The Curious History of Joshua Ramdinkka

The Final Cut

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First paperback edition printed 2023 in the United Kingdom
ISBN 978-1-910815-29-8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Published by Mystic Mouse Publishing
www.mysticmouse.com

Design by Lorenzo Guescini/Mystic Mouse Design
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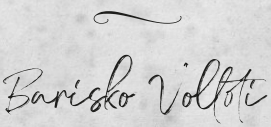
'For though we share one planet, we inhabit many worlds.'



The Sequence of Events

I. The Birthday

II. The Path of Least Resistance

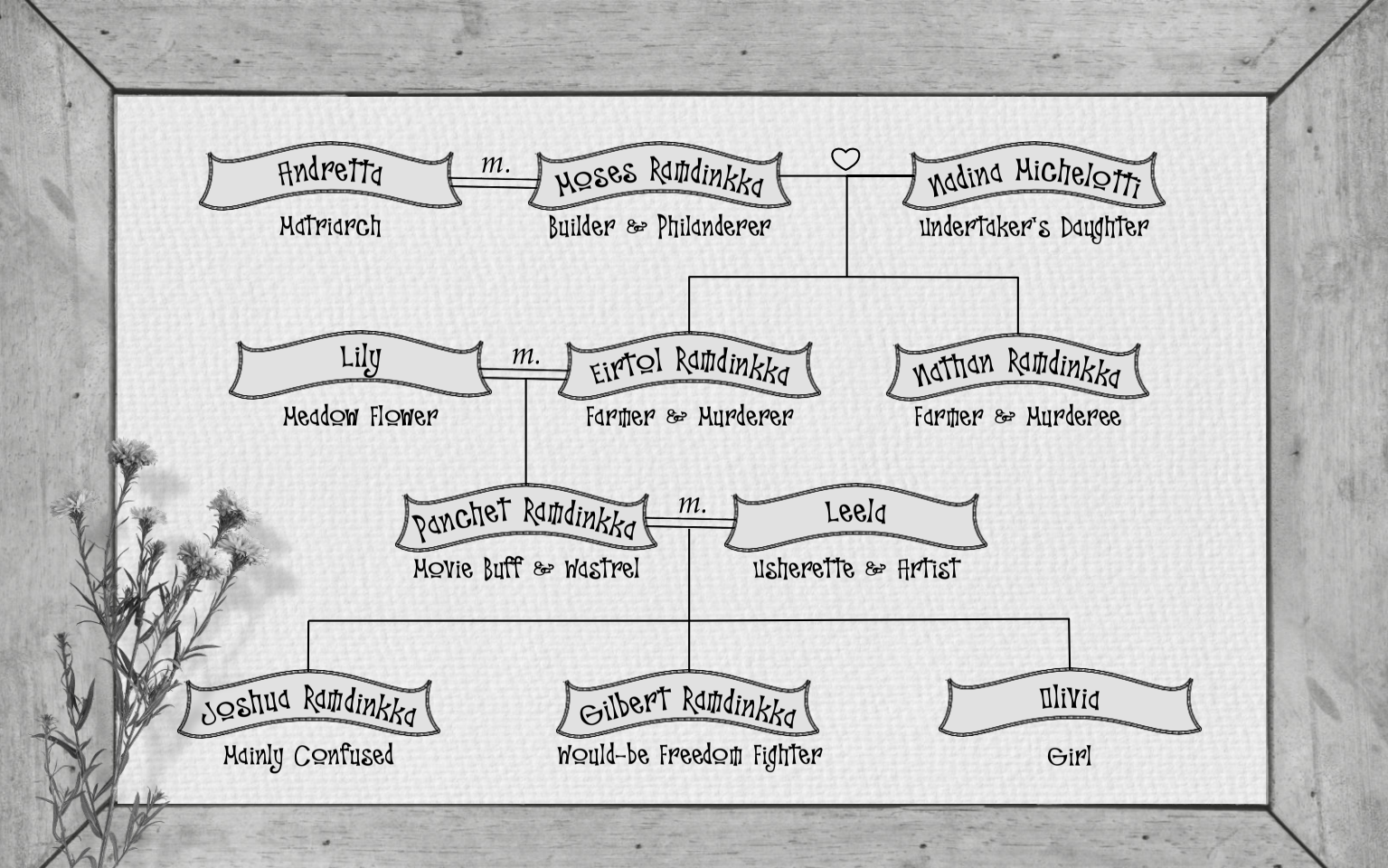
III. Medicine Man

IV. Love & Other Maladies

V. Another Fork in the Road

The Ramdinkka Family Tree

A family of good standing in the village of Potokini


Andretta
Matriarch
m.
Moses Ramdinkka
Builder & Philanderer
Nadina Michelotti
Undertaker's Daughter
Lily
Meadow Flower
m.
Eirtol Ramdinkka
Farmer & Murderer
Nathan Ramdinkka
Farmer & Murderee
Panchet Ramdinkka
Movie Buff & Wastrel
m.
Leela
Usherette & Artist
Joshua Ramdinkka
Mainly Confused
Gilbert Ramdinkka
Would-be Freedom Fighter
Olivia
Girl

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Act I

The Birthday

'Those who come through life with their original stake intact have forgotten that the measure of a life is not the number of years you live, but the number of moments you are truly alive.'

Aldo Maccone

Chapter 1.

A Life Imagined

Joshua Ramdinkka was not an old man. On the morning the tractors came to tear down the vines and level the terraces around his family home, the frothy white spittle was still glistening on the baby blue icing of his birthday cake, where he had huffed and puffed and drowned out the fifty red candles that had blazed there the previous evening.

To call it a celebration would be wrong for that would imply joy or happiness and those emotions had been noticeably absent. Instead, the proceedings had been overshadowed by the black cloud of this coming day - a day that would mark the closing of yet another chapter of his family's history.

With the rising sun they had come, to destroy what he had once believed to be eternal - the magnificent estate his great-grandfather had built and that had been entrusted to him by line of blood.

For the people of Potokini, it was the end of an era, and there were even those nostalgic souls who might have dared suggest it would be sadly missed. The great house was as well-known to the locals – though not so well-frequented – as the labyrinthine street urinal in the village

square (nicknamed Tortel's Parlour in commemoration of the man who had commissioned it). Both had equally long and honourable histories and both could now lay claim to having been duly pissed on by the people of the village.

Joshua slumped forward in his chair. The tip of his nose brushed the windowpane and his warm breath spread like mist across the cold glass. As he looked out across the valley, he could make out the cowering rows of unkempt vines, still daubed in unnatural hues, and it seemed as if they were reaching out to him - as if he could save them.

The hardy fruit that had waited so patiently for the time it would be crushed under bunioned feet was now being mashed into the dirt under the unforgiving tracks of the bulldozers. He could almost taste the sickly-sweet elixir as it oozed from the bloated fruit.

He pressed a crusty handkerchief to his ruddy nose and blew, for ill health and flatulence dogged his every waking hour, and fungi - the like of which the world had rarely seen - spread between his toes. Some believed it was these very afflictions that had contributed to the immense character of the Ramdinkka label and, perhaps, explained the family's reluctance to embrace the new machinery that might have saved their fortunes.

Mustering what was left of his strength, he heaved himself onto his feet. The effort left him drained, and he cursed the state of chronic enfeeblement that had seen him consigned to this infernal place. The village council had wasted no time making the arrangements for his removal to the twilight home in the holy orchard. Now it seemed they were determined to wash away all remaining traces of his family.

Joshua's arrival at the nursing home, seven days earlier, had been conducted in a manner befitting a local luminary.

The taxi had pulled up to fluttering bunting and a yellowing banner - found languishing in the town hall basement - that read *King of the Vines*. The nursing staff had waited patiently in line to greet him, with starched uniforms and starched smiles. To complete the sense of occasion, a photographer from the local paper had been on hand to snap the bows and curtsies for posterity.

The niceties had been short-lived, and the matron, clearly unamused by such pomp and ceremony, had whisked Joshua away in stony silence to his new home. It turned out to be an anonymous, little room with an armchair and a bed. As the orderlies had dumped the boxes containing all his worldly belongings around him, Joshua had found himself wondering if it were possible for his world to shrink any further. His one consolation had been the solitary window that, by chance or design, gave an unobstructed view across the valley towards the once majestic vineyard - the same window that today afforded him a grandstand view of this final calamity.

The boxes still sat unopened on the floor behind him, exactly where they had been placed a week earlier. Inside was everything he owned. A disparate assortment of bric-a-brac - so inconsequential that one small fire, barely sufficient to heat this tiny space, would have been enough to erase it all.

So, this was his life.

In truth it was not even his life, so much had come down through the generations and was really no part of his life at all. Yet it was all part of the Ramdinkka legacy, and that was something he had been desperate to preserve; for if not him, then who else?

As he had watched his family wither and die around him - his father succumbing to a lifelong opium addiction

that had begun before he left the womb, his brother to tuberculosis, and his sister to a rampant attack of mange – he knew he was destined to be nothing more than the full stop in the grand history of his family, for nature had left him with no way to perpetuate the line. If there was a God, He had decreed the end for the Ramdinkkas and good riddance.

Why God should have wished such a thing, Joshua could not imagine, but then he knew little of divine ways. He had seen a Bible, of course; he was not uneducated. The august tome had been handed down from some dead relative or other and had been given to Joshua when he was still a child. Books had little material value and, if there was no profit to be had, they were deemed fit only for the children, and the children loved them because they had not yet been coerced into adopting the shallow ways of a material world. And so a worn family Bible sat in the collection of memorabilia behind him. Yet for all its substantial presence there were other books that had left a greater impression on the pliant mind of a young boy; like the picture books of dubious nature celebrating the female form that had inflamed his adolescent senses and caused him to go blind on more than one occasion.

The Bible, by comparison, could never hold such enchantments. Still, he had quite liked the stories, particularly the magic bits, although some of the tricks – like turning water into wine – he had seen before at the local theatre or at least something very similar. And he had always felt a little disappointed that Jesus had never attempted to saw anyone in half because that was his favourite trick of all.

Sometimes, in an idle moment, he would speculate on the Second Coming and how it would be in these modern

times. He longed to see the three wise men replaced by economists from the city, shepherds by the ranks of the unemployed, and the angels would be drawn from the red-light district, for those ethereal waifs were angels indeed. And that beacon on high would no longer be a shining star - for when you're wading through shit, no one has time to lift their face to the heavens - instead it would be a satellite, broadcasting *an invitation to salvation* on a prime time slot. And thus the world would know it was so. Joshua hoped that was how it would be.

In truth, he had always struggled with the notion of religion. As a child there is only life, so what need can there be to contemplate anything beyond? Now when he prayed it was to no god in particular. He was no expert and there seemed to be so many to choose from; he would accept favour from any god who would listen. It was a simple deal that he felt sure any omnipotent being would grasp.

He blew his nose once more and coughed and belched. As he witnessed the final death throes of his family home, dark thoughts of his own mortality started to gather, and he prayed there would be no afterlife for he feared his great-grandfather's wrath. Joshua had felt the old man's spirit stalking him in this life, now he trembled to think what would happen once he had passed beyond the veil that separates this realm from the next.

His great-grandfather, Moses Ramdinkka, had been the local builder, a shrewd businessman, and a drunken philanderer, whose fortunes had been inexorably linked to Tortel, the man whose name would come to be so fondly associated with urination.

Tortel had been made mayor of Potokini by virtue of the fact that he owned most of the village and all of its

surrounding lands as far as the eye could see, or the feet could comfortably walk. He was a man of honour and proud of his family heritage – a name that could be traced back to *the Rape of the Sabines*. He had travelled the world and his knowledge set him above the humble peasants who loved him for his benevolence. And when at last he returned to settle in the village of his birth, all he really desired from life was a little peace and the fourteen-year-old daughter of the village undertaker.

In all his travels he had never seen a creature of such serene purity as Nadina Michelotti. On the balmy evenings of that first summer after his return, he would go to sit with Nadina in the olive grove and watch the sunset. And so would Mamma Michelotti. And Grandma Michelotti. And Great Grandmother Michelotti.

Mamma Michelotti did her best to make polite conversation, the pleasant warmth of the evening being a recurrent theme, but Grandma simply held Tortel in her steely glare, making threatening hissing sounds like a serpent if she felt he was getting too close to her beloved granddaughter. Great Grandmother simply chattered to herself, as she did all day long, complaining mainly about how figs no longer tasted like figs but like prunes.

After a decent period had elapsed, Tortel went to Naismith Michelotti and asked for his daughter's hand. The people of the village openly rejoiced at the news for it seemed a perfect match – the much-admired Tortel and the beautiful Nadina, Rose of Potokini. As the engagement celebrations raged for seven days and seven nights, only one man could not find it in his heart to raise a glass to the happy couple: Moses Ramdinkka. His own love for Nadina was surely greater than that of any man for any woman. No poet had ever expressed love with the longing he felt

in his heart. No artist had captured beauty in the way her beauty was captured in his eyes.

In the weeks preceding the wedding, he would lay awake until dawn with tears rolling down his cheeks imagining her lying in his arms, enraptured. So powerful were these thoughts and feelings, fuelled by such emotion, that they seemed to transcend the boundaries of space and he would appear to her in her dreams each night and make love to her with such passion that her breathless moans could be heard all across the village.

