

Chapter 1

I SMELL THE SWEET SCENT OF GINGER FLOWERS AND IT BEGINS. I am the vulture circling, but I'm not as bad as Pete. He stalks. I insist there is a difference. I pick my way through the bodies rotting in the afternoon heat: white bones jutting; maggots erupting through bloated, black skin. Treading on something soft I look down to see a small hand under my boot: body parts; tiny body parts; children's body parts. As I move through the human debris a thick cloud of flies disturbed from their work rise to crawl their putrid business across my skin. The scarf I have tied around my nose and mouth can't keep out the sickly sweet smell of death.

Words forming into sentences: unspoken expressions of horror disrespectful in the presence of this thing; this obscenity. Our silence separates us as Pete moves where the lens takes him and I, rudderless, drift in the opposite direction. The church of Nyarubuye, this testimony to what man can do, is pulling me

DENISE LEITH

down so deep into its darkness that nothing will ever be the same again.

Wandering deeper into the circle of buildings I hear what I cannot possibly be hearing: a moan. As I enter the church I'm initially blinded by its darkness and stumble, scraping my arm down a raw brick wall, and as the blood begins to ooze the flies descend. Before sight there is always smell: the metallic odour of blood, and the sharp, protein-ripe tang of rape. The bodies of two women and a little girl are lying at my feet, their legs spread wide, blood crusted on their open throats, dried semen spilling out from between their thighs to stain dull, dark skin. As I lean down to close the little girl's legs the flies rise up again and this time they find their way in—up my nose, into my ears, across my eyes—and I am blinded by the soft horror of them and I scream, a deep primeval noise that rises up from the recesses of my being, from all the lives and times I have ever lived, and from all that I will ever live, as if the very act can stop the nightmare and it does.

From: Bullwinkle91965@yahoo.com
Date: Monday, 28 March 2005 6:44 AM
To: Rocky91956@yahoo.com
Subject:

Dear Rocky,

I had the Rwandan dream again last night. Have you ever wondered why these dreams are always so much more rich in texture, more vibrant in colour, more real than memory? Sometimes it feels to me as if they are being played out in my head like a movie in slow motion or from a faulty projector. Other times they come in disconnected flashcards with dark, troubling

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edges. More than the pictures, though, it's the stench of that afternoon that stays with me. I smell Rwanda before I dream Rwanda. Is it the same for you, my friend?

I'm back in London for the funeral? **Funeral**—what a strange word that is. If you say it too many times it sounds all wrong: a clunky word that refuses to slide easily off the tongue. You'll be there, of course, and Bella and John, but I wonder how many others we know will be coming?

I'm going to keep writing to you. I hope you don't mind.

Your loving Bullwinkle

Chapter 2

London

March 2005

IT'S NEVER BEEN A SOFT LANDING—AN EASY SLIDE—THIS constant shifting from one world to the other. Perched on the side of a vacant baggage carousel I watch the jostling for position across the floor as a little girl begins to cry at her father's feet. Shuffling through the passports and landing documents as he waits for their luggage to appear, he pretends he hasn't noticed her tugging at his trouser leg. The woman next to him sighs before bending down to pick up their daughter. Kissing the child's head as she strokes her fine blonde ponytail the exhausted mother makes loud shushing noises for the husband's benefit, but still he will not hear. It has been a long flight from Australia.

On the train in from Heathrow the very important suited man sitting next to me is having a conversation with his mobile, explaining to it why he needs to fire the woman he's been having an affair with. Sitting opposite is a young girl in a tight black skirt that's riding up with the rhythm of the train. Next to her

is a woman applying make-up: contorting her face with strange little moves as she paints and smudges and draws. I look around the carriage to see if anyone else is watching, but everyone is either reading, or staring vacant-eyed into the space in front of them. Why am I the only one concerned with this blurring of the private and public taking place in front of us? Pete would say that I'd been hiding away too long again and he'd be right, for each time I return home it is becoming harder to adjust: to paint my face, or put on clothes that are overtly sexual—too short; too tight; too low; too black. Each time it becomes harder to advertise that I might be single; available; desirable.

'She looked better before she began with the make-up,' offers the man claiming the seat next to me vacated by the suit. Ah, I think, another dysfunctional soul does exist on this train after all. 'You've just flown in, right?' he says, motioning towards my suitcase and the laptop propped between my feet.

