhausted and Timo does not go hunting. Instead he rations the small packed fruits and biltong they have from Monument. The day's walking has been difficult, as they negotiated the steep hills and narrow gorges nearer the coast. The puppy has been mostly quiet and sleepy, but every now and then is full of energy and can flap along with them as they walk through the early summer growth on the grasslands.

"We'll be there quite early tomorrow, I think," says Timo. "Let's get an early night and surprise them all for breakfast."

In the night they are woken by loud shouting and whooping. It seems to come from a nearby ridge, but fades after a while and the normal night sounds resume. Timo sits up for the remainder of the night, watching the flames and clutching his bow and arrow.

They get to the finger of plateau leading to the lookout above Lambu as the sun begins penetrating the deeper parts of the gorge upriver from the settlement. The smoke they saw yesterday has vanished, but a stale and ugly smell fills the air. Forest is filled with a sense of dread, or maybe excitement, as they approach the edge at the lookout and look down into the valley.

"No!"

Forest sinks to his knees. Some of the buildings below are burnt and split open. The water tower is lying toppled in a steaming metal tangle, and the fields are muddied and bare. Timo begins hurrying down the path, and then pauses. "There may be more of the pillagers. Let's be very careful."

Forest is looking for people, living people, but all he sees are dead ones. There is Nathan, hacked and bloody. Grandma Tuli lies near him, her garments torn and red. Timo looks at Forest. Shakes his head.

Forest rushes to Hanna's place and finds the garden in ruins. Inside there is chaos and broken things. He calls out, "Hanna? Hanna?"

A small noise seems to come from the back of the house. He holds his spear ready and calls again. It sounded almost like a voice, small and lost. He makes his way through the mess, watching carefully where he puts his feet. The puppy is sniffing and following with its tail up. In the back room, where Forest spent a long time recovering, there is no one. He calls again. The puppy is sitting, head cocked, ears perked, looking down. With a start, Forest realises the noise must have come from below his feet. The bed has been tipped over. He shoves the mattress out the way and feels around on the wooden floor.

Silence. He calls again, "It's me, Forest. Is someone there?"

This time a voice responds with a joyful squeak, and there is a scrabbling near his feet, and a section of the floor lifts up. Forest raises the little door to see the grubby, haggard face of his mother; behind her in the gloom are Hanna and Killian, both smiling tiredly.

The pillagers arrived a number of days ago. They came first as two, looking for shelter and food, then more arrived in a loud, rambunctious group, and when their leader finally showed his hand by demanding more food, and insisting that the girls must report to him for servicing, Hanna, Lydia and Killian started putting water and dry food away in the hidden basement.

Yesterday, Nathan confronted the leader, Tuli at his side. Things got ugly very quickly and those of the community who were not killed immediately, fled, while the

few young women and girls who had not managed to escape were tied up and led off. In the chaos the three older women managed to get themselves to the basement, and cowered there while the house was ransacked. Luckily, it was not set alight.

Lydia looks at Forest, and then goes to him and holds him, long and tight. Tears prickle in Forest's eyes, and he holds his mother. Finally at peace with her turmoil.

"You came back," is all she can say into his hair, as they hold on, each needing the contact and love more than they first realised.

Forest and Timo start immediately with cleaning up. Nathan and Tuli, and three unidentifiable burnt bodies, are taken to the small burial ground at the base of the cliff. Timo digs a series of long holes and the bodies are wrapped and lowered one by one. A couple of people return as they stand over Nathan's inert form, saying their goodbyes. By the end of the day, two others have emerged from the gorge upriver and the sad duties are completed. No children or their remains have been found, but perhaps they were taken by the pillagers.

The thought of following the roving band of troublemakers is quickly dismissed, the numbers are impossible, suicidal, they all agree. The parents are dead or missing too, and no survivor's blood calls for revenge or rescue. They are barely enough to start again, but they try anyway.

Everyone knows what to do in the cleaning and fixing. No leader guides or admonishes. Each person goes about their self-assigned tasks with a grim silence and a drive to forget and forge anew.

Many days later, they are sitting around the fire, enjoying the warm evening and the quiet company of a clan shattered, yet resilient. Forest is telling of his time at Monument. He describes the place, the people, the lessons. He shares his knowledge of the rising seas, and he shows them the books Barb gave him. There are pictures of spears and slings, bolas and studded clubs in the weapons book, and Timo and some of the men huddle over it, plotting which to start making first.

One of the books shows flower gardens, and another, vegetable fields, and they offer advice and guidance in the growing and maintenance of food and medicinal plants. Hanna is fascinated and garrulous over these treasures, and begs Forest to explain the captions and explanations accompanying illustrations.