And so it came to pass that for forty nights the villagers got no sleep whatsoever and they all, without exception, became irritable beyond endurance. Small scuffles broke out in the normally peaceful streets and all lines of credit were withdrawn at the local shop because old man Lombardi, the storekeeper, claimed that everyone was getting *right on his tit*.

The cries of ecstasy from his virgin bride-to-be caused such distress to Tortel that he insisted that the doors and windows of her room were locked and barred until their wedding night. This daily ritual he took upon himself to perform; however, while returning home one evening after locking his betrothed away, Tortel became unwittingly embroiled in a street fight between two nuns of the holy order of St. Granola, during which he sustained a broken nose.

Consequently, the wedding had to be put back by three months, by which time Nadina, despite her solitary incarceration, was pregnant with twins: Eirtol and Nathan. Tortel pleaded with her to tell him the name of the bounder who had plucked her virtue. In the end, all she could do was tell him of her dreams. Tortel, being a man of the world, had heard tales of such witchcraft on his

travels to the Polynesian islands and was thrown into despair fearing the ruin of his family name. Yet, he could not cast aside his beloved Nadina, so he struck a deal with Moses that he should take his bastard offspring, find a wife, and bring them up as their own. In return, much of the land surrounding the village would be signed over to Moses.

Mercifully, Joshua had always assumed this tale of immaculate conception to be mythologised and not a literal truth. Had he known differently, it is almost certain he would have come to some fanciful conclusion about his own divinity, which would have been, in all honesty, total horseshit.

Chapter 2.

Enlightenment & Destruction

Moses dutifully went on to take a wife: Andretta. She fulfilled his bargain but not his desires. Then he retreated to his lands, built a palatial farmhouse, and erected a wall around his newly acquired property, so tall it cast a shadow across half the village. All through those first summer evenings, as he sat in his high-backed cane chair, all he could hear was a distant wailing – like the sound of throttled geese – of the locals belly-aching about what a dark and cold place Potokini had become.

To appease the villagers, Moses personally supervised the construction of a town hall. He declared that they would be the first village to have such a thing, and the people cheered for they were easily impressed. The elaborate plans, drafted by Moses himself, included a fine gallery to run the length of the building where images of famous local dignitaries could be displayed - sadly this was never to be used in his lifetime. The old village hall fell into disuse and was boarded up for a time until, eventually, it became home to the magic lantern show of Signor Bartoli. And so the people no longer felt disposed to promenade in the darkness of the square when such modern diversions as a picture show were available.

Instead, they chose to sit in the darkness of the old hall, captivated by the hypnotic images breathed into life by a flickering flame.

The Bartolis were considered a pleasant enough couple who, coming from a family of itinerant entertainers, had decided to break with the nomadic tradition and settle down. They chose Potokini because of the breathtaking beauty of the surrounding lands, the charming architecture of its buildings, and, as has already been alluded to, the in-bred stupidity of the peasants who could easily be dazzled and beguiled by a simple light show.

While Signor Bartoli raked in the money, his wife lived only to cook. She was never so happy as when she was creating a delectable sauce, preparing a fragrant salad, or disembowelling some poor, unsuspecting farmyard creature. It was said that her cooking was fit for the mouths of angels; but, in the absence of the celestial host, there were more than enough sinners with tales of hardship and woe to fill the places at her commodious table. Even the sick and dying would rise from their beds and risk the most heinous complications for just a slice of her fig and melon tart.

Above all, the Bartolis loved to entertain. The walls of the Bartoli residence would reverberate to the sound of music and laughter. And, whenever he was home, Signor Bartoli would take up his grandfather's accordion and play. The tatty old instrument puffed and wheezed like the clapped-out lungs of the old man himself but not a gayer sound could be heard in the village. The people would come and whirl about his living room like dervishes, to the ever-accelerating rhythm of Bartoli's pumping and squeezing.

Such was the hedonistic nature of these gatherings that

many found it difficult to leave. Their sweating bodies would simply collapse with exhaustion and they would sleep where they fell, under the twinkling eyes of Signor Bartoli. And, when the morning sun finally made its unwelcome advances across the mounds of slumbering revellers, there was much consternation and not a little embarrassment as near perfect strangers found themselves disentangling their knotted limbs. But I digress…

As Moses was laying the foundations of the Ramdinkka empire, the world at large was waiting expectantly for the dawning of the twentieth century and a new age of enlightenment and destruction. Yet it would be fair to say that this landmark event meant little to the people of the village; for, in Potokini, they marked time not in years but seasons. After all, the seasons and the harvest affected all things in the little village, including the nocturnal habits of the feverish populous. When all was good and bountiful there was much excitement and merrymaking, particularly in the bed chambers. But, when the crop was poor, no one got any. In fact, there were certain desperate times when entire family lines were in danger of disappearing completely.

This situation was compounded by the fact that most of the menfolk worked in the fields for as much as twelve monotonous hours each day. That in itself would have been enough to curtail any extracurricular exuberance; however, the work was so mind-numbing that it also led to some unfortunate lapses in concentration. This resulted, more often than is desirable, in various body parts being lopped off – sometimes with fatal consequences. The proportion of widowed women in the village was,

therefore, somewhat high. Swarms of black-clad predators were a common sight cruising the market square, and there were times during the day when it was just plain foolish for any healthy, single male to venture out.

Still, this was a Latin population and romance was often in the air, particularly in the springtime and this year it was not only the young who found themselves preoccupied with matters of the heart. Rumour had it that old man Lombardi was on the lookout for a good woman. The first indication of this was when a card appeared in the window of his shop. It read:

> Dashing, mature gentleman of means seeks attractive flexible woman with GSOH and strong constitution. Ability to throttle a chicken desirable. Apply within.

This had initially caused some confusion, as people were unsure whether this was a search for true love or simply someone to look after the meat counter, but it soon became apparent that the old boy was looking for someone who could handle more than just his bacon slicer.

This news created something of a buzz around the village. After all, a man with all his own teeth and most of his own hair was considered something of a catch amongst the over-forties. He was, as the card had stated, a man of means. That was not to say that he was a mean man – although he patently was – he also had a lot to offer a woman in the bedroom: a bed for a start; which was generally considered preferable to the stitched sacks of hay favoured by so many of the peasant labourers.

However attractive the proposition, it would have been unseemly for a woman of mature years to enter into such

an arrangement at the mere drop of a hat or placement of a card. Yet it soon became obvious that certain personages of the genus *femmes sans homme* were making more calls to their local store than could reasonably be explained by the need for mere domestic provisions. Over the coming weeks, rivalry for the old man's attention rose to fever pitch and, even as the shelves emptied and fell bare, the torrent of overly made-up widows and spinsters continued to swell.

At times the heady cocktail of lavender water and mothballs could have floored an elephant, but still the old man remained unmoved by his would-be suitors. This intransigence, far from acting as a deterrent, seemed only to fuel the fires of passion in those who longed for his attention. Soon competition spilled out onto the streets where accusations of questionable morals and snide comments at the sudden appearance of a new hat or shawl flew all too freely. The ensuing fracas started in the 'Street of a Thousand Potholes'[1] and soon spread to embroil the whole village.

In the end, the mayor had to step in and appeal for calm. Hurriedly, a law was passed, with the full backing of the local church, prohibiting the placement of advertisements intended to *'elicit the attention of those of the opposite gender for the purposes of relations either matrimonial or otherwise, whether explicitly stated or not'*. The card was duly removed from old man Lombardi's window and life slowly returned to normal. To this day, there are those who maintain that the whole incident was nothing more than a cynical ploy by the old man to drum up trade. But, once again, I digress…

[1] This is a loose translation of the original Latin.

…yet, in truth, it is difficult to trace the history of the Ramdinkkas without also relaying, to some degree, the story of the village and its inhabitants. This is not only because of the inevitable day-to-day interactions that occur, but also because the attitudes, motivations, and behaviours of our protagonists are a direct product of the world in which they find themselves.

It is important, for example, to appreciate that, while Potokini was insulated from the outside world, it was by no means immune to its influence. True, the village sat like an island surrounded by an ocean of patchwork fields that sustained and nourished it. And beyond the fields were woods and meadows and, finally, a near unbroken chain of rocky hills and treacherous outcrops seemingly placed by God to deter the rest of the world from getting too close. And, yes, in those halcyon days, when transportation and communication were still relatively primitive, the people of the village certainly harboured a strong desire to keep themselves to themselves[1]. Yet, despite all of this, the outside world had an exasperating habit of elbowing its way in and making the comfortably familiar, uncomfortably unfamiliar. At such times the villagers, with their usual sense of resignation, would simply carry on as best they could, adapting where they must and generally complaining all the while. The exceptions to this rule were Tortel and Moses - both were men of vision and imagination, who secretly yearned for modernity and understood the need for progress.

[1] Not personally you understand, as there are few things in life as entertaining as poking your nose into your neighbour's affairs; no, this was more a communal keeping to themselves.

As mayor of Potokini, Tortel felt it was his civic duty to introduce the people of the village to the benefits that the modern world had to offer. The villagers on the other hand viewed the role of a leader somewhat differently: they saw it more as someone who would protect them from the changes that the outside world might wish to impose upon them.

Still, being an experienced public servant, Tortel knew better than to be swayed by the will of the people. He reasoned that if the villagers were given just a glimpse of what the modern world could offer, natural curiosity would do the rest. In short, if he accepted modern technology into his own life, it would inspire others to follow.

It would not be long before providence would present him with an opportunity to test his theory. Stories had started to circulate of an extraordinary contraption that was capable of sending the spoken word along a humble wire. Tortel welcomed the advent of telephonic communications, having long realised the vast potential to business of allowing people to abuse, insult and annoy each other over vast distances without fear of physical retaliation. At great personal expense, he lobbied the newly formed Municipal Telephone Company to connect the little village to the outside world. The fact that this corporate leviathan acquiesced, despite the obvious financial folly of such a project, is a testament to the persistence of one man. And that man was Maurice Chevonik, whom Tortel had coerced into sleeping on the steps of the Telephone Company head office with express instructions to harangue company officials each day as they entered the building. Finally, after eight weeks, his dogged determination paid off and the Company capitulated. It

was a triumph for the common man, although to be fair it may also have had something to do with the fact that Chevonik was well and truly *on the turn* and the foul smell of this rancid little man would fill the offices every time the doors swung open.

No matter what the reason, Tortel was overjoyed. In his excitement, he decided that the honour of being the first to experience this modern wonder should fall to his dear old mother.

And so it was.

The historic day dawned and the telephone was installed in an alcove in the hallway of his home on a beautiful antique table with a matching chair placed at its side. At about half-past two in the afternoon, the shadowy contraption started to chime its tinny symphony. Tortel stood by his mother's side and guided her trembling hand to the receiver. She lifted it to her ear, made some affirmative sounds, and then replaced it on the hook. Tortel clasped his hands together in anticipation and delight as he awaited her reaction. Slowly she looked around until, finally, her sparkling eyes alighted on her only son. She gave an enigmatic nod, pronounced that she had heard the voice of God, and promptly expired.

As tragic as this event was, oddly, it did achieve the desired outcome of stimulating the curiosity and imagination of the general populous. Hence, on the day the news came of the new-fangled power station that was to be built in the Potokini valley, the people actually found something in which to rejoice. Many believed it would mean an end to the great darkness that had afflicted them for so long. Once again it would take a great deal of cajoling, this time on the part of Moses Ramdinkka, to bring such a modern convenience to the little village.

Tortel, being the only other individual in a position to consider such a conversion, did not at the time (remembering well the telephone debacle) feel inclined to participate in this particular venture.

A full three summers drifted by before work finally commenced on the wiring for the farmhouse and a further two months would elapse before it was completed; however, when the long-awaited day finally arrived, Moses invited everybody in the village to witness the Grand Switching On.

And so the villagers came, two by two, with some trepidation. For the first time in Potokini's history, the copious bottles of wine supplied by the host stood untouched, as all agreed that a clear head would be needed to fully appreciate the miracle that they were about to witness. Moses stood at the window of his bed-chamber, his finger poised above the Bakelite switch, and looked down upon the expectant faces gathered in the yard below. A deathly hush descended upon the waiting throng. Even the cicada fell silent. Then Moses proclaimed that man's own ingenuity had, at last, come to outshine even that of the Lord. He flicked the switch and cried, 'Let there be light' and there was light as the first Potokini power station exploded in a ball of flame, illuminating the skies above the valley for four whole days.

This calamity was enough to bring the villagers' short-lived dalliance with the dream of modernity to an end. It was obvious to them that the modern world was just too dangerous and that they were right to shun it and it did not take long for the old suspicions to return.

Despite this temporary setback, the Ramdinkka estate flourished. Eirtol and Nathan shared their father's appetite for work; though, as is often the case, they did not share his vision for the family business. While Moses continued to spend his time tending the cattle and planting the wheat and maize, which he saw as the staples of the family business and of village life itself, the brothers began to implement their own master plan.

The vineyard that had started as a few terraces, supplying wine for the family, began to expand across more and more of the vast estate. Acreage that had been previously unused came to life and, on the outlying fields, cottages were erected to provide housing for the growing army of workers.

