

Three



book one of
the derelict koan trilogy

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www.derelictkoan.com

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Published by derelict koan creative in 2009

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 0 9807118 0 6

Cover and book designed by derelict koan creative

Printed in China through Printciple Source Australia

Pages 1-3 have been omitted from this excerpt.

Earth. Down Under. Australia. Down Under. Melbourne.

Here.

This is my building. CTI Australia. It is black and mirrored and set amidst a row of trees. It is an insurance firm. Originally an American company, CTI extends to fifteen countries across the globe, though our branch is its newest. There are, of course, great advantages in this, the most impressive being the leeway afforded us as we find our feet. Our mother branch is an extremely wealthy and thus powerful company that has swallowed numerous small fish on its way to market dominance.

Being the first Australian branch allowed the staff to enjoy the setting up process in marked style. Our building is, as far as buildings go, a sexy machine. Even the most vague of people, like myself, would feel a certain pride of character about being a part of the décor.

And there I am. Me. Ruth Chambers. Twenty-six. Black hair, ponytail, Sagittarius, romantic, realist, artist, spirited, determined, dogged, Australian, battler, cobbler, digger, for we are young and free. Yes, I know, I'm sorry, but the details are so important, and singing is a proven method to bind all the facts. Like mortar for bricks.

I was a proud young woman. Broken...but proud. You see, in the years that preceded this industrious model I was what you might call a bit of a stray dog. For years I had done everything I could think of to avoid the workforce with its cooing comfort call. My self resembled a shantytown of beggars and scraps quite different to the buildings you see there now.

Still, that shantytown is important too, so we have to put that in. I've left things like that out before and it just doesn't work. You need all of it.

The treasures and the waste. Even Lance, in his way.

There is movement, too. Consumption, growth, sprawling like suburb into the green, green grass of imagination. So little why amongst the great heaps of what. I am girl-under-construction,

with a scaffold about my face. Treadmill cranes of noun and verb
machinating away around the intravenous media plumbing.

A microcosm–macrocosm.

Little ol' me and the Greater Good.

My desk is black and spacious, framed with pale blue partitions
against walls of bluish-grey. Every now and then there is one
of those lame pictures that everybody hates with some animal
stamped with a word. Courage—a lion. Teamwork—a flock of
birds. Presumably commissioned by one of those conveyor-belt
interior designers that specialise in industry rather than flair.

You'll have to forgive me—I'm an artist.

Style aside though, the level of care afforded the treasured
employees of CTI was irrefutable. The air was kept at a pleasant
twenty-two degrees, those bluish-grey tones were gentle on
the eyes and then there was the carpet. It's not hard to imagine
that carpet, how every morning I began my day by slipping off
my heels and pushing my feet in amongst the fat fibres of shag
goodness.

Yes, shag. Not for us the common office berber.

Divine.

Most of the details on the fourth floor are black. Black coffee
mugs, black monitors, black keyboards and paper trays. Even
before the White People came and put me in their room, I always
had preferred the opposite tone. My hair is black, as black as not-
even-there. And though I used to tie it back in the morning, by
the time I was squeezing sweet shag between my toes it would be
out again. No one was around, I was on the earliest start.

Mine was a special partition, for a start it was smaller than the
CTI standard. Whereas the standard partition was a four-human
area, my pod (as I liked to call it) only had room for two. You can
imagine my surprise then, when I turned around that morning
to discover I was not alone. I'll admit now that it wasn't creepy at
all back then, it was just an issue of territory.

But then isn't everything?

* * *

I am on a call, helping some lost soul navigate the realm of contract. Buying insurance can be an unsettling experience, full of loopholes and bull-men and string. It was my duty to put the sword in hand, the mind at ease, sink the chest, relax the shoulders. I endowed posture in the invisible terrain of legal liability.

Yes sir...of course madam...it's actually quite easy...follow me...

He slinks on the edge of my vision like a wraith, while I sit stoic within my duty. Words and processes exchange inside as he rattles around in my pod, plugs into my power points. I turn my chair slightly. A hand on each leg as I chat into my headset. My ears fight to take notes against my eyes' inspections. It is a boy. No, a man. Tallish and thin, he sits and presents his back. A thin, unwashed ponytail lies limp against his smell.

Meat? I smell meat.

He is dressed in black, matching the décor with aplomb. His shirt, his pants and his shoes blend easily with the blue-grey partition maze. I swivel gently back to front and centre to finish my call, my hands rising up to flicker and type the details into my electrical box.

'Sorry sir?'

'Yes, of course sir.'

'Three bags full sir.'

My pod.

I finish the call and rotate to face my intruder, looking again at the limp black ponytail.

'Hi. I'm Ruth.'

Ta da!

'Hello?'

Hmmm...the silent treatment eh?

'Um...excuse me?'

His hair needs a wash. My thoughts are busy and full of questions, suggestions.

How come he gets a laptop? Why doesn't he have a headset? How come everyone else has one if he doesn't? Maybe he's from upstairs? He's really ignorant.

I Fred-Flintstone my chair a little closer, which puts me near the centre of the now-shared space.

My space.

Should I touch him? He could be some sort of specialist, that's why he gets a laptop and we don't. IT perhaps, typical, they get all the new stuff. Well that would account for his typing. Wow...look at it. I wonder if I could...

I begin to lean around for a better look.

My earpiece beeps and then—'Ruth Chambers.'

Shit!

Ah yes. Let's not get too carried away with the virtues of the CTI workplace. My eyes stray to the roof to stare at one of the many small, black, half-sphere objects hanging like a shrug from the roof.

'Maddy?' I ask into the microphone thrusting from the side of my headset. It was possible that she might not even be listening anymore, that was just the way it was.

She was.

'Are you on a call, dear? No of course not, or you wouldn't be talking to me, would you? Oh silly me, never mind.'

'Yes I was just...um...yes, I'm available now Maddy.'

You know those types that tell you by not telling you? That was my supervisor, Madeline Stott. Apart from the pre-excusing nature of such not-telling, Maddy was further endowed with the abilities of omnipotence and telepathy, by means of her workplace gadgets. It was like having a glass guillotine poised at the door of the mind, ready to make sausage of any stray thought.

And although moments like this did tend to challenge ideas of autonomy at the most intimate of all levels...slice!

Work is work.

I pull my chair in tightly and roll back my neck, my hand reaching up to the call control module. My thoughts are of mashing potato.

‘Ruth, dear? Thirteen calls waiting.’

I flinch a second time. ‘Yes Maddy, I was just...adjusting my posture.’ I glance at the array of flashing lights before gating one into my brain. Beep. ‘CTI, replacing your faith, how may I help you?’

Salami.

I can talk to him later. He might not even be staying here, he has all that different equipment after all. That’s of course if he hasn’t decided to ignore me for—oh my God, what if he’s deaf?

I turn to look at him as if looking might reveal such a thing and startle.

He’s gone.

I stir in a light manner and sniff at the air. Electricity, conditioned air, unwashed hair, that meaty smell and...

Couldn’t be.

I watch myself work for awhile. Hours, maybe? It is hard to tell, time is malleable here. Less an arrow and more a sphere, you can’t really tell where it ends. I notice I scratch my hair a lot and disapprove of the action.

‘That looks feral, Ruth.’

Ruth looks around again and my heart soars and like lightning I snatch it back down. The heart is like this, one must be vigilant. The event seeks my wonder at the marriage of purpose and doubt but I shake the developing koan.

Focus.

‘Ruth darling?’

‘Yes, Madeline?’

‘Would you come and see me please?’

‘Now?’

‘Yes now.’

‘Sure.’

I place my headset on the desk and briefly scan my pod. The man had not returned. *Must’ve been IT.* I put him out of my thoughts and rise. The partition walls are probably high enough for others to peer over, but I am a short girl. My mother was short and my grandmother tiny. Of my father, I couldn’t say. I never met him. But I have a feeling he could’ve seen over the temporary walls. It’s a man thing. In Australia they say that if a man can’t see over the walls he ends up with ‘small-man syndrome’ and I can’t imagine that my father had such a thing.