'Right,' I say, looking down to see my sandalled feet and the chipped red nail polish on my toes. I am out of place on this early-morning commuter train. Crushed and baggy cargo pants, and a shirt with its sleeves rolled up to reveal arms tanned from five months of the Australian summer. I am a strange brown nut in the middle of all this busy London grey. When I look back up again I see my reflection in the train window and notice for the first time that my hair has grown lighter, streaked blonde by the sun. Reaching up I pull it back into a ponytail, securing it with the elastic I have around my wrist.

'Anywhere interesting?'

'Not really.'

'Just got back from South Africa a couple of days ago myself. Covered the rugby test. I'm a sportswriter, you know. American . . .' He hesitates. 'New York, actually.' Ah,

I understand completely. New York is not quite American. No Midwestern redneck here. Educated. Sophisticated. Worldly. With that settled he offers up his name, along with a handshake that carries with it a whiff of stale cigarette smoke and freshly applied cologne. I return his smile and notice that he's a handsome man, probably in his late-twenties. His hair is still wet from the shower. ' . . . married an English girl and we have a son. That's why I'm still here . . . '

As he talks I realise that I've already forgotten his name, and then wonder if you can technically forget something that you didn't register in the first place.

' . . . separated a while back. I'd go home to the States at the drop of a hat except for my boy. He plays "ruggers", you know.' The word does not slip easily off his tongue as if he is trying its Englishness on for size.

'Really.' I just can't dredge up any interest in what he is telling me.

'Yes, he's very, very good.'

I nod. Smile again.

'Could play for England, you know. Of course—' he's leaning in towards me now, bringing with him again the cigarettes and cologne '—I wish it was real football, but he's half English, right?' His body stiffens then and he backs away when he realises the possibility of his error. 'You're not English are you?'

'No, I'm a crossbreed like your son.' I watch him to measure the impact of my words. I see him wince and I regret them immediately. Why did I have to say that? Why did I have to hurt this stranger needlessly? It's not technically true, anyway. I might like to think I'm part Australian, but I'm English by birth and by passport. What I really wanted to say to this man is that things could be much worse . . . much, much worse. His

son's still alive, isn't he? He has a future ahead of him, doesn't he? Oh, yes, things could be much worse.

'No, I could tell you weren't English.' We lapse into silence then as each of us retreats back into our own little world. I imagine he's thinking about sons, and real football, and crossbreeds, while I'm trying not to think about anything much at all, especially why I'm back in London.

As the train rocks its way towards the centre of the city I stare out the window again, losing myself in the suburban morning flying past. A young woman is hanging clothes on a line, her breath frosty in the grey of the chilly early morning. Another is sweeping the concrete steps outside her back door with a straw broom as a dog barks at her silently from a patch of mud below. Dirty, brown-grey vignettes flash past until my attention is caught by a shiny, red bug of a car pulling out of an old timber garage. A young mother is standing close by with a baby balanced on her hip, her hand raised to wave goodbye, and all I can think of is Thoreau's lives of quiet desperation . . . my life of quiet desperation.

It wasn't always like this.

'I don't want to lose him so I'm stuck here.' The sports writer's words are dragging me back into the train again.

'That must be hard.' I offer a half-hearted smile to try to make amends for my rudeness, but this only encourages him to tell me about the destruction of his marriage and how much he hates everything about England: the food, the climate, the people. He hasn't actually said it yet, but I suspect his former wife and her proprietary rights over their son are top of that list. I look around the carriage to see how our travelling companions are reacting to his opinion of them and their country, but in true British style they are pretending not to hear.

I have grown too hard over the years and I know it is not an attractive trait and so as the train pulls into Embankment and I begin to gather my things to change lines I turn to him and wish him luck with all his troubles. It is not enough, I know, but it is the best I can do this morning. Yet, it seems as if it is more than enough because he beams back at me and shakes my hand once again, only this time he holds it for too long. Once out on the platform I look back through the crowd to see that he is watching me and we both smile, embarrassed at being caught out. As I manoeuvre my suitcase through the crowd I consider that perhaps he and I are kindred spirits after all, both part of the world's great mass of unattached: the less happy, the hurt, the anxious. It was not always like this. I used to be someone different.