Moses was not at all convinced as to the wisdom of such a venture. Still, if his sons insisted on flirting with more glamorous enterprises, he was prepared to indulge them – providing such nonsense did not disrupt the real business of the estate.

Chapter 3.
A New Order

It is important to appreciate that the precise chronology of these early events may well be a little muddled, relying as it does on stories and anecdotes carelessly relayed to a young Joshua without much thought for accuracy or context. However, it was at about this time that Joshua's grandmother first appears in the family history. The story goes that Eirtol first met the woman he would come to marry on the seventh day of May in a year that was otherwise unremarkable.

Eirtol was an ambitious man. There was nothing he liked more than to walk the fields of his kingdom, plotting and planning. One day, he was so absorbed in these machinations that he managed to walk all the way to the very boundaries of the estate, as far from the village as it was possible to go without leaving Ramdinkka land. He found himself in a pretty field, carpeted with lush grass and scattered with bright meadow flowers. It was a place he knew well. It was where the vital stream that watered the cattle entered the property. Consequently, the cows often found their way down to this field, which was somewhat tiresome because, as a lad, it had always fallen to Eirtol to fetch them back.

Unlike the cattle, people seldom ventured out this far, so it was with some surprise that Eirtol came upon a vision of beauty amongst the flowers. She lay on her back with her arms outstretched and the loose sleeves of her dress gathered beneath them like angel's wings. Her eyes were closed, and she was smiling as if she were immune to the troubles of the world.

'Are you alright, Signorina?' asked Eirtol, fearing that such an expression of serene happiness might be hiding some suicidal intent.

She opened her eyes and looked at him so strangely that he wondered if she was able to comprehend his words at all. *Perhaps she is not a native of this land*, he thought. So, he raised his voice and slowly repeated the question.

'I am perfect,' she replied sitting up.

In that moment, Eirtol knew that no human had ever uttered a truer word. There was something so natural about her presence here, as if she had simply risen from the earth like the other flowers, and Eirtol's heart was suddenly saddened knowing that he would never share such a bond with this landscape.

He asked her name and she answered, 'Lily'.

Ah, consider the lilies of the field, thought Eirtol, for once having cause to remember his Sunday school studies.

He looked down upon her as she sat on the ground and it seemed to him that even the flowers turned their faces towards her as if she were their sun. And when she stood and brushed down her white dress, there was an effortless grace to her movements that was spellbinding. As they walked, the butterflies seemed to dance around them and in that glorious moment Eirtol forgot the reason he was here – he forgot he was alive at all – for all he wanted was to follow her for all eternity.

In a flash of divine insanity, he turned to her and said, 'Will you marry me?'

She laughed: 'I don't even know your name.'

'My name is Eirtol Ramdinkka and my family owns all this land,' he said, sweeping his arms before him in a majestic all-encompassing gesture.

'This is a beautiful meadow,' she said, not realising the sheer scale of what Eirtol was implying.

'If you marry me, I will give you this meadow as a wedding gift.'

'How can you make a gift of a meadow?' she asked with a quizzical look.

'Well…you will be able to come here whenever you choose.'

'But I do that now,' she replied.

Eirtol looked crestfallen.

Lily felt his sadness.

'You do not know me,' she said. 'But I will make an agreement with you. I will meet you here every Tuesday morning for one year. If one day you do not come, I will know that you have grown tired of me and you will not find me here again. But if we are here one year from today and you ask me that question again, I will agree to marry you.'

And so, every Tuesday morning Eirtol religiously made his pilgrimage to the meadow, come rain or shine or snow or that unusual day that frogs and toads bombarded him from on high – nothing could stop him. And one year on from that first meeting, he went down on one knee and asked Lily once again to marry him, and, true to her word, she agreed.

The wedding was a momentous occasion befitting what was now the most influential family in the region. The

ceremony took place at St. Silva, which stood in the orchard just outside the village. As a structure, it could be politely described as being in need of some attention, but it was the only church in the immediate vicinity. During the ceremony, the congregation was surprised and delighted to find themselves continuously showered with confetti; although on closer inspection this turned out to be flakes of plaster and rotting wood from the vaulted ceiling. Somehow that didn't matter, it just seemed as if the old church itself was joining in the celebrations.

With a fine wife at his side, Eirtol's obsession with the rise of the Ramdinkka empire intensified and so too did his impatience. In his gut, he could feel that the growth of the estate was being stifled and he knew what must be done. There had always been a healthy rivalry between Eirtol and Nathan, but now they would find themselves united in a common cause.

And so began a relentless tug of war as the brothers tried to wrest control of the family business from their father. They took every opportunity to point out to him that, at his time of life, he should be slowing down and enjoying the autumn of his years. This irked Moses somewhat as he still considered himself to be revelling in his high summer. Yet, with a certain inevitability, the brothers' persistence began to wear the old man down and, as they took on more of the day-to-day affairs, Moses found himself in the unfamiliar position of having time on his hands. For the first time in years, he had the chance to reflect on his life. He started to realise that his voracious appetite for work had come about because of his extreme indifference towards Andretta, and his resentment that she was not Nadina.

Now there are those of you who may observe that this

is quite an acceptable state for a married couple, but it must be remembered that at this time Moses was still a man of high ideals. He had become, without question, a man of notable standing within the village; soon to become a man of notable falling down.

One spring evening his promenade around the village square brought him to the table of Naismith Michelotti, who sat outside the café-bar cursing the mites that feasted upon his flesh. Moses took the opportunity to politely inquire as to his health and that of his only daughter. Naismith complained about the ruinous state of his business and went on to expound that the pox of the modern age was that people refused to die, with little thought for those whose livelihood depended upon it. His daughter however was more radiant and contented than ever – with this most desperate news, Moses called for a bottle of the local poison and set about drowning his sorrows, along with his judgement, good taste, and dignity.

His days came to consist of nothing more than sitting outside the bar, unsuccessfully propositioning the local women for, through the bottom of a glass, they all looked more appealing than his Andretta. All the while his sons were taking the family estate to new heights of wealth and power in the not unreasonable expectation that the old man was not much longer for this world and that all would come to them.

Andretta, in a desperate attempt to provoke a reaction from her husband, commissioned the building of a new church on the boundary between the Ramdinkka estate and the village; however, due to his advanced state of inebriation, Moses failed to notice the scores of workmen and several thousand tonnes of white marble that appeared

in his backyard. That was until the day that he and Naismith had drunk the bar dry and had started to devour huge doorsteps of panettone. The dry cake soaked up the wine and refused to surrender it to the bloodstream and, as Moses made his way home in a rare state of sobriety, he was confronted by his wife's vision. Distressed and confused by what he saw, he ran to the door of the farmhouse shouting, 'I shall tear down that ghastly erection with my bare hands'. It is at this point that certain, albeit unsubstantiated, reports claim that old man Lombardi was seen to leap naked from the farmhouse window. However, this is now believed to be untrue, as it would have required him to shut up shop at least half an hour early and, as anyone would testify, when it came to matters of a financial nature, he was as tight as a cicada's chuff.

Chapter 4.
The Last night of the Fair

The wind in the trees blew gentle raspberries at the passers-by on the morning that a young man, scarcely more than a boy, wandered along the village path whistling jolly revolutionary tunes. Eirtol was the first to lay eyes on the urchin and, taking pity on the boy, resolved to offer him a job. However, the youth declined stating that he already had gainful employment. To support this dubious claim he produced a letter of introduction, validated by the seal of His Holiness the Bishop. The young man was Father Crespo, and he had been sent in response to Andretta's plea. It seemed that the Bishop, in his divine wisdom, had decided that a fledgling church was only worthy of a fledgling priest. Still, in Eirtol's eyes, a man of God was a man of God, and due all the reverence and respect that title demanded.

Father Crespo took up his new role with an infectious energy and enthusiasm, and the congregation of the new church quickly swelled, much to the joy of the young priest. His elation, however, was tinged with more than a little guilt as his success came at the inevitable expense of the old church of St. Silva. Father Arredondo, the aged priest of St. Silva, seemed altogether less concerned.

Perhaps it was because, to him, all men were hopeless sinners and as such unfit to sit before him in a house of God. Or maybe it was because he was as blind as the bats that roosted in the ancient oak beams and wouldn't have known if he was preaching to a full house or the chill East wind. Either way, he fulfilled his duties to the end, even though it is rumoured that his final sermon was preached to a rat, a cockroach, and a toothpick[1].

Now, at first glance, there may appear to be just a whiff of disloyalty in the villagers' rapid abandonment of their former place of worship. However, it is perhaps not really so surprising. Firstly, compared to the glistening white marble and imposing elegance of Andretta's design, St. Silva's looked like a derelict barn with an oversized ice cream cone inverted on the roof. The creaking structure leaked profusely and allowed the wind to howl in from all directions. Secondly, unlike his counterpart, Father Crespo refrained from systematically accusing the members of his flock of being philanderers, drunkards, and whores – generally speaking, people don't like to think of themselves in those terms. Instead, Father Crespo would reassuringly refer to the villagers as *pretty good eggs*, sometimes adding that he felt certain that the Lord appreciated their efforts - which most people agreed was much better.

As a side note, after St. Silva closed its doors for the last time[2], Signor Lombardi, in a moment of entrepreneurial

[1] Although the cockroach was later discovered to be dead, and the rat was allegedly spotted fleeing from the building about half way through proceedings. The toothpick, it's probably fair to assume, sat there for the duration like a piece of wood. All of which were fairly typical reactions to one of Father Arredondo's sermons.

[2] Some say with Father Arredondo still inside and still preaching.

brilliance, struck a deal with the church authorities to sell the apples, gathered from the orchards around St. Silva to neighbouring villages under the label *'Sacred fruit from the Holy Orchard'*. This stroke of marketing genius netted both him and the church a very tidy profit for years to come.

It is around this time that a son, Panchet, is born to Lily and Eirtol. Now, in truth, there has been some speculation as to the precise identity of the father. The fact that Eirtol worked all the hours God sent, stopping only to eat and sleep (often in the fields), and his wife had started taking in lodgers to keep her company as the evenings drew out, has been the cause of much idle gossip. Whether there was any substance to this feckless tittle-tattle is difficult to say, however, what can be stated with confidence is that the most notable of her guests was one Joseph Wong, a gentleman of oriental persuasion, who provided the villagers with their first insight into the ways of the mystical East. It was also around this time that Joshua's grandmother formed her dependence on opium, which was not entirely out of keeping with the mood of the moment.

You might expect the arrival of such an exotic outsider to have met with some resistance, but that simply wasn't the case. Many of the villagers found Joseph quite fascinating and were unusually keen to learn more about his intriguing ways. This proved to be easier done than said. You see, Joseph's grasp of the local vernacular, while impressive considering that no one in the village could fathom his native tongue, was not really adequate to communicate the essence of his curious practices. Fortunately, he was more than happy to demonstrate with

great patience the intricacies of his daily exercise, which proved far more effective. It soon became a common sight to see the octogenarians and nonagenarians, of whom there were many in the village, strolling out at sunset each day into the vineyards to practice the graceful flowing forms of Tai Chi under Joseph's watchful eye. And when the travelling fair pitched itself on the village green – as it did at that time each year – and both Eirtol and Joseph were seen together shying at coconuts, the locals felt happy that any rumours of impropriety could not be true.

Moses himself was to meet his fate on the last night of that very fair when, in his usual drunken stupor, he chose to pick an ill-advised fight with the bearded lady, goading her over her sexuality. In her fury, the mighty wench ripped off his right arm at the shoulder and throttled him with it. The whole gruesome display solicited a ripple of polite applause from those who thought it was all part of the show. After the litter of coins had been reclaimed by the punters who now realised there was, indeed, no charge for this entertainment, the bearded lady got off with a caution as she was substantially larger than any member of the local police force (that and the fact that her itinerant status played havoc with the paperwork).

The people of the village unanimously agreed that it would be unseemly for the murder weapon to be buried along with the body. So it was decided that the arm should be laid in a casket of its own - to be constructed, at no extra charge, by Naismith Michelotti as a mark of respect for his old drinking buddy. Naismith laboured day and night and fashioned a magnificent reliquary, worthy of any saintly body part, to hold the orphaned limb. The two caskets, containing the various parts of Moses, were laid in separate plots. It was a happy arrangement that meant

both his wife, Andretta, and his love, Nadina, could have a piece of Moses over which they could mourn – convention dictating that the larger portion should be buried close to the old ball & chain.

Moses left no will, but local law was clear: the lands would be shared equally between his two sons. Eirtol feared that the power of the estate would diminish when halved – the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. So, one balmy night in late June, while the cicada chirped sweetly in the background and with his father scarcely cold in his grave, he crept silently into his brother's bed chamber and, not being a violent man, pressed his hand into the chest of his sleeping sibling and ripped out his still-beating heart. At the time it had seemed the right thing to do. The estate was preserved; as was Eirtol's head (in formaldehyde), shortly after he was hanged for murder. By popular demand, his pickled bonce was put on display in the town hall – the first celebrity the village had ever produced – it also served to cover a rather unpleasant patch of mould on the wall, the result of a poorly installed damp course.