I walk briskly through the partition maze until I reach the far northern wall. There stands a row of offices, side by side with shuttered windows, again in that mix of blue and grey. The door that says Madeline Stott is closed, so I knock on the glass. The Venetian blind on the door is open and I can see her inside the room. She has a piece of paper on her desk and she is reading.

She looks up at me and crooks a finger. Dutifully I enter.

‘You wanted to see me?’ I say. Maddy motions for me to sit. I notice that the chair isn’t as comfortable as the one in my pod.

‘Miss Chambers.’

She seems to go back to the piece of paper that had occupied her before, which leaves me alone in the room. I stare around the walls, at the roof, at the little black half-sphere, at Maddy. At her lame animal picture. It is an eagle, it says ‘GRACE’. I chuckle. Maddy looks up from her desk.

‘Ruth?’

‘Oh I...nothing. I was just looking at the eagle,’ I say. Madeline looks at me for a moment before turning toward the monitor on her desk. Her right hand creeps across the desk and finds her mouse controller. She is an attractive woman, in the traditional

western sense. Slim, tall, blonde, blue-eyed, industrious and, relative to little old Ruth Chambers, powerful. I feel my heart surge with intimidated adrenaline, galvanised by the years of popular women's media. I admired her. I despised her. She was an inspiration, yet she was a traitor to all women. And blonde, just so blonde.

'I want you to listen to something for me, Ruth.' It was strange to see the mouth that ran so many words over me every day actually speak. She had started to become just a voice to me, a blip in my brain. I wonder if I might somehow be able to perceive the difference in the speed of her words, which now had to travel their way through space.

'Ruth?' Her sharp tone snaps me out of my reverie.

'Oh...sorry Maddy, I was just thinking that it was strange to actually, um...see you. I mean...I normally just hear...'

Madeline stares at me for a moment with an intrigued yet non-committal look. She tilts her head back slightly and gives it the smallest of shakes. 'I want you to listen to this for me.'

She clicks her mouse a couple of times then leans back in her chair, folding her hands on her lap and commencing a small rocking motion. Her gaze settles on me.

'CTI replacing your faith, this is Ruth, how may I help you?'

'Yes, hello, my name is Mrs Joel Eddingsworth and I have a problem with you.'

I close my eyes and sigh. Mrs Joel Eddingsworth. I'm in trouble.

'You have a problem with *me*, Mrs Eddingsworth? How can that be, I've never...'

'Mrs *Joel* Eddingsworth.'

'Okay then, Mrs *Joel* Eddingsworth, what seems to be the problem?'

'There is no seeming about it missy, I have a problem with you.'

'You mean CTI?'

‘No, I mean you. What did you say your name was Missy?’

‘Well it’s not Missy, I can assure you of that.’

I open my eyes to find Maddy still staring at me. Her expression is flat, piercing and blonde. This had all taken place the week before. Mrs Joel Eddingsworth had called to claim on a farm policy which I had the fortune to process. Apparently however, it had already been processed before, by at least two other people, who had both left it, for whatever reason, undone.

By the time I got my hands on the file, Mrs Joel Eddingsworth was already an angry woman.

‘Mrs Joel Eddingsworth? Was that the name on the policy?’

‘It is the name on the policy.’

‘Okay, cool your jets, I’m just—’

‘I will *not* cool my jets! This isn’t the first time I’ve been through this, young lady. I’ve been through and through with this infernal company and might I say it’s been like an excursion into Lucifer’s kitchen!’

‘Well what—’

‘Every single time it’s yes madam this and yes madam that and yet never has one single cent arrived in my bank account for the years of money I have invested into your damned company. And then if it’s not for the fact that none of you seem to be able to finalise a simple payment without passing to this branch and hold a moment while I talk to this person, it’s like I’m living in China!’

‘I see.’

‘So you see why the problem I have is you! Because you’re all you, it’s this person and that person but I know how you insurance companies work. I’ve seen you do your thing on *A Current Affair*, I know what you do. You’re all one filthy beast.’

‘Look. Mrs *Joel* Eddingsworth. I have your file right here in front of me, it says here that you were authorised payment three weeks ago. Are you saying you haven’t received anything?’

‘Not a cent.’

‘Alright, well I can get this to you today. I just need one more thing from you.’

‘Oh for the lord’s sake...’

‘No really, just one more thing. If you’ll just hold the line for one moment.’

‘Fine.’

I look up at Madeline, wondering what else she knows of Mrs Joel Eddingsworth. ‘Would you like to fill me in on the rest of that episode, Miss Chambers?’

I shuffle in the uncomfortable chair. ‘Am I in trouble?’

‘That depends,’ Maddy says. ‘We have records of that particular number on our switchboard for over three hours that day, Ruth. Now I must say, that is some kind of record in this company and I am more than a little intrigued as to how you managed to do it.’

My eyes close for a moment. ‘Okay, I bounced her around for awhile. So what? She was a pig, Maddy.’

‘I’m sorry Ruth, I didn’t realise your job description required you to make judgments of that ilk.’

‘She got her money, didn’t she? I thought we were supposed to press customers a little. What would you have done?’

Madeline tilts her head slightly and picks up the piece of paper from the desk. She flicks it twice before sliding it across the desk.

To the Managing Director, CTI Insurance

I wish to draw to your attention a matter regarding an employee of yours by the name of Ruth Chambers. On finalising an account with your company through the agency of this employee I was put on hold in excess of ten times, which further entailed a trip to every department I have ever heard of in a corporation including two to the mail room and one to the basement.

Each of these ten minute holding periods was intervened by Miss Chambers who would either make one small correction to my policy or inform me of a detail she would just have to have cleared. Now I am no fool. I realised after an hour what she was up to, though I had it in mind at this point to see just how far this impudent girl was willing to go.

Needless to say, the first hour was sheer torment, and considering all I have lost through this whole episode of my shed burning down with many irreplaceable valuables inside, followed by the incompetence of two of your staff where Miss Chambers finally succeeded. Though I loathe to think that that would sound like a form of compliment, I will clear this matter finally by calling for this girl's head. I have already contacted *A Current Affair* regarding an expose citing the insensitive treatment I have experienced on account of your company. Though the sacking of this girl would certainly ease the pain somewhat and put me in mind to not follow through with said media channels.

Sincerely, Mrs Joel Eddingsworth

I shake my head.

Maddy raises both her eyebrows this time. 'Quite a missive,' she says.

'Maddy, surely you wouldn't take this woman seriously.'

'On the contrary Ruth, I take this woman very seriously. This woman is our livelihood and I'll tell you one thing: we *are* a beast, all of us, we are a single entity that must work together in cohesion at all times.' Madeline holds her hands like a cage as if to demonstrate the level of integration she intends for her team. Then she gazes down into the palmed space as if to cast a magic

spell. I roll my eyes. 'We're a team Ruth, you *are* me and I *am* you. When you act like this, I feel your rage and suffer its consequences as much as Mrs Eddingsworth.'

'Mrs *Joel* Eddingsworth.' My superior doesn't smile. 'Okay. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

Maddy drops her hands and makes a pained expression. 'I only wish it was that simple, Ruth. I truly do. But there are more important things than individual egos at stake here. There is the company, the organism, of which you are only one small cell.' She holds her index finger aloft. 'An important cell. But a cell nonetheless. Have you heard of the buffalo theory, Ruth?'

I bite down on my lower lip and nod. 'I think someone sent me an email once.'

'Right. Well, in the buffalo herd, the weaker and slower buffalos die off, leaving only the quick and intelligent. Now there is no doubt that you have intelligence Ruth, you have it in spades. Your ability to think on your feet is what got you to where you are today, a part of the finest insurance organisation in the world.'

Is she joking?

'Now like I said, you're a fast buffalo, but don't be a stupid buffalo, Ruth. A stupid buffalo will lose the herd altogether.' She nods and refolds her hands, her head lolling on a stupid angle that I hate. Something tells me she isn't serious, at any moment she might burst out laughing and expose the absurd melodrama. 'Don't be a stupid buffalo.'

'Don't be a stupid buffalo. Got it.' I wonder if an eagle ever caught a buffalo. 'Can I go now?'

'Well there is one more thing,' Maddy says and reaches into a drawer at her hip. She pulls out a pink sheet of paper and withdraws a pen from her breast pocket. Clicking it once, she begins to write.

