

The Multiplicity of ‘I’

Exegesis

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Much has been written about the ‘death of the author’⁽¹⁾ and while it stands that the reader does not need to know anything about the author’s life to fully understand or appreciate his or her works, in this case (when the author is the reader and also the commentator of his or her own work) the author cannot be removed from the process.

Roz Ivanič, a linguistics and English language professor, states that:

“all our writing is influenced by our life-histories. Each word we write represents an encounter, possibly a struggle between our multiple past experience and the demands of a new context. Writing[...] implicates every fiber of the writer’s multifaceted being. Who we are affects how we write, whatever we are writing.” (183)

Therefore it stands reasonable that I position myself before I explain the ideas and theories which have shaped The Rain of the Praying Mantis. I was born in Zagreb, a part of Yugoslavia which ceased to exist around my sixth birthday. Due to a civil war the country split and I found myself living in Zagreb the capital of Croatia, which it still is to this day. The Balkan has always been a hotspot ravaged by its own people. Towards the end of the war my family moved to New Zealand. Here I created a new ‘home’ for myself, but the memories of a ‘home’ I once had tainted my perceptions of the new society in which I lived. Upon my return to Croatia, after several years of absence, I realized that the memories of my childhood and the place in which I was born had over the years created a mystical and magical place which no longer, if ever, existed. My return ‘home’ made me realize that I was a stranger to this foreign place called Croatia which was still of great importance to my identity. From this experience The Rain of the Praying Mantis emerged.

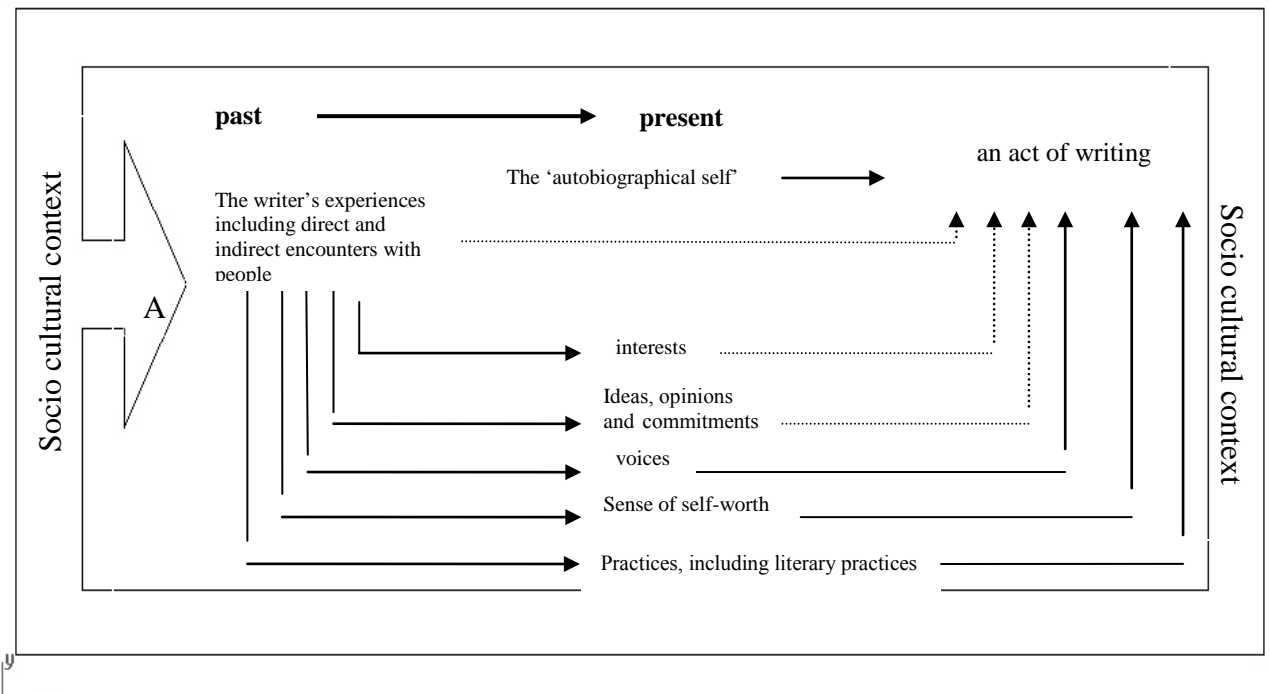


Fig. 1 - The effect of past experience on writing (Ivanič, 183)

All writing, whatever term we cloud it under tends to blur the boundaries between life and fiction. To produce a piece of writing entirely from one's imagination without any help from real life experience is an impossible task. To put it in the words of William Wordsworth

"I cannot say what portion is in truth
The naked recollection of that time,
And what may rather have been call'd to life
By after-meditation." (Burke, 214)

Thus, who I am determines what and who I produce upon a page. One's identity is comprised of many fragments and compartments all in turn informing the whole which makes up each individual human being. What is unique to human beings and what separates them from the rest of the animal world is their ability to consciously consider, construct and discover their own identity with respect to their past experiences, hopes for

the future, societal roles, immediate communication with others and memory. Thus, the human experience is, as Kundera says, “a unified whole like the voices of polyphonic music” (232).

Many diverse fields and theories, such as psychology, philosophy, cultural and social studies among them, concern themselves with the questions of identity and belonging. These questions are difficult to answer as the terms themselves are complex, problematic and contradictory. Every individual is a set of complex, intertwining, inclusive and exclusive categories as well as possessing an exceptionally unique world within their own mind. Psychologist Ulrich Neisser fragments identity into “five modes of self-experience”:

1. The *ecological self*: “The self as perceived with respect to the physical environment.”
2. The *interpersonal self*: “The self as engaged in immediate unreflective social interaction with another person.”
3. The *extended self*: the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing outside the present moment”
4. The *private self*: the self of “conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else”
5. The *conceptual self*: “the extremely diverse forms of self-information – social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person – that posit the self as category, either explicitly or implicitly”(Eakin, 22).

When the contexts within which these five modes of self are created are in tune the identity is stable, secure and experiences a sense of belonging. However, we also know who we are by identifying who we are not. The sense of belonging to a particular community cannot be achieved without the belief that there is the ‘other’ to the ‘self’ which is different. If one perceives oneself to be part of the central majority the identity remains stable. However, if one perceives oneself to be on the margins of the society the self experiences, as Helena C. Buescu a literary critic states, “dissolution of unity” (Buescu and Duarte, 64). When one migrates from one’s original country, or is seen as a migrant due to a different heritage or

place of living, the sense of not belonging and the need to reinvent and adapt the self to a new society is intensified and thus the individual becomes more aware of the notions of self and belonging. A migrant is bound to be changed by the new culture which he comes into contact with, a change which is perhaps best evident when one returns to the original culture and thus faces, upon return, a realization that one is the 'other' to the perceived place of belonging. Ha Jin, a migrant and a writer of fiction who also engages in literary criticism about migration and belonging, draws the conclusions from Greek mythology. Jin states that in his "years of exile, he (Odysseus) has changed and so has his memory of his homeland;...one cannot return to the same place as the same person." (66) Thus, Kataryna quickly realizes, much as Odysseus did, that she is different to the inhabitants of Punta as she has lived in and been shaped by another culture. She is in fact the 'other', a foreigner, an invader, in the place where she was born, Punta.

Marginalisation and exclusion from the central society can arise for numerous reasons, not only migration. As social psychologist Dominic Abrams states "exclusion can arise in several forms or modes, ranging from the ideological to the physical, communicative, and purely cognitive." (Abrams, Hogg, Marques, 13) The title of the novel stems from a natural phenomena which splits the inhabitants of Punta, but it is a metaphor for any hardship which falls upon the people and forces lines of differentiation to be drawn. There are those in Punta whose houses are not invaded by the praying mantises (a minority) and those whose houses are invaded (a majority) thus creating a point of differentiation between the inhabitants who otherwise share the same language, culture and history. As the invasion of the praying mantises intensifies and continues, frustration grows and manifests itself in the aggression of the two brothers upon the old shopkeeper and his wife (Tovic, 64-66). The old shopkeeper and his wife do not react to the aggression as "[o]stracism, rejection,

exclusion – no matter what label we give it is extremely unpleasant to receive”(Abrams, Hogg, Marquez, 64) and the individuals who find themselves in this situation “report lower levels of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence” (Abrams, Hogg, Marquez, 58) Thus, if one identifies oneself as being on the margins of the society, not part of the central majority, it is hard to feel that one belongs to this society and the self experiences “dissolution of unity, hybridity, dislocation in time and space, multiplicity and is in a haunted process of dis-remembering and re-remembering”(Buescu and Duarte, 64); a state familiar to all those who in one way or another perceive themselves to be the ‘other’ to the society in which they live.

As Kataryna is a migrant she returns to the place of her birth in order to once again associate herself with the society in which she perceives herself to be part of the central majority. Ha Jin speaks of the individual migrant’s understanding of his or her homeland. He says, that “[c]onventionally, a person’s homeland is his country of origin, to which he longs to return no matter where he goes. A Chinese proverb summarizes this longing: ‘Gold nests and silver nests, none is as nice as your own straw nest.’” (65) Punta is a place like many other which dot the Mediterranean coast, but Kataryna’s emotional connection, as the place where her identity was stable and secure, makes it rise from obscurity. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, who concern themselves with the research of heritage sites and its impact upon tourists and locals alike, state that “sites are never simply locations. Rather they are sites for someone and of something” (11). Before Kataryna encounters any other characters she comes upon her grandmother’s house, the mere sight of which evokes in her memories of her childhood so strong that she is able to live through them again. She comes upon “the frozen monument” in its “sterile vestigial state”(Waterton, Watson, 12), but is able, by stimulating her memories, beliefs and emotions, to “engage politics,

dissonance, and the essence of culture as a process of knowledge production that is at once concrete and prefigured yet also challenged, negotiated, provisional and subjective” (Waterton, Watson, 4). Kataryna can be seen as what Watson and Waterton call “identity builders” (26). They define “identity builders” as “those visiting the site to strengthen their identity” (26)

Kataryna must return to what she considers to be her Origin, her birthplace Punta, in order to be able to discover the memories which have shaped her identity. She must face the past, return back, in order to be able to move forward with her life. Paffenroth, a religious scholar and a literary critic, states that “[e]pistemologically the order of the cosmos can be rightly understood only by a person who seeks a return to the Origin.” (212), but he defines the Origin through the Platonist’s “*exitus-reditus* scheme” which states that “as all things come forth (*exitus*) from God, so do all things return (*reditus*) to him.” (Paffenroth, 213) Therefore, it can be seen that “[i]n this Platonist ascent to the Origin, then, the way forwards is the way back.” (Paffenroth, 213). On the other hand, philosopher and one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers, Locke looks at the Origin of self as being tied to one’s mind and memory. He states that “as far as the consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person” (119/20) Thus, only by searching through memory and knowing where one has come from can one begin to understand oneself and the world that surrounds one. Kataryna must return order to be able to discover the memories which have shaped her identity. She must face the past, return back, in order to be able to move forward with her life.

In philosopher Gerald E. Myer’s words, “we use the memories as data for reinspecting our present selves in terms of what we know and are now, for reinterpreting our present selves

of what we knew and were then”(129). Thus, it becomes evident that in remembering there are two selves present: the present self remembering and the past self that is remembered. As Kataryna stands before the gate of her grandmother’s old house she remembers herself as a child on a rainy day exploring it and immediately two Kataryna’s emerge: one of present and one of the past childhood. (The tense of the narrative also follows the protagonist’s movement through time shifting from the present to the past tense.) This idea is in tune with philosopher David Hume’s theory who suggests that

“every member of the series either would, given certain conditions, contain as an element a memory of some experience which is an element in some previous member, or contains as an element in some experience memory of which would, given certain conditions, occur as an element in some subsequent member; there being no subset of members which is independent of the rest.”(Perry, 20)

This theory rests upon the idea that the self of the past is different from the self of the present; that in fact we are a concoction of multiple selves thinking of ourselves as one due to the fact that we have a common denominator, memory, through which we are able to relate and see a sequence of experience.

However, memory and remembering is never as simple as the images which are conjured up but is rather tainted by one’s perception of them. St Augustine states, in his autobiographical work The Confessions, that within memory “are stored away all the thoughts by which we enlarge upon or diminish or modify in any way the perceptions at which we arrive through the senses” (214). Thus every moment, image, action, situation, or thought that is remembered is remembered how we perceive it to be, not necessarily as it had objectively occurred. In other words, our memory is a collection of our perceptions. Myers sees the self venturing into the past as undertaking the notions of recollection and retrospection in order to come to terms with what it comes upon. He sees recollection as involving “attention, selection of specific details and rejections of others, and

symbolization (recollection disguised in symbols).”(Myers, 119) Kataryna’s past memories are sometimes reproduced through the stories and fairytales which her mother used to tell her. These fairytales serve to show that there is an imaginary, fantastical element to memory as Myers states that “there is always a “delusive” element in memory. The past is never exactly reproduced in recollection. It is remembered selectively, parts of it always edited out” (123). Thus, Kataryna does not merely recount her past and her beloved hometown but she rather remembers it selectively, in the process distorting what once was.

The memory does not only govern the development of Kataryna’s character but also influences the structure of the novel. If our present thoughts are continually disturbed and broken by the delusive memory it can be seen that our thought processes do not run in a linear, chronological time. The memory rather acts upon its own accord interjecting our present state of being at its own will. It interrupts our flow of thought. It overlaps an image from the past with what lies here right in front of us. More often than not, however, these interjections and overlaps are brought forth by a present occurrence. They begin with a familiar sight, sound, smell or word which open the gate and let the memories flood through. The structure of The Rain of the Praying Mantis follows the workings of memory in that it jumps from present to past and back again. It interjects and jumps to the theoretical musings of the main character. The fragments inform, complement, overlap or contradict each other much like the human mind does. Kim Atkins, a philosopher with a special interest in Ricoeur and the self, states that

to be a person is to exercise narrative capacities for self-interpretation that unify our lives over time. Ricoeur argues that narrative is a form of understanding or practical reasoning that enables us to respond to the complexity of the human experience of temporality and in particular to mediate the irresolvable tensions between cosmological and phenomenological time (Mackenzie, 11).

We construct our lives, our identities and the world around us through the narratives we tell ourselves and others. We put one word next to another. Each symbol represents something. A word uttered or written creates a sound and an image. Our mind connects them to a concept and through the relationship between them, the signifier and the signified, our unconscious mind creates meaning. Put together these meanings create context. Through context they gain strength and become a narrative. Just as a Punta remains a mere place without the infusion of feelings, emotions, previous experiences, expectations and imagination, so too do words remain mere symbols until one engages with them and sees what lies beyond. All too often we forget that language is just a code for something greater; linguistic code is a representation of the world which has created it. The problem and the value of language is exhibited in the scene when Nona Flora and her best friend Gloria watch a Spanish soap opera (Tovic, 81-84). Gloria has had limited schooling and as such sometimes the language she comes across is not of her 'level'. As she reads the subtitles she reads them out loud, but not in the words which are written on the television screen. She manipulates them in order to make them her own. Once a thought is spoken it becomes real. It is no longer contained within the realm of the television, or the mind (a theatre in itself). Spoken, language shapes it and it becomes a means of adjusting one's thoughts, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is formed.

Fairytales are one of the oldest forms of narrative (certainly the first one I, as a child, came into contact with) and, as writer Schiller states, "[d]eeper meaning resides in the fairytales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life" (Davidson, Chaudhiri, 5). As Marina Warner puts it "fairy tales act as an airy suspension bridge, swinging slightly under different breezes of opinion and economy, between the learned, literary and print culture in which famous fairy tales have come down to us, and the oral, illiterate, people's

culture...and on this bridge the traffic moves in both directions” (Davidson, Chaudhiri, 2)

Every fairytale in the novel begins with “[o]nce upon a time”(Tovic, 32) which is a, as literary critic Kevin Smith says, a “customary distancing device”(42) and somewhat of a cliché. However, “not using this device would be to *consciously* avoid it, in an effort to elide cliché (a massive difference between the *writer*(2) of the fairytale and the oral storyteller for whom clichés are a useful mnemonic device)” as these words signal to the reader or the listener that “the realm of wonder and enchantment is about to be revealed” (Davidson, Chaudhiri, 5). The character of Mama is a “storyteller”(Tovic, 130) not a storywriter as she is orally transferring the fairytales to her child and as such she is able to, as John Truby a story consultant and teacher of screenwriting says, “blur or even destroy the line between reality and illusion” (Truby, 311).

The fairytales are remembered by Kataryna but they are her mother’s stories. A daughter’s relationship with the mother is vital to her own sense of self identity. The daughter learns from her mother how to conduct herself within the society and the family. She also learns what her role as a grown woman will entail. However, Adrienne Rich, a feminist literary critic, speaks of ““matrophobia”: the fear of “*becoming one’s mother*” (Miller, 58) when she analyzes the daughter’s relationship to the mother. She says that “matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother’s bondage, to become individuated and free” (Miller, 58). Thus, Kataryna recreates her mother through the stories which she remembers but the mother never ventures outside of the imaginary realm. The mother is disconnected from reality and stuck within the realm of the past, something which Kataryna is trying to free herself from. The fact that the mother is also recreated only in Kataryna’s remembrance of fairytales shows

the inability of a child to comprehend the mother as a person whose identity spurs further than this role.

Nancy K. Miller, a feminist literary critic, argues the following:

“[h]aunted by our past we are forged in relations of likeness and difference. Showing our faces, telling ourselves, cannot help but betray the others who live on in our heads and dreams. Writing about oneself entails dealing with the ghostly face in the mirror that is and isn’t our own.”(x)

Kataryna’s Mama and her stories invade her present consciousness. As Kataryna frees herself from her past, and in a way grows up, she is able to forge and accept the “relations of likeness” (Miller, x) to her own mother. When Kataryna dresses up for the Carnival she puts on her Mama’s dress and looks at herself in the mirror. She says “[i]t is no longer I in the mirror. It is my Mama looking back at me.” (Tovic, 126). Thus, Kataryna can be seen as going through the psychoanalyst’s, Jacques Lacan’s, mirror stage which is instrumental in the process of growing up. Although Lacan first developed the theory with regards to the infant he later considered it to represent “a permanent structure of subjectivity, or as paradigm of ‘Imaginary order’”(author unknown, Mirror Stage, 1) The Mirror Stage can thus be seen to represent the “dual relationship” (author unknown, Mirror Stage, 1) between the ego and the body, the mother and the daughter, the past and the present, the real and the imaginary, the self and the other, understanding and misunderstanding, and between the unity and fragmentation.

The Rain of the Praying Mantis is an exploration, a journey into the life and mind of Kataryna as she returns to her perceived place of belonging and unity and seeks to discover her identity. The memories, the philosophical musings, the fairytales and the present day-to-day occurrences form a collage, a puzzle of sorts with hazy edges which do not quite fit

together but enable the reader to make his or her own connections and have a sense of unity, albeit fragmented, much like the mind does with respect to memory and self-identity. As I am so closely involved with the process it is difficult to view the novel as a whole, as a product, and the things which stand most clearly in my mind are the further developments needed to bring it to desired effect. “Creative writing, as an appellate, recognises what we need to keep constantly in mind – that we are a discipline whose principal concern is with the development, critique and articulation of *process* rather than *product*.” (Bourke, Neilsen, 1) The thesis/novel The Rain of the Praying Mantis is still a work in process.