Lily never really came to terms with what had happened. She simply could not reconcile the memory of the man she loved with that terrible deed. Each day she would walk to the furthest field where she and Eirtol had first met. No one ever saw her because no one else ever ventured that far. That was what had made it so special: it was their place. But she did not come here for sentimental reasons, she did not come here to reminisce, for these things could only deepen her sorrow. Instead, she would lay down and allow herself to drift into sleep, cradled in the arms of nature. She would do this just so she could experience those precious moments of awakening when

she would open her eyes, stare up at the sky, smell the familiar fragrance of the meadow flowers and feel the soft, pliant mattress of folded grass beneath her. In those first few hazy seconds – while her mind raced to reconstruct the reality of where she was and who she was – she was back in happier times; one of those golden Tuesday mornings when her heart would race in anticipation as she had waited expectantly for that mad fool who adored her so. But all too soon her obedient mind would escort her back to her prison of thoughts, and once again she would be faced with the injustice of it all.

She had not sought love.

She had not given her heart hastily.

At the start, she had never really expected anything serious to come of it at all. It had all just been a game. She had been sure that he would soon tire of their weekly clandestine rendezvous. But he had never failed her and, sure enough, it was this persistent devotion that had won her over. Surely the bond that was forged from such a courtship was destined to last? Surely it deserved to last? But no, he had been snatched away from her and it felt as though they had had no time at all. How could the world be so cruel?

It would have been so easy to be bitter, but Lily knew that would only add poison to the sadness. For now, she would cling to those few precious moments each day when she could break free of the knowing and escape to happier times.

And what of Tortel and Nadina? you may ask. Well, they lived out their lives comfortably enough. Though she was never the homemaker he would have liked, Tortel's love for her could overlook any shortcomings. It mattered not to him that the only meal she could prepare was tagliatelle

Bolognese, made to her grandmother's recipe. So, night after night, she would come to the table with the old leaf bowl, a family heirloom, and dish out the long strands of pasta tossed vigorously in that rich red sauce – it was of no consequence to him. And it continued to be of no consequence to him right up until the moment his colon prolapsed.

Chapter 5.

The Cobbler's Wife

They say that in life only change is constant. Over the long haul that, of course, is true – one cannot stop the march of time – but in reality little changed from day to day in the village. Peasants did what peasants do, which is make the best of what they have while trying to find a little joy where they can. Families frequented the same homesteads for generations, farmed the same land, and sat at the same table in the local bar as if their maker had simply lost interest and, unable to find a place for them in his grand design, left them to run in a perpetual loop – surviving only because that is what had been encoded into the very strands of their being.

But for one woman surviving was not enough. Signora Giaconda had known since she was a little girl that she wanted more than village life had to offer. Things had started well enough when she had married Tadesco Giaconda, the son of the shoemaker – a profession with great potential – however, after that her plans had floundered.

Tadesco had dedicated his life to mastering the art of his fathers. He sat outside his shop singing his heart out, happily hammering away at heels and soles. All the while,

his wife watched with growing frustration, knowing that her husband could be so much more. The quality of his work was evident to all, yet Tadesco would not consider leaving the village and moving to the city where his work would have commanded the price it undoubtedly deserved. It was not that he thought such a move would be difficult or a great risk, it was simply that he could not conceive of such a thing. There had been a Giaconda in the village for as long as anyone could remember; the possibility that it might be otherwise did not even enter his mind. Whenever the subject was broached at the dinner table he would simply stare blankly at his wife and smile. And so Signora Giaconda came to the realisation that, if she was going to reach the lofty social heights to which she aspired, she would have to raise the whole village with her.

Evidence of her plan first became apparent when a few pairs of dress shoes appeared in the window of her husband's shop amongst the clogs and sandals. Then slowly they began to take over, fashioned from the finest materials and garnished with braid of gold and silver. The Giacondas would soon come to eschew completely the bland utilitarianism of the working shoe in favour of these more fantastical offerings, pushing the limits of design and taste beyond all reasonable bounds.

It was a strangely disturbing sight to watch the army of hard-working, hard-drinking men marching out to the fields in their well-worn and faded work clothes, wearing patent leather court shoes or suede crackowes, often adorned with hugely ostentatious brass buckles and Cuban heels.

Surprisingly, it wasn't the inappropriateness of the designs for farm work to which most people objected;

instead, it was more the amount of time it took to buff the shine back into them after a hard day in the fields. Although it is also fair to say that everyone really appreciated their quality and hard wearing nature.

The lengthening summer days were approaching their zenith when a coach, emblazoned with the crest of the Duke of Abelcante, pulled up outside Giaconda's shoe shop and the Duchess stepped out. As she entered the premises, the morning sun was streaming in through the grimy windows. By the time she left the little shop, the light had been all but blotted out by the distorted faces of the inquisitive locals squashed against the glass. The Duchess made her way back to her carriage with ducal dignity. A procession of page boys followed close behind, each carrying a small stack of shoeboxes tied with ribbon. The coach made its majestic exit, leaving the spectators to look on dumbfounded.

Overnight a new sign appeared above the shop reading: Giaconda's Shoe Emporium – Shoemakers to the Nobility. The next morning the window of the old shop sparkled like lead crystal and the rickety old three-legged stool, reserved for customers, had been replaced by an elegant scarlet chaise-longue. Yet all of these fripperies paled compared to what had happened to the price tags, which overnight had each sprouted two extra zeros. There was uproar as news of this outrage spread through the village, but Signora Giaconda simply waved away any protestations, saying that her husband was an artist and no longer deigned to work for peasants. After all, he had worked a lifetime to master his art, and now at last his diligence and skill had brought him the recognition he deserved – there could be no turning back. His shoes would only grace the feet of those who could appreciate

the craftsmanship and show that appreciation in material ways.

And so an impasse was reached: the villagers could not afford new shoes and took to going to work with their feet in sacks tied off with cord, while the old man lost all his customers.

No longer did Tadesco sit outside his shop happily singing in the sunshine; instead he would sit in the shadows, staring out of the window, mournfully watching the world while the world resolutely ignored him. And, just to make sure his resolve didn't weaken, there in the background, he could feel his wife's icy presence. Tadesco was truly caught between a rock and a hard case. With no other source of income, all he could do was watch helplessly as his hard-earned savings drained away – still, better that than incur the wrath of his good lady.

Then one morning Tadesco awoke to find a note nestling in the depression of the pillow where her head should have been. As he read the words he could hear her disapproving voice ringing in his ears. She accused him of not being the man she had married, which, as a statement of fact, was difficult to dispute; however Tadesco wasn't entirely sure that it constituted grounds for desertion. As far as he could see, expanding waistline and receding hairline aside, he had only ever changed to comply with her wishes – blaming Tadesco for such things seemed rather like a potter blaming the clay. She went on to speak of being unable to bear the shame of his failure, which once again perplexed poor Tadesco as he hadn't realised he was a failure – still it is always good to have these things pointed out to you, just in case you never notice. Now, it seemed, she had run off to the city to find someone who could keep her in the manner to which she had always

planned to become accustomed. Tadesco should have been devastated; however, as no one else in the village had ever been left by their wife before he had no emotional reference point and so the whole incident just left him feeling greatly puzzled and slightly numb.

Yet life must go on and Tadesco was nothing if not a pragmatist. So, to earn a crust and keep his business going, he decided to exploit the new niche that had recently opened up in the market by selling sacks to the villagers. But the old man couldn't help himself and before long he was shaping the sacks so that they better hugged the foot. Soon everyone was in agreement that a Giaconda sack was the finest sack you could put your foot in, but, his incessant tinkering didn't end there. Next, he took to stitching an extra layer of sacking on the bottom to make them harder wearing, and before long the sacks had turned back into shoes, and once again the joyful shoemaker's song could be heard as he went about his work.

At heart, the old man was a shoemaker, he loved the village and he loved to make shoes. When he tried to live his life according to the expectations of others, he lost what was most precious. It did not matter that his dreams were modest; all that mattered was they were his dreams.

Chapter 6.
Lily & Bell

Late that September a young woman arrived in the village. In a modern world, where people think little of moving from place to place, it is difficult to fully appreciate the impact of a new face in a village like Potokini. Isabella Duprei's influence on the village would be profound, yet so subtle that few would appreciate just what was happening.

She was a school mistress, a real teacher who had studied at university and had earned the title on merit. Up until her arrival, schooling in the village had been a somewhat haphazard affair. The task of teaching had fallen to those unfit or unable to perform the real work, like bringing in the harvest, washing clothes at the river or the endless cycle of preparing and cooking food. For those who were injured in the fields, this just seemed to be adding insult to their physical pains. Julius Carasini, after losing an arm in a threshing accident, had volunteered to harvest the corn with his teeth, rather than face the humiliation of having to teach in the school.

Considering this attitude, it is easy to understand why the standard of education amongst the villagers was not good. Those who did find themselves unable to escape the

punishment of teaching had a choice: either they could plow slowly and painfully through the small and somewhat eclectic stock of outdated books in the schoolhouse, trying to bring their own feeble knowledge up to a respectable level, or they could simply spew out a load of ill-informed and highly opinionated drivel to their charges. As a prerequisite of the first option was the ability to read, it instantly ruled out the majority of those who found themselves at the helm of the village's educational system.

Adopting the second strategy meant that, all too often, misunderstood facts or ill-considered conjecture could quickly be passed on and accepted as the gospel truth by entire generations. This resulted in, amongst other things, the generally held belief amongst the villagers that gravity only happened in the autumn when the apples fell from the trees, that Beethoven wrote very loud music and that sometime during the 16th century Sir Francis Drake had successfully circumcised the world. There were also those villagers who were labouring under the misapprehension that to have one wife should rightly be called 'monotony', although whether this misunderstanding had arisen due to their schooling or from bitter experience was unclear. However, with the arrival of Isabella Duprei, all of that changed.

Isabella had completed her studies in the city and had chosen, as many well-educated young ladies do, to broaden herself with travel. The outward journey of her grand European tour happened to pass through Potokini and that was as far as she got. It wasn't that she was overcome by the charm or beauty of the place – although it had both for those with eyes to see it – it was rather that, in Potokini, she saw a place where she could make a real difference. It was a chance to help people change their

lives for the better and when one finds that kind of calling, it is difficult to ignore. Of course, it should always be remembered that people are under no obligation to change their lives for the better – that is always optional.

Isabella soon found she had a passion for sharing her knowledge and the reward was seeing her students blossom. And, much to the surprise of her pupils, they discovered for the first time that they enjoyed learning. At the same time, she dreamt up ways to acquire new books for the school, often assisted by Father Crespo, who was now a man of some influence and who quickly procured a large number of bibles for the expanding school library. There were also books on science that actually acknowledged that the world was round, classical texts by Homer, Sophocles and Virgil from Isabella's own treasured collection and, to fire the imagination, there was even Pietrocòla-Rossetti's translation of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. And so the village entered a golden age of learning.

Indeed it seemed that gold truly was the colour of the moment. The landscape was awash with copper and bronze, as the autumnal leaves had not yet fallen from the trees to rot and decay below. And each evening a silent procession of the elderly would make their way out into the fields led by Joseph Wong. Minds clear of extraneous thought, they removed their simple footwear and relaxed their bodies. At sunset, their supple forms stood, silhouetted against the burning sky. The crane, the dragon, the eagle and the mongoose flowed together in a silent ballet.

A transcendent calm settled upon the little village born from the fusion of mystical practice and modern learning. And those who were aware of such things came to

remember this as the perfect time. But for villages, as for people, perfection is ephemeral, a fleeting breath. It cannot be held. To all intents and purposes, it can only ever be approaching or receding. Then, without anyone really noticing, the autumn turned silently to winter and the gold was gone.

One cold October morning, Lily walked out of the farmhouse. She did not return that evening. An hour after darkness had fallen, a frantic Andretta raised the alarm. The able-bodied men of the village rallied round and, with torches blazing, selflessly braved the bitter cold to search for her. They gathered by the barn and slowly and methodically began to fan out across the fields. Andretta sat at the bedroom window and, with a heartfelt prayer, began her vigil. She watched the fiery line of dots that punctuated the darkness. While behind her the boy, Panchet, lay sleeping, unaware of the unfolding drama.

It would be morning before the men reached the far field. When they found Lily, her pale skin had lost that rosy pink tint, replaced now by an equally subtle hue of blue. Her face was more beautiful than ever, glistening with frost, while diamond teardrops hung frozen at the very corners of her eyes. She seemed so peaceful. None of the men could bring themselves to move her. Instead, they sent for Andretta, who hurried to join them, a black shawl draped over her head and shoulders. Andretta sat herself on the frozen ground and clasped Lily's cold, stiff hand in her own. One of the men asked where they should take the body, but Andretta could sense that what had happened here was no mere accident. She instinctively understood why Lily had come and she knew what must be done.

'You will take her nowhere. Bring the priest to her.'

The snows came early that year and did not bode well for the harshest months that were yet to come, and so set in the deepest, darkest winter in living memory. The peasants of the village increasingly refused to leave the warmth of their beds and so began an involuntary hibernation that was unhealthy in the extreme.

The nights were long and the driving snow stung the skin like the touch of a hot needle. Families huddled together in a single room trying to eke out their dwindling supplies of food and wood. Those who braved the ceaseless blizzard in a desperate search for fuel found little for their pains.