'What's that?' I ask.

'I don't want to have to do this. I really don't.'

'Is that an official warning?'

'I'm sorry Ruth, but like I said, there are more important things in this company than the egos of individuals, even for me. If I don't give you this warning then it is possible that the whole system could collapse.' She looks up from the pink sheet with another pained expression. 'Then there wouldn't be a herd at all.'

Madeline Stott signs the form with an exaggerated flourish before holding it out to me, her eyes averted in some ridiculous display of shame. I stand and snatch the form from her. 'Thanks, have a productive afternoon and remember, you only get three of those,' she says in a sing-song tenor.

'Monkey can count,' I mumble as I march from the room, closing the door with contrived softness. The noise of it summons looks from a few of my fellow employees, who hurriedly avert their eyes. I sigh like Eve and march toward my pod, whispers like clouds at my ankles. I kick at them once or twice on my way, yet they only reform in my wake. You can never really break a cloud. By the time I make it back to the cubicle, I am glistening with fury.

'What are you doing here?' I demand far too loudly.

The skinny man flinches and half turns, raising his hands at his sides to show me his open palms. 'I'm...um...fixing...'

I ignore the rest and drop into my chair. 'Well nobody told me. This is my pod, I work alone, it's the way I like it.'

I can feel him stare. He is afraid. 'I'm...sorry I...'. He reaches up to the sides of his head and makes a pinching gesture. Two small silver buds appear in the tips of both hands, they emit a slight shimmer in the pale white light of the ceiling. 'I really have to do something,' he says. 'I'm nearly finished.' His voice is nasal and submissive. I do not acknowledge him. He shrugs and goes back to work.

I shake my head, shame and anger brewing within. The sound of his typing begins to rise in the air, a minute thundering. I turn sharply to complain but stop. He is staring at me. His mouth is open.

We stare.

'I'm sorry,' I say. I let out a deep sigh and sag my shoulders. My head shakes softly. 'So unfair. I just...I just really hate this fucking place.'

He smiles immediately, a boyish grin. 'Fair enough. I don't mean to intrude, it's just that, well, I've started here now so I have to finish here. I won't be too long. After that you'll probably never even see me again.'

'Okay. Sorry. Do whatever you like. I'm Ruth.' I extend my hand and he looks at it for a moment, wondering. I notice a smile under my skin. He takes the hand with a certain...reverence? I frown a question.

He shudders and withdraws the hand. 'Lance,' he says finally. 'I'm Lance.'

'Are you new here?' I ask.

'No. Well yes, I mean, I don't work here,' he says.

'Oh. What are you doing then?'

'Working,' he says and grins again. 'I don't work for your company. I'm from another company, we do other things.'

'Like what?'

He shrugs and looks at my desk. 'Just network stuff.'

'The computers?' I ask.

'Mostly yes,' he says. His eyes stray into my lap. 'What's that?'

I look at the pink slip I am still clutching. It is crumpled now, I blow my cheeks and hold it out to him. He takes it and begins to read.

'I am a bad employee,' I say.

He nods. 'So you are. Do you get a little stamp card or something?'

I start to think back to the office. 'It's like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in this place,' I say. 'Can't bloody scratch your armpit without them knowing about it, speaking of which,' I turn and look up at the ceiling, indicating the small half-sphere to Lance.

He hands me back my slip and glances at the ceiling. 'I wouldn't worry about that for now.'

'Why not?'

Lance tightens his lips for a moment. 'I turned it off. I'm fixing the network.'

I look at the headset on my desk. 'What about that?' I ask.

He looks at the headset for a moment. 'No,' he says. 'Should be fine. So what did you do?'

I turn my hands up and lean back on my chair, kicking my shoes off in turn. Lance looks down at my feet and smiles.

'I'm addicted to the carpet.'

'I see. Yeah, this place is pretty lush.'

'This room is the most comfortable place I've been in my life. Sometimes I think about how comfortable this place is when I'm at home.'

'Ah yes. The fat of the land,' he says and smiles knowingly.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'Well, you know, got to pander to the organism.'

'The organism? God, you sound like my boss.'

Lance makes a funny face and shakes his head. 'I doubt that. What's your boss's name?'

'Maddy.'

'What's her full name?'

'Madeline Stott. Why?' I ask.

Lance turns his back to me, returning the buds to his ears.

'Fair enough,' I say, but he makes no response. I can see his fingers clawing at the air as if he is playing an invisible instrument, before reaching up to withdraw the buds again. He swings back to face me, simultaneously hammering the keyboard of his laptop. His eyes flicker to the screen and back to me.

'That is just amazing,' I say.

'What?' he says, still working.

'Your typing.'

'Oh. It's only practice,' he says simply and I marvel.

‘God, Ling used to say that to me every day of my life.’

‘Ling? Who’s that? The CEO?’

‘What? No. Ling was my grandmother. Well, is...she’s dead.’

‘Good for her,’ Lance says and stops typing. He raises his hand with the silver buds and toggles them between two fingers. I notice they catch the light, they look expensive. Lance catches me looking and draws them into his fist. ‘You’re not supposed to see these, you know.’

‘Earphones? Why? What are they?’ I ask and shuffle closer, shag gripped between my toes.

‘It’s how I talk to my software,’ he says.

‘It looked like you were casting a spell,’ I say and he turns to me. There is an amused grin on his face. I feel myself wishing he’d cut off that long hair.

‘A spell? Like magic you think?’

I feel stupid for a moment, embarrassed. ‘Why can’t I see the...’ I make a small parody of his gesturing and he laughs at me. It is a gentle laugh, fused with a certain relief.

‘It’s secret,’ he says with mock drama. He holds his eyes in a wild gaze and I turn away. ‘Ruth. Ruth Chambers?’

I turn back. ‘Yes? How did you know?’

He shrugs. ‘I have to go now. But I’ll be back to see you again.’ He holds out his hand. I offer him suspicion and humour. ‘Give me your hand.’ *Charming bastard*. He takes the hand and turns it over, holding it still for a moment. ‘Do you have a computer at home?’

I nod. ‘Why?’

He shakes his head. Turns, closes his laptop and snatches his silver earphones from the desk. He looks at my bewildered face and smiles again. Next, he holds his finger to his lips for a moment before pointing at the camera housing. As he leaves I turn to glance at the black sphere. He crouches under the partitions and saunters away in a baffling gesture. I screw my face up and notice my heart at once, pirouetting discreetly inside.

I give myself a shake, noticing a friction in my hand. I look down and see a small disc, like the ones you get with cameras these days. I turn it over and it flashes its rainbow at me. *Do I have a computer at home?*

I slide the disc into my bag and snatch my headset, pulling its padding over my ear as I glance again at the sphere.

‘CTI, this is Ruth speaking...’

I see it now. The Lance thing, I mean. He just seemed to know things. That’s the real trick though isn’t it? If I think he knows then it must be that I don’t and that means I am a fool.

Such a stigma to be stupid.

Lance P King. According to the man himself, the world is a war against the stupid, or a war against stigma for that matter. According to Lance, everything on earth is a hot and cold war. He says things like this to me all the time, since he took me away from that place and I think that sometimes he is right.

Now. But not then. Not there.

There the walls were all white and the chance of war was me. There. Where the White People brought me my meals and told me of the things that I was: Schizophrenic, Bi-Polar, Breakdown, full of my dreams and my stories.

Idiots.

I open my bag and fiddle for my keys, seeing the disc within. My heart asks a question I choose to ignore. I turn the retrieved keys in my hand. My locks are new and tumble like promises under the edge of the key. The door snaps once and I enter.

My home is a box, five stories high. Apartment living is all the rage in Australia now, and though my building is only small it is still an apartment so I suppose I am lucky and cool. Phew. Lucky and cool in the lucky country, with bars on the windows and gate.

Nice and secure.

The apartment itself is small but sweet and I am happy to be home this night. I go straight to my computer and press its power. It makes a whirring sound. I put the disc on the monitor and move to the kitchen area, which is in the same room, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl. The television remote lies still beside said bowl. I stare at it and listen.

Noise from the road downstairs seeps secretly into my walls. I don't mind the rumble of traffic, it dulls the small ache of alone. The computer is still booting up. It is an old computer. My mother got it for free from a friend.