I spend the morning unpacking and cleaning out the musty corners of the flat I rent for a pittance in Clapham Common—I'm hardly ever there and don't cause my landlord any trouble, he says, so he gives me the place cheap. By the afternoon a misty rain has begun to fall and a new freshness is moving through the air. I take the tube to Bond Street and walk to Berkeley Square, where I find my favourite bench and sit under my umbrella watching the strangers passing by. This watching, I fear, has become my addiction—an unbroken line from my earliest memory to this day—and like all addictions it has exacted a heavy price. Will it be the measure of my life?

To avoid going back to the empty flat I drop into Ratko's shop in Clapham Common High Street. 'Ah, Kate, we been worried 'bout you. We very glad you still alive. We heard. It was a very, very bad think they did,' says Ratko by way of welcome as he heaves his ever-increasing bulk out of the seat he rests in by the front door.

'How's Mila, Ratko?' I say, changing the subject. I absently pick up an avocado from the display beside him and test its ripeness with my thumb.

'She very difficult. Very difficult.' The familiar ritual of complaints has begun and I smile at the comfort of it. 'She all time is wanting return to old country. What for, I ask you?' Ratko spreads his hands and shrugs his shoulders, as if the absurdity of his mother's longing is obvious. 'Is nothing for her there. Dead. You know. Please you tell her, Kate. She listen to you.' Mila doesn't listen to me, and who can blame her when it is I who was the cause of her misfortune? But there is no point in telling Ratko this for the scene must be played out. 'I do everythink for her. Everythink.'

Suddenly the monologue of complaints falls abruptly short of its predetermined ending and I turn to see Mila emerging from the back of the shop. 'Kate, Kate, Kate,' she says, rushing over to crush me to her black-clad bosom before releasing me to squash my face between her hands.

'My English, she is good now?' Mila says proudly, releasing my face to look pointedly over at her son. 'I am taking English lessons,' she says, before leaning in to whisper loudly, 'He think it big waste of money 'cause I old woman who die soon, but bahhh.' Mila waves her hand in the air. 'I speak better than him. What you think, Kate?'

Before I can answer in the affirmative Mila is asking if I've been home. She means Sarajevo, the universal home in Mila's universe, and I reply in the negative, as I have done for years.

'No mind. No mind. Come, come,' Mila says, taking my hand and leading me to the small, overheated flat out the back of the shop to ply me with strong, sweet tea and an array of cream biscuits pilfered from Ratko's shelves. Mila wants to talk

about the war in Sarajevo and the time before the war that I don't know about: the time when she was young and pretty and wore flowers in her hair; when Ratko was a baby and she and her husband danced together in the town square. Sometimes, when she's filling me with her tea and biscuits and sweet, sweet memories, I believe she has forgotten my part in her drama, so that instead of being the architect of Mila's misfortune I have become the bridge between what Mila wants and what she can no longer have. And so I sit with her, as I always do, and I listen to her stories and I smile, trying to balance out the scales of my misdeeds against this old woman's loneliness.

Later, back in my flat, I take my cup of tea and sit down at my desk in front of the laptop. As I wait for it to boot up I consider phoning my parents to let them know that I am back in England, but they would only want to take the train up to London to see me and I can't quite face what it is that I would have to tell them.

Opening a new document I watch the curser pulse on the screen and then type: *Can you ever understand who you were in the moments before your life changed? Is it possible to know what was lost and what was gained in that moment? Who existed before and what remains?* I stop, my fingers balanced over the keyboard as I search for the sentence that will begin the story that was us. But how do you begin a story when you cannot be sure where the beginning is? Was it that day in Larry's office in London when I saw you for the first time? Was it in Riyadh? Perhaps it was Sarajevo? Did it begin in New York, or was that where it ended?

'Why do you always have to make things so complicated?' I can hear you saying over my shoulder. 'Just pick a point, Price, any point, and then go forward or back.'

WHAT REMAINS

'It would be that simple for you, wouldn't it?' I say, smiling into the memory of you.

A hard dirt floor in Africa as he cradles me; Bosnia, his hands rough, hurting my shoulders as he pushes me away; New York and a poster of a white ibis and an old Indian chief above a soft, warm bed. Ghosts of times and lovers long gone drift through my head until the weight of the all the years we wasted and all the things that were left unsaid settle heavy against my heart.

And so I am going to go back. I will unpack the suitcase, fold back the layers and rummage around in the past so that I might find the truth of how it all happened; so that I might feel more and care less. So I might understand what remains.