Signor Bartoli drew his chair close to the fire, but his predicament remained. The front of his body glowed hot as it absorbed the heat thrown out by the raging flames, while his spine was frozen to the core from the icy blasts emanating from the kitchen door behind him. As he lamented this sorry state, he could think only of how he envied the suckling pig, as it turned upon the spit, and the even warmth it enjoyed.

At Chici Giaconda's house, four generations of shoe repairers came together to exchange stories of leather manipulation, the finer points of heel fixing and to generally talk cobblers. It all started well enough, swapping tales of gloom and woe in the comforting atmosphere of resigned apathy. Grampa Giaconda's wooden leg crackled festively on the open fire, as he sat on his threadbare armchair and prized out his glass eye with a tarnished silver spoon to amuse the innocent ones. Chici removed the lead pellets from the six dead sparrows that lay side by side on the kitchen table – it wasn't the feast she had hoped for, but at least everyone would get a leg.

By evening, the genial conversation had turned as chilly as the weather. Grampa Giaconda chided the younger generation for being feeble in body and spirit as he told of the bleak times of his own childhood and the year it got too cold to snow. With relish, he recounted the story of the day whole clouds had frozen solid, like huge popsicles in the sky, and came crashing to the ground causing mayhem and devastation. And all those who heard such tales came to fear the freezing cold and would no longer venture out in winter without a hard hat.

December offered no respite and the ceaseless onslaught of the cold took its toll on young and old alike. Then on Christmas Day the snow stopped, the sky turned from grey to blue and the sun shone. And, though the bitter cold remained, the sunlight seemed enough to warm the villagers and lift their hearts. So grateful were they for this beautiful day that they chose to eschew the traditional Christmas spirit of greed and ill-will to all men, in favour of a celebration of life and friendship. They came together to share what they had, and those who still had strength placed themselves at the service of those who had suffered most. It is perhaps curious that, out of these darkest of times, the human spirit shines brightest - then again perhaps it is not. And just for a fleeting moment, the villagers were reminded of an age-old truth, that it is not possible to raise someone else up without also lifting yourself.

The first months of the New Year remained cold and hard, but somehow together it was easier to bear; as if hope and courage, when shared, were multiplied. And despite the hardship they endured, all who had experienced that winter would look back on those bitter days with an inexplicable fondness.

Chapter 7.
The Tale of the Ancient Mariner

It was a day of celebration in the village, one of a hundred and thirty-eight saints days scattered throughout the year. The object of veneration on this particular day was Saint Spicolli, the patron saint of those little flecks of dust that get caught in the rays of the morning sun. It was a particular favourite of the villagers as, traditionally, it signified the end of winter and this year, for many, it also felt like the end of a great ordeal.

If there was one thing the people of Potokini knew how to do, it was celebrate their saints. Gaily decorated market stalls filled the square as traders from surrounding villages touted their wares. Cloths and fabrics of many colours hung from wooden frames, and everywhere exotic gastronomic creations sizzled and spat over glowing coals, releasing the sensual aroma of herbs and spices with the sole intention of beguiling passers-by. Three sailors had laid out a blanket and covered it with intricate carvings in bone and wood. The oldest and crustiest of the three sat on the ground whittling, while his friends engaged heartily with the passing throng.

At the end of the day, the nautical trio packed up their wares and dropped anchor at the bar. The place was

heaving. Aldo Macone had set the evening swinging with free drinks for all. Macone was an overseer on the Estate of Tortel, or what was left of it. There had been a time when it was virtually impossible to leave the village without crossing land owned by the former Mayor, but debt had eroded his holdings. Now you needed a map and a magnifying glass just to find his property.

'Our shipmate comes from Toravilla. He is going home to die,' said one of the younger sailors in answer to a natural question.

'To die, you say? Is he ill?' enquired Macone.

The sailor shrugged: 'I do not think so, but he is old and has not the will to live.'

'Tell me, for now I am fascinated,' said Macone, 'what kind of life could lead a man to such desperate thoughts?'

'Fill our glasses, friend, and we will tell all about this salty old sea dog.'

The patrons of the bar cheered their approval and all-around glasses were hastily brimmed. The sailors began their stories honestly enough, but, as their willing audience urged them on, so the tales started to grow taller. The ancient mariner sat in silence with his back to the rest of the bar, his posture becoming more and more hunched each time the eyes of the crowd returned to him.

His companions seemed to know much of this man and imparted more of his life than most would be willing to disclose. The coarse graining of his grey leathery skin and straw-like whiskers gave him the appearance of a large sea mammal, a fact not lost on his shipmates as they recounted tale after tragic tale with comic relish. The crowd were delighted, finding amusement in every line, and residual chuckles started to fill the shortening gaps between hearty belly laughs.

Suddenly the old sailor slammed his glass down upon the counter.

'Damn you,' said the Walrus. 'You have turned my life into a storybook tale.'

As the room fell silent, he lit his pipe. He turned, and all could see the great sadness in his eyes.

'My life is not some cautionary yarn – a lesson to others,' he said solemnly to himself, before raising his gaze to address the room, 'though if others learn from my mistakes, I shall not be sorry. I remember sitting at the quayside as a lad, watching the tall ships come in, just like it was yesterday. Where did the years go?'

Those last murmured words conveyed his pain so vividly that everyone who heard them could feel the crush of Time upon their hearts.

He took the pipe from his lips and exhaled. A pale, tobacco haze drifted across his face, softening his heavy features.

'I carved this on my first journey,' he said, turning the wooden bowl in his hand to show off the delicately sculpted form of a mermaid, her long tail flowing back into the stem of the pipe. 'Look at her…look at her beauty…she is just like the sea maidens I saw off the Cape.'

Macone laughed out loud.

'I did I tell you!' said the Walrus. In an explosion of rage, he leapt to his feet, cracking his glass on the edge of the bar and thrusting the jagged shards in the direction of Macone.

'I do not like your face,' he growled.

Macone smiled.

'Then we have an accord, sir, for I have never cared much for it either,' he said slapping the bewildered old sea

dog on the back. 'Let me buy you another drink. It seems to me that you carry with you a heavy heart and I do not understand why. Explain your sad demeanour…for I cannot fathom the cause of such heartache.'

'Is it not as clear as the warts on my face? My days are drawing short and soon I will be no more. All that I have done and all that I have seen has made me old before my time. Robbed the years from me it has, for in truth I am probably little older than you,' he said, examining Macone's face, 'but who would guess it?'

'My friend, life is currency to be spent,' said Macone. 'Do not lament the passing years when they have been as full as yours. I am reminded of the Parable of the Talents: he who tries to conserve what he has is destined to lose all. God has no time for those who do not dare greatly. Those who come through life with their original stake intact have forgotten that the measure of a life is not the number of years you live, but the number of moments you are truly alive. When I hear the stories of your adventures I am reminded of how little of life I have savoured. And now you say you are no older than I - that, sir, chills me, for I have not lived one-tenth your life. In fact, of this moment, I resolve every day to fill my life with new experiences, to see the wonders I have heard tell of here tonight, to feel the thrill of danger and, yes, perhaps to find a mermaid of my own to chase.'

And with that Macone finished his drink, walked out of the bar, out of the village and out of our story. As the door swung shut, the Walrus gazed after him in astonishment. The rusty cogs of his mind began to grind and turn. Slowly his expression transformed from puzzlement to epiphany. His back straightened, the hunch that had protruded from beneath his heavy coat melted away, and the lines that had

once furrowed his brow seemed to fall from his face making way for the radiant glow of enlightenment.

'You know, he is right,' said the Walrus to himself in a moment of divine clarity. 'If I have made mistakes in my life it is only because each day is a new adventure. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? My life is extraordinary and to think I almost missed it.'

He turned to the bewildered crowd.

'My friends, I too must go! I am off to find a ship. I feel the need to taste the ocean breeze and to tread once more on virgin shores. How foolish I have been. My life is not over, it is only just beginning. And when many more years have passed then, perhaps, I shall write my memoirs – for mine is a story worth telling.

'Let me say this, be proud of your mistakes for they are a sign that you are growing, striving, living. You heard my friend, spend the currency of your life – there is no interest to be earned by hoarding. Resolve now that you will walk into the arms of God with empty hands and a heart that is overflowing.'

And so the sailor left the bar, twenty years younger than when he had arrived.

The old sailor had no appreciation for the wonders of his life; it took another to open his eyes. Is it not strange that so few of us really step back and examine our passing years and ask: is this what I truly want from my time on this Earth? For some, it is not until the final curtain that they allow themselves the luxury of reviewing their stay on this remarkable planet, only to realise that there is little to celebrate. Sometimes, however, circumstances can conspire to bring such things into sharp focus – as Como Clamenta discovered, with a little help from his journal and the village schoolmistress.

Como was a simple man. His father had worked the fields, as had his father and his father before him. So Como had known from the start what he was destined to do. As a child, Como had little love for school and whenever the opportunity arose, which was more often than not, he would slip away and join his papa labouring beneath the sun. His father did not approve of such behaviour, yet the persistence of a child can often prove greater than the will of an adult and, in the end, it was just too much trouble to try to keep the boy in the classroom.

And so Como grew up unable to read or write. But do not think that this left him in any way disadvantaged, far from it – in Potokini, illiteracy in the working man was as common as rats in old man Lombardi's storeroom. Besides, Como was a handsome man - tall and strong - whose years of toiling in the glory of nature had left his body bronzed and muscular. More than that, he had a playful innocence that endeared him to all he met, particularly the young women of the village. When it came time for him to take a bride, there was no shortage of willing candidates, so it was perhaps just a touch ironic, although not altogether surprising, that this uneducated man should come to choose Isabella, the new schoolmistress.

It is also perhaps not surprising that the first gift the young bride had wanted to give to her new husband was the gift of reading and writing. Como's devotion to Isabella was so great that the task that had seemed so impossibly tedious as a child, now seemed truly magical. And as he read, he discovered a whole new world opening up before him. He read stories that made him laugh out loud or brought a lump to his throat and a tear to his eye. He learned of great men and women who had shaped the

very course of human history. And he read of acts of courage and sacrifice that caused his skin to tingle and his heart to swell with pride.

On their second anniversary, Isabella presented her husband with a leather-bound journal in which, she explained, he could record his actions, his thoughts and his feelings. To him, it was a glorious gift, not just because it came from the person he loved more than life itself, but because it gave him the chance to create a book of his own. Each night, after the dishes had been cleared away, he would open his journal to a blank page and, in his mind, he would go through everything that had happened that day. Then he would meticulously document it all. By the time he had finished, his eyes would be heavy and he would close the journal and go to bed content.

For one full year he followed this routine without fail, but tonight, as he opened his book, he realised that every page was full of words; there was nowhere left to write. In his excitement to fill the tome, he had never actually found the time to go back through it. So he settled back in his chair and, for the first time, started to flick back through the pages of his treasured journal.

What he read left him dumbfounded.

His body froze. Slowly the journal tipped and fell from his hands, his eyes still fixed on the space it had occupied, as he tried to come to terms with the realisation that every page was identical. His whole existence summed up in just a few paragraphs – one day, repeated endlessly.

In that moment Como had come to the same realisation as the old sailor: that a life should not be measured in days, but what makes up those days. The days themselves are merely markers, counting down relentlessly; it is how we choose to fill them that makes all the difference.

Chapter 8.

Love Amongst the Cheap Seats

With Lily's passing, Panchet was placed under the guardianship of his grandmother, though the situation was far from ideal. Andretta effortlessly managed the day-to-day affairs of the estate without fuss or drama, but her relationship with the boy would never be close. Try as she might, she could not forget or forgive the wicked act perpetrated by the boy's father against his beloved brother. And, though she knew the child was not to blame, there was just too much of his father in him for her to ever be able to give him the affection he needed.

Each morning she would pack him off to Signor Bartoli's picture house and there he would stay, mesmerized, until the final credits had rolled and the gentle clatter of the spinning reels had ceased. He always knew he had a secure home to come back to, but, denied the love he so badly craved, Panchet regressed further and further into the escapism of the celluloid world.

Despite being the sole heir of the Ramdinkka estate, Panchet showed little interest in the farm. The fields reminded him of the parents he had lost and that memory stung like the wicked wasps that crawled from the eaves above his bedroom window. By contrast, the movie

theatre was warm and inviting. It was a world where good and evil always knew their place. His daily pilgrimage to the picture house would become sacrosanct and, in time, he would come to fall in love with Leela, the usherette, the only woman he ever took the trouble to get to know. Her generosity with the popcorn was unparalleled and, just as he had a special place in his heart for her, so she had a special place for him – 11F, the best seat in the house.

When he wasn't enveloped in the dream-like darkness of the cinema, Panchet would sit at the café killing time between screenings, while passive thoughts meandered aimlessly through his mind, harmless and unaffected. On occasion he would be treated to the antics of Volio the Mime as he followed his unwary victims around the village square, mercilessly mimicking their every mannerism - puffing out his cheeks and belly as he swaggered around behind one stout gentleman or putting on the affectations of the ladies who hurried home at dusk. Panchet always enjoyed the spectacle. To him, Volio followed in the great silent tradition of Chaplin and Keaton. For every impersonation that raised a smile, Panchet would toss him a silver coin and the powder-faced urchin would scrabble to pick it up, making all manner of bows and gestures of appreciation as he did so.