I pick up and point my remote control and the television goes bong. After a second or two a newsreader appears, swaying minutely and talking to me. She tells me of Terror, Insurgents and The Bombs in the Middle East and I wonder who else does the killing. But we both know she won't tell me and I won't complain, for I am too tired to care.

I lean forward and chomp my apple.

There are people crying on the television and shots of bloodied streets, a comprehensive wrap of the aftermath. So many of the stories show the aftermath these days, just some blood and some teddy bears in the rubble. It reminds me of what Ling used to say to me. That our lives are already the after.

Crazy woman.

I change the channel. Someone is trying to win something. The camera pans across the audience. Their screams are different from the Mothers and Fathers in the Middle East, full of humour and nervousness and fun. The man in the suit smiles and whips them like so much cream. I flick channels and see some animals, a herd of African deer. I flick again to return to my newsreader and her immaculately trained pronouncements. I mute her and look at her half-exposed breasts.

Chomp.

My computer makes a sound.

My shoes swipe dull squeaks on the floor as I move toward the desk. I look at my crappy carpet and sigh, wiping my apple-smearred hand on my pants. With one hand I grab Lance's disc and put the apple down with the other. I sit, open the tray and drop the disc down. It clatters to rest, the device shuts and hums.

Click.

'*Ruth.*'

I squint and turn my head very slightly.

'*Don't open it.*'

I shake my head suddenly and click on the icon related to the disc.

I thought icon meant God?

The file opens and I browse. 'What have you got here Mr Lance?' I say aloud to quiet my mind. *So tired.* Something stirs in me as I read from the screen. The contents seem to be of a mailbox interface. I stare confused but suspicious at the array of titles on offer. I click the one at the top: 'Imperial'.

Madeline,

Just a reminder that the Imperial account is due for deliberation in three days, best you be prepared.
Please check the attachment for details.

Thanks Al

Holy Hell. I sit up straight in my chair and frown. My hand floats across to the mouse to scroll down the list. 189 entries.

'Fancy dress?'

'Mads'

'MacGovern and Knotts'

'Air con maintenance'

'Send this to...'

'LOVE is only...'
'Chambers'

I stare at my name. It sits patiently on one side of the screen like a child outside in a sandbox, unaware of the Queen watching silently. Funny to see your name in such a circumstance, like it's not really yours. I move the cursor so it hovers above 'Chambers' like a target for a trans-continent bomb. My index finger hovers and I feel my pulse in the tip.

I check my posture: finger—hand—wrist—elbow—rib.

Such a flimsy thing that we have in the end, this cage of thirteen bones. *Ridiculous*. Is this all we have managed to evolve for ourselves in defence of the world outside? This well-meant bar assembly?

Open it.

'No.'

I push back the chair and stand, take two steps away and look towards the television. The newsreader continues to mime her concern about The Things it's Important I Know. I look again at the computer. 'No,' I say aloud and retrieve the disc, pausing only to shut the box down. I return the disc to its cover and then to my bag and check on my rattling heart.

I am afraid.

I snatch the remote from the bench as I pass and crash into my mini-couch. I find the animal program again and return sound to the scene.

It is a lioness. She stalks slowly through head-high grass, her spine an arrow, gliding toward her prey. The deer turns to look in her direction. With pre-supposed timing she stops, harmless as the grass, the foliage, a mound of drying clay. So beautiful—so dreadful. The deer turns away and the lioness accelerates imperceptibly. The lioness has only three speeds: stop, stalk and go.

Pandora has deserted the deer.

The cat bites throat and the deer knots itself around the pain in a tangle of shock and hoof. The television casts red around my room as the lioness tears open her prey. A narrative voice springs to life and begins to explain the scene. Carving the deer into venison steaks and the lion into killing machine.

Facts.

Proof.

Open the email.

'No,' I say aloud again as my thoughts somersault, spring up and present like a gymnast.

Open it.

I turn the volume up and the narrative shouts about energy, nutrition and survival for the cat in the wild. My neighbour bangs on the wall. I sigh and turn the volume down again to number Twenty-Three. That was our agreement. She had called one day to broker an accord on the maximum volume for televisions. We walked back and forth from my room to hers to test the levels of sound.

Twenty-Three.

I mute the set. Why shouldn't I read the emails? Didn't Madeline listen to my calls? Recording my voice and my face and my thighs as I sat like a dork at my desk. Would not I become the lioness if I took this opportunity to bone up on some Madeline Stott?

Definitely.

My heart thumps from inside its cage.

Ah, the heart.

There have been numerous times in my life when I had wished the heart wasn't the necessity it was. Such times as wetting my pants at school, the perpetual fight with my mother, and watching the White People carry off my grandmother all stand as testament to my own cardiac awareness.

The Queen can explain anything, the heart explains nothing.

I am not going to read the emails.

I am a good person.

Though I suppose that's only a half of a thing.

Lance is right, I suppose. Life in his case is always two sides. You should hear the way he rambles on. Life is division. The only law is opposition and we are the three are the three. Choice. Taking that for granted, life is little more than a chain of choice. Yes or no. Fight or flee. Contemplate these choices and you have yourself a war of knowledge. Of course, failure to perceive in Lance's way is a war of reality itself.

Either you've not yet reached awareness, or you've lost it.

I know this game, I've lived in his world before.

I'd had self-awareness.

I called her my Queen.

'I.

But 'I' was a powerless thing, long ago usurped by her very own court and kept alive to absorb all the blame. How did they get there?

I don't really know, such things are beyond my memory.

The Queen let them in I assume—they offered to help and she trusted them. I could never blame her for this, the Queen is lonelier than all of us and it is hard to reject real help. I assume they promised her something, that is the only reasonable explanation. So she gave them the keys and they clamoured into me and the rest is history. This has happened before, you know.

GAIA AND THE LINE OF KINGS

Gaia wasn't always a Queen, such ideas are the gifts of Kings. Kings come second and call everything something and then use such to make themselves first. This is what it means to be King, you make words for the space between you and the thing and then write them on a clipboard in columns. This is how all things begin.

They say that in the beginning was the word and that the word was God. Next this God creates Heaven and Earth but if you want it can be a big bang. I don't like big bang though, it just sounds like the loudest 'I don't know' they could think of. Anyway, no one bangs in my dream. In my dream there are Three.

Chaos, Gaia and Eros.

Now Chaos comes before Gaia and yet Gaia is always first, which is usually what happens when no one understands you. Gaia turns and looks for something that makes sense and falls for the very idea. Eros. Now Eros comes after and calls from forever, and yet Eros can never arrive. It is for Eros to curve on her horizon like comets, turning her around and around, madness. And all she has to do to make it all end is to seize him and condemn him to real.

But...she can't...

She won't...

For who is Gaia to put herself first?

So instead the great mother coils into her gut, and from regret spews a jewel-encrusted void, black and forever fanning out to her corners until it meets behind her back and turns down.

Ouranos.

Ouranos will be first! Ouranos will be King! And so by virtue of desire, Ouranos becomes the first King, which makes Gaia the first subject, for who would object to a King having subjects? It is Kingly for a King to have subjects. And each night that follows the King subjects his Queen to night after night of his reign.

The reign bears fruit.

Oh dear.

Gaia gives birth to the first three children of the world, the Cyclops. Thunder, Lightning and Flash are all born calm with a single eye each, a mark of their perfect intuition. Knowing that their father will react to their births with anger, jealousy and suspicion, yet so wise that their perfect intuition was matched with perfect trust.

Their three eyes watched and waited as the complex arrangement twinkled through the galaxies of their King. Until finally it mirrored at the core of their mother, as great crystal caverns that set off quakes of rippling shame. The King of course, gloried in the display, determining it all proof of his will. Inspired, he rammed the offspring straight back in, into the core of his Queen. And as Gaia hurled in pain and despair, her King knew that his reign was good. The world had balance. The world had harmony. Here was a problem, there was the solution.

So continued the reign of the King.

In time more children came, though in keeping with the now realised traits of the parents, they came almost mockingly.