While the structure and the ‘core’ of the novel are in place I believe the plot needs further development. The Rain of the Praying Mantis falls under the category John Truby refers to as the antiplot stories. Truby states that “what I am calling antiplot [then] is really a range of techniques that [these] storytellers devised that would make the plot organic by making it express the *subtleties* of character. Point of view, shifting narrators, branching story structure, and non-chronological time are all techniques that play with plot by changing how the story is told with the deeper aim of presenting a more complex view of human character” (264). The story told in the present tense needs to flow chronologically and have the inherent, and used to, twists, turns and developments of more ‘traditional’ (for want of a better word) plots in order to capture and carry the reader through to the next page. Also as the past memories and the fairytales spring through and branch over and through the present story, almost invading it like the roots of the Pohutukawa which refuses to be subdued, there is a need for order and coherence on at least one of these levels. The following table is Truby’s twenty-two-step story structure which needs to be applied to the present storyline.

STEP	CHARACTER	PLOT	STORY WORLD	MORAL ARGUMENT
1.	Self-revelation, need, and desire			
2.	Ghost		Story world	
3.	Weakness and need			
4.		Inciting Event		
5.	Desire			
6.	Ally or allies			
7.	Opponent	Mystery		
8.	Fake-ally opponent			
9.	Changed desire and motive	First revelation and decision		
10.		Plan		
11.		Opponent's plan and main counterattack		
12.		Drive		
13.				Attack by ally
14.		Apparent defeat		
15.	Obsessive drive, changed desire and motive	Second revelation and decision		
16.		Audience revelation		
17.		Third revelation and decision		
18.		Gate, gauntlet, visit to death		
19.		Battle		
20.	Self-revelation			
21.				Moral decision
22.	New equilibrium			

Table 1. A twenty-two-step story structure (Truby, 270) ⁽³⁾

As the novel consists of many fragments it also needs to be woven together in such a way that the fragments flow from each other in a logical way, and foreshadow what will come next. For example at the moment the Carnival is almost sprung onto the novel. It needs to be foreshadowed earlier and subtly woven through the other fragments. Two great books come

to mind with regards to a Carnival or a festival, the Steppenwolf by Hermann Hesse and the Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov. Both of these books do what is still missing from The Rain of the Praying Mantis; they allude to the Carnival or the festival long before it occurs, and make it an integral part of the story. Carnival is a time of freedom from the shackles of everyday life when the morals and rules of society are overturned. Laughter, sexuality, irony and social criticism form an essential core of the festivities. In order to gain the maximum from the Carnival it needs to be woven through as it is a point in the book when all the issues are resolved and the imaginary and the 'real' realm of Kataryna's world come together. Also, the grandfather's clock, although woven through several fragments, needs to feature more prominently in the novel as it gives Punta, and the rest of the novel, a mortal element. Punta is not a place which never changes, but is rather a small town which is slowly dying. The grandmother, Nona Flora, also dies in the novel. And Kataryna's fragmentation of identity also nears its end. All together when these elements are completed the novel and the characters will be more complex and unified.

During the year I have found my reading glasses somewhat tainted. Numerous times I have picked up a book, attempting to read for pleasure, escape and entertainment only to find my interest vain after several chapters, the story lose its grip and the book be put on a night table only to be forgotten. However, some books have managed to hold my interest and they, I believe, have influenced The Rain of the Praying Mantis. I galloped through Kundera's work and found that theoretical passages entered my work. I savoured philosophical books on personal identity and memory. I read up on magical fairytales and magical realism, on the structures of the novel, how to deal with time, how to develop a character or a theme. I even read what writers have written about their own process of writing. The effects were twofold. I was more knowledgeable on the subjects which

interested me and arose in my work, but on the other hand I was none the wiser. I thought reading literary theory and others' fictional works could put a distance between me and my work and thus help improve and strengthen it. What I came upon were many possibilities, a lot of dim lights in an otherwise dark and horrid corridor but none showed the way out. The story was still what it was; the characters persisted on remaining true to themselves. I was faced with a problem whether to try to artificially lift the novel to the desired theory or to simply let it be what it is.

If I have learnt anything this year it is that possibilities are many, common mistakes are easy to detect and fix, the work is hard, solitary, strenuous, times of joy and purpose are quickly overshadowed by self-doubt, criticism and despair, but if when I lie in bed exhausted the sleep refuses to come as the voices and pictures continue to pester, the theories and techniques must be put aside and the story must be allowed to come out, whatever it may be. The following passage written by William Grass I feel very clearly exemplifies the feelings which I encountered in the past year writing The Rain of the Praying Mantis.

“Lowry could not invent at the level of language, only at the level of life, so that having lied life into a condition suitable for fiction, he would then faithfully and truthfully record it. No wonder he felt enmeshed. No wonder, too, that he had to revisit in order to revise; repeat the same difficult passage of existence in order to plunge further into it, make the necessary changes, get it right; and this meant only too often that he had to drink himself into madness again, to resee what was to be rewritten; to fall down in a ditch, to find vultures perched on the washbasin, fold fearfully up in a corner like a pair of discarded trousers, or bruise his head between toilet and sink in some dirty anonymous John.” (Burke, 26)

And so I am left banging my head between the ‘I’ which is writing, the ‘I’ which is being written about, the ‘I’ which is remembered, the mythical, magical ‘I’ who serves as the

model for the written 'I', and the empirical 'I' who tries to look over my shoulder and objectively judge my writing. (Calvino, 15)⁽⁴⁾

Notes

1. – term ‘death of the author’ comes from a scholarly article by a French literary critic Roland Barthes from an essay under the same title, “The Death of the Author”, but has since been used by many literary critics
2. – by “writer” Smith here refers to post-modern writers who use and intertextualise fairytales within their works.
3. - the table should be taken as a guide only, not a set of rules one needs to adhere to. As Truby says “each step can be an expression of more than one subsystem” (268) and “a story may have more or fewer than twenty-two steps, depending on its type and length” (268).
4. – the actual quote from Calvino is “the person ‘I’, whether explicit or implicit, splits into a number of different figures: in an ‘I’ who is writing and an ‘I’ who is written, into an empirical ‘I’ who looks over the shoulder of the ‘I’ who is writing and into a mythical ‘I’ who serves as the model for the ‘I’ who is written. The ‘I’ of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process.” (15)

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The Rain of the Praying Mantis

Thesis/Novel

By

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Always the same face looking back at me. No matter where I am or who I am with it is always the same face looking back at me. So many buildings, so many skies yet that's all I ever am; a partial reflection watching the world pass me by. Never belonging, never having a home, others live while I watch their skylines, their Muslim desert, their protestant east, their undefined colony, their conservative homeland. None of it is mine and will never be. I have no home. I own no place. I am a transparent partial reflection in a window collecting life as it comes past.

The bus weaves along the Magistrala, a highway that follows the coast from north to south and passes straight through Punta. The sea juts into the rocks below, waves violently break the staunch rocks, foaming white as if though a war is waging below. I look up to find the small clutter of white houses with red roofs among the wild, rocky terrain. The grass has never been dark green in Punta. It has always been scorched by the sun, giving it a warm yellowy tone. I look at myself in the reflection of the window.

Most of the time I don't know where I am going but there is at least one certainty to my journey; I know where I have been. Well, certain as certainties go as it is after all distorted by the millions of lenses tainted with my perceptions. But this time I know where I am going. I recognize the land on the other side of the window. It is my land. Those are my trees swaying in the strong northerly wind. That is my blue sea sparkling under the midday sun. I have known this land for generations; my blood flows within its roots. I can no longer remember people's faces, but every wall, every rock, every tree and shrub are familiar to me. As the strong northerly wind blows I know I have arrived. Punta has always been ravaged by the strong northerly wind. In the past people used to tie ropes around their

homes so that they could hold on to them while they walked, as the wind was strong enough to knock over a grown human being. But those, whose first memories are entwined with the northerly wind rushing through their hair, sliding across their skin, penetrating every particle of their being, it is a wind they love. There is something melancholy about that wind, as if though it makes the past come alive. On these stormy days, the life in Punta restores back to ancient times with only the locals coming out. There is nothing modern about it then. Isolated, Punta seems to have a mysterious, magical feel to it. It is wild and free, not ravaged by fancy tourists and cars.

I feel with my left hand for the bag. The clasp comes off easily and I push my hand inside. As I rummage through the too numerous objects, my hand gently closes as it feels the desired thing. I look down and carefully, one by one, let my fingers slide open. The green, lean legs softly push against my flesh. The head turns meeting my gaze. It is still, always and forever, with me. As a happy man puts a stone in his shoe to keep the troubles at bay so too do I carry him, my own little praying mantis, with me. As a reformed alcoholic needs that sickly, cheap brandy within arm's reach so too do I need my praying mantis. He is at once my destructor and my saviour. I close my fist making a soft cage and slide him back into the bag. Here to remind, there to forget.

I get off the bus and walk to the main road, one of only two roads in Punta. The road has been layered with concrete for as long as I can remember, but nothing can stop the grass underneath from springing through the middle of the concrete. The grass is too strong to be contained by the human hand, and the yellowy, hoarse strands tickle my ankles. I walk along the middle of the road, as I always have, and admire the two meter high stone walls from ancient times engulfing the houses. The old inhabitants stacked rocks on top of each other, without concrete or any other bonding material. In Punta man did not control nature. Man could only use nature as he found it, and not temper with it forcing it to collide

with manmade materials. The strong bluish grey rocks protect the houses within from the wind. I never walk close to the walls because there are always snakes hiding within the spaces between the rocks. The snakes in Punta are not menaces, nor something to be afraid of. From an early age I was taught that if I leave them alone they will not harm me. The snakes made me stay away from the walls and other people's houses, although in the bush they did not seem to care if I came close. They protect the people within the solid walls. Nobody can pass through the gate unless they are invited or familiar. You are safe from strangers in Punta.

I come to a three meter high, steel brown gate. It is a gate I have opened numerous times before, but now my presence within the walls would be considered trespassing. The gate contains my grandmother's house. She inherited the house from her father, but due to the war and the circumstances which came along with it the house is no longer ours. Strangers sleep in her bedroom now. I look at it, unable to accept that it is no longer mine.

2

It was a fortress. It was a castle. It was a dungeon. Most days, however, it was my grandmother's, Nona Flora's, house. The three meter high, brown, steel gate contained all the mysteries and treasures my little mind wanted to conjure up. The high gate hid my great-grandparents' locked old house to the left of the entrance, the new bigger house equipped with all the necessities of modern life stood across the gate, a cool summer kitchen opposite the old house and an old toiled that was locked long before I was born at the side of the new house. A vast garden, in which my great-grandfather took great pride in, framed the buildings.

It was a perfect house. Unfortunately, I lived with my parents in another house. The house was my father's and very ordinary by comparison. It evoked no mystery or excitement for a little child and, perhaps even worst, was perched on a hill far from the beach. Everyday, on my way to the beach, I would sprint from my house to Nona's house. I spent the majority of childhood with scabby knees as the hill was too steep for me to stop without falling over and grazing my knees. I'd scream as I ran down so my grandfather got a regular warning to get the antiseptic cream and plasters out. Once my grandmother tried to catch me, but her attempt resulted in both of us needing antiseptic cream and plasters. She never tried it again, but rather left me to my ritual.

There were two things that made me certain that my grandmother's house was the best house in the world: the gate and the old house. The brown gate was always there, but the old house existed as a ghost at the side of the garden. It was there, but it was locked and out of bounds for us children. Every now and again, on a miserable, rainy day when my grandmother was in a good mood she would unlock the doors of her parents' house and let me loose inside.

Three narrow steps led to a small, flaky green door. The door showed no clues as to the majesty of the inside. It opened to a small dark corridor filled with old shoes and my mother's and auntie's childhood toys. The inside was always dark and stuffy; the windows had not been opened since my mother was eighteen and my great-grandfather had passed away.

Every room of the house could be glanced into from the corridor as the three rooms with no doors stood beside each other. To the left was the grand bedroom where my great-grandfather slept. In the middle of the room was a huge double bed made of dark wood. It looked majestic and heavy. I walked in hesitantly. Everything stood as it once was.

I didn't touch anything in the room, ever. I never even walked to the far left corner of it. The room with everything in it belonged to somebody I had never met and therefore was not mine to intrude upon. A large, delicately carved, grandfather's clock, twice the size of me stood opposite the door. As I looked at it the brass pendulum encompassed my reflection, a second here, a second gone. Above it the hands turned, springing to the next mark in the circle, measuring the passing of the time. The clock knew and counted the lives which it could no longer see. The clock kept time with a soft and muddled chime. As the two hands overlapped and pointed to the sky, the wooden casing vibrated with the chime echoing the toiling Church bells. Between the grandfather's clock and the doorway stood a large marital bed and night tables. The two night tables on the opposite sides of the bed matched the dark wood of the bed. I imagined that they once contained medicines and personal things. It was the only room in the house that was truly theirs. There wasn't much privacy in a house with nine small children.

To the right of the door stood a vanity mirror. It was antique and matched the bed, the night stands and the big wardrobe opposite the door. It was empty now, but I could see my great-grandmother sitting there every morning combing her jet-black, waist-long hair into a tidy bun on top of her head. She was a simple, hard-working woman, but this did not diminish her want of looking her best, even in the worst of times. I'd seen enough pictures and heard many stories to feel as if though I knew her. I could see her everywhere in the house going about her daily chores. She was the master of this universe.

I turned on my bare heels and walked into a small bedroom with two big single beds in it. The beds were high and made of light wood. Just like in the master bedroom, the handmade, early twentieth century bedding covered the beds perfectly. I jumped onto the bed and lay there on the rough, heavily starched white sheets, imagining myself in the midst of my great-grandmother's busy household. It did not stay busy for long, as seven of

the nine children, all boys, vanished before they became adults. Thus, the two beds belonged to the two youngest children, my Nona Flora and her sister Lucia. The beds were hard but comfortable. I jumped up startled by my grandmother who walked past me from the kitchen to the entrance door. She never stayed long in this house, and she never came in alone.

I went to what I considered to be the kitchen of the old house. I now know it used to be another bedroom, as the kitchen was rebuilt to be part of the new house's living room. There was another bed in there, same as in the previous room, covering the left wall. Opposite the bed stood a high cabinet, which was once part of the kitchen. The crystal glasses were still in there and served to show my great-grandmother's upbringing. She brought the crystals into her marriage. I stood there looking at the crystals, still brilliantly clear, and wondered if they were ever used - maybe on special occasions. As much as I wanted to touch them I didn't dare open the glass doors. Last summer my brother chased me through the new house and I ran through the glass door of the kitchen. Glass is fragile.

A radio on a little table beside the cabinet caught my attention. It was much bigger than the radios I was used to seeing. I turned the knobs waiting for a sound to come. Nothing. Maybe this too should not be touched either.

I took a last look around the room realizing that there was a world which existed before me - a world to which I did not belong - a world which I could never touch or be a part of. I walked through the bedroom into the corridor. The door was wide open letting the sun shine in making it glow with an air of hospitality. I sat on the doorstep rummaging through the old toys. Nona Flora sat in front of the summer kitchen, drinking coffee and smoking. She was watching me with a sad, yet satisfying smile. I wondered what she saw when she walked into the house.

“Nona, what are you thinking?”

“It’ll be a nice day tomorrow. We’re lucky here. The wind is too strong for the clouds to stay around,” she replied absentmindedly.

“Nona, which bed was yours?”

“I didn’t have my own bed. There were three of us sleeping in one bed”, she answered letting the smoke escape her mouth.

“Why? I have my own bed. I wouldn’t let anybody sleep in it. They can sleep in their own bed.”

She laughed. “We didn’t have enough beds. We had to share. Besides, the winters were cold so we kept each other warm. And on the nights when we couldn’t get to sleep there was always someone to talk to.” Her voice was raspy, yet warm.

“I wish I had heaps of brothers and sisters. That way I could play with someone all the time,” I said twisting her favorite cotton blue dress. The warmth of her skin passed through the light fabric.

“Times are different. It always was better to have less children, but there wasn’t much they could do about it,” her green eyes lowered, looking straight through me. She knew something.

“Nona, where are all of your brothers now?”

“Some of them are in the graveyard, next to Mother and Father,” she replied, looking up towards the top of the village. Her gaze was lost in the distance.

“What do you mean some? Where are the others? Can we go and visit them?”

Dead people are fascinating. There is something magical in their disappearance. The minds play with the memories, selecting carefully what to keep.

We change the details to suit the overall mood. Or, perhaps, we simply do not appreciate things until they are gone. Everyone says I have Nona’s eyes, but not her stare.

Long sightedness makes her squint in order to put things into focus, thus giving her an all-knowing stare that passes straight through people. She doesn't need to get to know someone to know what they are like. She can feel them from the moment she sees them. She is simple. She trusts her intuition. Never asks many questions, yet always knows what is going on. She speaks a lot, always laughing, never intruding, never burdening others with her problems.

3

I close my eyes and try to shut out the world that once was, but the memories continue to haunt me, to invade my present. The silver handle among the brown steel starts to move. An invader tries to get out. Quickly, I turn away towards the road ahead. From here the road coils steeply. The luggage heavily presses upon my shoulder and my legs start to feel the ponderous way up. I still don't like to walk up the hill alone. Mama used to always come to get me from my grandmother's house so we could walk together.

Mama used to say that memory is like a vast space within the mind which contains all that we need. If we cannot remember something it is because momentarily access to it is not possible. Thus, it would seem, if we do not always possess the power to open the desired portal, that we are not masters of this vast internal space called memory. It rather acts upon its own accord interjecting our present state of being at its own will. It interrupts our flow of thought. It overlaps an image from the past with what lies here right in front of us. Memory is a joker with a poker straight face playing to its own tune. More often than not, however, these interjections and overlaps are brought forth by the present occurrence. They begin with a familiar sight, sound, smell or word which open the gate and let the memories flood through.

The memories of which we are not aware of are our saviours or destroyers for they govern our instincts and reactions. There are times when a thinking minute is a luxury not bestowed upon us and it is usually those moments that decide who we are and where our life is going to take us. Those subconscious moments of memory reveal our innermost fears, loves and tribulations. They have the power to save or destroy us for it is them that define us.

I always needed some distraction to get me to the top of the hill and Mama knew me better than anyone else. A story always did the trick. It took my mind of the momentary mundane action and put it in another universe. Her words would push my feet; every word, every step. This time I walk alone up the hill to our house but my mother is still, and always, with me. Her dark wavy hair is wild in the northerly wind. As I walk the concrete heats my soles and the story breaks through, my mother's voice echoing within.

4

Once upon a time in a big, thick, green forest there was a little cottage. In the little wooden cottage there lived a little girl with her brother and grandfather. There was only one room in the cottage. In the middle of the room there was a magnificent fireplace. The little girl and her brother knew nothing of the world which lay outside the forest. They came to the forest too young to remember the wonders which lay beyond the thick, green trees, but each night by the fire, their grandfather fuelled their curiosity with the tales of his previous lives spent among the pirates, kings, peasants, sailors, knights in shining armours and beautiful maidens. As he told them a different story each night his black eyes sparkled and came alive by the light of the flame. He transformed from an old, weathered, tired, hard-working man into something beautiful and magical. The wrinkles around his eyes, mouth

and forehead were smoothed by the fire that burned within his eyes. Every night the grandfather became the magician who intoxicated them with the vast pleasures of the world that they had never seen, but whose seas and continents they could travel to without leaving the room.

During the day the little girl and her brother helped their grandfather work in the garden, tidy the cottage and bring firewood for the night-tales. Each day, when the work was done, the brother and sister would choose a direction and roam the forest. They walked east to China, or south to Australia, or north to Iceland, or west to America. They never wavered from their set course, hoping to reach the land they had chosen. They walked beneath the canopies of high trees, around the little shrubs and above the fallen trunks. They walked and walked, but the forest was so big all they ever saw were more green leaves and more thick trunks. They could never find the place where the trees ceased and the outside world took over.