Panchet's routine barely changed, year in, year out. With each passing season, the picture house slid ever further into disrepair and the rows of plush burgundy seats that had once seemed fit for royalty were increasingly threadbare, stained and crusty. But to Panchet this was still home, and home, as they say, is where the heart is. For Panchet, this was doubly true, for here he could also be with the one person who had captured his heart. Between the movies and his blossoming opium addiction, there was

hardly time for a marriage ceremony; yet as Panchet and Leela walked down the central aisle of the picture palace towards Father Crespo, with the image of Valentino's Sheik flickering above his head, Panchet felt confident that he had made the right choice.

Unlike his father, Panchet was a passionate lover, a student of Valentino and the stars of the silver screen. His kisses were the envy of every pillow in the house and, as soon as Leela had filled in the gaps in his knowledge[1], they set about producing three fine children: Joshua, his brother Gilbert and their sister Olivia.

It has been observed that the arrival of children changes everything, and so it was for Panchet and Leela. The trips to the movie house stopped abruptly and, with his grandmother's health failing, Panchet steeled himself to take over the running of the family business in earnest. It was not something he relished, yet he accepted it as a necessary evil, for the sake of his children. The escapism of his childhood was left behind and now the real world stood before him like a mugger in a darkened alley.

Leela left the employment of the Bartoli's to raise her children, but domestic life never really suited her. Reality was a far cry from the romantic visions of the silver screen. She would sit with a babe in arms and stare at the world, framed through the bedroom window, silent in her thoughtfulness. However, unlike her husband, she had the imagination to wonder. Consequently, her thoughts were vibrant and filled with life – the life that seemed so far beyond her reach. Heroes and heroines played out romantic scenes in her head whenever she chose, but she was only ever a spectator, detached from the amorous adventures for which she longed.

[1] The bits his hero had so gracefully skipped over.

She tried to convince herself that these feelings would pass and that her new life would bring its own sense of fulfilment, but, as the days turned to years, it was resentment and frustration that established themselves as the predominant emotions in her life. Seemingly trapped by a society incapable of understanding the things that moved her soul, she found her excursions into the world of fantasy becoming ever more frequent.

One day she was returning from the market with her wicker basket looped over her arm, brimming with provisions. She had chosen to prolong the journey home, as she often did, by detouring through the narrow side streets. The ancient stone walls created a claustrophobic canyon around her and washing lines zigzagged from window to window above her head. Through each open aperture, a soap opera sounded out: domestic banter, accusing voices, sounds of passion, the banshee cries of a wayward child. Leela drank it all in. She loved this world of disembodied words where every voice was an actor playing out a role, just for her. Everything she heard was instantly gathered up by her fertile imagination and woven into an intricate tapestry of love and loss.

So consumed was she with this fantasy that she didn't notice the elderly gentleman ambling towards her with his head down. In the ensuing collision, an orange dislodged itself from the top of the precarious pile of groceries and dropped to the ground. It came to rest at the old man's feet. Before Leela could say a word, he bent down, picked up the errant fruit, and handed it back to her with a courteous tip of his hat. She thanked him and rearranged the top layer of her basket. As she looked up, she noticed something quite unexpected. Something she had no recollection of ever seeing before. There in front of her,

like a shadow within a shadow, was a strange little passageway. She blinked her eyes, half-expecting it to be a trick of the light, but there it remained.

The village had a reputation for being as capricious as its inhabitants. For the longest time, there had been rumours of buildings and, indeed, entire streets disappearing once they had reached the end of their useful life, only to reappear again if they were ever needed. First, they would disappear from sight, then from memory – much as humans do. Science would have surely struggled to explain such a phenomenon and likely dismissed it out of hand; although, it has always struck me as a rather elegant solution to the problem of urban blight.

Leela had never really placed much stock in such stories. Still, her curiosity was piqued, and she found herself drawn to explore the alleyway, wondering who would want to frequent such a place. As the cool shadows gripped her, she pulled her shawl tight around her shoulders, yet it was not the cold that caused her body to tingle. Her mind was already filling with the animated image of this curious little slot in the wall sealing itself up behind her, leaving her forever trapped in a murky netherworld.

The alleyway did not close behind her because things that exciting seldom happen in real life. To one side of her, the wall was continuous and featureless. On the other, things were marginally more interesting. There were three small windows of three small shops, and three small doors, through which one could enter those establishments.

The first window was patterned with smears and swirls where somebody had obviously expended not quite enough effort chasing the dirt and grime around the pane

with a cloth. Beyond this veil of filth, she could make out a collection of handmade clay pipes of the kind favoured by labourers before cigarettes had become so fashionable. These plain, unadorned creations sat languishing under decades of dust.

She moved on to the next window and the sight of a rather magnificent orrery – an exquisite mechanical model of the heavens fashioned from brass and dulled by the patina of time. As Leela looked more closely she realised that the Earth had been placed at the centre of the Solar System with all other planets tracing their clockwork orbit around it. It was an extraordinary machine, but ultimately of only fleeting interest to her.

The final window, by contrast, proved to be a revelation. There, in the gloom, stood an artist's easel, in front of which sat a splendid mahogany box filled with brushes and tubes of paint, all neatly arranged. For the first time since leaving the picture house, Leela felt a sudden flush of excitement.

Chapter 9.

A Gathering Storm

The estrangement between Panchet and his grandmother continued until the very end. Even the arrival of his children failed to bring about a reconciliation. Panchet and Andretta inhabited separate wings of the great house and some have suggested that they arranged their daily routines to deliberately avoid one another. As far as I have been able to tell there was no animosity between them, and their ability to avoid each other seems, to me, to have been more instinctual than conscious. When Andretta eventually passed away peacefully in her sleep, Panchet was one of the last in the village to know.

Her passing was a significant event in the lives of the villagers. She was considered the matriarch of the village - more respected even than the mayor. On the day of her funeral, a hearse, drawn by two magnificent black stallions with plumed headdresses, sombrely carried her coffin through the streets of the village. Flowers rained down upon the carriage from the windows above, and, out of every doorway, people flocked to join the procession. Like a black serpent, they trailed the hearse out of the village to Andretta's church.

As the mourners found their places, Panchet, his wife and their three children sat on the rearmost pew, separate from the rest of the congregation and screened behind one of the mighty marble columns, as if they were nothing more than distant relations.

Father Crespo sat on a hassock on the curving stairs of the pulpit; his feet immersed in a steaming bowl of unction.

'Death! Death has come to our village,' he wailed, waving his hands theatrically from his seat on the narrow stone steps; his wild hair tinted by the light from the stained glass above. 'Life, death. Death, life. It makes you think, doesn't it? Are we all doomed? Maybe? Can you see what is coming? Can you see it? Not the Wrath of God, but the folly of man.'

The congregation looked at each other, unsure of where the priest was going with this and wondering when he was going to get around to mentioning Andretta. In truth, the villagers were starting to become accustomed to Father Crespo's eccentric behaviour and mystifying outbursts. Most assumed that he had merely succumbed to an advanced state of religion. Many even considered this *de rigueur* for a man of God moving into his twilight years.

'This land is run by idolaters and madmen leading us all along a treacherous path to ruin. Hypocrites and bastards to a man,' the priest ranted, as the carnivorous cicada feasted on his bulbous ankles. 'They have no respect for the sanctity of life. No upstanding Christian could condone such an attitude. We must smite them down before they unleash another plague upon this land. If I were not afflicted by the throbbing giblets, a heart like a powder puff, and chronic piles I would journey to the capital myself and kick their lily-white arses.'

He then went on to offer complete absolution in the name of the Lord for any sin or crime committed while carrying out this somewhat dubious *holy crusade* to rid the land of these laggards.

What had happened to that innocent young man who had strolled into the village all those years ago with high ideals and a lust for life? Yet, we could ask the same of the world at large. When Father Crespo had first arrived in the village, the world had been a simpler place, filled with quaint notions like decency, honour and chivalry. Tragically, just a few short years later, Europe had found itself at the epicentre of one of the largest mass exterminations of human life ever known: the Great War. It was supposed to be the War to End All Wars, which, of course, it didn't. Innocence had been the first casualty, while honour and chivalry were left battered and bloody in the bottom of a muddy ditch. Decency, meanwhile, was taken out and shot by the crackpot generals who couldn't tell the difference between a human life and the tin soldiers they played with as children.

The horrors of war must play on the mind of a man like Father Crespo, who has dedicated his life to teaching people to see the good in one another.

On the day of Andretta's funeral, the storm clouds were once again gathering over Europe. War loomed, ready to cast its shadow over a new generation. Is it possible, I wonder, that Father Crespo had foreseen what was coming when he issued his prophetic call to action?

Chapter 10.
The Creeping War

At the tender age of twelve, Gilbert was wandering through the cornfields with his mother's wicker basket in hand when he came face to face with a Nazi. In an instant, he saw that these men were evil as they stood before him gnawing at the corn cobs they had stolen from the fields. This disgusted him greatly as he knew that maize was only fit for animals. After that incident, Gilbert would not venture out of the house. Instead, he would sit at the window of his room and watch the soldiers return, day after day, pillaging and plundering from the land of his father – land which had so little left to give. Through those first months of the war, Gilbert grew to hate the Nazis, being of the strong opinion that no nation should align itself behind a small man with a poor haircut. The warnings had been there for all to see, if only they had learnt from their history – take Imperial France in the early nineteenth century. Then there was that moustache…

It was all so obvious.

With a festering hatred inside, Gilbert became consumed with the desire to fight the tyranny. During the latter years of the war, he tried increasingly bizarre ways

to join the resistance, but the false beards and ridiculously penned chest hair could not disguise the fact that he was a mere child. This rejection simply frustrated and enraged his young blood and he would take his sister's dolls and fashion effigies of the Nazi leadership from them, before brutally stabbing them with a shrimp fork.

Joshua, by contrast, was a quiet boy who would sit for hours in the shade of the old yew tree, gazing across the fields, blissfully unaware of the hustle and bustle around him. His father despaired of him, convinced that his mind was broken and, in the end, he could bring himself to feel nothing but pity for the boy.

But behind what his father saw as a vacant stare was a ceaselessly inquiring mind, absorbing everything that touched his senses. In Joshua's world, everything was a marvel, everything was a mystery – created for he alone to unravel. And if adults could not grasp such things it was because they had not the will or desire to see what was right in front of them. Their gaze had become dulled to the splendour of the world, while he drank it all in, in wide-eyed wonder. And it is with this in mind that we must view certain episodes in Joshua's young life, such as his failed attempt to create powdered egg by dehydrating a chicken, which were viewed with incredulous despair by those closest to him as they failed to appreciate the rigorous logic that had brought about such experiments.

Perhaps a mother might be expected to see past outer appearances. Perhaps the bond of blood should afford some greater insight – though why that should be I cannot say. But Leela was wrestling with her own demons. She had struggled and failed to come to terms with the mundane routine of family life. Now she spent her days out in the fields with her cherished paintbox and easel,

capturing the world on canvas, not as it was but as it should be. She painted dramatic vistas where lovers embraced for all eternity, silhouetted against the flaming sky. So lost was she to this world of make-believe that when her children came to her she would sweep them aside with a thoughtless comment or gesture.

Through such acts, Joshua came to learn that he was of less value to his mother than the paper and paints on which she lavished her time and attention. In a heartfelt attempt to win back her favour, he constructed his own easel, of sorts, from offcuts of wood. Then he broke open the jar in which he kept the coins he had earned running errands, and took the meagre stash down to the village and exchanged the lot for an artist's sketchbook and some pencils. From then on, each morning, he would follow his mother to the field and set himself up beside her. The two would work in silence. She would never acknowledge his presence because, in the celluloid-fuelled world of her imagination, such reminders of reality were not permitted.

She would never come to realise that the child she had brought into the world had a rare gift. For, as his mother painted lost horizons in rich, bold strokes of colour, her son sketched in astonishing detail those things which delighted his mind.

He watched the birds and was awestruck by such a miracle. He wondered at the majesty of the soaring hawk, the sweet song of the nightingale, and the serenity of the owl - the wisest of all creatures.

He would examine the flowers and wonder at the perfection of nature's design. And he would sit for hours mesmerised by the insects. To Joshua, these remarkable creatures seemed most closely to resemble man-made

machines. He surmised that these were the prototypes on which the Lord had honed his engineering skills and he wondered if this could be the chink in God's grand design that could reveal to him the workings of all living things. So when Joshua pulled the legs from a beetle it was not with spite or malicious intent, but with a genuine curiosity as his mind wrestled with the intricacies of such a creation. In his sketchbook he made exquisitely detailed drawings of each limb and then pictured reassembling them in his mind's eye.

Throughout those dark years, while the world at large succumbed to the insanity of war, the people of the village continued as best they could, whilst their uninvited guests goose-stepped their way around the square and draped huge flags of black and red from the walls of the town hall.