Kottos, Briareos and Gyes were hideous beasts. Gargantuan in size, with fifty heads and a hundred arms each, bristling with

the unholy strength of a conflicted mob. Sadly, the beasts also suffered the overwhelming confusion such a mob would suggest, for so many ideas boggled around their fifty heads at any one time that they lacked any wisdom to act. When their father came across them, he made an icky face and they too were sent whence they came.

The Queen, meanwhile, writhing in pain and remorse, thought back to her original choice. Was this the price of her resistance? She had refused to choose and allowed Eros to remain free, and in return had been chosen herself. Consigned to a series of limp gestures that returned to roost every night merely to ingrain its condition. Every fired constellation to become my diamonds forever, in whose faces I'm supposed to see Eros?

No. She would see an end.

Determined to see off the King, the Queen gave birth to more offspring, each baring a kernel of her new will. The Titans were of a new breed. Passionate and beautiful, these mighty wild beings would become the blueprint for all children to come. And as each of them was stuffed back into her gut, one by one, Gaia felt Time growing near. Kronos, the youngest and most accomplished of the Titans, was born to bind his father in stasis forever.

Gaia fashioned a golden sickle and sent Kronos to the gate of dusk, where predictable Ouranos would appear. And as the sky began to darken on his mother's horizon, Kronos leapt like a demon. He twisted the sickle and castrated his father and tossed his junk into the sea. The passionate gesture gave birth to Aphrodite, who embodied his mother's lament to Eros. On Gaia's edge, Ouranos hung neutered and silent, his dripping blood the only remnant of his reign.

So began the Golden Age.

The Golden Age was a glorious time. Where need was a myth and feasting was forever, as Gaia provided for all. And though

there were signs that things just weren't right, everyone was a bit too satisfied to notice. Poor old Kronos had inherited a curse.

For starters, Kronos refused to free the Cyclops or the Hundred Hand Monsters—only Titans were allowed to be free. Yet rather than dwell on who was free and who wasn't, Kronos made his sister Rhea the new Queen and got her pregnant instead. And if there were any lingering doubts that Kronos had gone a bit twitchy, they were dashed when out popped his first child—which he promptly swallowed.

Kronos was quick to point out that he had not only nobly spared his mother a repeat of her prior burden, he had done what needed to be done. And though some Titans loathed the deed, the compelling mixture of power and profusion was enough to deter any revolution. While the Titans enjoyed the bounty of the Golden Age, Kronos continued to swallow his children with their implicit consent.

Or so he thought.

There was one Titan who quietly seethed at Kronos's injustices. With a fury reserved only for a mother, she had watched each child devoured. With a sixth in her belly, Rhea turned to Gaia, and together they planned the end of the Golden Age.

His name was Zeus.

The Third and final King.

REVOLUTIONS

I don't remember much of my Golden Age. It is as vivid to me now as my dreams of the Holiday People. I remember freedom and the absence of its knowledge. It is blurry and without reference. That's the way it is with freedom though, always before or to come.

Random, miraculous mirage.

I remember that my ideas never counted for much and it was best I not bring them up. Little girls have no awareness of themselves or The Ways in which Mothers Provide. These things come about once our stomachs get full and we burp them all up like Kronos. Then you sift through the crap and assert all your selves and the next thing you know you're at war.

Poor old Kronos.

When I was a child learning at school I was asked which religion was mine. I didn't know, so I asked my mother and she said to ask Ling, but Ling only shook her head and insisted such things were for communists.

I should point out that this was her answer for almost everything.

I told my teacher this and she seemed somewhat ashamed of me. She told me that a girl needed religion to know she was good

and that I should find one and save my poor soul. So I went to the library, to section Nil where all the religions lived.

There were many stories, but none from Vietnam like my family. It seemed that my mother was right. So I chose a religion that no one else in my class had, to match my role in the world. Different. You see, when you are the only child with slanted eyes in class after class, you start to build a certain momentum. So when I went to the Nil section that day I chose stories that no one believed.

They were from Greece.

They were all about war.

I know a lot about wars, I grew up in one. The war of Ling Po Koi and Betty Chambers was the landscape of my entire childhood. A thick jungle skirmish of history and promise of which I was the eternal messenger.

The V in the midst of their lives.

Theirs was an endless struggle, born of bitterness, pain and regret. Ling and my mother were refugees of the Vietnam War, and in a strange way I guess, so was I. Conceived amidst the bloodshed, nurtured on the junk and finally birthed on the shores of this Great Southern Land. Does that make me Australian then?

Bloody oath, mate! As fair as dinkum gets.

Or is that the education talking?

My father was an Australian. A soldier. He fought in the war that tore us apart even all the way home to Australia. He and my mother weren't together for long, but she has told me all that she can. That he was the strongest swimmer that my mother had ever seen, that he could fly helicopters and was lean and fair and calm. Yet I can also tell you how undermined were those traits, due to my alliance with my grandmother, Ling.

For Betty, Ling was not an adversary in the ordinary sense. Unlike my mother who would take you head on, Ling fought best

from the shadows. Lighting spot fires in the back of my head that Betty would forever be finding and extinguishing. When I was a child Ling was a natural ally for me, so promising was her nature. She was literally riddled with secrets and treasure of which only I could share. They were my inheritance, those secrets, passed on to undermine me.

Betty didn't believe in secrets, she thought such things would only lead to trouble. She believed the path had already been laid and all we had to do was follow. Which is strange in a way, for it was not unlike Ling who believed in inevitable natures, that all of the choices had already been made and we only came now to see. I guess the difference lies in the fact that my mother's choices had been made by others, and they were a sure-fire way.

You only had to look at her.

She was the living proof.

From the moment Betty Chambers stepped down off that boat she considered herself Australian. Though, as she was to find after settling in the suburbs, saying and being were two different things. *She* was different.

She had to change.

Fortunately for 'Fu', for that was her name by birth, the criteria already existed. All she had to do was put her head down and practise and in time a 'Little Aussie Battler' she would be. First went her name, then her clothes and her language, replaced by ready-made choices of an intelligent thing that asked only that she tick all the boxes. By the time I was schooling she was well on her way, with certificates that hung on the wall.

Like medals from the Queen.

Ling never looked at those certificates, refused to even glance in their direction, never even stood still in the room in which they hung, except when she thought she was alone. I'd see her every now and then, thinking the house empty, run her old fingers along the new glass that preserved those strange triumphs she would never understand.

Ling learned to speak English, never to read it.

My mother's English was superb, as far as I can remember. She had language training five nights a week and a job nearby in a milk bar. At home she only allowed English to be spoken, on threat of exile for any who strayed. It was the standard equation. Betty supplied the money, so Betty made the rules, like a sun to which the all of me should rise. And my grandmother Ling spun her orbit, casting her shadows and sweeping my tides with her endless revolutions.

As my mother was one, we were the two. Arranged beneath her proud mercy like beggars swapping alms in the evening. It was a powerful alliance, my grandmother's and mine, full of magic and love and delight. Like an underground we worked with our masks and tunnels to balance the restrictions of our master's dominion.

'It is good for Fu,' Ling would say. 'She need us both to remember.'

Ling always called her Fu, with obviously heated results. According to Ling, my father had called my mother Betty before she knew whether it was even a noun. According to Ling, he and his friend had raped my mother and filled her all up with me. According to Ling, his friends and the communists were all the same thing.

According to Betty, it was her true name and it had come to her in a dream.

Betty in the sky with diamonds.

Able to leap across oceans in a single bound, to storm the halls of halls of any and all bureaucracy and secure the necessary green form. This last was a skill of particular importance to our family as any of the current crop will explain. Failure to find and tick the appropriate box these days can swiftly land you in a jail in the middle of the desert.

We were lucky.

We had me.

Stretched out like Jesus between their two stories, it was I that secured us here. The fact of me. Dragged as I was from doctor to doctor to office to army dropping drips of my blood all the way. Until finally one day went smack on the wall the proof of my rights as Australian.

‘You a communist now Ruth?’

‘No Ling-Ling, it says I am Australian. Come and look at it, I’ll read it to you.’

‘I not read communist.’

‘Ling-Ling, it’s English. You speak English.’

‘She speaks Mandarin too,’ said Betty. ‘Don’t you, Mum.’