Forest talks and smiles and promises clarifications, but, in the end, and almost without thought, he does not show or explain his other secret. Not yet. He thinks of his father's words of despair and despondency. And sees the difficulty of explaining, the gaps in people's knowledge and understanding, and so he does not give the truth to anyone, fearing they will not believe him, or react in unpredictable and dangerous ways, like his father thought and did. He strokes and cuddles his puppy, and thinks how many days and years he has with this young life before it ages and dies, like so much of life.

Except him and his people, and all humans now living, perhaps. These survivors of a vaccination gone wrong. And their offspring. Death still stalks them of course, in the world around them, in the wild danger of creatures and in the dangerous acts and accidents of the difficult life of survival. But if they avoid any such mortal encounters, they will live long past the range of the people of before, perhaps forever.

Later, as the group settles into a stillness in preparation for sleep, Forest steps away from the recumbent forms around the fire. He looks up at the sky, the bright band of the Milky Way arching into the West. He thinks again of his father and the questions he refused to or could not answer for a curious young boy. And sees now, the reason his father was so uncomfortable with his curiosity and questing intelligence. He had hoped to protect him from devastating knowledge, to keep the simplicity of their lives foremost and foregrounded, to see his son grow strong, free of darkness and forgetting.

He wonders what the future now presents to him, Forest, iHlali, the reader, the teacher. A life here in the valley perhaps, quiet, simple, hard, sometimes dangerously vulnerable. And he thinks of the boats Timo saw up the coast, and the potential they may hold for a life wandering the world. And he sighs and smiles. He will have a life. Here, elsewhere, everywhere.

And he thinks of the endlessness of that.

## Epilogue

The morning is one of those unforgettable, rain-cleansed, fresh-aired mornings they both love to enjoy in silence and reverence. He is up first and tends the small fire on the sand while watching the world slowly come to light. She lies staring through the tent flap at the mountain tops and the cloudless sky.

Across the inlet, the slopes of the mountains are streaming with waterfalls. Birds have emerged from whatever shelter they found from the storm and are clamouring and calling to one another in the clear air. A herd of zebra can be seen wandering across the grassy lower slopes, and a single wildebeest is standing looking out at the new day.

The cliff behind their sandy sanctuary hides the slopes on their side of the inlet and, if she remembers it correctly from the glimpse they had yesterday afternoon, the dell where the little house stands. The house of the man they are looking for.

After a light breakfast they make an assessment of the damage. Other than the broken mast there is a dent in the hull from the rock or something they hit as they came into the beach last night, some scrapes all along one side, and cracks inside. She sighs, realising that this will require major repairs. And their goal is surely within a moment's walk.

So, the only logical thing to do, she decides, is take some water and food, and find a way to climb up out of the cove to the slopes above. They will find help and shelter up there, she hopes. And can return to repair the boat later.

At the top of the long tumble of rocks that they have to climb from the sand, they encounter a vista up and down the inundated valley. They see remnants of buildings emerging from the waters down at the mouth of the bay, and past that, across the shining water, a legendary island. Its high table land and string of isles and rocky dangers make it a formidable fortress and bastion of power in these parts. Cape Town Table Republic emerges from the sea that drowned the proud city that once sprawled across the land between islands and mountains.

They turn to look up the inlet to the high heathland and jagged peaks surrounding it all. From the top of the cliffs they look down at the waters of the drowned valley. The rough weather of the night before has left streams of sea foam across the surging waters. Closer to the end of the bay they see another sandy cove, bigger, more protected and enclosing. Two boats covered and hauled up on the sand. And raising their eyes from this reassuring sight they spot the house, a wreath of smoke visible at its chimney. The house of a man who, it is rumoured, has the truth about what happened to them all, what killed them, what saved them, what drowned them and what made them live forever.

Two men emerge from the house as the companions trudge up the gravel path that leads from the stream. One is tall, light skinned and dark haired, the other shorter, muscled and golden brown. The latter walks forward, welcomes the shipwrecked sailors with a broad smile and turns to his taller friend.

"They're here to see you, Forest, to see if you can explain it all to them."

"Without all the mysticism and nonsense that has come to surround it all," she adds.

Forest throws his head back and laughs. He lifts his good arm and waves them towards him. "You actually want to come and question the origin?"

And so the companions enter the house and the lives of two people who, legends tell, sailed the world many many decades ago and told whoever they encountered, or would listen, uncomfortable and sobering things.

That evening they sit on the stoep of the house looking down the length of the valley-bay and westwards out across to the islands of the Republic. The sun sets in a spray of orange and red and little lights appear on the slopes and the plateau of the distant island nation. Timo explains how the people over there have managed to pilfer from ships and other sources, getting solar panels and even a good supply of diesel, an old fuel source, and generators that make light and fumes. It looks magical and mysterious. It is a dangerous place according to all accounts, he explains. Any boat or ship getting too close can be taken, the goods and people redistributed according to need and influence.