One day, as they were exploring the little girl and her brother heard a lonely howl. They took no notice of it, but then, all of a sudden, a large grey wolf jumped out onto their path. The big, bad wolf stood in the middle of the path, looked towards the brother and sister, turned his head low and bared his enormous, sharp teeth with a terrifying growl. Out of fear the brother and sister started running as fast as they could.

The little girl ran and ran, until tired from running she stopped. She looked around her and could not see her brother, nor the big, bad wolf. She called after her brother but there was no response. Tired and lonely she sat beneath a tree. As she almost dozed off a bright yellow light burned through the canopies and descended in front of her. For a split second she thought it was the sun falling on her, but then she realized it was a beautiful golden chariot dragged by two magnificent white horses and with a handsome Prince holding the reins. The handsome young Prince's hair was the same golden colour as the

chariot. He looked at the little girl who sat frightened under the tree and called her by her name. The sound of her name coming from the Prince's mouth calmed the little girl down.

The Prince offered her salvation and to show her the world she so often imagined.

"How long will that take?" the little girl asked, still unsure whether she should take the prince's offer.

"The world is a big place," the Prince answered.

"I cannot stay long," she relented, "I have already been gone for too long and my grandfather will worry."

"You can see everything you ever hoped to see," the Prince said smiling generously. The hope of seeing the vast treasures of the world and the fear of the big, bad wolf were too much for the little girl. She took the Prince's hand and climbed onto the chariot. The chariot, upon feeling her weight, flew high above the trees.

For the first time in her life she could see where the trees stopped and the fields, ploughed by the farmers, began. The little girl finally saw the places from her grandfather's stories. She saw all the different landscapes and all the colourful people. She saw thousand year old structures and the modern buildings. She tried to remember all that she had seen, but despite the wonders she could not forget about time, and the thick, green forest, and the humble cottage, and her playful brother, and her loving grandfather. She asked the Prince to take her back home.

The Prince pulled the reigns sternly and the chariot slowly descended between the trees, softly landing below the tree where the girl had sat before. The little girl stepped off the golden chariot disappointed that she had forgotten all that the Prince had shown her.

"But, I don't remember anything," the little girl said. "There was too much to remember."

"People remember only the things which are dear to their hearts," the Prince replied.

The light of the chariot disappeared and she saw the moon and the stars in the sky. The little girl realized that she had been gone for a long, long time. She ran back to the cottage as fast as her little legs could carry her. She ran beneath the canopies of high trees, around the little shrubs and over the fallen trunks. She ran to the cottage faster than she had ever run before, but it was too late. As the little girl approached the humble cottage, the air became hot and the sky was coloured red. The cottage was engulfed with flames, her brother and grandfather fast asleep inside. When the night fell, and the little girl had still not arrived home, her brother and grandfather left a fire burning so that she could find her way back home. They stayed up for as long as they could, but their eyelids were too heavy and they fell asleep with the fire still burning. The little girl was devastated. She no longer cared about the wonders of the vast world which lay beyond the thick, green forest or the big, bad wolf hiding in the forest. All she wanted was her home back, but with time it had vanished forever taking those she loved with it.

5

Mama always had good timing. Her stories always finished as we were just past the little white chapel and the house became visible. I look at the path which leads to the small graveyard. Even though the road is lined with pine trees which twist and meet in the middle it does not have a sinister feel about it. I know what lies beyond them: a peaceful and open resting place overlooking the entire bay.

I turn my head and keep walking towards the present, towards the now and here.

As a child I would always on the sight of the house run to the gate, push it open, run along the path, up the stairs, beneath the canopy of the walnut tree and through the open front door straight to the dining table.

The house in the top village is ordinary compared to my Nona's old house. It is a big, two storey house split down the middle; half of the house is ours, half is our crazy neighbours'. Of all the people in the whole of Punta they have to be the worst neighbours. There are five of them living in the house; grandparents, their daughter, her husband, and the grandson, Tito, who is four years older than I. They would start fighting at six in the morning and continue throughout the day. Swear words were always a common sound in our house, but only due to them. The grandmother's name was Mary, and for a long time I thought the expression 'Hairy Mary' was because of her. Mary had a moustache. The grandson hated the grumpy grandfather, the father hated the wild son, the grandfather hated the dumb father, the mother was sick and the grandmother was evil. There was no escape from them. Their garden was, or rather still is, connected to ours, and only a ten centimetre wall in the middle of the house separates us. When we can't see them we can hear them.

The house is built on a slope with the higher end being next to the road. There is a two metre high wall sheltering the house from the road, but the majesty of the wall is undermined by the fact that the neighbours' half was demolished and then rebuilt in yellow concrete. One summer, the grandfather decided that the two metre high dry stone wall which stood between the house and the road for the last hundred years was not safe enough, so he dug a trench just underneath the wall causing the stones to collapse onto his own house. It was a mess. He built a new wall out of concrete and tried to get us to pour concrete over our side of the wall too. We refused, so he poured concrete on about a metre of the wall which was closest to him. He wanted to keep his family 'safe' and never spoke to us afterwards. The removal of half of the wall managed to destroy the strength of the ancestors. After its collapse the wall never seems to be able to protect anyone; it appears to be more for a decoration. The gate to the house is situated away from the road and it looks unimportant. It is only one metre high and made of steel bars, which sometimes make the

gate hard to see and thus it looks like our house has no gate to keep the strangers out. The house is open, warm and inviting. There isn't too much mystery about it. There are two doors at the small gate; one for the people and one for the cars.

The grey driveway is at the left side of the garden with fig trees decorating the side of it. The driveway leads straight to the garage which is situated under the big white marble terrace. The footpath goes through the middle of the garden, with a small dry stone wall to the right of it. When I was young there was a sandpit between the driveway and the footpath, but later Nona Flora turned it into a small garden, which is what it is now. To the right of the footpath is another bigger garden which never gets used much as it is full of thorny roses. The vine spreads beneath the two metre dry stone wall and frames the garden. Hidden in the right corner of the garden is an old dog house, which stands as a testament to my late grandfather's hunting days, though I don't remember him bringing anything back from his trips. The footpath leads to a majestic pink oleander on the left and the steps on the right. The steps lead to a small terrace with a table and four garden chairs, which connect to the front door of the bottom floor and the outside steps for the upstairs. The table and the chairs always stand outside during summer no matter what the weather is like. The grandiose walnut tree rises from the garden to keep shade above the table and the chairs. On hot summer days the walnut tree is our saviour. It is the only place where there is always shade and a soft sea breeze floats. As a child I loved swings, so my father made a swing out of two pieces of rope and a piece of wood and hung it on the walnut tree. The swing is now broken, but it is still hanging on the walnut tree. The canopy of the walnut tree spreads almost to the front door which consists of a dark wooden frame with small yellow glass squares. The front door opens to a tiled square hallway and a large wardrobe. There are three doors in the hallway; right for the bathroom, straight right for the bedroom and a straight left for the living room and the kitchen.

The left straight door leads to the kitchen, the living room and the dining room. Three living spaces are contained in one. An old sofa stands against the far wall. My grandfather slept on the sofa during summer and, because he was a rough man, a prickly, orange blanket covers the sofa. Nobody likes to lie on it as it is uncomfortable against the naked skin. A large dining table with four chairs, one on each side, stands in the middle of the room. The dining table makes it difficult to open the door which leads to a large white marble terrace. We have never used the terrace although it is possibly the best part of the house. There is no cover to provide shade over it, so during hot summer days the sun from above heats the heads and the glare from the white marble tiles burns the eyes. I stay away from the terrace as much as I can.

Opposite the terrace door is a small cabinet with a black and white television. Nothing is new in the house; nothing gets replaced unless it is completely broken. The television still works, although there are only two channels and most of the knobs are broken. Next to the television, out in the open where the lives are led, the old grandfather's clock from my great-grandparents' bedroom counts the passing of the time. The pendulum swings to and fro encapsulating and reflecting the daily goings on.

6

The kitchen is small and hidden in the opposite side of the room from the sofa. The wall is decked out in kitchen appliances; the stove, small fridge, sink and the boiler for hot water. My grandmother stands in front of the stove in her bra and skirt sweating profusely, her cheeks reddened by the heat from the stove. She loves to cook, so the kitchen is her own part of the house. Nobody else knows exactly where everything stands in the kitchen. Her quick hands are used to the daily ritual of preparing lunch. As her hands stir the pot so

too do the clock's hands move in a circle, carefully jumping from one second to the next, finishing the circle only for the other hand to jump to the minute in unison. She takes the boiling pot of fish stew from the fire cooker and places it onto the thick wooden coaster which lies on the table. If summer is hot, kitchen is hell. She wipes the sweat from her brow and slicks the strands of her hair back into place. Nona Flora has become a large woman but her body still moves easily. There is not an ounce of fat on her body. She opens the cupboard and pulls out two plates. She places the spoons next to the plates on the table and cuts the bread into two thick slices.

“Nona Flora,” I say softly from the doorway.

“Kataryna! My child!” her hands extend and she comes towards me. Her reddened face stretches into a nostalgic smile. “God you’ve grown”, she murmurs almost to herself as she kisses my cheeks.

“How was your trip?” she asks.

Tears roll down my face. She wipes them away.

“No need for that now, my child. Lunch is ready.”

“Right on time,” I smile. “Smells delicious”

“Your favourite”. She is proud.

“I love you Nona.”

“Wash your hands and lunch will be on the table.”

I rush to the bathroom and rinse my fingers under the cold water. The bathroom is small and without any lavish appliances. There is no bath, only a shower, a toilet, an old washing machine and a small sink. The entire bathroom is white, although over the years it has become a murkier shade of it. My brother's and mine growing is inscribed on the inside frame of the door. Every summer we would stand barefoot with our backs against the wall

while our father held a box on top of our heads to measure how tall we were. Each line marks a year. I always thought I would one day be taller than my brother. Fortunately, my wish did not come true.

I wiped my hands on my shorts and went into the room. My brother and father were already sitting at the table while my mother and grandmother were setting the food out. I took a seat opposite my father and scrambled with my brother for the food.

“Don’t fight with your sister. Let her take the food first. She’s younger,” my father said looking at my brother sideways.

It’s good to be the youngest. People always let you have your own way. I put some spinach, mashed potatoes and scrambled eggs on my plate and muddled them all up together.

“Take a bit more,” my grandma looks at me worriedly.

I ignored her as I continued to stuff food down my throat. They talked of something, I talked of nothing. I finished my lunch in record speed. My mother had barely sat down to eat as I stood up happy to be rid of this chore.

“You haven’t eaten anything,” my father looked at me disappointed.

“Leave the child alone. She’ll eat when she’s hungry,” my mother replied.

“I don’t know how that child can run around the whole day without eating. She’ll faint one of these days,” Nona Flora butted in.

Nona loves cooking and she loves people who love eating her cooking. I eat every last drop of the fish stew this time. Her cooking has never tasted this good before.

“Nona Flora that was delicious.” I let my spoon hit the empty plate.

“Jesus, child, I’ve never seen you eat so sweetly before.”

7

I kiss Nona Flora’s cheek once more and leave to take the bags upstairs. The only way to get to the top floor is by the white marble stairs which follow the outside of the house. The stairs begin outside the front door of the bottom floor and run all the way around the corner to the front door of the top floor. There is a balcony on the top floor with a view of the entire Punta. You can see all the bays, beaches, boats, houses and roads in Punta from the balcony. There is always a soft breeze on the balcony even during the warmest, calmest summer days and when the strong northerly wind blows we can watch the angry sea. We can see the sea foaming white against the sharp rocks, we can see the boats jutting in the furious waves, we can see the high trees swaying heavily under the weight of the wind.

French doors with wooden exterior Mediterranean blinds open to a large room. To the right of the door stands a small wardrobe with broken doors. The wardrobe always smells musty as if though it is holding onto the past. In the far right corner there is a large double bed with a brown blanket over it. The bed was my parents’, but now I will sleep on it. The left side of the room is made to be a small living room with a black and white sofa and a small dark brown table. The entire room is tiled to provide some much needed cooling during summer. Beneath the table stands the carpet of childhood nightmares; the cow. The carpet is made out of skin and hair from a cow and you can clearly see where the legs and the head were. I hated it as a child. I avoided standing on it as if though it was a real cow.

Next to the double bed there is a doorway with no door which leads to a small room with two single beds. This room was my brother's and mine when we were young. We slept opposite each other, talking every night, as we could not sleep without each other. We were each others' security blankets. Between the two rooms stands a door to the bathroom which is situated right above the bathroom on the lower floor. This bathroom, however, is a bit more luxurious. It has a bath, a washing machine, a small basin and a toilet. The bath is rendered useless as the hot water cylinder is not large enough to fill it. A perfect breeding ground for the praying mantises – a shame they never used it.

The house is small, but adequately equipped for hot summers when most of the living is done outside. We come home to sleep or eat. Everything else is done outside and away from the house. On the days when the strong northerly wind brings rain with it we all huddle together upstairs and play games. The house is not mysterious yet it contains so much history. It is too small and cosy to evoke any mystery in my mind. I leave the bags, unpacked in a corner.

I undo the clasp and let my hand slip into the bag. Slowly and gently I feel for the praying mantis. It pushes its spindly legs against my palm. I clasp it and carry it down the stairs to the walnut tree. It too has come back home.

8

Walking down the stairs I hear Nona Flora talking to someone. The lower pitch of testosterone drums through the midday heat. Teachers always complain that boys are incapable of whispering. It is a matter of nature. The lower, drumming base of their voices vibrates further and stronger. I know this voice. As I reach the front door I can smell the

cigarettes. They must be his 'cause Nona Flora has long ago stopped smoking for the fear of becoming breathless one day. I stop on the doorway. A blindsided deer.

“Tito came to see you,” Nona says.

“Hi,” is the only word I can muster.

He lets the cigarette clumsily rest in the nip of the ashtray and stands up. Smoke escapes his mouth as he smiles and comes towards me. We hug. Awkwardly. It is a game of measure, to see whether the other is still interested after seven years or whether the lust and the love have vanished into the abyss. I hug him and, against every instinct shredding my bones, my body melts into his. I know this territory. It has not changed much.

“You haven’t changed at all,” he says pulling away to get a better look.

I smile and nod. “How’ve you been?”

“What in the last seven years?” a coy smile stretches the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah...I suppose...,” the absurdity of the question lingers as I try to laugh it off.

“All sorts, I guess,” he says looking at my grandmother. “Good. Bad. Better and worst. It’s life, isn’t it?” he asks turning back at me.

“I guess...”

“You?”

“Pretty much the same as you.”

His hand reaches backwards to see where the chair is for the eyes are still upon me.

“I have to go to Gloria’s house,” Nona Flora says. “Promised to take her some asparagus.”

“O.K. Nona. I’ll see you later then”, I reply.

“Be back round seven. Dinner will be on the table by then. It is not so hot at that hour,” she says walking out the door, a plastic bag of asparagus rustling in her hand.

“I’ll be back by then.”

“Bye Aunty Flora. It’s always good to see you”, Tito says his eyes still upon me.

I take a cigarette from his packet and light it. It is only with the first breath of tar and nicotine that the levels of courage increase. Smoking has always served me like a mask; there to hide the truth and portray the character. As the breath escapes my lungs, weaving out through the mouth my eyes look up to meet his.

“What were you going to do now?” I ask.

“Came to see you.” he replies.

“Do you wanna to go down to the beach?”

“Yeah would be good now. Too hot to do anything else.”

The rustling of the plastic bag interrupts the conversation. I drop the cigarette into the ashtray hoping I have let out the last remnants of the smoke from my lungs.

“Don’t forget to go see Aunty Lucia”, Nona says from the doorway. “She knows you are here already. Probably.”

“O.K. I’ll go see her first then.”

“Do you want me to come with?” Tito asks.

“No. I’ll go alone. Will be fine. We could meet down at the beach later on?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you down on the corner....you know the spot.” a nostalgic smile covers his face.

“It was good to see you.”

“You too. I’ll tell Gina to come down as well.”

9

Tito jumped over the fence and we ran down the stairs, down the footpath, out the gate and across the road to Gina’s house. Gina was only a month younger than me, so the

three of us were inseparable during summer. We were the only children in the Top Village who were around the same age. Gina was ready to go when we walked into her living room. She was sitting on the sofa with her little sister Ana, who always wanted to tag along, and Ana's little friend Sonya.

“Hey. Let's go”, Tito said to Gina as we walked in.

“We have to take Ana and Sonya with us”, Gina replied annoyed.

“What?! No we don't,” Tito and I said simultaneously. They were the last thing we needed at the beach.

All of a sudden Gina's grandmother appeared out of the kitchen.

“Take Ana and Sonya to the beach. I can't go to the beach when it is this hot. ” Her words were not a question; not even an argument, they were an order. Tito, Gina and I looked at each other irritated. We knew there was nothing left for us to do, but take Ana and Sonya with us. There was only a small light in this dark situation. Sonya had a lilo and that was the best and only toy anyone took to the beach in Punta. On calm days we could sit on it and paddle from one beach to the next without getting tired or cold.

“Come on. Let's go,” I sighed.

As soon as we walked onto the road and away from the prying ears and eyes of Gina's grandmother, Tito turned around and said “‘cause we have to take you to the beach, we're taking' your lilo too.”

“No you're not! That's mine,” Sonya replied quickly.

“Fine then. Stay at home with your grandma.”

Gina took the lilo off Sonya. Tito, Gina and I piled our towels on the lilo and raised it above our heads to ease the strength of the midday sun.

“What beach are we going to?” Gina asked when we got to the white chapel.

I looked down the scorching road which led to the main beach and to the shady bush path leading to Dugna.

“Let’s go to Dugna. It’s too hot to walk all the way down to the main beach”, I replied eager to get off the hot concrete.

The path to Dugna was tricky as we had to walk along the bush path beside the graveyard, over the Magistrala and down hundreds of steps. But, Dugna was closer and a nicer beach. They poured concrete over the main beach to make it more attractive for the tourists, while Dugna was left as nature intended it to be. Dugna was full of pebbles which put many people off as the soles of your feet had to be hard and your mind quick to choose the next step. Us, local kids, could run on pebbles barefoot, while the tourists wore shoes to protect their soft city feet.

“Can I go in the middle?” I asked Gina and Tito as we stepped around the white chapel into the prickly bush. All the snakes were swivelling in the bush, sunbathing on the rock, watching us as we were walking past.

“Yup.” Tito moved from the middle and swapped places with me in the front of the line up. I figured if a snake came along wanting a bite out of one of us it would go for the front or the back. I was safe in the middle; someone cleared my path and someone watched my back.

“Look at the sparrow”, Ana said, pointing to a tiny bird fluttering ahead of us.

We trailed in a line; Tito, I and Gina under the lilo and Ana and Sonya rambling in the back. Tito kept his eyes firmly on the ground carefully choosing our path, while I looked to the sides just in case something was to jump at us. I looked at the graveyard which stood behind a small white wall. It was so peaceful and open from this side.

I stop at the little white chapel but choose a different path to Aunt Lucia's house. It strikes me that, although the village had a Church and was a strong community attending mass every Sunday, there are no people buried outside the wall. Punta has had its fair share of divorces, adulteries, miscarriages and babies born out of wedlock. Life is too hard and people are too simple to worry about Christian values. People are judged based on the goodness of their souls, not on the mistakes that they have made.

My great-grandfather once threw a priest out of his house. The priest had come for a drink, but then proceeded to tell my great-grandfather how to raise children. The answer: "You can tell me how to raise children when you have nine mouths to feed and only twenty-four hours in a day." Life was tough, people were rough. They stuck together through thick and thin. The village had once breathed like a family; accepting and loving everyone who was theirs. People were not punished for their mistakes, but rather helped through the tough times and respected for overcoming them. That is why in Punta no 'bastard' children were buried outside the protection of the wall. A child did not ask to be born out of wedlock. Every child was equal and precious regardless of what their parents had done.