‘Don’t call me Mum,’ said Ling, giving the word two syllables. She turned to me. ‘I speak Mandarin, I speak Vietnamese, I very good speak Mandarin, but learn Vietnamese when get there.’

‘That’s right,’ said Betty encouragingly. ‘Now we’re in Australia, we all speak English. We’re all flexible here in the Chambers family.’

‘Ha!’ shouted Ling. ‘Fu think she flexible. Ha!’

Betty turned to advance but I cut off her motion. ‘Why did you go to Hanoi, Ling-Ling?’

Without even turning to look, Ling flung her arm back to point at the certificate on the wall. ‘This why. The Red People.’

Betty shook her head with dramatised sadness. ‘Oh Mum, you and your Red People.’

‘Mum, Mum, Mum,’ Ling said with six syllables and waved her hands in the air.

‘She left because the government made her go,’ said Betty. ‘Like I will make her go. Go back home and speak Mandarin with all of her friends.’

Ling raised a pointing finger and waved it at Betty. ‘Yes that very clever Fu. Very clever Betty. Then Betty be very hungry yes? No Ling to cook for Betty. Betty very hungry. You tell her Ruth. Ling look after Betty yes?’

‘C’mon Mum,’ I said.

Ling groaned.

She was a warrior, my grandmother, but according to my mother she'd been broken. Captured and twisted and left for dead only days before they had left for Australia. She would have been over sixty years old then, whipped and dismantled for suspicion. I remember seeing the marks on her wrists and her ankles where she was bound to the bone with rusty wire. She should have been dead, Betty would say, but instead she was broken and left with naught but her rules of Four:

1. Anyone (Everyone) worked for the Communists.
2. Never, under any circumstances, open or participate in the mail exchange.
3. Never leave the house.
4. Ever!

Not until they carried her out. For Ling, the world was a very small place: the kitchen, the garden and her bedroom. So different she was in each of these settings it was like knowing three complete versions. Of these three women, only one could be considered reliable.

Kitchen Ling was as reliable as the release of breath. Every night as the sun dropped down she appeared to ply her trade. I suspect this had less to do with Ling 'doing her bit' and more to do with distrust. Ling was a strict vegetarian, you see, and viewed Betty as a risk to this fact. My mother never complained about this—if Ling wanted to cook then good, that was one less chore for Betty.

Thus dinner became a traditional ceasefire at home, breached only when my mother needed a fight. Which, although not exactly a common occurrence, could never be considered rare.

'Fu need fight,' Ling would sometimes whisper to me. 'Make Fu feel strong. Fu like boy, too much *yang*.'

I would giggle with glee at such things. But the proof was never far away. There were nights when Betty would come home from work with a steak or a leg of lamb, slam it on the bench, fold her arms and calmly declare:

‘Ruth needs meat.’

It was the simplest of causes, the room exploding instantly into battle. It was the most ridiculous sight and I still laugh easily at the thought. My tiny old grandmother, working all kinds of *kung-fu* postures, would threaten pain or death on her daughter who simply moved around the house taunting or exclaiming the virtues of meat to anyone in a fifty metre radius.

At the time it was terrifying. I can’t really remember how seriously I took my grandmother’s threats, but I certainly remember her skills with a knife. Over and over she would put knives into the wall that appeared to be aimed at my mother. Our house was covered in these tiny triangular holes.

Where I would run circles screaming in fright, my mother would stroll through the house, pieces of steel blurring past her face like glimpses of doom. The memory still irks me, surreal like a circus as though put on for show, but then I have always felt like the one in the middle. If only just once we had sat down and laughed about how funny we were, how skilful my Ling, how sober my Mum and how scary it all was for me.

But that was precisely the thing with this war—there was never any peace. Only proof in the day and secrets in the night and the guilt that shunted me around.

‘Ruth? Call the government, tell them to come get your crazy Ling-Ling.’

It was my mother’s Ace of Swords, like turning off a light. Ling’s shoulders would sag, her small hands would fidget, her eyes would disappear into the past. She had no defence against that threat, it was as if some spell had been burned on her brain. After a moment you would see her return to the kitchen and I would feel sick with shame. I never understood why at the time but I do now.

My Ling had been standing there naked.

Usually she would run then, taking the meat as she went. My mother would smile and watch her go, knowing she would never leave the house. Sometimes you would find the meat stuffed in a plant on her way, but not always. One time she even tried to flush a leg of lamb down the toilet. Most likely the carcass ended up in her room, but I couldn't tell you for sure.

I was banned from going in there.

Wherever it went though, you could be sure that I wasn't eating it, though I did get my serve of meat. My mother would sneak it to me in the car and tell me it made me strong.

'Why do you think Ling is so small? No meat.'

I didn't want to be small.

I ate the meat.

It was tasty.

I should apologise now I suppose, for I have focused on the negative. Just as important was my role as Ling's assistant, and that she was a magnificent cook. Legend has it she cooked for over twenty people a day back in Vietnam and that she was something of the village charm.

'I cook for everybody back home, kitchen a lot bigger than this.'

Assisting my grandmother to cook was a dangerous endeavour, everything always on maximum. Bubbling pots, searing woks and columns of arrogant flame coiling between rice, beans, vegetables and fruits that cart-wheeled like a circus of clowns.

'Like this see? The food absorb everything, like wood. Food is like wood. Wood for people. Good food make good wood. Good wood absorb everything. Absorb water. Make strong.'

I could throw a few moves today if I had to, but I was never in league with my Ling. She had wrists like branches and swung her wok like a shield.

‘Only practice Ruth. Everything in whole world is practice. Practice wok make Ling strong.’

There was more to it than that.

Ling had been trained from childhood in the arts of health and destruction, insisting that it was impossible to learn simply either. According to the woman herself Ling Po Koi was a dangerous warrior, yet it was always hard to take her seriously. Having seen her threaten my mother with all manner of pose, it seemed little more than comedy.

She claimed to have learned most of it in China, when she was still a child. She says she was only a girl when the ‘Red People’ came to turn the triangle upside down. The Cultural Revolution has endured various histories since its time, though the crux of the event never changed—it was a revolution. And for Ling, the end of her family as she had known it.

One by one, the Red People came to displace any doctor, healer or Master of Arts that represented a threat to the envisioned regime. Most were put to work for the good of neo-industrial China, many were simply killed and the last of them fled to the western world, where their descendants remain today.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Ling would say about this. ‘They got what they came for.’

‘But we made it didn’t we? Me and Mum.’

Ling would spit breath at such statements. ‘Fu and you? Ha! How much you listen to your Ling-Ling? You listen to Fu and her communist things.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you that Australia is not communist?’

‘Fu not communist? Ha! Ruth make Ling laugh. Ruth is very funny.’

It was hard to reason with Ling, but then she had lost so much. She said that she never completed her training, that she had to sell herself all the way to Vietnam after her family was murdered for certain beliefs. They call these beliefs ‘ancient’ in China these

days and they are all but extinct. Watered down and repackaged for the hordes of market modernity.

‘Only slaves in China now,’ Ling would say and dismiss the topic. ‘Everything is gone. They came for our beliefs and they took them all. No matter. All that matters is practice. Practice survive. You learn. You master. Fix all things for Ling.’

I don’t know about that, but I know how much I tried. Like Ling and my mother I was trained in our family’s art, *qi gong*, though nowhere near to the extent of my grandmother. I have the bones of it though, and a lifetime to cultivate the rest. Most of the days of my childhood, excluding the peaks of winter and summer, began with my daily *qi gong*. Each of the classes was presided over by the second of my grandmother’s personalities, the one I called Garden Ling.

Garden Ling was a far cry from the practical flurry that was Kitchen Ling. Calm as a stone, mostly silent and seemingly in command of the slow tide of inertia that was her heritage. Here she divulged her treasures to me, the gold in the nape of her wounds.

Secrets.

Of primary concern to the *qi gong* is *qi*, or *chi*, or energy, or whatever template you require to focus the mind to effect reality. The map is not important, for the map is not the territory. The *gong* itself is nothing but a frame for the brush of the mind. The *qi* follows the mind, the mind directs the *qi*. The *gong* helps you to lure it, train it, making it stronger every time. The *gong* is practice.