Every few months a truck would turn up to collect a fresh group of young men who would be given the honour to fight and die for a country that had never shown any interest in them, in a war instigated by ageing madmen a thousand miles away. Joshua remembered those mornings well. They began with the sobs and wails of distraught mothers, followed by the rapid footsteps of army issue boots on cobblestones as the soldiers rounded up the next group of unwilling volunteers. Vivid in Joshua's memory was one particular autumn morning when the drizzle saturated his hair and left it clinging in clumps before his eyes. As he wiped the sodden strands away, he saw two boys, who had once bullied him in the schoolyard, forced into the back of the unmarked grey truck. As he watched, he had to remind himself that these were the same boys

who had towered over him in the playground - they had looked so grown up then, so much bigger than him - yet, as he watched the truck pull away, all he could see were the faces of frightened and confused children and he felt a deep unease.

News of the war filtered back only in snippets. The villagers were vaguely aware that they were winning, though what the prize was seemed unclear. The only certainty was that with each passing season there was less food on their plates and fewer young men to plant the seeds and harvest the crop.

Occasionally, warplanes would scream overhead. At those moments, the workers in the fields would raise their faces to the sky, more in reproach than interest or fear. As soon as the aircraft were out of sight, they would sombrely return to their labours. A notice was posted on the town hall door advising that, on the sound of the church bells, all villagers should make their way to their cellars and stay there until the bells rang the *all clear*. Of course, no one really took any notice. The planes that flew over the village were considered an unwelcome annoyance but little more. That was until the night that Joshua was awoken by the distant chiming of the bells.

At first, he thought he had overslept. He struggled to open his eyes and even then the rest of his body refused to acknowledge that he was awake. He peered over the covers towards the window. There was no hint of light through the shutters. A chill shot down his back. Perhaps the sound of the bells was not real, a ghostly calling, chiming only for him in the dead of night. What did it mean?

He pulled the sheets up around his neck and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. As he lay perfectly still, he was aware

that beneath the peal of the bells there was another sound: a monotonous drone rising in volume, until it was a thunderous roar. Then suddenly it was no longer continuous, instead, it was broken – a mechanical coughing and spluttering.

Seized by a rush of adrenaline, Joshua leapt from his bed and ran barefoot across the cold marble floor to the window. He threw open the shutters. What he saw electrified him.

Every inch of his skin seemed to prickle and fizz.

It was not fear, but it felt very much like fear.

It was not exhilaration, but it was close enough to make you wonder.

He found himself looking head-on at a bomber, a tongue of flame streaming out behind one wing, lighting up the whole side of the fuselage. Even in those first breathless few seconds, Joshua knew it was coming for him. He didn't even think to run. This was a moment that had the mark of destiny running right through it like the words through a stick of rock. He drew a deep breath of defiance believing for a minute that it would come right through his bedroom wall – though, from the size of the thing, it would likely level the whole house. But the plane was falling ever faster…

Falling…

Until finally it pitched down a few hundred meters away, just behind the old hay barn, sending a column of flame high into the night sky.

Joshua turned and ran from the bedroom. As he did so, he was aware of his parents' frantic voices and the wails of his sister. Outside, his bare feet struggled to find purchase on the loose dry earth. He stumbled and grazed his knee on a broken flagstone, one of the many that created a

pointless stepping stone path across the yard, but he was soon up again and moving fast. The ground sloped gently towards the barn, causing him to rapidly pick up speed. As he rounded the corner, he had to bring himself to an abrupt halt to avoid casting himself onto the fire.

The shattered fuselage was a raging inferno and only the tip of one wing remained undefiled by the kiss of flame. He took a step forward and another, ever closer, trying to see inside the cockpit. He was aware that he was in the presence of Death and he wanted to look Death in the face. The heat started to sear his eyes, yet still he edged forward. Finally, his progress was forcibly restrained by an unwelcome arm across his torso. Signor Calmera, one of the labourers on the estate, pulled him back from the scorching flames, gathered him up under his arm and carried him unceremoniously back to the farmhouse.

Joshua remembered nothing else of that evening. The next morning he awoke on top of the covers of his bed. Outside there was much activity as his father surveyed the damage to his property, which seemed to extend to the collapsed roof of the old barn and a rather nasty crack that had opened up in the gable wall of the farmhouse itself. Joshua bypassed this and joined the small crowd that was staring at the smouldering expanse of ash behind the barn. All around, huge chunks of charred and twisted metal littered the ground – some identifiable, others just formless lumps half-buried in the dirt. He pushed his way to the front of the gathering and sat himself down and did not move for the rest of the day.

Chapter 11.

Grand Designs

The memory of that night was the clearest of Joshua's young life. It was, of course, a momentous event in its own right; yet, as he cast his mind back over those years, he realised it had also marked a turning point. From that day on, the soldiers had stopped coming to the farm. It was about a week later that Joshua finally plucked up the courage to go out by himself and play in the fields. He remained understandably wary – there were still many soldiers billeted in the village and he could not rule out the possibility of them returning to the estate. He told himself he must be vigilant as he rounded the barn, then he spied a fox and all thoughts of caution were gone.

The chase was exhilarating: the frustration of losing your quarry, then the sudden rush as you glimpse it once more. Of course, he couldn't even get close to the sleek orange flash as it darted in and out of the tousled stems, but that was never the point – this was about the feeling of sheer joy. It was a feeling that kept him running and jumping even when the fox was gone and he was in pursuit of nothing but shadows.

When all the youthful energy had been expended and he'd run himself to a standstill, Joshua turned to look back

across the fields. He could see the rooftops of the village in the distance. The farmhouse was out of sight. By his own reckoning, he was at least a brisk twenty-minute walk from home and the sun was already setting. He was about to turn back when he heard a hollow popping sound. It was difficult to tell exactly where it was coming from, but it brought to mind the circus and the image of a prancing clown with a ribbon of firecrackers tucked into his pants. He was still trying to figure out what it could be when there was a flash on the horizon. Moments later he felt the ground shake beneath his feet. Without a second thought, Joshua started to run towards the village. Suddenly he felt awfully alone and terribly, terribly vulnerable. After ten minutes, it felt like a dagger had pierced his side and his heart was trying to punch a hole through his chest. He chanced a glance backwards and discovered that the soft glow illuminating the sky behind him was not the last remnants of the setting sun but the fires which now raged beyond the distant hills.

When at last he reached the village he found a comedy of activity: soldiers trying to load everything they could into the waiting trucks while simultaneously pulling on boots and jackets. Between the town hall and the waiting vehicles, officers were marshalling their men, barking orders and waving their arms. Whether, in the noise and confusion, anyone was really able to take in what was being said was doubtful. In frustration, one of the officers grabbed a young recruit by the scruff of the neck and shoved him violently towards a waiting half-track. The oversized helmet on the soldier's head slipped forward over his eyes and almost sent him stumbling to his knees. Somehow he managed to stay on his feet. Momentum kept him moving blindly onwards into the hands of his waiting

comrades, who hauled him on board. The villagers watched the whole pantomime through tiny gaps in the curtains, wisely choosing not to draw undue attention to themselves.

By the morning the soldiers were gone.

With the departure of their unwanted guests, village life was able to embark on the slow ascent to normality. Buildings were slowly reclaimed and any articles left by the army were respectfully gathered together and left in the town hall in case they should return.

With the soldiers gone, Joshua found himself spending much more time in the village than he had ever done before the army arrived. But he was older now and perhaps a touch more adventurous. He even got himself a regular job running errands for Signor Lombardi. The work was not too taxing; a pile of boxes would appear at the back door of the shop each morning and Joshua was then expected to deliver them as swiftly as possible. Even carrying one box at a time, he could usually complete his round in an hour or so. The little bit of money this generated was more than sufficient to keep him in pencils and paper, so he appropriated a new jar from the pantry, the kind with the rubber seal that was used to preserve fruit, and started saving once more.

The café in the square was his favourite delivery destination, which was handy as it invariably featured on his route. He would always make it the last stop, just so he could linger there. He had come to love the aroma of freshly ground coffee, but it was more than just the smell that captivated him. The ambience of the place made it feel terribly grown-up and deliciously sophisticated. He would sit, out of view of the patrons, on the edge of the long terracotta troughs which held the bushy green shrubs that

screened the café-dwellers from passers-by.

From this vantage point, Joshua could eavesdrop on the most private conversations with impunity. He found constant amusement listening to the young men awkwardly trying to woo their female companions, or the old men heatedly arguing about things that didn't seem to have anything to do with them at all. But there was one conversation that stood out in his memory. This particular conversation was neither amusing nor highly charged. In fact, it was little more than idle gossip, yet the words gripped him all the same. The conversation concerned the village's recently departed guests. It described how the retreating army had left behind them a dump of supplies somewhere along the Ciarlegio highway: empty gas cans, replacement parts for trucks and tanks, and darkly foreboding items whose purpose could only be speculated upon – according to the speaker. To Joshua, this was like being handed a treasure map and finding out that X is only a short walk away. He set out early the next morning and, ignoring the obvious perils, resolved to seek out this glorious booty.

The depot was further from the village than he had anticipated though it was not difficult to find. He just kept following the Ciarlegio highway and there it was, hastily erected on a fork in the road. The first thing he spotted was the giant sentry tower that rose menacingly above the tree line and he found himself wondering whether you could see the village from this lofty perch. He briefly considered climbing the match-stick structure, just to see what he could see, but even looking up at it made his head swim.

The whole facility covered a surprisingly large area and was surrounded by three concentric barbed wire fences

creating an impenetrable defensive perimeter. At least it would have been impenetrable were it not for the large gaping entrance that now stood unguarded except for a solitary wooden barrier. As he approached the entrance, Joshua found himself confronted by a stark sign, declaring 'Danger of Death!' and depicting a stick man being flung through the air by an explosion. If this was meant as a deterrent, it failed to trouble Joshua, who, recognising that the *danger of death* was an occupational hazard for anyone who happens to be alive, found the message somewhat redundant.

Next to the entry barrier was a small guardhouse. Unfortunately, all that was left inside was a clipboard stuffed with forms, typed in German, which he could not decipher. As he stepped into the compound itself, he was suddenly overcome with a feeling of awe and wonder. Whereas other children might find delight in the majesty of the confectioner's art, Joshua had an inexplicable fascination for twisted and corroded metal objects. He sifted through the mechanical debris and found himself daring to dream. His mind once again stepped out boldly into a boundless realm of imagination and he felt himself gasp as he contemplated the unthinkable – imitating God himself. The irreverence of the notion scared him, yet it was irresistible.

Behind the scattered piles of scrap ran a long single-storey hut. The door stood ajar and Joshua cautiously peered inside. This time he was disappointed. Only a few basic tools remained spread across two substantial workbenches. It was clear that the owners had found time to remove the best of the equipment. He made a quick inventory in his mind of what he had seen so far and then he pulled out his sketchbook and began to plan.

When he had finished, he collected the parts he would need, loaded them onto an abandoned trolley cart with a squeaky wheel, and parked it out of sight behind the shed, ready to collect when time and opportunity permitted. Whatever happened he knew he must get these precious items out quickly, before the grown-ups came and closed the fun factory down.

By the next morning, the trolley cart with its prized cargo had magically found a new home in the old hay barn. The corrugated steel roof had conveniently collapsed in such a way as to form an effective partition. The space behind this screen became Joshua's private workshop.

To supplement his haul from the army depot, he began to collect tins and jars and old cogs ready for the day when he could begin work on his homage to the Creator.

Chapter 12.

A Spark Extinguished

The Allies are coming! The news spread around the village faster than a collection plate at mass. Soon Potokini would be liberated. And while nobody was really sure what being liberated entailed, general opinion held that it was probably a good thing.

The next day, just after noon, Gilbert raced through the town square shouting, 'They are here! They are here!'

The villagers poured out onto the streets, some carrying baskets of food and bottles of wine, others carrying flowers. The young women working in the bar threw off their aprons and fussed with their hair. A conga line spontaneously appeared and started snaking through the crowd, while elderly couples waltzed around the square. The party atmosphere was infectious, and everyone found themselves engaging in what would have been, in less exceptional times, terminally embarrassing behaviour.

By the time an American jeep sped into view, followed by two trucks, the festivities were in full swing. From the passenger seat of the lead vehicle, a soldier, whose appearance and general demeanour suggested he was probably an officer, waved coolly to the cheering crowd.

The convoy thundered across the square and out the other side. Within seconds they were gone. Still, not being the kind of folks to pass up the opportunity for a celebration, the wine flowed, the food was consumed and the dancing continued until the sun had set. And thus Potokini was liberated.

With that, for the village at least, the war was over. Of the thirty-four bewildered young men that had left to fight for something that no one could quite explain, not one of them returned. In the church, the priest placed a book which listed, in beautiful illuminated text and gold leaf, the names of those who had fallen. And it stays in the entrance to this day as a reminder that no matter how hard you may try to live a decent, unassuming life, we are none of us immune to the madness of mankind.

Joshua continued his covert scavenging activities, determined to complete his grand design. His job running errands for Signor Lombardi had allowed him to save a respectable sum and he used the money to buy some large sheets of paper on which he meticulously planned his creation. He also managed to finagle a rather splendid journal, bound in midnight blue leather. He intended to document the project, but, in his impatience to finish, he never quite got around to it. In the heat of the afternoon, while others slept, he would slip away to the barn. Behind the rust-streaked corrugated sheets that made up the false wall of his secret workshop, he would toil on his project. Sometimes it was only the dinnertime cries of his mother that would bring him back from his labours.