10

Aunt Lucia is Nona Flora's only sister. Their parents had nine children, seven sons and two daughters. Only the two of them, Nona Flora and Aunt Lucia, lived long enough to grow up. As I stop in front of the high stone wall I realize I cannot picture the inside of the house. The green, narrow gate is familiar but not my own. A dog viciously barks from the other side. I don't know this dog. I don't know whether he is big or small. I don't know

whether he is black, white or somewhere in between. I don't know whether he is good or bad. I don't know whether he just barks or bites as well. He must be a new addition.

"Aunty Lucia!" I call from the outside. "Aunty Lucia!"

"Stop barking you little mutt!" a woman angrily howls at the dog.

Aunty Lucia's house was never full of children's laughter. She had no children. Nona Flora always said it was unfair that she was the one who had children. Nona Flora never wanted them. Aunty Lucia could not picture her life without them. Life had played a cruel trick upon them.

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Aunty Lucia."

I stand on my toes and look through the decorative cut-outs in the gate. She looks at me from below, holding a small brown dog with her right hand. Her green eyes rest upon me.

"Ha! Those eyes!" she exclaims as a smile spreads across her face.

"Come on in child. He doesn't bite. The mutt only barks, all day long. Drives me and everyone else crazy. Don't know what we needed him for."

I press the metal handle and the gate screeches as I push it open. The entrance is narrow. It does not open upon a big, warm courtyard. She kicks the dog lightly, sending it in the other direction as I come towards her. We hug and kiss, as family should.

Aunty Lucia is the elder sister by two years. She is tall with dark brown hair; although it has long ago turned grey it remains true to its original colour none-the-less with the help of the colour from a box – as Nona Flora calls it. Wide shoulders, large feet and tanned arms reveal a strong build. To my child's mind they seemed to be the complete opposites of each other. From afar none believed them to be sisters, their differences seemed so vast. However, up close their faces and demeanours are startlingly similar. They share piercing green eyes, a perky nose and a mouth which easily stretches into a

contagious smile. That is what I find so striking now. I see my Nona's face superimposed upon an alien body.

"Take a seat", she says pointing to a large desk with two wooden benches.

"I remember this...", escapes my mouth as I catch sight of a large mural which adorns the wall on the left. It is intricately done. A large, black horse propped on its back feet takes the central position. Upon his back a soldier, from times long gone, sits aiming a spear at the figure below. The other man lies beneath the raised front legs of the horse, hands by his sides. His fate lies in the hands which guide the spear. In the right hand corner a tree is made of fragments of green and brown tiles. Upon it a cicada, a praying mantis and a sparrow stand, each on its own branch.

"Yeah. It's always been there", she says glancing at it. "You hungry?"

"No. No. Just ate."

"Some juice then? Or coffee?"

"Coffee would be good, thanks."

"Sit. I'll bring it."

I look around to see if anything else revives my memory but it doesn't. All I can remember is the pale green gate and the mural of death to come, of love betrayed.

11

I sat on the floor beneath the mural and ran my small hands along the jagged edges of the multicoloured tiles. Mama came up behind me and asked "Do you know what this means?" I looked up. Her white dress swayed in the breeze touching my face lightly. I grabbed it with my left hand letting the other hand still rest upon the mural.

"It's a King on a horse killing his enemy."

My mother crouched down and touched the tiles, gently lifting her fingers as they came upon an edge.

“It’s a story of a Chinese King Wu and his most loyal servant.”

I took my hand off the mural and placed it on my lap.

“Tell me.”

Mama sat on the floor, neatly folding the dress beneath her. She ran her hand through my hair and kissed my forehead.

Once upon a time there was a King in China called Wu. He was very young and very handsome. One day he decided to attack the state of Chu. The young King was very eager to prove his bravery and authority so he ordered that anyone who raised objections must be killed immediately. One of the King’s stewards wanted to protest but he was too afraid to speak out. He thought long and hard about how to raise an objection and not be killed immediately.

One morning the steward finally had an idea. He took a slingshot and some pellets and walked around the King’s courtyard until he was completely covered in morning dew. The steward did this every morning and the entire time he did not say a word. Finally on the third morning the King saw the steward again glistening with the morning dew. He called to the steward and asked him in a stern voice “Why are you completely covered in morning dew?” The steward replied “in the bottom of the garden there is a tree. Upon this tree a cicada perches and drinks the morning dew. Behind it a praying mantis waits ready to pounce. Behind him a sparrow cranes its neck to peck at it. Below the tree someone with a slingshot and pellets waits, aiming carefully.”

“Continue!” the King demanded.

The steward continued obediently “All of these three small creatures, the cicada, the praying mantis and the sparrow, are so eager to profit by something directly in front of them that they fail to see the danger behind them.”

The King, sitting up high on his beautiful black horse, let the steward go. The next morning the King came out of his chambers and called off the attack on the state of Chu.

12

She walks down the steps carefully. The hips no longer listen to the mind. Once a lithe young body has been deteriorated by years of hard labour and weighed down by the pounds slowly piled on each winter. Aunty Lucia is slowing down. She is nearing the end.

“Here’s the coffee. I’ve put in some sugar and milk. You young one’s like things watered down.” She laughs as she leans against the wall.

“Thank you.”

“The ashtray’s right there”, she points to the middle of the table, “if you smoke.”

I pull a packet of cigarettes out of my front pocket and drag the ashtray closer.

“How’ve you been?”

“Good. Finished Uni...Started working...”

“Came back to see ...”

“I suppose...”

“No place like home, is there?”

“No”, I sigh, “not even home.”

“How’s it, over there?”

“It’s good, you know. Different. Calmer. Simpler.”

“What’s the sea like? Ain’t no sea like ours, is it?”

“Nah. Completely different. You can’t compare the two.”

“Is your see not salty like ours?” her mouth involuntarily stretches, and she laughs, almost choking on her breath.

I laugh too.

“Yeah, the sea’s salty, the rain’s wet. Same as everywhere.” I sip the coffee. It is slightly too sweet.

She catches her breath, “Mama and Papa?”

“They’re good - working - looking forward to retirement like everyone else. The change has done them good.”

“Here...everything’s the same. If a little worst for wear... You did good to leave. The young here... hell there’s no future for them here.”

“I know...It’s hard.”

“It’s not hard. It’s stupid. But hey, we created it. We made our own bed and now we complain about having to lie in it.”

“It’s not the young one’s fault is it though? They didn’t create it. They just have to lie in it.”

“That’s even worse. They don’t even see the shit they’re lying in.”

I take a cigarette out of the pocket and light it. Extending my hand I offer her one too.

“Doctors say I’m not allowed”, she says taking one anyway. She rolls it between her fingers, tobacco slowly dropping onto the blue tablecloth.

“God, it was a different world when I was young”, she says. “Punta was a lot different back then...you wouldn’t remember...this was before your time...”

“It changed a lot during my time too.”

“It sure did and not for the better...but you never saw it in its full glory like I did.....The village stopped at the graveyard. There were no people or houses up there and

we used to take the cows to graze up there. There were a lot less houses but a lot more people living in Punta. Near the coast, where the new restaurant is now, was our school...and down below, on the other side of the bay, was a small church whose bells echoed through the village at midday....We all knew each other well. And helped each other out...There was no concrete. The roads, we called them the White Roads, were of gravel and dust. A rock here and there to tear the shoes we got once a year....And the dances....God they were the best in this part of the country. People came from neighbouring villages on a Saturday night just to hear our band playing and to watch us girls dancing. I used to wear men's shoes 'cause my feet were too big. Didn't make them in my size back then. And the beach...It was a real beach. They poured concrete over it about thirty years ago. Ruined the nature completely. Made it nice for the tourists...And what did they get? Everyone's leaving for the big cities now. Only we, the old, the dying out have stayed. I tell you, it will become a ghost town. Mark my words", she says pointing a finger at me. "It's good you left." She takes a puff of her cigarette and inhales deeply as Nona Flora used to. Her gaze is lost between the swaying leaves of the vine which engulfs the terrace.

13

A sparrow flutters past me and chooses a path of childhood feet.

Finally, we emerged from the bush to Magistrala. The snakes had not touched us. We kept to our path, stayed out of their way, and in return the snakes showed the same respect they received. Gina, Tito and I slid from under the lilo and wrapped our towels around our necks. Magistrala was tricky to cross. Tito put the lilo under his arm while Gina grabbed Ana's hand and I took hold of Sonya's. We all stood next to each other looking

carefully at both sides of the road and listening for any oncoming traffic. “Now!” I yelled when it was safe to cross. We ran across the road aware that there might be a car coming at lightening speed towards us.

As soon as we were on the other side of the road, we resumed our previous positions; Gina, Tito and I under the lilo with towels piled on top and Ana and Sonya following closely behind. We were almost at the beach now. All we had to do was walk down hundreds of white steps and the pebble beach awaited us. We could see the whole bay stretch out in front of us with the glistening blue sea beckoning us to come for a swim. Gina started humming a familiar melody. Tito immediately recognized it and began singing along.

As we were descending the stairs to the beach it became harder to balance the lilo above our heads, so we gripped the edges of it to stop it from sliding sideways. All of a sudden the lilo pulled backward forcing me to squeeze my hands harder. Gina had tripped on the edge of a step, lost her balance and tumbled into the prickly, blackberry bush. Startled by her fall I started laughing.

“Shit”, Tito let out a quiet surprise.

“You OK?” I asked as I put the lilo down and proceeded to help Gina up. She was a bit shaken, but it was a minor catastrophe. Her left knee was badly scratched, but it was nothing a couple of days couldn’t heal. Just another scratch, cut or a bruise to remember the summer by. Gina looked at me and started laughing too.

For somebody who played so much sport Gina’s legs never seemed to go where she wanted them to. She looked strong and athletic, but somehow she always managed to hurt herself. I used to have a habit of climbing over the two metre high dry stone wall of my house, in order to get to her house faster. It saved me having to go through the gate and around the wall just to get across the road. I wanted to teach Gina how to do it too, so that

she could get to my house faster. She managed to do it a couple of times, until one day she tripped over her own foot and fell off the wall straight into my garden. After that day I wasn't allowed to climb over the wall anymore.

I walk past the old bowling place. Every afternoon as the summer heat went down old men, crimped and weathered, used to meet there and play. They would gather and drink beer, their shouts and jeers echoing through the bay. It stands empty now. Even the red clay has deserted it. The small marina is still as half empty as it used to be. Most of the boats look ravaged and unkempt, faded paint peeling off. Here and there a newly painted one glistens and burns the eyes. A disruption, a discrepancy, to make the other boats seem even more battered.

A towel around my neck collects the sweat, tangling the lower hairs into dewy knots. I contemplate not walking past the restaurant. The path which goes around the back of it would make it possible to avoid any familiar faces, but I know – whoever is there has already seen me. If they have recognized me they would be offended. If they haven't, someone would tell them tomorrow and then they would resent it. A girl, one of their own, comes back and is too good to talk to them. So, I take a deep breath and careful not to avoid any eyes walk past. Some nod and smile. I follow their lead. Others stop me. The smell of their respective drinks, salt, sweat and heat linger upon my face long after the kiss. *Look at you, all grown up! How's mom? Dad? You? What's it like? Back for good? No place like home, is there?* I nod, smile and give them answers to please.

I make my way past the bathers to a small, decrepit, gaudily painted bar. There are a few round plastic tables, white once upon a time. The edges are scoured and the coffee stains dot the table tops. With the constant flourish of children also come the chewing gums stuck, within their reach, to the bottom of the table. The chairs are many, closely squeezed

together, each with their own unique piece missing. A small concrete wall encircles the sitting area providing another place to sit or lounge upon. Below the beach and the sea spread providing a million dollar backdrop.

I see Gina and Tito sitting at a corner table, their bodies still glistening from the refreshing swim. I hug Gina. There is something comforting about childhood friends. There is a feeling that they know everything despite the gap which obviously exists.

“Jeez you haven’t changed at all!” she says measuring me from head to toe.

“You have”, I laugh looking at her.

“Yeah got them a couple of years back”, she says grasping at her breasts.

“What’ll you drink?” Tito asks.

I look at the table; a small beer and a coffee adorn it.

“I’ll have a beer - just had coffee.”

He leaves to order as Gina and I take a seat.

“So?” I smile.

“So”, she smiles nodding her head from left to right. “I can’t believe you’re back after all these years.”

“Seven years”, I nod. “So what’s new?”

“What’s new?!” she laughs. “After seven years you ask what’s new like I haven’t seen you for a week. Jeez where to start?”

A waitress brings over a small beer and puts it in front of me.

“Thanks”, I say.

“That’s Ana. Not my sister,” Gina says and the waitress extends her hand.

“Kataryna,” I say tightening the grip.

“Ah, your friend,” Ana the waitress looks at Gina with a smile. “Good to have you back.”

I smile back at her and she walks away as a hand at another table is raised.

“I work here too,” Gina says.

“That’s nice. Close to home,” I reply.

“Yeah, nice. Stuck in this god forsaken place.”

“Oh come on. It’s not that bad. How’s your sister doing?”

“She’s good. She’s at Uni. Studying business, or economics, or something like that.

She got out. She’s got a boyfriend there too so she doesn’t really come over anymore. Too boring she says.”

“What about your boyfriend?” I ask coyly.

Gina smiles. “You know him. Remember Marco?”

I look at her puzzled.

“We didn’t really used to hang out with him much when we were kids. He lives on the other road in that big house. No?” she asks and is met with my blank expression.

“You’ll meet him tonight”, she replies. “What about you?”

“Nothing serious,” I shake my head.

“We’ll find you something”, she laughs.

Tito returns. “Sorry, couldn’t just leave - had to talk to him.”

“It’s all right.”

Gina winks at me and bursts out laughing.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing”, she keeps on laughing. “What you got to know everything?”

“Caught a lot?” I ask.

“No. We’ve been fishing’ in this sea for far too long. Not a lot of fish left anymore.

It was fine before when people used to catch only what they needed. But today...with the

restaurants and city people, the tourists, all wanting fish ‘cause we’re on the coast and it’s summer...we’ve eaten too many of them.”

The waitress brings out a cold, small, golden beer, condensation already formed on the smooth glass.

“Beer?” Gina asks.

“Yes”, he answers.

We believe we have a choice. We assume that we can be anything we wish to be. However, the harsh reality smacks us straight when we leave the nest and attempt to conquer the heights we assumed were within reach. We all dream of a time when the shackles of responsibility will be lifted of us and we hope that our bodies will have enough strength to enjoy the long lusted over freedom. For many, however, this time will never come and they will spend their lives being slaves to the ideals and wishes which were not theirs to begin with.

“I see you’ve still got the scar,” I say, diverting the conversation.

“Which one? On the knee?” she replies putting her leg above the table.

“Yeah. When you fell over, when we were carrying a lilo down the stairs to Dugna.”

“This one?” she points to the white vertical line across the left knee. “No way. I didn’t get that falling down those stairs.”

“Yes you did. Don’t you remember? We were going down to Dugna. Ana and Sonya were with us – we had to take them along. I was in the middle, he”, I point to Tito who is lighting his cigarette, “was in the front and you were in the back. All of a sudden you tripped and fell into the blackberries. Ana freaked out about it...”

Tito laughs choking on the smoke of his cigarette. He coughs loudly and thumps his chest gasping for air. His face still scrunched in pain he says “That wasn’t her that fell over! It was you! Don’t you remember? We were going down to Dugna, and we were carrying a lilo, and we had Ana and Sonya with us. But you were in the back and you couldn’t see where you were going. You kept knocking into my heels. You stepped onto the edge of the concrete stairs and fell over. You were all cut up from the bushes. Nona Flora almost had a heart attack when she saw you.”

“No way! That wasn’t me. I did fall over once but there was no lilo in the picture.”

“Hang on”, Gina raises a hand. “I got this scar when we were playing behind that old house, which is gone now, and we were jumping over some old bricks when I clipped my knee on one of them and this happened. Don’t you remember? I cried all the way home.”

“I don’t remember that,” I say.

“Neither do I”, Tito nods.

“That’s ‘cause you weren’t there, Tito. It was just the two of us”, she says.

“Hundred heads, hundred minds”, Tito adds.

“What?!” Gina and I exclaim and burst out laughing.

“Hundred heads, hundred minds, hundred pairs of eyes all looking at the same thing and seeing it in a hundred different ways. Memory is a joker with a poker straight face.”

“I don’t know”, Gina says taking a last sip of her coffee. “Look I have to go get something for mum, for the Carnival, but I’ll see you tonight at Marco’s?”

“Yep, of course.”

“I’ll show her where it is”, Tito says.

“So good to see you.” She hugs me strongly. “We’ll have plenty of time to catch up now, finally”, Gina says and leaves waving goodbye to Ana the waitress and some other people.

14

“Memory is a joker with a poker straight face”, Tito said. The only thing that matters, yet as soon as it occurs vanishes, is the present. Blink and you have missed a fraction which shall never be repeated. But you have not noticed it. Your eyelids have shut together to moisten your eyeballs. For a fraction of a millisecond you have become blind. As it occurs so quickly your mind connects the former and the latter moments of vision and fills in the gap. Thus, you are constructing your own reality. You do not see all of it. Your mind plays a trick on you like a joker. You have not witnessed the deception even though it has played out in plain sight of your shut eyeballs. It has gone on for as long as your body has existed, long before your mind was able to grasp the concept of ‘I’. You have accepted it as the truth as you have never known another. So the joker remains with a poker straight face playing the joke upon you, the blinker. You recollect the moments. You construct your memory. Or does your memory construct you? Are you what you remember yourself as being due to the reconstructions of your recollected perceptions? Blink for long enough and you become aware of the trick the joker is playing upon you. In denial you exclaim “I have missed it” and request a repeat performance. Though you really shouldn’t worry. There is nothing more universal than blinking and creating your own reality through the perceptions which cloud your recollections.

15

“I’ve been waiting’ for you to come back”, Tito says taking a sip of cold beer.

“You can’t come back before you do”, I smile.

“Seven years I’ve been thinking’ about you.”

I nod and light a cigarette.

“Remember our first kiss?” I ask.

“How could I forget?”

The water was cold against my warm body and when it came almost to my stomach there was nothing left to do, but dive into the refreshing sea. As I dove under my body came alive by the rush of the cold currents. It shivered and I began to swim in order to get it warm again. I swam straight for the lilo which Tito was protecting from Ana’s and Sonya’s sticky little hands. I got to the lilo and climbed up. Ana grabbed my arm trying to pull me off, but there was nothing she could do. She wasn’t strong enough. Tito and I paddled away furiously throwing water into Ana’s and Sonya’s faces. After a couple of strokes they gave up a battle they were destined to lose.

Finally in peace, Tito and I arranged ourselves on the lilo. We sat on top, our legs hanging off the sides, facing each other. The pillow rose behind my back, giving me something to lean against, as we pushed further away from the beach.

“Let’s paddle to the main beach see who’s there”, Tito suggested.

We turned the lilo around and paddled out of the bay into the deep black sea. We went around the cliff on the right side of the bay towards the main beach. There was a beach just behind the cliff. We called it the Pigeon Hole, because in order to get to the beach you had to traverse down a steep five metre cliff. Only birds could get down the cliff, so the beach was almost always deserted. As we paddled closer to the beach we realized there were

some people on the Pigeon Hole. We paddled towards them hoping it was someone we knew, but on a closer look we realized it was a group of old naked people. Nudists!

“Oooh! They’re naked. Yuck!” I said.

“Oooh! You can see everything hanging there! Wrinkly old farts!” Tito yelled at them scrunching his face up.