My grandmother’s *qi* had the strength of a lifetime and when she practised you could feel it pulse from her gut like a great golden wave, a molten mix of mind and will.

Expanding–contracting.

But you don’t believe that, do you?

No, I understand. It’s hard at first, with our nimble western minds. Trained as they are, so fast and hungry, devouring lessons

like the meat of success. Show me the proof! Where is the trace?
What does it actually *do*?

Qi gong is a slow lesson. Aside from life, it's the slowest of all.
Which means that it is also the biggest, even Einstein could tell
you that.

Minutes to learn and a lifetime to master.

'Why don't you ever practise your *gong*, Mum?'

'My what?'

'*Qi gong*?'

Groan. 'Chinese nonsense.'

'There's no way that you could really believe that. What about
Ling? It would mean so much to her.'

'Which Ling is that, Ruth?'

'Probably the one that misses her daughter the most. It might
even help her with...the bedroom.'

Betty thought about that for a moment. 'Has Ling taught you
about *karma*?'

'Lots of times. You know that.'

'And what do you think?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'Yes, well. There is a lot you don't know about your grand-
mother, Ruth.'

'You could tell me?'

'They are not my stories to tell.'

'Well I know that she talks to people, in her room. All the
time.'

'There is no one there, Ruth.'

'How do you know?'

Betty turned and dropped her chin toward me, looking
through the front of her head. 'I sincerely hope you are not
serious.'

'Maybe there are ghosts in there,' I said and Betty snorted.

'Is that what you think? I think you might be crazy as well.'

'People from the war,' I tried, but Betty merely shook her head.

‘Don’t talk to me about war. You don’t know anything about it.’

Only that I grew up in the middle of one. That’s Mum though, she doesn’t think anyone knows anything about anything, especially me. I was dismissed from the moment I snuck out of her womb as a thing that would be forever beneath her, with a conviction so strong it would pervade even me. All it required was the right conditions and I would finally reach for her sun. What were the conditions?

Confusion.

Doubt is a festering thing you see, a fungus that spreads in the dark. Only the light will destroy its coy dreams, the way Ling’s death finally destroyed mine. But what do you say about death? Is it best to just fall back on small proofs?

She was cold and stiff and didn’t come out that morning. They let me touch her on the stretcher. The White People, that is. That was the first time I had seen them. I hated them there and then and wondered at the rise in my heart.

‘Ling?’

She knew. That sly old fox, she knew she was leaving that day. Only thirteen hours earlier she had snuck me inside the forbidden room and finally given them to me.

‘But I don’t understand.’

‘That’s because your head is all wrong,’ Ling said. There was a loud smack in the air as Ling clapped her palms together. She began to jab her prayer shaped hands like a knife in the air, backwards and forwards and pointing at my head. ‘You see? You see? This is mind for you...like this...communist make mind this way.’

‘Grandma...’

Ling whipped her prayer shaped knife across the back of my head.

‘Ow! Ling!’

‘No! Shut up, you listen.’ Suddenly she expanded the hands, keeping the tips of the fingers together to make a kind of cage.

She lowered her voice, as if in awe of the shape. 'This...this is mind.' Slowly she let the cage come apart as she expanded the size of the shape, then drew it back small with her breath. 'Like this. Everywhere.'

Together we watched the expanding and contracting of Ling's invisible ball. This continued for a minute or so, which kindled a kind of sadness. Ling broke her cage and reached up to touch my forehead. I felt a small warmth spread from her finger. 'Mind gather here, like cloud, come and rain,' she said and began to draw the finger down my nose, my lips, my chin, my chest until finally it stopped at my gut. 'Time in here,' she said.

'I thought you said *qi* was there,' I said.

'Yes, yes, *qi* there, also time.'

'Is—?'

Ling clipped my ear again, her finger back on my belly before I even noticed. 'Very important that Ruth shut up. Ling not here tomorrow.'

'What? Where are you going? You never go anywhere.'

Ling began waving her hands around either side of her head. Her voice thin and angry now. 'This is you, see?' She shook her head. 'Too much. *They* do this to you, take you away every day and give you these things, now you want things all time. Give me, give me, more things, all time.'

She shook her head and mumbled some Vietnamese. I smiled and shrugged at her and again she drew the line down my front. This time she repeated the gesture several times. 'Pour water down see? Just a little bit.'

'What water?' I ask.

'Shh, there is no time. No time. Listen to Ling. Listen.'

THE TEMPLE

I suppose that the moment my grandmother passed away, nothing was ever the same for me. The war of Betty and Ling might have ended, but my own was about to begin. School was one thing, life was something else entirely—terrifying. I just can't believe I never saw it coming.

Here I was, finishing up, imagining I'd be free, that my Golden Age had finally arrived.

I'm sure you can imagine my shock when I realised it had been and gone.

The Fates had matured and the gold had been taken, divided and apportioned in advance. I just didn't get it. That there was more to the world than *me*. It didn't make sense. Just when I needed my Ling more than ever.

All I had left was Betty.

Gulp.

I was always considered intelligent for a human, but that just means you understand, doesn't it? The fact that I believed in precious little of what I was hearing was irrelevant.

If our ideas aren't all the same then you're stupid, right?

Leftover.

I had always thought the idea of spending a large portion of your existence doing something for someone else in order to accumulate a large amount of money, with which to trade back for the freedom we apparently had in the first place, ridiculous.

Yet without the support of Ling, such ideas began to sound less like ideas and more like ravings. Ravings of a loser. A lost and hungry loser. I never wanted to be a loser. Yet there I was: a loser. The evidence was all around me and strangely projecting against me.

Like inertia.

I had no job. I had no future. I was a bludger. I stole from honest people because I did not really want a job and they were forced to put food in my mouth, because they were the victims of their own kindly hearts. I was a thief.

How could I live with myself?

How could I sleep?

I couldn't. I had to change. I had to attack the source. I had to reseed my Fates. The critical ideals that I had mustered throughout my childhood now seemed mere childishness.

The fact that I didn't lie wasn't really all that relevant now, it was more important to impress. The belief that I endeavour to be my very own person was now subject to compromise in order to assimilate. The truth that I had always aspired to feel happy, free and infinite?

'You can't make a living out of painting silly pictures, Ruth.'

I was never free. I just hadn't noticed the wall.

'There are no such things as choices, Ruth. Only consequences.'

By Jove she's got it.

My love throughout school had always been for Art. Painting and drawing for the most. Over and over it was canvas after canvas of my mighty Greek religion. I'll admit that I wasn't the most gifted of painters, but for me it wasn't about that. It was about me, right there, on the canvas in front of me, demanding to know who I was. So to buy myself some time, I made a move for a degree and it was off to university for me. Where I was continuously told what to paint.

How to paint.

Why to paint.

I left the course. After two years I was back at home and battling the hundred hands of my mother.

'I told you you couldn't make a living from painting, but you know better than me don't you, Ruth?'

'Define living, Mother?'

'Don't you start that nonsense with me.'

'How can I make nonsense if you know what I mean?'

'Are you going to be a loser all of your life, Ruth?'

'How do I know for sure?'

'Stay inside like your grandmother? Never go outside? You think I am going to look after you? Na-ah, not me, I've had enough of looking after you lazy people.'

'Why don't you let the woman rest in peace, Mum.'

'Well it's time you smartened up. You need to think smart. What about sign writing? I tell you, this is smart thinking. You have a talent for colour.'

'Being good at something is the worst reason to let it make a slave of you.'

'You talk rot, Ruth. Always a loser.'

By this stage, Betty owned the milk bar.

Conclusions such as 'you talk rot Ruth' had long been hammered into the grooves of Betty Chambers. Her mouth was but an escape for the echo. There was a long list of these little mantras, which she would drum into me day after day:

'That's just the way it is.'

'Somebody's got to do it.'

'Life wasn't meant to be easy.'

'If I don't, who will?'

'Because. You just have to.'

Betty was never really comfortable being my friend until I joined her inside the system. As if she had created a Ruth in totality like

an outfit and laid it out on my bed. She had done her part, now it was up to me to do mine. All I had to do was put on the clothes and I would have instant loser immunity.

Look we're twins.

Giggle.