With nature serving as his inspiration, his plan was to construct an elaborate and intricate machine that would

bedazzle the children of the village and win him the respect and admiration of his peers. Determined to achieve the highest degree of anatomical accuracy, he pulled out his old sketchbook and carefully went back over his drawings. Then he started to forage around in the dark corners of the barn for live specimens so that he might study their movements in yet greater detail.

With his blueprint now complete, Joshua was ready to begin work on the scrap metal creation. As he cast a final critical eye over his design, there was a nagging sense that his dream could be so much greater. After much soul-searching, he took up his marking pencil and increased every measurement on the page by an order of magnitude, then finally leant back in satisfaction.

The supply dump was now in the hands of the local militia and Joshua was forced to search through garbage for the parts he needed to complete his work. But he knew his plan would never come to fruition if his creativity was constrained by the contents of a trash can. So stealthily, and by cover of darkness, objects from around the village started to go astray. The starter motor from the rusting tractor that lay dormant in the corner of his father's yard was barely missed; the battery from Tito Trevioti's Motorini caused somewhat more consternation, and when all the chicken wire in the village suddenly vanished there was one hell of a fuss – not least because there were now several hundred disgruntled hens roaming free through the streets of Potokini.

As the mechanical contraption grew, so the corrugated sheet that formed the temporary wall was slowly edged back to accommodate Joshua's ever-expanding vision. Only an inch here and an inch there, for Joshua knew he dare not risk exposing his project. It is a testament to the

defective mental processes of his father, that Panchet was happy to attribute this reduction in the interior volume of his barn to the effects of a particularly warm spell. So Joshua was able to press on, undiscovered, through the oppressive heat of the day and sometimes, on those nights when sleep eluded him, in the nipping chill of the wee small hours.

As he tightened the final nut and bolt, there was only one decision left to make and, with the village carnival only a few days away, there seemed no better time and place to unleash his creation on an unsuspecting world. On the morning of the carnival, he skillfully moved the mechanical marvel before anyone awoke, concealing it under a tarpaulin next to the route of the procession.

The parade was never a particularly convincing affair and usually consisted of no more than half a dozen horse-drawn carts made up to look like…well, to be quite honest, it was often difficult to tell exactly what they were supposed to be. This year, the first cart to pass by had, apparently, been inspired by Defoe's tale of an island castaway. It was lined with a yellow cloth, presumably to represent sand. The outside of the cart had been liberally daubed with blue & white paint, which we will charitably suggest represented the waves breaking on the shore. In the centre of this lush creation, there had been a rather gaudy cardboard palm tree. However, this had promptly snapped in two as soon as the cart had started moving. Completing this picture of tropical tranquillity was Dr Erasmus Gurney in a grass skirt as Robinson Crusoe. Unfortunately, the bit of the tree trunk still visible from the roadside now looked uncannily like a candle, which left the bewildered bystanders to conclude that the float was supposed to be a giant birthday cake. Although quite

why their local physician was standing on top of it dressed like some kind of rustic fairy, taxed even the most fertile imagination.

As the carts strung themselves out along the route, Joshua saw his chance. The mechanical spider sprang into life with a pneumatic hiss and the whir of gears. The sound alone was enough to cause the crowd to part before him and Joshua was able to pilot his creation onto the street unhindered. The machine lurched its way into a gap between 'Nature's Bounty', which looked like a mobile greengrocer, and the nuns of St. Granola, who had been re-enacting the fall of the walls of Jericho with extraordinary zeal, but who had now been persuaded to stop after several members of the crowd had been injured by flying masonry.

Young Joshua rode astride the mighty contraption, waving to the silenced throng. Women swooned, while the men stood gawking in slack-jawed amazement. The multitude of faces blurred and faded, leaving just one. It stood out as sharply as the creases in Signor Bartoli's stepping-out trousers – the face of Joshua's father. If emotions had a colour, then his were black with searing flashes of scarlet.

Joshua had his moment, but little more. As soon as the procession had reached the end of its route, and before anyone had a chance to talk to the boy, his father hauled him away by the scruff of the neck. Joshua's feet barely touched the ground and, every time he stumbled, he could feel the stiff collar of his shirt cut into his windpipe like a hangman's noose.

The march to the farmhouse seemed to take an eternity with Panchet maintaining a festering silence. Joshua was dragged through the hallway and into his father's study,

where he was left standing dazed and confused. It was the waiting, not knowing, that was so frightening – such is the curse of imagination, it can make the anticipation more terrifying than any punishment. After an excruciating interval, his father returned carrying something in his hands. He set it down in the middle of the desk and Joshua's heart sank.

'What are you doing, boy? You show me up in front of the whole village!'

Joshua's eyes were fixed on the desk as his father paced around. On the table between them sat his treasured sketchbook.

'And what is this?' said his father, picking up the book and waving it in Joshua's face.

'You will never amount to anything. Wasting your time with your…your…scribblings. How do you expect to accomplish anything? You are a waster and a good-for-nothing and you always will be. I can only bless the Lord that I have one son to whom I can entrust this estate. God help us all if the lives of the workers were left in your idiot hands. I hope you never forget this day,' he snarled, removing the thick leather belt with the silver buckle from around his waist.

Gilbert and Olivia sat at the top of the stairs, trembling as they listened to the cries. It was a sound that had not been heard before in this house and they prayed it would not be heard again.

Joshua had never seen his father so angry or felt such fury. In that moment the young boy came to learn that imagination and curiosity could only bring bad things upon him. The next day he collected up his sketchbooks and the neatly folded blueprints of his grand design and placed them in his satchel. Then he walked out to the

water-meadow and stopped by the edge of a flooded channel. He piled the books on a simple raft that he had constructed from fallen branches, bound together with twine, and lowered the vessel into the water. Then, using a magnifying lens that had fallen from his mother's reading glasses, he focused the rays of the sun on the mound of paper. As smoke rose from the covers, he cast the vessel out into open water and watched the coarse parchment char and furl, revealing page after page of his splendid creations. Tears filled his eyes as he recalled his father's words. He felt confused and stupid. It seemed that everything that felt good to him, that fascinated and delighted him, was bad. Now he knew he had been wrong to trust his own feelings. They had betrayed him, and inside he scolded himself for not being able to see the world with the clarity of an adult.

The next few weeks were hard to bear as Joshua tried to fulfil the role of dutiful son, never really knowing what it would take to please his father. It seemed to him that every endeavour was doomed and every well-meaning action, misinterpreted. The harder he tried, the more displeasure he seemed to incur; for what he failed to realise was that his father did not seek reconciliation. To Panchet, Joshua was a lost cause and it seemed only common sense that he invest his precious time grooming Gilbert to take over the family business. By contrast, Joshua's interruptions were considered little more than an annoyance, to be borne with barely concealed contempt.

Joshua was never bitter, he didn't begrudge his brother the attention that was lavished upon him, and he certainly did not resent him being heir to the great estate with all its

attendant duties. What neither he nor his brother could have appreciated was just what a poison chalice that role would prove to be. Panchet, as we know, was no farmer, and it turns out that he was no businessman either. Debts were rising, yields were falling, and yet somehow Panchet managed to remain oblivious to it all.

Chapter 13.

Two Paths Diverged...

It is said that stability and security are essential ingredients for creating a happy, healthy childhood. Now, this may appear a little paradoxical given that we live in a universe of constant and unrelenting change; however, our Maker foresaw this potential snag and circumvented the whole issue by simply disconnecting the human experience from reality. In its place, he provided a fertile playground known as the mind, where we can conjure up any fantasy we desire, even that of 'stability and security'. And, if enough people buy into the same illusion, then it is generally accepted as *reality*.

To Joshua's young mind, however, the world seemed neither stable nor secure. He was constantly seeking answers, but when he looked at those around him, what he saw was a bewildering assortment of fractured and dysfunctional realities that left him feeling increasingly befuddled. Only the local priest seemed to speak with any real conviction about the great mystery of life. But, while his advice sounded fine within the sanctified confines of the church, it never seemed to translate so well to the altogether messier world outside. Reluctant to broach such complex issues with the adults who were so

dismissive of him, Joshua was left trying to piece together his own truth, in much the same way that he had pieced together his tin-pot invention from disparate pieces of junk.

He spent many hours trying to figure out how he fitted into this chaotic and confounding world. Yet, despite all his painful introspection, the only real conclusion he could draw was that he didn't fit in at all and that his family would be better off without him. His father had been very clear on the matter: *the running of the estate should never be entrusted to Joshua*. If that were so, then what point was there in remaining here? He did not feel suited to labouring in the fields and, without some gainful role to fulfil, his presence would be little more than an ongoing irritation to those around him.

Perhaps leaving would be the best thing. Somewhere out there in the world, he reasoned, there must be a place where I make sense. Maybe God had simply delivered him into the wrong family. After all, the postman was always delivering letters to the wrong house and God had a lot more on his plate than the postal service.

On one particular evening in August, as he sat in his room, he realised he had reached a crossroads. The choice before him seemed simple and stark: to stay and try to be the son his father wanted him to be, or to go and set himself free.

When put in those terms, it really shouldn't have been a difficult choice, but the path to freedom was a path into the unknown and that is always a frightening place to go. The mere thought caused his gut to knot and twist in the most uncomfortable way.

Still, he couldn't risk basing such a life-changing decision on a case of indigestion. No, this required, nay

demanded, the most careful consideration. He reached for the blue leather-bound journal and picked up his pen. As he stared at the page, his eyelids started to sag.

At that moment, an owl flew down and perched on the ledge of the open window. Joshua looked up, startled. He was about to shoo the bird away when it hopped from the windowsill to the desk and wandered over to the open notebook.

What are you doing? asked the owl.

'I have an important decision to make,' replied Joshua. 'I need to carefully weigh the benefits and detriments of each path that is open to me.'

The owl nodded sagely.

You do not seem to have got very far? observed the owl, leaning forward to inspect the empty page.

'I have only just begun,' explained Joshua.

Perhaps I could help?

'What do you know of such things?' said Joshua impolitely.

More than you might think. For instance, I know that life cannot be lived for others. Living to please someone else is no basis for a happy, healthy life.

'Ah-ha,' said Joshua.

I might also point out that, while your meticulous and analytical approach is commendable, it may not be the best way, continued the owl.

'What would you suggest?'

Should you not trust your feelings? Listen to your Inner Self - that still, small voice - and allow it to lead you where it will. Only by living in harmony with your Inner Self will you find true peace and happiness.

These words puzzled Johsua.

'Then you think I should leave this place?' he asked,

seeking clarification.

That is for you to decide. The answers are always inside of you, I am merely here to remind you of that fact. I cannot tell you anything that you do not already know. The world is an open book. Your future is an empty page. The pen is poised to write. It is time to make a commitment - to nail your colours to the mast. Let whatever goes down on this first page set the tone for the rest of your life.

Joshua heard these words and they moved him. The primal emptiness of the night seemed to expand within him. He was one with the silence. In that moment, he was aware of the subtlest sensations arising in his body - subtle, but as clear to him as the peal of a bell. They filled him with an aliveness like nothing he had ever experienced before.

'I can feel it!' Joshua shouted, leaping to his feet. 'I can break free.'

The owl hopped excitedly from foot to foot. Joshua collected up his notebook, along with the most treasured and portable of his belongings and stuffed them into his school satchel. Then he sneaked silently into the kitchen to scavenge whatever scraps of food he could find.

He left the farmhouse with the owl flying ahead, leading the way. The moon was preternaturally large, backdropped by a billion pinpricks of light that made the night as bright as day. Joshua moved through scenery that changed seamlessly from the familiar to the unfamiliar to the, frankly, bizarre. He passed trees with purple leaves and yellow trunks, and candy cane cottages wrapped in rainbow stripes. The world was bold and bright, ablaze with primary colours. He looked down at his feet and realised that the road he was standing on was paved with gold. He started to run and skip, and all around he saw the

creatures of the woodland, peering out from behind every bush and tree trunk, speeding him on his way.

He danced along the meandering ribbon of gold for what seemed like hours, and yet his body felt fresh and new. When the road finally ended, he found himself at the edge of a sheer cliff, looking out across the sea. He had never seen the ocean. The sheer scale took his breath away. Then he saw the sails on the horizon. The tinniness of the ships spoke to the vastness of what lay ahead, and he realised this was only a glimpse - there was so much more to explore. From the line of the horizon, a ball of fire was starting to emerge. A new day was dawning - as if this day could be any more brilliant.

Overhead, the owl had been joined by more than a dozen other birds - common species that Joshua knew so well: the sparrow, the blackbird, the crow, and the magpie. Joshua watched in awe as the rays of the rising sun played across their iridescent feathers, revealing the most amazing colours in the most monochromatic plumage. The sun continued its blinding ascent. Joshua raised an arm to his eyes. The scene bleached to white.

He awoke, sprawled across the desk, with the sunlight streaming through the window of his room. His neck was stiff and his back ached from sleeping in such an absurd position. He rubbed his eyes. Through the open window, the sounds of everyday life crowded in.

What a curious dream, he thought to himself.

He looked down at the journal, still open on the table in front of him. There in the middle of the first page was a dollop of bird poop. Joshua scratched his head and went off in search of breakfast.

Act II

The Path of Least Resistance