Not wanting to see any more than we already had, we paddled furiously away from the beach, but in our panic stricken condition we lost our balance and fell into the freezing black sea. The lilo overturned and we were left wondering what monsters were swimming beneath us. I surfaced, looked at Tito and burst out laughing. Tito had one hand on the lilo and the other around my neck. He was looking straight into my eyes and I stopped laughing overcome with a strange feeling. He was close and tense, unaware of the world around us. He tilted his head, pulled my neck closer with his hand and pushed his lips against mine. I closed my eyes enjoying the tension and awaiting his next move. His tongue slid into my mouth. Startled I opened my eyes.

Adults interrogate love; children accept it with open arms. We forget what we knew as children. We forget that we once knew who we were and what we wanted to be. Perhaps, that is why adults are so cautious when it comes to love and relationships. We are no longer certain who we are, and whether who we are is good enough. Good times are always followed by the bad, but the first kisses are never forgotten.

16

That afternoon, after the first kiss, within my wall, I saw it for the first time. I walked in and a sparrow fluttered by. My eyes followed the bird but landed upon the green

spindly legs of the praying mantis resting on the walnut tree. I noticed it and moved on, but later that day the sky opened. They came out of nowhere. Thousands and millions of little green legs walked on every road, every stone, and every white wall of Punta. The windows and doors stayed shut for two weeks; a feeble attempt to ignore the praying mantis. Some learnt to deal with them, playfully ripping their spiny green legs off leaving the dismembered bodies scattered around slowly dying on the searing concrete. I never touched them for the fear that their blood would stain my hands forcing the remaining million army to attack their deadly enemy. I figured if I don't touch them, don't hurt them, the praying mantis would show me the same respect and leave me alone. But, they did not. They intruded uninvited, their little green forelegs rubbing against each other, their beady eyes carefully measuring their next victim. They were vicious; striking from behind during the blind night. Any opportunity the praying mantis were given they took. There was no fair play, no consideration, no respect. The praying mantis occupied the village; their coherent army striving for the same goal – to attack, to defeat, to take over, to inhabit the land that was not theirs. However, the army of the praying mantis did not take history into account. They did not know about the countless soldiers who came before them.

Time passes. It changes things. To forget what has been would be a betrayal. To remember would be too painful. Forever, as darkness above my shoulders, the past lingers. It must be remembered, never to be forgotten, always to be run away from. It was after the rain of the praying mantis that the cracks in the idyllic façade began to appear. They were everywhere. A good night's sleep became a wish, an open window a threat. As much as we tried to keep the praying mantis out they found a way into our lives. Every night I would push my bed away from the wall and from a safe distance check whether there were any green legs ready to pounce. There never were any. Not in our house. Our home was safe for reasons unknown. There were those in Punta who blamed the invasion of the praying

mantis upon those who managed to escape their wrath. The praying mantis did not attack an entire village. That would have been fair. Instead they focused only on one road, and even there they had preferences. Some houses were engulfed; others were merely grazed by their forces while some were spared. They had no logic, yet their strategy was exquisite. If there had been a reason, a reason upon which we, the people, had influence it would have made more sense. This way panic mingled with confusion and brought out the animals within the most. There were those, exceptions to every rule, who remained clear headed and warm hearted. Morals still intact they clung to a code long expired. Cast out yet secretly respected they lived on amongst the rubble. We define ourselves by what we are not, by what we see as missing from ourselves. The humanity and morality exhibited by a few individuals forced the others to see what they no longer had and it made them turn their wrath upon them. For when one extinguishes the light forever one does eventually cease to see the darkness.

17

We walk through the barely lit street on the other side of the village. The street curves violently and I dig my toes in as I walk down the hill. A beautiful, large two storey house bears the voices of youth on the veranda. Tito opens the gate and walks through pulling me by my hand.

“Isn’t this the old shopkeeper’s house?” I ask.

“It’s Marco’s house”, he replies.

Once upon a time an old shopkeeper and his wife lived in this house. They were a gentle couple with only one daughter. When the daughter got married and went to live in

the big city they fell into their quiet routine. The old shopkeeper and his wife would rise at dawn. On the sheltered veranda with views stretching across the bay they would eat their scrambled eggs and drink their black coffees. Then the old shopkeeper would go to work maintaining the only shop in the village even though he was well past the retirement age. His old wife would walk down to the bottom of the village with him where they would separate with a soft kiss on the cheek. She would go to the Church to give thanks for the loving, quiet and gentle marriage that was bestowed upon her. They lived each day the same as the one which preceded it content with what life had given them.

One day it all changed. When the praying mantis invaded they were careful to avoid the old couple's house. Not one pair of green spindly legs entered their courtyard. Their routine went on unchanged and for this too they were grateful unaware that it was to be their downfall.

In the house next to them lived two brothers each of whom had two sons of their own. They were not quiet, nor gentle, nor loving and their house was engulfed by the army of the praying mantis. The brothers could not understand why their neighbours, a weathered couple who would soon drop dead, were spared when their household, numerous and full of children, was engulfed by the praying mantises. They suspected that the old woman with her constant praying must have something to do with it so they began taunting them, calling them foul names whenever and wherever they saw them. The old couple retreated; kept their heads low to the ground and hoped that unprovoked the brothers would stop. But they did not. The brothers took the silence to be a proof of their guilt.

One morning when the old shopkeeper went to work and his old wife went to Church the brothers broke their front door and invaded their house. The little possessions the old couple had were thrown out of the window. The old man came home to find that a house he had so lovingly built in his youth for the large family he wished to create was now

occupied by two rude, crude, drunk brothers. He knew his old bones were no match for the brothers and the rest of the village had long ago stopped noticing them. He had no one to turn to so he collected the possessions that the brothers had thrown out and neatly placed them into the bags he had carried home from the shop. He walked down the road to the bottom of the village to the Church. There his wife was still praying. He sat in the back row and waited for her to finish. When she said the last of her prayers she turned and saw her husband sitting, head bent low, and their possessions neatly packet in plastic bags. She came to him, took him by the hand and they walked out of the village never to be seen or heard from again.

18

Around a white plastic table littered with bottles of whiskey, brandy and cognac, with casks of red and white wine, with cans of beer sits a small group of young people. Everyone greets me while I look at them confused with the exhilaration of trying to chisel the children's features into the faces which stand before me. Some are easier to spot while others have changed beyond recognition. A drink is pushed into my hand, a chair freed for when I wish to sit. I get lost between the faces, the information, the changes, the juxtapositions. The party is well under way by the time my mind stops and my butt settles into the chair between Gina and Toni. I exhale into my empty cup.

"Everyone who says they have two homes is either lying or is ignorant. You can't have two homes. To have two homes means that you first had to lose a home, and once you lose something you can never get it back," Tito says.

"No you can have two homes. You can have two places to call your own", Gina replies.

“No you can’t. Can you live in two places?” he asks.

“Yes. Just not at the same time”, she says

I grab a cask of wine and pour some into my cup.

“That means that forever and always there is a part of you that is not there and that is unknown to both the people and the place. To have or to be at home means to be entirely at one with the people and the place”, I say.

“But do they really need to know everything about you?” Tito asks.

“No, I suppose...but to understand you probably yes. They need to know where you’ve been to understand why you are who you are now. History is everything”, I reply.

“I don’t know about your two homes, two places, theory, history, whatever, but I’ll tell you this. This bay here in Punta, I am the happiest man when I see it and I’d never want to live somewhere where I can’t see it”, Tito adds pointing his cigarette towards the sea.

“That’s ‘cause it’s your home”, Gina says. “But how do you know you could never love another place like Punta? And how do you know that Punta will always be Punta, that it’ll stay the same?”

“Why would I want to find another place which I could love as much as Punta when I already have Punta? And the Punta that I love will never change because it’s not the people, the atmosphere or whatever that I love. I love the rocks. I love the sea. I love the memories that I have here. I even love the damn fish”, he laughs.

“What if one day you have to leave? What if your life here becomes unbearable and out of fear or hope for the better you have to leave?” I ask.

“Nobody guarantees that there is a place where life will be easy and dreams will come true”, Gina replies.

“No. True. But what if there is a place where all those things that you need or want will come easier?” I ask.

“Life’s not easy. Maybe it’s not supposed to be”, she says.

“Why not? If there’s something or somewhere that can make it easier why shouldn’t you go?” I push on.

“Think about it. We have a lot more than our parents did and our life’s easier. Our parents have a lot more than our grandparents did and their life is definitely easier...” Tito replies instead.

“Wouldn’t you want your children’s lives to be easier than yours?” I interrupt.

“Of course, but let me finish...Our grandparents considered a good and happy life to be if they had a roof over their heads, food on the table and some clothes to keep them warm and protected. If they could educate their children they saw it as a huge success. They were happy. Life was hard but simple and they appreciated everything they had. Today, now, we, take those things for granted. It’s not enough to have a roof over our heads we need a nice view, a room for every person, fancy appliances, flash furniture and whatever. It’s not enough to have clothes. They have to be the right brand, colour, price, style, whatever. And we are not happy. We want more”, he sighs.

“It’s in human nature to want more and to want better”, Gina says.

“More is not necessarily better”, I say.

“More money more problems,” Tito laughs.

“More money more opportunities more choices”, Gina adds.

“More choices more searching more possible mistakes”, Tito says.

“You’re getting off track.”

“Yeah. My point was, is, that we have more but we’re not happier. There’s a huge difference between having and not having, but almost none between having and having better when you give up that which is the most important: a home and people that you love”, Tito says.

“It’s not that simple. We’ve gone past that age where you can close yourself off in your small, little world and pretend that you don’t see what others have or are doing. In today’s world money does turn the wheel. It might not make you happy, but it can certainly make you miserable”, Gina says.

“Oi, you the discussion panel, anyone want more drinks?” Marco interrupts swinging a bottle of homemade liquor in a plastic bottle.

“Nah we’re good. We’ve got wine and beer on the table”, Gina replies.

From there the conversation swirls and swoops around gossip, weather, fishing, stories dug up from childhood memories, tourists seen, gone and those that are yet to arrive, money, work and all those acceptable and shared interests. Somewhere along the way, between the toilet and drink trips, the veranda has divided into two groups. Marco, Tito and other men have formed a tight circle leaning towards each other with cool beers in their hands. The homemade liquor sits in the middle of their circle and every so often one of them picks it up and pours a small amount into their glasses. The conversation stops as the glasses clink together and the liquor burns their throats. The girls on the other side have formed their own conversation mainly around clothes, gossip and love stories. Childhood friends have grown. I stand on the doorway leaning against the open glass. It is a scene they have repeated many times throughout but it is a first for me. I gaze at them not really catching any of the words which come my way carried by the northerly breeze. The house has not been painted in a while. The façade is worn and rough with bits and pieces of black dirt stuck in the crevices. I run my fingers lightly over it touching it with only one finger at a time. My forefinger gets stuck in a crevice. I move my head close to see what it was that has caught me. And then I see it. Painted an innocent white, immortalized forever, row after row of praying mantises cover the walls. Beady eyes, elongated thorax, front legs with

raptorial graspers and long spikes still pray as a reminder of what once was and never will be again. A memory they had tried to erase lies in plain sight.

“I’m the sixth generation living in Punta”, Tito says proudly, arms folded, head bent over the table, weighed down with the hazy liquor.

“Sixth?” Ivan says.

“How many is six generations?” Marco asks.

“Like two hundred years, round about”, I reply.

“What, one generation is twenty to thirty years, so a bit less”, Ivan says.

“All right so hundred and fifty to two hundred years”, Marco says. “But where were they before that? See you’re not from Punta, really.”

“What?!” Tito yells. “Take it back, man!”

“Well, you’re not. Your family’s been here for less than two hundred years. Where were they before that?” Marco asks with a laugh.

“I’m from Punta! Fuckin’ sixth generation.”

Tito’s head lifts and he takes another sip of the homemade drink.

“Yeah, but who knows where your family is really from”, Marco replies.

“Take it back or you’re not walking off this veranda!”

“Who knows. Who cares”, Ivan says.

Tito slaps the drink on the table. “Take it fuckin’ back!”

“What are you getting so worked up about?” Marco asks.

Tito starts repeating “Take it back or I’ll fuckin’ slap you!” and walks towards Marco.

“Whatever man”, Marco says and a closed fist meets his face. Stunned, he stumbles back and Ivan and Paulo jump between them, hands raised towards Tito.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” resounds through the veranda. All conversation stops and all eyes turn to the commotion.

“Take it back! I am from Punta and nowhere else do I belong!” Tito yells.

Blood is slowly dripping from Marco’s nose, down the corner of his lips.

“All right. I take it back”, he replies.

“Where’s your family from?!” Tito yells. “Where did they live before they took over this house?!”

“That’s enough! Stop it!” Ivan interrupts.

Gina comes over to me and says quietly “Get him out of here.”

“Tito lets go home”, I say as I grab his arm.

His head turns my way and he nods, but his attention is still focused on Marco.

“Tito lets go”, I say and start walking away.

“Listen to her”, Ivan says to him.

Without a word Tito follows, swaying from side to side pushed by the liquor, murmuring under his breath.

19

The morning sun streams in through the shades. I sleep in my parents’ empty bed now. The beds of childhood gape vacant, a reminder of a time that once was and will never be again. The room is the same as it once was, although slightly more weathered. There is a void that can never be filled.

The northerly wind is calm this morning. Only a trace of it lingers in the coolness of the breath. Red rooftops dot the horizon until they merge with the glistening blue sea.

Barefoot I walk down the stairs into the living room. Nona Flora has long ago eaten her breakfast. I kiss her forehead and ask where the coffee is.

“Have breakfast first”, she answers. “Coffee and cigarettes are a terrible way to start the day.”

“I’ll have breakfast straight after coffee, Nona.” I smile at her. “Promise.”

“I’ll make it for you then.”

As she moves purposefully around the kitchen I notice that she has gotten older. Even though grandparents seem to always be ancient it never occurred to me that they could get older than they already are. I had always imagined them to be out of time’s reach. Her back is more stooped now as if though the years and knowledge are a burden too heavy to be carried for much longer. She is old, but, if possible, she gets older with each passing day.

As the smell of fresh coffee fills the air she turns. In her unsteady hand a small white porcelain cup with blue flowers clinks against the saucer.

“I’ll take that Nona. Thanks.” She seems relived as I take the coffee out of her hand.

“Hmmm it’s good”, I say taking a sip.

“Do you want more sugar?” she asks.

“No. No. It’s perfect.”

“I don’t know how you like your coffee”, she replies

“It’s excellent. Thank you.”

I sit down and light a cigarette. Smoke escapes my mouth as guilt seeps in. It is strange to be smoking inside Nona Flora’s house, like a violation of her meticulous home. A chair away she sits looking at me. Wordless. Perhaps she is simply taking a note of things which have changed and a future they may bring. Old people have seen so much, her memory too must overlap with the present. I wonder if she sees me as I am right here sitting, drinking

and smoking, or whether her mind has escaped and she sees another figure from the past in my place.

20

“Come for a walk with me. There’s something I want to show you”, Tito says.

“What?”

“You’ll see. Come on”, his hand extends towards me.

I take his hand with a questioning smile. Hand in hand, we walk along the road down the hill towards the graveyard, the scorched grass tickling my ankles. At the little chapel a candle is burning faintly, wavering softly in a hot breeze. He leads me along the bush covered path, beside the graveyard. A path I had not taken since I’ve been back.

“Are we going to Dugna?” I ask.

“You’ll see”, he smiles and continues to walk.

We stop as we emerge on the Magistrala. We know the dangers of the road. We know the rules. We know the paths. A moment with no cars presents itself and we run across the road. We come to the place in the path which splits, like a wish bone, into two possibilities. One leads down to the pebbled beach, millions of little steps descending upon each other, down to the place of grazed childhood knees. Tito leads me down the other way, a so called ‘white’ road. It has its name for the dust which unsettles as the feet scurry along it. The road is wide enough to let one car, or a horse and a carriage which was the original intent, pass through. Rocks jut out beneath the dust. As we turn a corner a bay opens in front us.

It is so overgrown now that any remnants of past campers are visible only to those who know the past, who remember what it used to be. Nona Flora used to take me for long walks and scavenger hunts here. If I let the window just slightly slide open the two fuse

together; the shiny spoons and broken cups with delicate pictures rise from the deep grass. They know what I know.

Nona Flora squinted and looked hard towards the sea, all the way to the distant outline of the dormant islands.

“It’s good here. The air is fresh,” she said to no one as she took a breath which penetrated to the deepest corner of her being. She looked down at me and smiled, contently and peacefully, for no reason.

“Let’s keep going. Anything you like you can take home with you. They’re here for the chosen few. Go!” Her eyes laughed now too.

“See that house over there?” Tito points.

“Can’t miss it”, I laugh. “It’s huge.”

On a small hill, raised away from the treacherous salty wind a large, two storey shell of a house stands. Red brick with grey mortar, gaps for windows yet to come clash against the grey rocks and the scorched grass which surround it.

“It’s mine”, he says not taking his eyes off it.

“What do you mean it’s yours?”

“It’s mine. I’m building it.”

“It’s huge.”

“I know.”

“What do you need such a big house for?”

“I’ll need space.”

“What for?”

“Families get along better if there’s more space.”

“Something you want to tell me about? Like a wife and twelve kids hidden in a closet somewhere?”

“Yeah, yeah”, he smiles. “It’s a perfect house though. See how it’s curved to the north so the wind slides over it. On the west side towards the sea, it’ll have big windows, double glazed, and with a slight yellow tint, so that on the days when there is no sun the inside will be golden. At the end of the U shape, towards the sea, the two bedrooms are gonna be with the same windows, so that you can look out at the sea from the bed, but nobody else will see you. The U shape will also protect the patio in the middle, ‘cause it rarely blows from the west, and it’s protected from all the other directions.”

On a second look the stark contrast between the brick skeleton and the terrain which surrounds it diminishes and it seems to stand in a strange unison with it. The house is being built with a knowledge of the nature which may destroy or enhance it. He pulls me by my hand and walks towards the house. My toe hits something sharp. I let go of his hand and shrivel to the ground in pain. A curved, sharp-edged porcelain piece of a cup has jabbed into my big toe, blood flowing and staining the earth and the porcelain.

I picked up a cup. A side was missing. The other side was stained ochre from the ground below, the intricate red flower on a green stem protruding.

“Nona look at this.”

“It’s beautiful, my child. Put it in the bag. We’ll take it home and clean it.”

I placed the broken cup into the bag and it clanked against the other forgotten pieces savoured by Nona.

A thin, wobbly branch extended from her left arm and prodded the ground below turning over the leftovers of others’ past. A blue saucer with a sparrow caught her attention. She bent down and with her right hand, letting the plastic bag fall against the ground, she

picked the saucer up for closer attention. Twisting and turning it, satisfied with what it portrayed she placed it inside the bag. Another piece to add to the useless collection, to be placed into the garage until a purpose for it was found.

Tito slides one hand under my knees and the other around my waist and picks me up. My hands circle his neck as he carries me towards the house. The blood trickles down to the ground, like breadcrumbs, memorising the path we take.

“On the top floor”, Tito continues, “there’s gonna be two more rooms and a huge bathroom which overlooks the sea - and a big balcony in front of them.”

He carries me over the threshold and into the house. With his left foot Tito clears the ground and gently puts me down. I limp across the room, my gaze catching every detail possible. The brick is still completely exposed, but wide wooden beams have already been put in place. I can see it. My imagination fills in the gaps. I can see the glistening white walls juxtaposed against the dark warm beams and wooden floors. A large, leather sofa encircles the living room, weathered to perfection by years of use.

“This is where a fireplace is gonna be”, he traces the air with his hands, carefully measuring the distance between them, “open, so you can sit around the fire, and then above it”, his hands reach as far as they can above his head, “the chimney vent thing. But it’s all gonna be made of rock.”