But I did it. I joined the winning team. I put on the clothes, landed my job at CTI and Betty just sprung like a spring. Walls came down, bridges were built and we connected in all kinds of new ways. She began to talk to me differently, less tell and more show, she began to ask my opinions of things, as if the sources no longer shamed her.

And though I felt my heart rattle my ribs like Poseidon, I just couldn't help going along. Besides, there were at least fifty reasons to listen and only one lousy heart and it's a world of decisions these days.

'There is only room for the quick and the dead.'

The persona I designed in order to secure CTI employment was for that purpose flawless. Positive, friendly, compliant, the perfect balance of suggestion and surrender. I let go my childish ambitions and created a self which could finally assimilate Ruth Chambers into workforce Australia. I would be a loser no more.

I had two interviews in total. The first was with CTI big man Al Jobber, Madeline Stott's direct superior, a friendly and generally relaxed individual. The interview was all-over brief and general, serving for the most part to encourage the seed of my new self. It was sort of like a game of riddles, 'Jobsey' would ask a question he would expect a certain answer for and I would then provide that answer. In a way, it was like the two of us were being interviewed by something else altogether.

'So Ruth, how would you describe yourself?' Al Jobber was a middle-aged man, bald on top with a band of grey hair from ear to ear. Tickling his face was a neat grey beard.

Big smile. 'Well, I'm honest, motivated, confident, hard-working, and as my records state, I'm of above-average intelligence.' My records constituted high school reports and two years of the arts degree I'd left almost eighteen months before. Aside from being incomplete, the records were excellent.

'Confident indeed. What do you think you could offer CTI? Are you a team player?'

'Oh definitely, I am a people person through and through.' I recall my heart's outrage at this comment, a heavy vibration invaded my gut causing me to lean slightly forward.

'Are you alright, Miss Chambers?'

My need for work responded with a surge of ice-cold focus, which cut through my gut like a scalpel. 'Oh yes. I'm just very nervous. I really want this job.'

Be still, treacherous heart.

Jobsey's smile emanated trust which my ego devoured like meat. 'Have you worked in a team environment before?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Oh? In what capacity?'

'Well at university, I was often called upon to lead philosophy debates. You know, manage the team and so forth? We were very successful.' Lies. I had avoided such things as a rule.

'I see. You look a strong candidate, Ruth. There are quite a number of positions to fill, did you know? I think you may do well.'

Exultation. *Take that.*

'One more thing though,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Why did you leave university? It seems that you were doing well.'

My heart leaped with one final surge, desperate to be heard. I left because I was hurt. I had wanted to paint for painting's sake, but the course was corrupted. They lectured compromise,

to pawn my depictions for gold, to capture their boundless souls and declare them as proofs. I had wanted freedom for all of them, pure infinity. That I could perceive an end was enough reason to end it.

Oh but how cool my new persona was. It observed my raving heart like a lunatic child and scruffed it by the neck. I felt myself smile warmly like an old friend. 'I decided that in the long run, art would not be a financially viable option. Let's say it's more of a hobby now. I want to pursue a career, preferably in insurance.'

'But Miss Chambers, that was eighteen months ago.'

'Oh, yes. Some hobbies die hard.'

He laughed. 'I see. Preparing an exhibition?'

'Oh I do plan to have one eventually'—I had thrown my easel into a dumpster—'but for now I see security as the highest priority.'

'I see. Well I think I can tell you now that you will be having a second interview next week. If you impress the next interviewer as you have me, she will become your new manager. Someone will call you during the week. Good luck.'

'Thank you.' I rose and left.

The period between the two interviews was one of metamorphosis. I soon learned that the most integral component of my new personality was that it required fuel. A great deal of fuel. Being a loser is easy, all it requires is ignorance. *Knowing* you're a loser isn't as easy because you have to stand firm against the tide of inertia.

But success...

To be a winner you must know things. Things like how to play the game. You must know your opponents and how to bend the rules. Winners stay on top of their game and on top of the competition. They keep up to date with their finances and with strict attention to law and detail they extend the parameters of

their playing field. Winners see life for what it truly is: a game. A game to be won.

So how did I become a winner?

I began to think like one, my reality blossomed and the Queen assembled her court.

‘I think we should get you a new outfit for the interview, Honey.’

‘Mum, I don’t have any money.’

‘Oh Ruth, I’ll shout you this time, it’s far too important. You can always pay me back if you like.’ Mother looked tearfully out the kitchen window at my adolescent ghost making daisy chains on the lawn. ‘Who would have thought. My Ruth in insurance.’

‘Well, somebody’s got to do it.’

My heart lurched at the smile she gave me, torn between my ends and my means. ‘Oh Ruth, I’m so proud of you.’

‘Well, I’ve certainly made you earn that pride, haven’t I?’

Her toothy grin was so innocent, almost childlike. It reminded me of Ling. ‘Oh no, I knew you’d repay my faith in you.’ She leaned closer to me, co-conspirator. ‘Michael Barlow is in insurance, you know.’

‘Who?’

‘You know Anne Marie’s friend Carol?’

I had a hazy memory of such a name. ‘Um, not really.’

‘Yes, well her ex-husband. He’s a lovely man, so sad about their marriage. He’s been in insurance all his life, he’s done very well for himself too.’ The last accompanied a prolonged wink.

‘That’s nice Ma.’

My mother would often share with me the fates, facts and predictions of people around the neighbourhood. Usually I would ignore her and commence a series of stern nods. This time however, I felt close to her and wanted to maintain the connection, so I stored the data accordingly.

Winners know things.

'So when do you want to go shopping?' she asked.

'That's up to you I guess,' I replied.

'Okay, let's go right now.'

And so we did.

I swished into Madeline Stott's office a *femme fatale*. I was dressed all in black and mildly enhanced: perfume, eyeliner and my freshly washed hair gathered painfully to my crown to form a long, taut braid. My jacket was open so to expose my chest, which was wrapped snugly in a too-small wool skivvy. My breasts had never been large, but they had so far maintained sharp form. Maddy's tongue delicately touched her teeth as I entered and I knew I had the job.

Her questions were scattered amongst detail of what I would be doing. She would prattle on about CTI for minutes at a time, pointing out the areas of insurance they dealt in, with whom and in what capacity I would function. Then suddenly she would ask me things.

'You think you can handle that?' Her eyes flickered to my chest.

I smirked. 'I don't think I'll have a problem.'

Her energy lost its warmth. 'Oh? I think you'll have many.'

I stayed my response. Submissive. She picked up my resumé and began to scan the front page. 'One doesn't learn without problems, without challenges.' She looked hard at me over the page. 'But I'm sure you are capable.'

My heart stirred. Danger.

I stuttered. 'I-I'm ready for challenges, I-I'm...'

She warmed again, inclining her head and smiling. 'I'm sure you *are* capable, Ruth. It's a friendly environment, and I have a strong team. The *best* team. I'm sure you will fit in wonderfully.'

'I've always been a team player,' I said lamely.

Again her eyes flickered, she knew things. ‘Excellent,’ she purred.

‘Sounds like I’ve got the job,’ I said with a thin spread of innocent anxiety.

‘It does *sound* like that,’ she smiled and sent me on my way. A promise of a phone call was my only real hope, but I suspected I had it. I possessed a surety within that I had never felt before. My old loser self cowered at the power of my new identity and I swelled with pride.

I was an overnight success and the world became a beautiful waking coma. I could pay my own bills, buy my own appliances and afford new clothes. I moved out of home. I was independent. I was finally free.

Freedom.

I started my job two weeks later and never looked back. It was exhausting but I felt I was being rewarded, I remember feeling very grateful for Mum’s support, thinking we might just be able to get along after all. There was too much sadness in that house for me and she was a nicer human being over the phone anyway.

‘The hours are pretty long, I’ve been ultra-tired,’ I said.

‘Oh you’ll get used to it Ruth, just think of the money.’

And I did. It was amazing but suddenly the world seemed relevant to me. I stopped dismissing so many things as conscious waste and began to accumulate possibilities and ideas. I identified whole worlds of desire within me I never knew were there and for every complaint I had there seemed to be an affordable answer, or at least a capital loan. My soul responded with what I can only term fervour and before I knew it, I was going places.

The inertia?

I was surfing it like a crystal swell.