"It's lucky that you came in close to the coastline of the mainland. Or did you know?" Timo asks.

She looks out at the twinkling islands, nodding. "We had been warned to stick to the coast, but we didn't know why."

The two companions have many questions, and Forest and Timo answer as many as they can. They all work on repairing the damaged boat, and soon are able to explore the region, keeping well away from the Republic. They learn that Forest and Timo originally stayed much further along the southern coastline, but the rising sea eventually claimed their community's valley, turning their fields and hunting grounds into a salty marsh and undermining the old buildings. By then many of the community were dead, and a few of the remaining people decided to move to Monument, high on its hill.

Forest and Timo had not returned there to settle. Instead they had helped Hanna and Lydia make a home with them at the boat-building community on Kaai. Forest had set up classes for people there, and taught reading and writing and other useful skills, as he and Timo had built a boat. But throughout, he had kept his secret.

One day, he tells her as they walk up from the beach after a brisk swim, he saw Timo watching him explain things about time and years to a group of children. Timo's expression had been thoughtful and slightly puzzled. And after the children had all raced off to jump in the river to cool off, he had asked Forest to explain it all to him again.

"I decided there and then, after all the years, to tell him the truth, to break it to him that our years would stretch into decades, and the decades into centuries, and in fact already had."

"How did he take it?" she asks.

"He stayed, didn't he?" Forest grins. "I showed him the journal of my great-grandfather. And he understood, and, well ... he was the one who suggested I start telling other people about the situation."

He recounts how he learnt to tell the story: gently, couched in a way that focused on wonderful potential rather than dark endlessness, boredom and despair. The story was learnt to be told, to teach the world how to live anew.

And so they built a boat and got ready to sail off together, exploring and explaining.

"We called it *Talisman*," he says, referring to that first boat.

She nods, uncertainly, unsure of the word. Tull is man? Tell us, man? She remembers the legend of Forest, his journey, and the myth of a protective vaccine, a lucky book, a magical memory. The name of his boat was different in the stories.

Forest sees her confusion, reaches into his satchel and pulls out some sheets of vellum. He sorts through them, selects one and presents it to her.

"I've been learning this new sketching skill lately, and I drew this from memory, of our first little dinghy."

She looks at a charcoal drawing of a boat on a high wave. The name clearly visible.

"Talisman, a thing that can provide good luck, inoculate you from harm, and may have magic powers," Forest recites from a memory. "I chose the name for that one."

But that boat did not last very long, he explains, not without irony. They survived its destruction in a vicious storm just up the coastline from Kaai on a test trip, and immediately set about building a new one, bigger, faster, stronger. This one Timo named.

"Barbara, he called her, and she has lasted until this very day," he adds, unnecessarily. She knows the name of the boat from the legends, has recently seen it hauled up safely on the sand of the big cove below them.

Forest explains how, with Barbara to hold them, they set out to see the world, to tell some truths, to share a knowledge. But the knowledge they shared with the world was not always welcome, or properly understood, and a strange mythology had since grown and festered in the few remaining places of learning and teaching.

And so, Forest teaches the two companions many things about the time before, about the vaccine, the deaths and the broken world that followed. He teaches

them the real words, the real sequence of events, and about the people involved. He makes them tell him again the next day, so they remember. And he watches them come to unlearn their previous beliefs, their submerged superstitions, and their unfounded fears, and grow into understanding and knowledge.

And they learn peace. They learn to be completely present, to accept that the world is sacred and cannot be improved. They learn and understand how to be content with what they have, to rejoice in the way things are, to realise that in these actions, or non-actions, one learns to reside at the centre of the circle.

They learn to practise eternity.

## Acknowledgements

Without Paul Wessels, this project would not have got very far, and so to him I owe a deep gratitude and respect for his calm, thoughtful, and eminently useful guidance and assistance.

I would also like to thank the other teachers, and the fellow students, on the Creative Writing Masters course at Rhodes University for the valuable input, creative challenges and supportive get-togethers. Writing need not be a completely lonely affair.

All science, especially regarding the vaccine, is mine and reflects my understanding of such things, and so may not fit reality. I also took some, but not unreasonable, liberties with exactly how high the sea might get, but only for effect. (For a "fun" look at possible sea levels of the future, visit <http://flood.firetree.net/>.)

I have used the Stephen Mitchell translation of the ancient book of wisdom, the *Tao Te Ching* as a source and inspiration in this work.

The world-creation and concerns of Ursula K. Le Guin provided further inspiration, insight and instruction. The quote at the beginning of this work is from the opening of her compelling and wide-ranging *Always Coming Home*.

November 2012  
Grahamstown, South Africa