Another dimension added to the picture, but the solitude penetrates my bones, and makes my spine shiver. It is a perfect house, one of childhood dreams.

I walk through the arches onto the dusty courtyard. The blue sea spreads out in front of me, merging with the sky above. On a rock, sitting sideways, Nona Flora is looking out towards the blue. Her eyes are lost in the distance, her hair gently swaying in the northerly breeze. She does not turn to look at me.

“It sounds impressive. It’ll look good,” I say.

“It’ll be perfect. And there’s heaps of room for kids to run around, no neighbours to keep their eye on us, and I can keep my boat right in front of the house.”

“Everything you need.”

“Everything I want”, he says.

I sit down on the rock overlooking the bay, my back turned to the house. Silence fills the air. Below me, on a rock of its own, the praying mantis too is capturing the scene ahead. Tito comes up behind me and rests his elbows on my shoulders, fists clasped in front of my face.

“It’s perfect, isn’t it?” I ask.

His head lowers and his lips touch my neck. His breath vibrates through my ears. He kisses my neck again.

“Everything I want”, he whispers.

I turn around and kiss him back.

21

I snuggle next to him and let my face rest in the crevice between his neck and chest, nose pressed against the moist, salty skin. His left arm envelops me, heavily resting on my waist, fingers softly picking at the folds in my skin. I open my eyes and slowly run my hand through the hairs on his chest. They flatten out but quickly spring back towards the sky.

“You know...when you left I wrote you letters”, Tito says.

“I know.”

“I wrote you a letter a week.”

“I wrote them to you too.”

“I never got any.”

“I wrote you a letter every Sunday.”

“I never got the letters.”

“I never sent them.”

“I waited for them.”

“I just couldn’t send them...and then your letters stopped.”

“I thought you forgot about me.”

“I thought I could.”

“It doesn’t matter now...you’re back.”

That first day, when I walked down the stairs of my Nona’s house and saw Tito sitting and smoking in the living room, there was an energy which resounded through the house. It washed over me. I could not quite decipher its meaning, but when I saw him I realized what it was. It was him I could feel. Ever since we were children we could feel each other. It was not necessary to explain or to ask, all we had to do was trust. Perhaps it was a matter of knowing each other long before we knew ourselves, long before our conscious mind was able to question, deliberate and judge.

“Can I see them? The letters?” he asks.

“I don’t have them anymore. I threw them away.”

“Why?”

“They ceased to be me.”

I can still feel him, but there is a void between us now. A void filled with unshared memories and unknown passages of time. A void full to the brim of desires, expectations and fantasies. A void which separates us and dissolves the trust planted there long before the memories.

22

“Hey Tito, wanna hear a story?” I ask.

“Go on. Tell me a story”, he smiles.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Princess. She was the only child of a powerful King. The King loved his daughter very much. When she was a child the Princess had the best toys, the biggest birthday parties and the most extravagant presents. Whatever the Princess wished for she received. The Princess eventually grew into a beautiful young woman and when the time came for her to marry her father called upon the best suitors in the country. The wealthiest, the kindest, the strongest, the smartest and the most handsome men, one hundred in total, came to the Palace. The King had devised a three day contest upon the end of which the Princess would choose her future husband. In the first day the suitors’ intelligence was to be tested. Strength was to be put to the test on the second day and on the third their kindness.

The King gathered the most precious jewels and the most luxurious silks for his daughter. The maids spent thirty days and thirty nights sewing together three dresses, each more beautiful than the one before. When the day finally came the one hundred suitors gathered in the courtyard. As the Princess descended the stairs in her ornate gown and sparkling jewels everyone was left without a breath. They all agreed that she was the most

beautiful woman anyone had ever set their eyes upon. She was so beautiful that all one hundred suitors instantly fell in love with her. Even the King was so touched by her presence that tears swelled in the corners of his eyes.

Each sunset saw many suitors defeated and sent back empty handed to their homes. The first day Johan won. He had proved himself to be the smartest suitor. On the second day the strongest suitor, Gustav, won the contest. The final contest, one of kindness, Kiril won. The King was disappointed. He had hoped that one man would triumph over others and thus make the decision an easy one. The King sent the suitors away and asked them to return on the seventh day.

The King and the Princess spent many a day and night trying to decide upon the best suitor. The King had a favourite. It was Markus. Markus was not the smartest, the kindest nor the strongest suitor, but in each contest he had won a second place. In King's eyes this made him an overall winner and thus the man who should have his daughter's hand in marriage. However, the King noticed that the Princess was not particularly drawn to any of the suitors. On the seventh morning, as the suitors began to gather in the courtyard, the King came to see his daughter and to urge her to choose a suitor. As he walked into her chambers he heard a sobbing sound. He turned to find the Princess in the corner crying.

“What is the matter, my child?” the King asked gently.

“Oh father, I have not been honest with you.” the Princess replied. “My heart already belongs to someone.”

Unknown to the King the Princess, seven years ago, had fallen in love with the shepherd's son whom she saw every day through her window as he took his sheep grazing. He was not the kindest, nor the strongest, nor the smartest and certainly not the wealthiest man in the country. Even the handsome trait seemed to escape him, but the Princess' heart could not

see further than him despite the years which had passed. Every morning the Princess would sit at her window and imagine the shepherd's son grazing his sheep below. Each day she waited for her love to return.

The King patiently listened to the Princess speak of her love for the shepherd's son and finally after deep thought said to his daughter

"If you marry Markus you will be able to continue a life of pleasure and content that you lead now. You will have a handsome, wealthy, intelligent, strong and kind husband who will treat you well and with whom life will be full of ease. The shepherd's son has been gone for a long time now and may not be the man you imagine you love so much."

The Princess heard and agreed with the wise words of her father but her heart remained unmoved. Finally she turned to her father and said "I will live with a man without whom I cannot imagine my life, rather than with a man whom I can easily live with."

Tito laughs. "Only you women could come up with nostalgic bullshit like that."

23

Before I reach the door, echoing and drumming through the midday, musky heat the beat of Latin music enters my ears. A noon was once marked by the toiling Church bells from the bottom of the village. Now, the Latin music blasting from the airwaves of Spanish, or perhaps Mexican, soap operas call the inhabitants to the table. In many ways they serve the same purpose – to remind one of life that once was and to give hope of what is yet to come.

Inside Nona and Gloria have taken their positions around the dining table - the best seats in the house. Ready and waiting, eyes glued to the television, they retell each other

what happened in the last episode. Never mind that they saw it yesterday, together, but the words are needed to refresh the mind, set the atmosphere.

“Hey, Nona....Gloria...”, a kiss on the cheek for each of the aging ladies. A placemat, with cutlery and dishes, is already set on the table.

I utter “How’ve...” but am met with a noise of protest. The curtain is about to lift. The play is ready to begin.

The opening scenes of betrayal, heartbreak, friendship, romance spread across the television in the various shades of grey. It tells the lives of others, intensified for the pleasure of those who no longer believe it will happen to them in this lifetime. Nona Flora’s and Gloria’s bodies are too weathered and their minds not naïve enough to allow such profound gambling of emotions anymore.

In silence I watch them as they edge closer in their seats to the television. Their skirts are hitched above the knees, cardboard fans ready. Gloria sits on my grandfather’s sofa, an ashtray in her left hand, cigarette in the right. The black, strong coffee rests on the table within reach. Nona Flora’s eyes are glued to the television anticipating what will come. They peel off momentarily to check the fullness, or the emptiness as the case may be, of my plate.

“Alejandro cheated on her last time. The bastard. But he is good looking”, Gloria says.

“The old one, Rosa, saw them, I think. She’ll tell Maria. You’ll see. He’ll get found out”, Nona adds.

“Which one’s Alejandro?” I ask.

“Not this one...the one that was on the screen just before...blue eyes, dark long hair”, Gloria replies not even looking at me.

“This one?”

“No, no. That’s Rafael. He’s the good guy. He’s Alejandro’s brother. He’s in love with Maria, Alejandro’s wife, the one he cheated on. But he won’t do anything about it.”

“That’s always the case isn’t it?” Nona adds. “The good ones never get the girl. Well, maybe in the end, once she’s been hurt by the Alejandro’s of the world.”

“Yes, we sure know how to pick ‘em. My first husband”, Gloria turns to me smiling, “he was no good but I couldn’t keep my hands of him.”

“Shhhhhh! It’s starting!” Nona interrupts her laughter.

Their eyes turn. Gloria stubs the cigarette out, but not completely. Smoke swivels upwards from the ashtray.

Exaggerated emotions spread across the television. Everlasting love is promised, friendships are made, betrayals are imminent, hearts are broken, tears of both laughter and fear are shed, plates of rage are flung across the room, over and over, and over again. I eat silently. Gloria mumbles beneath her breath. Focusing on her parting lips I try to distinguish what she is saying and I realize that she is reading the subtitles, but not completely nor accurately. They are not the same words that spread across the bottom of the screen. Only four years of school, more than fifty years ago, ensured that Gloria’s reading abilities leave much to the imagination. None-the-less she reads out loud. Mumbling, jumbling, pronouncing the words as she sees fit until they form a different meaning from the one exposed on the screen. By saying the words she is able to reconstruct them and make them her own. By listening to them she is able to consider and decipher them.

The series ends and once again the scenes of what once shall be, of what already has been play out within the black and white snow of the decrepit television set. A

thirst satisfied. The messages clear. It is what they need. It is what they want. It is what they once had a chance to have.

Nona turns to me. “You and Tito...you in love?”

“No Nona...” I try to laugh it off. Somehow, I thought that people lose vision with sight. “Just good friends.”

“Don’t get married young”, she responds.

“Oh come on. Leave the girl alone”, Gloria interrupts, “not like we listened to anyone when we were her age.”

“What if I fall in love like you did Nona?”

“It wasn’t love. I was nineteen...old by all those standards..”

“You know no one will marry her”, Gloria laughs, “she can’t even cook.”

24

We, the kids, were on Gina’s terrace. The sun was low; the day’s heat retreated until the next day. The air was still, the sky without a cloud. All the way from the hill, across the rooftops, to the blue sea beyond, the tranquil afternoon stretched over Punta. Gina’s house was identical to the two which stood beside it: two stories, large terrace overlooking the sea with the French doors opening onto the living area. A reddish brown waist high fence separated the three terraces.

We were playing, or just sitting there and talking, the details of the past sometimes elude me, when her next door neighbour came out. He was a large man in his late fifties. He had no children and no wife. He leaned on the fence and called us to come. He said he had something to show us. I looked closely at him. The thick black hairs pushed through and around the white, worn out singlet. My eyes followed the thick arm towards the reddish

fence. Between his thumb and forefinger something small moved. As I came closer the bright green colour caught my attention. Between his stubby fingers a praying mantis was caught. He had trapped it by its hind legs and was gently, so as not to rip them off, rocking the praying mantis, back and forth.

“A praying mantis!” I gasped. “I’ve seen them before.”

“It’s not just any praying mantis”, he replied, “it’s mantis religiosa.”

“What’s that?” Gina asked and looked at me, disgust scrunching her forehead.

“There are over two thousand species of praying mantis. Mantis religiosa is just one of them. They all look very similar. Amazing creatures....Their eyes move hundred and eighty degrees so it is difficult to trick them. They have eyes in the back of their heads....see their back legs – they are long and lean so that they can move quickly – jump from one place to the next...But it’s their front arms that are the most interesting. Do you know why?”

Gina and I looked at each other

“No”, we answered, shoulders shrugged.

“As they sit there, watching their pray with their jewelled eyes and calculating their next move they rub their front legs together. Before they attack their victim they give an innocent impression of praying. That’s why they are called the praying mantis. And the hands, which pray, have strong spikes on them which pierce and kill their victims.”

“That’s disgusting”, Gina said.

“Not really”, he replied. “Quite smart, if you think about it.”

“You said this one was a special praying mantis. Why?” I asked.

“Ah the mantis religiosa...You see, the female praying mantis is bigger than the male. And many people believe that the female eats the male after breeding because she

doesn't need him anymore. But it isn't true. Most of the praying mantises do not do this. It is this one, the mantis religiosa, which gives the bad reputation to the rest of its species."

"What?!" I asked.

"She bites his head off, I said."

"Why?"

"Ha...see that's the interesting part. During breeding...you two know how children are made?"

"Yeah...we're not that young", Gina answered.

"Well, as the male is about to come the female bites his head off to speed up the ejaculation. So literally as new life begins another one ends."

He continued rocking the praying mantis back and forth until he ripped its hind legs off. Then he threw it on the terrace and let it stay there, unable to move, to face its death.

25

"Hey. Coffee?" Gina asks.

I nod and she disappears through the French doors. Only the occasional clink of the cups against a spoon or the kitchen surface bears witness to her labour. She brings the cups filled to the brim with coffee and an ashtray in her back pocket. I take the coffee out of her hands and we walk to the place of childhood secrets. Over the wall, through the bush, upon the grubby ground many secrets were told, imagined and listened to in the privacy of no man's land.

"Tell me", I say to her, cleaning out the stones jabbing into me.

"What do you want to know?" she asks lighting a cigarette.

"Everything."

“Everything,” she laughs. “Could you be less specific?”

I sip at the coffee and look at her. Gina’s gaze is lost in the distance, stuck somewhere between the leaves, red rooftops and the glistening blue sea.

“There’s not much to tell. You are lucky that you left.”

“I don’t know. I envy you guys in a way.”

“Why?”

“You know where your home is. You’re not stuck between two places.”

“God, I wish I had the opportunity to choose between two places; to be able to come and go as I want. To see what there is out there in the world, beyond this bay here.”

“You can always leave.”

“It’s too late. I missed my chances. There are no second chances in this place.”

“You make it all sound so dead-end.”

“It’s not dead-end, but it’s all mapped out, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean it’s all mapped out?”

“I don’t have a lot of choices. I’ll end up marrying Marco, living in the house his parents built, have some kids and waitress till I can, or have to. And then one day I’ll die.”

“It could be worse,”

“Yeah, I suppose it could be worse”, she stubs out the cigarette and covers it with a small rock. “Remember Tania from our class?”

“Yeah, the pretty blonde one that all the boys were in love with ‘cause she was the first one to get tits”, I laugh.

“That’s the one. She’s got a kid now - a little girl.”

“That’s nice.”

“When she was six months pregnant she found out her man was cheating on her and got another chick pregnant. So she slept with Ivan to get back at him.”

“Fair enough.”

“Yeah”, she nods. “When he found out, fuck she wasn’t very smart about it – everyone knew- he threw her and the kid out. She became the village slut.”

“What about Ivan?”

“Ain’t no man around here gonna be raising another man’s child.”

“I haven’t seen her.”

“And you’re not going to. She moved to her grandparents’ place further down south and swore she’ll never set another foot in Punta again.”

“So two faced and old fashioned.”

“Welcome to Punta”, she smiles. “I’m glad you’re back though.”

A praying mantis sits on a branch within an earshot. He rocks backwards and forwards mimicking the leaves swaying in the breeze, almost inconspicuous, almost invisible. Always near keeping his eyes wide open. As a sparrow lands on the ground the praying mantis spreads his wings and turns a darker shade of green ameliorating into the leaves around it. Gone but present.

“So, you and Tito?” Gina asks. “How’s it going?”

“Good”, I smile.

“Why do you like him? What do you see in him?”

Who is Tito? What does he look like? How do I describe a man to whose being so many fairytales are connected? He is too rough and haggard to be linked to the adjective handsome. He is not tall yet appears strong and masculine. His features are too wayward to be described within the notions beauty. His mind is quick yet he is too lazy to build upon it.

Through his veins too much liquor flows and with time will become hazy, like the eyes which are constantly looking at the changing tides. He chooses to whom he is good. He unleashes at those he cares nothing about. He is a man stuck within the realm of shadeless black and white. He is a man I have dreamed about for seven years. He is a man who does not exist. He is a character within my mind created at the portal of escapism.

“I don’t know. It’s just Tito”, I reply.

26

“Are you all right Nona?”

“Just got a bit puffed from cooking. It’s the heat. And the age I suppose”, she says smiling.

“I’ll help you.”

“No. No. It’s OK. You relax, watch TV, take a shower or something. I’ll take care of it.”

“No. Come on. I’ll help you cook. About time I learnt anyway.”

“OK. Just give me a few minutes.”

“What are we cooking?”

“Dumplings with plums.”

“Oooh...the plums wrapped in delicious dough cooked to perfection only by you”, I laugh and kiss her on the forehead.

“Your favourite”, she smiles.

“Always and forever. I’ll take a shower and you rest a bit. Then we’ll cook.”

Nona is grasping at the strings of time. She listens intently, nodding lightly to the rhythm of the grandfather's clock. Every Sunday she winds it vigilantly like the last wounded soldier keeping watch at a forsaken battleground. She can hear the mechanism drawing the pendulum to its last swing, so she pulls on the chain, tighter and tighter, trying to run the last mile before she can slumber in peace.

"For how long?" I ask.

"Until it's done."

"How do you know when it's done?"

"When the dough sticks to your fingers still, but comes off none-the-less."

"Hang on", I clean my fingers on the table cloth. "I'll write it down."

"You'll never be a good cook if you follow a piece of paper. We'll practice, you'll help me, and you'll learn. Cooking takes time and understanding. It isn't just throwing some ingredients together and sticking them in the oven or pan for some minutes. We need food, and not just to feed the belly. It feeds our eyes, our noses, our minds, our veins and our souls, too."

"Yeah, Nona. I think they call it a nutritional value these days", I laugh.

"You joke, but I know. You never take the time to feed yourself properly."

"I know. But it's just that sometimes I forget."

"You can't forget about yourself. If you don't take care of yourself nobody else will and you won't be able to take care of others."

"I can, and do, take care of myself, Nona. You know that", I smile. "I'm a big girl now."

“I know you are but I see you. I see you running around, thinking of others, taking care of them. Like your mother always did.” Her eyes lift to meet mine. “Do you ever stop and think about yourself?”

“I do,” I answer. “I suppose I do.”

“I mean, of yourself. Alone. Not in relation to others?”

“I do. I think about what I want, what my dreams are, what I need....”

“But those are too often tainted by others’ wishes, dreams.....needs, especially needs”, she sighs. “You can’t help him, just like you couldn’t help your mother.”

“Help who?”

“Tito.”

“I’m not trying to help him.”

“You’re trying to make it OK for him. I see the way you are with him. You’re accepting him with his problems, allowing him not to face them. That’s not good for him.”

“He is who he is and that’s why I love him.”

“They’re not here. Not really. They’ve both checked out of reality. They’re not here. They do not live in this world. You have to stop enabling them.”

“We all live in our own world Nona. We’re all enclosed in these capsules, these bodies, within which the chemicals and thoughts run crazy. Most of the time we ourselves can’t make sense of them. How are others supposed to? We all live in our own world. The difference is that some of us are aware of it, at least.”

“Kataryna!” someone calls my name from the garden.

I wipe my hands on the tablecloth and step outside. Beneath the canopy of the walnut tree, before the stairs, Tito stands with a packet in his right hand.

“Catch this,” he says.

“Catch this”, Tito said.

Over the wall, through the leaves of the walnut tree something came rustling down. I stood up from the chair and faced the wall.

“Go again”, I said, hands cupped together.

Laughter broke out on the other side of the wall.

“Catch now!” he yelled.

A green speck of a thing once again rustled the leaves of the walnut tree and splattered against the white marble. I walked to the speck and bent down for a closer look. On the white marble glistened an intense green liquid. I took a dry branch from the ground and scraped at the liquid. Out of it emerged spindly green legs, a thick thorax and multi-faceted eyes beaming at me.

“Catch!” Tito yelled again and upon me descended, rustling like rain, numerous green praying mantises. I screamed in disgust. The laughter intensified. I covered my head and ran to the inside of the house. Speckled over, staining forever, the brilliant green burned my eyes.

“Stop it!” I yelled in desperation.

“Catch it!” he yelled again.

The laughter grew, mocking each rustling of the leaves, intensifying each rupture of the green body. I could feel them weaving through my hair, crawling upon my skin. I brushed my hands against every particle of my being trying to remove the sense of the delicate legs staining my skin.

“Stop it!”

A packet of letters hits my palms and spills against the white marble. Tito laughs and walks towards me.

“It’s all right. I’ve got it”, I say and start picking up the envelopes, one by one, carefully stacking them on top of each other. They too are now stained green.

“I’ll see you later,” he smiles, nods and turns away.

“See you”, I reply and run my free hand against my skin trying to remove the sense of delicate legs feeling their way to my most intimate thoughts.

I walk inside and let the letters drop on the shelf, out of sight, within reach.

“Who was that?” Nona asks.

“Tito just came to drop something off. Where were we?” I ask.

Nona looks at me questioningly but quickly returns to the cooking.

“And see now, when it’s like this”, she says grabbing the dough between her thumb and forefinger, “so it sticks but”, rubs her fingers, “it still comes off.”

I nod and rub my fingers together, with the dough between them, trying to remember the feel of perfection.

“I’ll make a good, no, an excellent cook out of you one day. You’ll see” she says smiling and taking the dough wrapped in the red, checked cloth to the kitchen.

“Now we let it rise” she says as she places the dough inside the stove.

27

Human existence is a minute, brief crack of light which lingers between two vast passages of darkness. Death is darkness, just as forgetting is. We will never be able to experience either of those times. The only light we have is the period of time when we are alive. The past is something that I have outlived. I can learn about and from the past. The future, however, is uncertain. My existence in the time that is yet to come is uncertain. My date of expiry cannot be foretold.

“Nona you should go and see a doctor”, I say.

“Child, there is no use”, Nona Flora replies.

“Your breathing’s a bit heavy and you’re getting puffed real easy.”

We have the grandfather’s clock in our house counting the seconds, minutes and hours to our end. Whoever invented the time probably did not anticipate the importance the human kind will put on it, that we would measure everything in our lives according to it. As I watch the clock handles tick over the seconds, minutes and hours I feel my life going to the inevitable end which nobody can predict.

“A body is like a machine my child. Eventually it must break down”, she says smiling.

“But that’s why we’ve got doctors – to come in and fix it”, I reply.

“But a body is a machine which must eventually stop.”

“He could extend it.”

“There comes a time when all you have is the today and yesterday. There are no tomorrows. They’re all used up.”

So much of every day is spent doing seemingly unimportant actions which are later, due to their perceived banality, difficult or even impossible to recollect. Yet it is these moments which fill most of the time in our lives - drinking coffee, watching the scene around me, flicking through the newspaper not really paying attention to anything in particular. Yet, it is at those times that my life truly comes into its own light. It is at those times when distractions are few that my heart knows what it needs, or what it wants, for the

distinction is often blurred. It is these moments I try to savour for I know how many there are and how fleeting they can be.

28

“There’s a hole in your jeans,” Nona says.

“I know. It’s meant to be there,” I reply.

“What do you mean it’s meant to be there? Can’t have you walking around with holes in your pants. Everyone’s going to think we don’t have enough money to buy you new ones.”

“Nona, that’s the fashion today.”

“I’ll give you fashion. Take them off and pass me some blue thread and a needle.”

“Nona, no. They’re meant to be that way.”

“Not while you’re under my roof. Pass me the thread and the needle. Shelf under the table,” she says pointing a weathered finger.

I lift the doily to reveal a shelf I have forgotten about, hidden beneath the table upon which I eat every day. Softly pulled it does not open. I pull stronger and with a squeak the shelf bursts out. A rainbow of thread and wool reveals itself, but one jabs the eyes. The vibrant green thread sits in the middle of the pile.

The women sat together for hours cutting and prodding the green fabric together, the northerly gusts which intruded through the cracks in the doors and windows urged them forward. It was an entire winter before their labour began to take shape. The bright, translucent green material which seemed to slide through their hands emerged to reveal arms, legs and entire hoods with antennae and jewelled eyes. As the women were putting

the finishing touches on the costumes for the Carnival the procession of men slowly trickled in to make sure the fit was suitable. The Marich brothers complained that the green fabric did not stretch far enough to cover their protruding waistlines so the women added an extra panel to accommodate them. Berto's legs stuck so far out from the costume that if he had worn it on the night he would have made a mockery out of the parade. Luciano's hands got lost in the fabric which flowed far beyond his fingertips. The women carefully noted and marked the fabric for the alterations to be made. They listened, watched and cursed the men for their ever changing and inconsistent figures, but they got to work anyway until the green fabric fitted each body as a glove.

When men's costumes were finished, ironed and neatly folded with a name tag for each to avoid confusion, the women set to work on their own attire. Their costumes were not nearly as fantastical or extravagant as the men's, but to them they were costumes, a step outside the ordinary, none the less. A cousin from afar had sent them a magazine with the latest worldly fashion and the women perused the pages until their minds concocted the most elegant dresses. From the fabrics available to them, which too often were merely old dresses or curtains, they made their own flamboyant desires. They measured each other, carefully drawing in their stomachs as the tape circled their waists. The Carnival was one day a year when they were allowed to become ladies from the realms of their dreams; demure, beautiful and impractical, fashioned above the hard labour their day to day life consisted of. It took months for the women to prepare for the magical day of the Carnival which could make their troubles disappear.

Once a year the inhabitants of Punta have gathered for as long as the oldest generation can remember. On that one day the men of the village dawned costumes displaying the problems and tragedies which had fallen upon the village within the last year. Punta was under siege by the praying mantises for a year now. It was time to put an

end to it. It was a day they had longed for. The women had spent an entire winter not only constructing costumes but also carefully recording upon them the symbols of life passed on through the generations. The eldest male from the Borich family was in charge of deciphering the women's messages encoded in the symbols. At midnight when the entire village was drained by the food and alcohol the Borich man would stand before them all and decipher all the tragedies, unfair actions, inconsistencies of character and burdens which had befallen the inhabitants since the last Carnival. No secrets were safe, no stones left unturned, many a hearts scorched, but the slate was wiped clean and the past firmly put behind them.

29

“You're distant and silent”, he turns to me taking a sip of his beer.

“Nah. I'm good. Just listening”, I smile back at him.

My stomach rumbles under the acidic weight of the apple juice. It must not be my first glass anymore. Time seems to stand still as I listen to the stories of the fishermen. They mention species, some of which sound familiar and others which seem to come straight from the depths of imagination. There is always a small beer in his hands. He occasionally looks at me wondering why the words elude me. However, each time he turns towards me I realize that his gaze is getting hazier and further from my world. I finally pull my hand out of the pocket and check the time. Twenty past eleven. Two hours have gone past with nothing really changing. Although it seemed the time had stood still it had actually flown past. The concept of time has forever eluded me. It has always posed numerous difficulties for me. The handles tick the seconds, the minutes and the hours yet I am unable to grasp

them. I have never managed to come to terms with the clocks. My mind and body seem to reject them. I cannot see the time. I cannot feel it.

“Last beer and we go?”

His head turns towards me. “Of course. I’ll finish this one and we’ll go.”

He turns away and continues, “remember the last storm we had? ‘Bout three weeks ago. Our nets were full; there were millions of little snappers caught between the eyes. You know the ones, the sweetest ones to eat...”

My mind trails away again. I prop my elbows on the bar and turn to take a look around the room. It is quite small. There are three well-used, leather booths which form a semi-circle so that everyone can inconspicuously look around the bar. There is a group of five girls, all severely under dressed and underage, sitting in one of them. They giggle and whisper their minds away. Only one of them, a fragile blonde, looks over at the bar occasionally. Her eyes are troubled. Her heart is taken. When I turn around I can feel her gaze upon me. Next to them three old men, fishermen I assume for their faces and hands are covered in scorched leathery skin. Their mouths are tightly shut. They must have run out of words. In the far booth four boys in their late teens or early twenties sit drinking beer. Their hair glistens from the generous amounts of gel used to keep every strand in its perfect place. They are dressed neatly with the brands on their clothes clearly displayed in the biggest and brightest letters the designers could muster. It is after all a Saturday night. The cocks are dressed to impress, feathers out on show, and hens are ready to tease. The age old game of seduction, lust and fleeting romance broken by the Sunday morning’s sun is passed on through the generations never getting old. The girls, boys and three fishermen are the only people in the bar beside the group of, which I am somehow a part of, six thirty

to forty year old men too old to go chasing the hens and too young to appreciate the comforts of their wives' beds.

I look at him and smile. Without looking back at them he says with a coy smile "My girl wants to go". He pays for the last round of drinks and with raised hands we say our goodbyes as we walk into the dark of the narrow, cobbled street.

"It hasn't come down yet", I mutter as the cold northerly wind sneaks beneath my clothes and shivers up my spine.

"Not yet. Day after tomorrow it'll be done."

Despite it being the beginning of the summer the northerly wind makes it feel like autumn. I seem to feel it more than the others. An extra layer is still not able to keep the cold out. As we near the car I notice that he is not walking towards the driver's door.

"You O.K to drive?"

"Sure. Always good to drive. Don't look at me that way. Haven't had *that* many beers."

I reach for the door handle but his hand intercepts mine.

"Allow me." The stale smell of cigarettes and beer lingers despite the wind. I smile, nod my head and careful to avoid his eyes sit inside the car. I take a cigarette out of my pocket and roll it between my fingers. As he takes a seat I light the cigarette. It gives me something to do and somewhere to look.

"Where do you want to go now?"

"Gina and the others are down in Punta", I say.

Without a word he turns the car on and speeds through the narrow streets. The entire wordless journey his hand rests upon my knee.

They live in the bleakness of today without the premise of a future. What the grandfather created the son has destroyed. Grandsons are left to wallow in the moment, destroying themselves hopeless. They live forgotten by their fathers, watching their ancestors pass away with fear in their eyes. They fear for the future of the lost generation. This is my, our, generation. We are lost between ambitions, money, happiness, possessions and a constant thirst for love, torn between the destruction within which we live. We see no future as the present is filled with fleeting uncertainty. The strong survive, find a way out. Countless others get stuck between the passages; the testaments of our lives. Allen was one of them. He reached early adulthood in the full bloom of its temptation. He tried it all. He liked it all. None of it was enough. Unable to withstand the powers of pleasure and escape he succumbed to its darkest corners. After a few cloudy years of good times he awoke one day to find himself mercilessly depressed and confined to a room with no windows or doors. He ventured too far. He forgot to control himself and in the process reached a darkness which will forever linger at the back of his neck; a monster ready to prowl and pounce at any moment. He will forever look down for the fear of what sits upon his shoulders. He will never experience the freedom he once had, or thought he had. We are all weighed down by our parents' lives. Forever. When our creators leave we become the decision makers, the adults, the burden of earth, the parents. No matter how long we live it is never long enough. If only the last breath was followed by another. We know we should take every opportunity we get but why do we tremble at some moment? Why a decision so right in the mind becomes so frightful when finally faced in the physical world?

“Let’s go home. I’ve changed my mind.”

“Don’t want to go to Punta?” he asks.

“No. I’m tired”

The indicator goes on and we drive along the familiar road back to the safety of my own home.

31

Walking down the middle of the road upon the green path in the centre, one foot in front of the other the bare skin traces its footsteps. Suddenly, without, or perhaps with some warning, a pure black cat slides across the stone wall. In silence it is startled, running and finally jumping down from its position. The black cat slides across my path. I stop. It is a curse, a bearer of bad luck. No two ways about it. One and only thing to do is to run and spit upon the cat, thrice, quickly to erase the curse she bestowed upon me. I stop and, in the sweltering heat, think about it. My legs remain glued to the searing concrete. An old people’s tale is all it is, I tell myself. Not much to it. No proof certainly. Let the black cat be merely a black cat. One step in front of the other, tracing my footsteps, I keep walking.

“What’ll you have?” the waitress asks.

“I’ll have coffee thanks”, I answer.

“The usual”, Tito answers.

The waitress brings out a tray with a white coffee cup and a cold, small beer, condensation already forming on the smooth glass.

“Beer?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Didn’t have enough last night?”

“Don’t be like my mother.”

"I'm not. Just saying...you could drink something else for a change."

"Beers good for you. It kills the thirst", he smiles.

"So does water or juice."

"What does it matter?"

"Nothing...just saying."

"Well if it doesn't matter what's the point of talking about it?"

"Don't get so defensive about it."

"Get off my back then. I'll drink what I want. I don't tell you what to drink, do I?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Did you ever apologise to Marco?"

"What for?"

"For the night at his house."

"What about that night?"

"You don't remember do you?"

"No."

He lights a cigarette and gulps the beer down. I look towards the sea. A darker shadow of blue travels towards the beach. The morning breeze has started to come through. The stillness will be broken soon, the beach engulfed with life. We sit in silence. Nothing can be said which will not be misunderstood. The smiles painfully stretch from ear to ear. Thoughts kept within the mind. The eyes tell it all so we stare in the blank spaces between and around. Watch what you think for others might sense it. Other than a dutiful smile, and jokes long ago chewed over only to be spat out once more, seems to be the common thread. Between them the dark clouds gather menacingly, the tensions burst upon the surface, things are said and done, tears shed only to be put aside and left to hover over the next day.

No foot can ever be put right. God forbid you ever say what you think or feel, someone will hear and put you back into your dutiful position. And the wheel will keep turning crushing us all to death until someone gathers the courage to yell stop to all the pretending, stop to all the menacing judgements and stop to the never-good-enough intentions. I think it's time to get away; to stretch my legs and take a lung-full of fresh air without the expectations forced down my throat. I need to live. I need to leave. Once and for all and forever, never to be crushed under the spiteful love.

A light lingers above, strongly breaking through the streams during good times. But it never lasts. Forever, it lurks beneath the expectation, the knowledge that it will not last forever. A word we heard so many times before suddenly sounds different, sinisterly illuminating the perfection and twists our perception. A mundane, menial, insignificant occurrence becomes the most significant clue we had never wished upon and breaks the illusion. No turning back is possible. To ignore is to ask for the unattainable. It is here. It is broken. It stands before me in its full glory of imperfection never to be brought back into the realm of magical and immediate love which penetrates and colours every particle of my being. It is gone and forever shall remain gone.

"I am not good for you Tito."

"I can make my own decisions on who's good for me."

"I don't belong here."

"I thought you came back for good."

"I can't stay here. My life isn't here anymore. Only my past is here. That's all I see."

"We could make a life for ourselves here. You and me. We could live in the house I've built. In your favourite bay. I built it for you, you know."

“And it’s a perfect house in a perfect place. Just not for me anymore. My life isn’t here anymore. All I see, wherever I go, are the past memories. I can’t live in the shadows of the ghosts. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

“I’ll always love you.”

“Well you’ve got a good way of showing it”, and with those words Tito gets up and leaves, without turning around.

32

It is through a glaze of perfection that one feels passion. Passion consumes completely, showing no boundaries or limits as it grows with every moment spent apart. Once the lovers come together the fantasy is fulfilled in its entirety. All of a sudden we see in each other our dreams coming true and we can’t contain ourselves. We wish to consume every particle of their being and all that surrounds them. What we fail to see is that it is not a person whom we lusted after but our dreams which they embodied. After a while the storm passes, things settle back into their place and we realize that it is a person, and not our fantastical dreams which stand beside us. Thus, the lust falters and needs to be replaced by compromise and hard work. Compromise is a strange notion. It signals that two can act as one and have their wishes fulfilled. However, it also signals that the wishes cannot be had in their entirety for to make a compromise is to give up a part of what you want. And if you do not receive something in its entirety do you ever receive it, or does it become locked in the portal of things that came and were not quite what you imagined they would be?

Once upon a time a father looked at his daughter with tears in his eyes and through clenched teeth said “Don’t ever compromise!”

“*Compromise*” the word echoed in daughter’s head.

“I won’t daddy.”

Two pairs of green eyes beaked at each other. Understanding. Lifetime of loneliness awaited them. Crying at night pressed against the wall, alone, they slept. What a curse to inherit a quick brain, ruthless nature and a strong will.

33

Once the glaze of perfection lifts we come to realize what truly stands beside us. Unfortunately by that stage the paths are so crossed and overgrown that in order to move on we must first destroy.

Gina stomps into the house and throws her cigarettes on the table. Her cheeks are red, forehead and top lip full of tiny beads of perspiration.

“Listen”, she says, “I know that he drinks. And that he’s no good when he drinks...but he’s always loved you, you know that. You can change him. He’ll stop drinking for you, you know that.”

“I don’t know that. And you can’t know that for sure.”

“Yes I can. He’s like my blood. I’ve, you’ve, known him forever.”

“I can’t change someone if they don’t want to change.”

“He wants to change.”

“Then he doesn’t need me.”

“You’re the love of his life. He can’t lose you again. Without you he’ll just sink deeper.”

“I was...maybe...he has ... maybe... I’ve changed.”

Somewhere along the way we grew up, the reign of the praying mantises ended. The end took me across the seven seas to a place meant to be my new home. We grew in different places, the similarities fading with each new breath we took. Strangeness entered my lungs and filled my heart. I returned to find a soul I had known and loved thoroughly for many years. Yet, he cannot see every different corner, he cannot understand every crevice. And neither can I.

34

As the eyes begin to close the mind begins to see.

“Lucia did you bring the sweets?” Nona Flora asks, a smile illuminating her face.

“It’s me Nona”, I reply.

“I know who it is. Don’t play games with me,” she says annoyance entering her voice. “Did you bring the sweets?”

Once upon a time, on a beautiful summer’s day in a small coastal village, two sisters were grazing their cow. They were born only two years apart but the difference between them was astonishing. The elder sister was tall with dark brown hair. Her little sister was very short for her age with straight blonde hair and fair skin. From apart none believed them to be sisters but up close their faces and their demeanour were startlingly similar.

They both had piercing green eyes, a perky nose and a mouth that easily stretched into a contagious smile. They were always together, constantly cracking jokes, dancing up a storm and being the life of any group.

The heavy brass pendulum swings to the right. The small hand on the grandfather's clock aligns perfectly with the number twelve. It triggers the gear on the centre stem of the digital face. The gear lifts the pin turning the music roll. The music roll turns pulling back the chime hammer. Upon the completion of the pull the hammer releases and falls back into its original position striking against the steel rod. The tall wooden casing of the grandfather's clock vibrates with the chime of toiling church bells sliding through the cracks of the house.

The church bells soared through the midday heat echoing the call of hunger. Flora and her sister Lucia sat in the shade of a lonely tree, their cow peacefully grazing nearby. The bells quickly awoke them from their daydreams.

"Lunch finally", Flora said lazily stretching her thin, boyish limbs.

"I'm starving. My stomach's glued to my spine", the older sister said standing up and brushing the scorched yellow grass off her cotton dress.

"Come on quickly. Get the cow." she said to her little sister.

The younger sister patted the cow gently on her backside. She was an old animal, the heart of the family, well mannered and kind. The cow followed without a pull or a shout. She knew the path home and slowly started on her way.

"Lucia, we'll go together and get the sweets", Nona Flora says turning to me.

"It's me Nona."

“I know who it is my child. Mother hides the sweets above the stove. She’s got some. I saw them earlier.”

“There is no Mother anymore, Nona.”

Mother’s quick hands were used to the daily ritual of preparing lunch. She took the boiling pot of fish stew from the fire cooker and placed in onto the thick wooden coaster which lay on the table. The church bells rolled through the open window. If summer was hot, kitchen was hell. She wiped the sweat from her brow and slicked the strands of her hair back into place. Mother was a large woman but her body moved easily. There was not an ounce of fat on her body. She opened the cupboard and pulled out six plates, setting one aside for Aleks. She placed the spoons next to the plates on the table and cut the bread into six thick slices. Mother poured the fish stew into the plates. She heard a tune being hummed behind her.

“Always on time.” she said and smiled at Father.

“Lucia the sweets! Mother hides them above the stove”, Nona Flora says.

“There is no more Mother, Nona.”

“I’ll get them myself.”

“No. Stay. I’ll get the sweets”, I reply and go to the kitchen. I open the pantry and search. No sweets. No chocolate. I open the cupboard above the stove. It too gapes empty of childhood. I remember a jar of Nutella kept especially for my sweet tooth. With a butter knife I spread it over a slice of bread and tear it into small pieces so that it adopts the look of sweets. With an open palm I spread them out before her. She rubs her hands against each other as a cheeky smile stretches across her face.

“I told you they were there, didn’t I?” she triumphs.

“Yes, you did.”

“Oh figs with sugar, nice and brown from the Sun”, she exclaims as she takes one and places it in her mouth.

“Best thing ever.”

“Get in”, she says shifting her body towards the wall. “I wonder if Aleks is hungry.”

“Aleks?”

The oldest son stood in the attic of his house in Punta. Aleks lived in the attic hidden away from the world since the day after his eighteenth birthday. A day that was supposed to be a celebration of his entrance into the adult world became a day of grief for the young man in danger. He was eligible for the army so they hid him away from prying eyes in order to save the life of their son. Aleks stood at the window listening to the cheering, singing crowd. They took over his world, filled his room, trembled through his body. He tried to lean through the window to see them, but he could not, so instead he closed his eyes and imagined himself there within the crowd waving the banner, singing and drinking. He wanted so much to be there amongst the Carnival.

“Maybe we should take him some”, Nona says.

“Nona, there is no more Aleks”, I reply.

“Of course there is. He’s up there in the attic. Must be hungry. Church bells toiled a while ago.”

The sisters came into the room drying their hands on their dresses.

“Should I take Aleks his food?” the older sister asked.

“No. Sit down and eat. I’ll do it”, Mother said as she took a plate full of fish stew, a slice of bread and a spoon. She pushed the door open with her free hand and walked out of the kitchen.

As she came into the yard the songs and cheers filled the air. She stopped for a moment listening intently. “It’s finally over. Thank You God”, she murmured under her breath. She walked on towards the attic, the sun heating her back. The door of the attic was behind the barn so she had to walk all the way around. As she came to the door she grabbed the handle and pushed the heavy wooden door with her shoulder. It nudged. *Should get this fixed*, she thought to herself. Mother lay down the plate and using all her strength turned the handle and pushed the door open. It squeaked. She picked up the food, walked inside and called to her son.

“Aleks lunch.” No answer. No footsteps.

“Aleks stop fooling around.” Nothing.

“Aleks!” she said a bit louder searching the room. It was empty. There was no one there. She noticed that the window was open and looked through it. The crowd had moved away, their cheers were muted. She dropped the plate and ran out of the attic not bothering to close the door. She ran around the barn and through the yard to the brown steel gate.

Father saw her and dropped the spoon into his empty plate.

“Girls stay here”, he said running out the door.

“Aleks has gone to see the Carnival. The attic is empty”, she said holding the door ajar. Her breath was short and her gaze fixed.

She blinks: the only universal sign which permits the blinker to consider the past and consolidate the future. She takes a moment which allows her out of the present state

and see what she wishes to see. She blinks again. And it brings her back into the present moment, the here-and-now.

“I’m tired my child”, she sighs. “My body’s getting tired, my mind’s losing track.”

“You’ll be fine Nona. You just need a good night’s rest.”

“Somehow the nights are no longer enough.”

“Then you can sleep in the afternoons too.”

“I’ll be plenty rested when I die.”

“Don’t say that Nona. Not yet.”

“I’m tired my child, so tired.”

I lean over and kiss her cheek, cold and covered in perspiration. Small beads of sweat are gathered on her forehead, just above the eyebrows.

In the late afternoon the brown steel gate opened. The sun had receded leaving an orange tint across the rooftops and walls. The musty smell of a warm evening invaded. A heavily lined hand held tightly onto the white linen bag stained red with blood. The lined face of the man was turned away from any eyes. His chest contained a heavy secret; secret hidden in the red and white bag. As his steps turned in the direction of their house Mother began to shake. She shook with a terrible fear, a fear that the man carried her heavy secret in the linen bag. Her heart quickened. Her breath stopped. She stood mesmerized with the happy past that was this morning. Life, God, had dealt her a terrible fate. The darkness and the musky air descended upon her. She lowered her eyes quietly praying that the man would pass the door of the house and continue to the barn, that the secret belonged to somebody else. But, the man’s steps stopped in front of her.

“I’m sorry”, he murmured handing over the blood stained bag.

“Nooo! Oh no! Dear God! Why?!” Mother wailed, her heart broken, her frail body crumbled onto the floor.

Father stood behind her paralyzed by the news. He reached for the bag absentmindedly. Without a word he took the bloody bag and lifted his wife inside the brown steel gate. The girls ran out of the house terrified. “Mother? Father? What happened?”

No words were needed to explain the bloody bag. At the sight of red they began to cry and shake frenziedly.

“Aleks!” Mother screamed, weeping uncontrollably. She cried for the unjust God who had taken even the last of her sons. Words could no longer explain her grief. She cried in a terrifying silence. She cried for all the man and women the war had taken from her, their absences never forgotten. That day Mother put on the black mourning clothes which remained glued to her skin until the day she died. She saw decades filled with colour go by, but she could never see the colours close to her skin. She remained veiled in darkness forever. Even her hair never turned the worn-out grey. Forever her hair remained obediently jet black.

Turning to me Nona says “We have to go to sleep now. School tomorrow. Mother’ll be angry if we don’t wake up on time.”, and turns towards the wall. The heartbeat is left behind, stuck between the two worlds.

35

I sit at the table, hands shuffling the cards. The mind is empty, the house is full. Expected departures still create a void despite the knowledge.

Nona Flora's body lies on her bed clad in her best black clothes. Her face and hands are unnaturally white against the black which surrounds them. She had picked out the clothes a couple of years back, washed, ironed and put them away in a cupboard, carefully wrapped in plastic to avoid the dust and moths getting to them. She had even bought herself new leather black slippers to go with the coffin and the dress. Nothing was left to chance. Gloria knew where everything was. It is an empty body lying there. My grandmother it is no more.

The coroner comes in and Gloria leads him to the body. He touches Nona, feeling for the life no longer there.

"The deceased, was she sick?" he asks.

"She was old", Gloria replies, "left us in her sleep."

He scribbles her answer in a black leather notebook.

"With the heat the funeral will need to be quickly arranged."

"She's paid for everything already. She'll be buried just down the road."

"Good", he says. "I'll see if anything can be arranged for tomorrow."

"Thank You", Gloria answers.

I hate him. I hate his curved, overgrown nose. I hate his beaky eyes. I hate his drab brown suit with the smell of death in its pockets. I hate his suitcase filled with papers of those that were. I hate his scrawny limbs and his curved back. A question mark he is. A big, brown, drab, scrawny, beaky question mark.

"My condolences", he says, head turned down with a knowledgeable nod.

"Thank you", I say trying to show my most grateful, sympathetic smile.

He is not meant to be here. Nobody is meant to be here. Nothing like death to bring them all out to play. Poking their heads in moments not meant to be theirs.

“Are you ok?” Tito asks. “I’ve just heard.” His hands engulf me, squeezing the breath out of my lungs.

“Yep. Still alive”, I answer and continue shuffling the cards.

“When did she die? What happened?”

“In her sleep. She just didn’t wake up.”

“Best way to go”, he says. “Coffee?”

“Would be good thanks.”

“Gloria?”

“Yes. Thank You.”

Tito gets up and starts opening the cupboards. In silence Gloria guides him. In her hand she holds a large white candle with a saucer. I hand her a lighter. The light flickers showing the dead the way forward. She closes a window and places it on a sill, “so the wind doesn’t get to it”, for Nona to see. It will remain there until it extinguishes itself. Hopefully by that time Nona will arrive to her next destination, wherever that may be.

“The clock’s showing five to twelve”, Tito says.

“Must’ve stopped. Needs to be wound, I guess,” I reply.

He goes to the clock and looks at it closely.

“Needs a key to open,” I say. “It’s on the shelf below the TV.”

Tito bends down and takes the heavy key, rust bearing witness to the years of life it has led.

He unlocks the glass door and exposes the organs of the clock.

“Now what?” he asks. “Do you know how to wind it?”

“I’ve watched Nona”, I reply. “There is some chain behind the face. You need to pull it tight.”

He reaches behind, carefully, his palm disappearing behind the dial. Squinting and bending he tries to have a closer look, but there is not enough space for a set of eyes to invade. Going by the feeling he pulls the chain. The clock face moves, but quickly springs back to its original position.

“Bloody thing! It’s pulled tight but it won’t move.”

“Maybe it’s the pendulum. Sometimes it gets stuck. Try tapping it”, Gloria says.

Tito taps the large brass pendulum, but it refuses to move. Eternal silence encompasses the glass case. The vibrations will come no more. The pendulum will never again swing and reflect the life around. The last breath has been taken.

36

Lives are so empty of people yet the death seems to draw them in. They come out of their crevices and hiding places, put on their best mournful faces and come out to play. Births are celebrated in silence out of fear of what is yet to come. There is no fear when faced with death, just a reminder that it is imminent. Everything that takes a first breath must eventually take its last and it is at that point that the people stop and gather together. In groups they are free to remember the life that once was without the haunting thoughts. They can also lament on the terrible fate of a living body to one day extinguish itself and not be alone or out of place with their thoughts. As I watch them I see more smiles than frowns. I see more laughter than tears. And perhaps, with fairness, it should be so. She has lived her life filled with trials, tribulations, fears, hopes, laughter, tears, forgetting, remembering, births and deaths. It was her life and she did live it. But there is a burning void within me. It is part anger, part sadness, part regret and entirely empty. With Nona Flora a part of my history has died, a part of me has disappeared. I envy my elders for the

memories which they possess. Memories accessible to me only through the power of their words; words which have painted my heritage; stories which have created the history of my kind.

The straight right door leads to a small bedroom. There are two antique wooden beds against each wall. The beds are similar to the ones in my great-grandparents' house; large and made of dark, heavy wood. Between the beds stands a matching night table which contains my grandfather's medicines and documents long after his death. On the right side of the door against the wall is a large wardrobe where Nona's clothes are neatly set out.

Memories of my grandfather are hidden behind the wardrobe; an old gun and some fishing rods. I don't remember my grandfather ever returning home with fish, but I suppose we all need an excuse to sometimes get away from life. The gun is a reminder of the War and the numerous years he spent walking through the forests with his troops. To the day he died, my grandfather believed every man, woman and child on our coast should know how to use a gun. Wars are frequent. People say that every generation has to live through two wars. I have lived through one so far, and the possibility of another war occurring before my death seems very likely. My grandfather was fortunate to live through only one war, as he died a month before the next war. For numerous reasons it was best that he left when he did. He was quick to pull a knife on a man, not as a threat, but as something he would do, and had done before, without any sense of guilt. Nightmares from his youth haunted him his whole life. The new war would have brought too many temptations to his temper.

On the left bed Nona Flora's dead body lies, pristinely groomed. Gloria fixed her hair and made sure she was up to par for the gathering tonight. Her lips sealed, her words gone, she lies in silence not allowing me access to the memories of her life.

On the opposite bed women sit, all clad in their funeral black. Their gazes are mournful, their backs stiff. Chairs from under the walnut tree have been brought in to

accommodate the old women, their bodies numbering nine. They are all of similar age, one foot in the grave, and seem to know the procedures of the dead. Nona Flora is just another of childhood friends to be fare welled and there is a sense that each knows the order in which they will leave. They look around the room and measure each other, inquire about health, or lack there of and move onto the more practical matters of day to day life.

In the living area the men have arranged themselves around the table and the sofa. Some more chairs, not Nona's, litter the room to provide further seats. The atmosphere here is more cheerful as if though the men are glad to have an occasion to all get together again. I go into the kitchen and take another plastic bottle of home made liquor to put on the table. As I approach they quieten down and murmur "thank you" as I place it on the table. Tito smiles at me, "don't worry. I'll take care of them here."

Gloria is already in the kitchen placing a chicken and a large batch of potatoes into the oven to keep the troops alive. It will be a long night but my feet already feel like they have walked a thousand miles despite the fact that I haven't left the house today. As soon as I turn my back the men continue chattering, like muffled parakeets, as if though the eyes and the ears are the same sense.

"Coffee?" Gloria asks and squeezes my hand.

"I'll make it", I reply. "Does anyone else want any?"

"Aunty Lucia, Maria and Ana. And I could use a cup", she says.

I open a bottom cupboard and pull out the biggest cezve, a pot for making coffee brought centuries ago by another set of invaders. I fill it three quarters of the way and let it rest on the stove until it boils. My hands rest on the basin and I watch the pot. Slowly small bubbles begin to rise swirling until they burst upon the surface. One by one they seem to multiply. Above them a candle still brightly burns. The heat of the day is slowly retreating. I open the top cupboard and pull out a red packet of coffee. The strong smell of Turkish

coffee fills the kitchen. Slowly, one teaspoon for each cup, I take the coffee out of the packet and place it into the boiling water off the heat of the stove. I stir the mixture until it ameliorates into smoothness. Placed back on the stove I wait until the coffee begins to rise. Slowly, from somewhere deep within, the coffee begins to rise and I take it off the stove just as it is about to overflow. No sugar for the ageing ladies. Only the young like it as I've been told. I search through the cups and pick out the five most beautiful ones. On one of them a blue sparrow rests. Two by two I take the cups to the women keeping watch over Nona Flora's dead body. It will be a night filled with Turkish coffees to trick the body into staying awake.

I take my coffee and sit on a stair beneath the walnut tree. There is no breeze to sway the leaves, to disturb the dead and the grieving. Tito comes and sits beside me.

"You OK?" he asks.

"Yeah, just a bit tired."

"Do you need anything?"

"I'm good."

"Want me to sit with you a bit?"

"No. Just wanna be alone for a second."

He squeezes my shoulder and leaves.

The comfort of the first breath of nicotine rushes through my throat and fills my lungs. Seven minutes of stillness and silence to be savoured. Seven minutes of peace and rest. Not even the praying mantis, sitting on the branch above, dares to disturb me. His million-faceted gaze is lost in the distance. Still, the musky heat penetrates occasionally between hazy puffs of smoke and black caffeine. There is something about smoking which I enjoy. It isn't the taste. It certainly isn't the smell, although both senses become deadened after a while. It certainly isn't how it makes me feel, for I feel nothing but a mediocre taste

running down the back of my throat as I inhale deeply. I enjoy what the cigarette allows me to do; to take seven minutes out of reality, sit and do nothing with no sense of guilt or urgency, the clock burning out slowly. Although I can feel my lungs go I don't want to give them up. The death from them is less frightening than the life without them.

Inside, the men are relaxed. Small glasses of homemade liquor have done their duty and let the tongues off the leash. The chicken and the potatoes have already been devoured and their remains litter the table and the shelves. Put aside for later. Two rows of men sit opposite each other at the dining table. All eyes are averted to them. On one side men have their fists beneath the table and are passing a ring from one to the other. All move their hands simultaneously to trick the other side. The other side looks on carefully trying to decipher their gestures and expressions. Finally, the first group puts their closed fists on the table. An elderly man, Tito's grandfather, on the other side looks at their fists closely. No touching allowed. He chooses one man's hand and the fist is opened to reveal emptiness. No coin. Tito, who sits directly opposite his grandfather, grabs the wet cloth from the centre of the table and whips his grandfather across his knuckles.

"Bloody, son of a bitch", the grandfather says as he clutches his red knuckles. The men laugh and once again their hands shuffle beneath the table hiding the ring. The grandfather takes another shot of the liquor. The men continue playing the game and regurgitating the tales of when they were young. They remember the supple girls, the vibrant music, the practical jokes they played on each other throughout they years. As the liquor flows the knuckles get redder and the laughter intensifies. The night has long ago fallen upon the village.

In the other room the women are much quieter. They do not have the liquor to set their tongues wagging. Some have begun knitting and beneath their quick hands, needles

threading through each other, large pieces of wool begin to take shape. They do not need to keep their eyes upon the wool but sometimes it is a good excuse to avoid others' gazes. Aunty Lucia's eyes are swollen, tears flow down her cheeks. "We were always together", she laughs, and "she used to be right behind me, no matter where I went - couldn't even go to the toilet in peace". The other women smile. They too remember. She begins to tell the story of my grandfather's courtship. How he stood in the corner looking at Nona Flora every Saturday at the dance. Flora was at first embarrassed by it, and the other girls teased her about it, but when he did not turn up one Saturday she realised how much she missed him. The next time he came, Lucia went up to him and talked him into going over and asking Flora for a dance. After that night they never danced with anyone else.

Their eyes are heavy. Their minds are tired.

"Coffee?" I ask and all heads nod in union. I look up at the digital clock. The red numbers glisten in the dark. Three forty-five. Few more hours and dawn will be here dispersing the grieving to their own beds to rest for the funeral.

I go to the kitchen. The pot is stained from the previous coffee. I run it under the cold water and watch the tiny, brown granules stain the sponge, my hands and the sink. Washed out thoroughly, I dry it with the kitchen towel. This is Nona's place in the house but she will never again stand here. She will never again cook in her bra, her cheeks reddened by the sweltering heat. She will never again watch the Spanish soap at noon with Gloria. She will never make a good cook out of me. I smile to myself. She'd be proud to see me making coffee for so many people. I might make a good woman one day after all. I place the pot filled three quarters of the way onto the stove to bring it to boil.

Behind me the men are well drunk. Their tongues untied. Their cheeks and noses reddened by the liquor breaking their capillaries, the skin on their knuckles broken to reveal blood and bone.

As the bubbles from the bottom rise to the surface one by one, multiplying with each passing second, I listen to their voices. So deep that whispering, were they capable of it, would be useless.

“Remember when we came into Flora’s house and invaded like a real professional army. When she saw us”, a man bursts out laughing, “you’d think she’d seen a ghost. And there was us, with full body suits and masks, like the Special Forces, forging through foreign territory taking out the enemy.”

“It was like a bloody Bethlehem in that house! We had to get the insecticide in there”, another man laughs.

“Maybe we didn’t need to march in there all suited up, with no warning and take over with such force. And in the middle of the night”, a solemn voice says.

“What would you have us do? Just walk in and say please we’ve come to destroy the colony of the praying mantises you’ve been cultivating in your basement? So if you don’t mind please leave while we kill them all and please, pretty please, don’t do it again?!” A mocking laugh breaks through the men.

“You almost killed them too, though”, a low voice breaks through the laughter.

“They had plenty of warnings. Even Lucia tried talking to her, but no. She tried to make a fool out of all of us. But we showed them. We put them into their place.”

“What?!” I say dropping the pot of hot water into the sink.

“Nothing”, Tito replies and looks sternly at the men around him.

“No. What did you just say?” I walk towards them.

“We were just protecting ourselves and the village”, Tito’s grandfather says, dismissing me with a nod.

“From who?! My Nona Flora?! She’s never done anything but good to you. All of you”, I say.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You were just a kid”, an old man says.

“It’s none of your business anyway”, Tito’s grandfather says.

“It’s my family. It’s my business.”

“They were the ones who brought the praying mantises upon us. They infected the entire village, made all our lives hell. Ask your Aunt Lucia, she’ll tell you”, Tito’s grandfather replies.

“You’re all sick.” I say slamming the door on my way out. My heart pounds, stomach turns, feet lose their grip as I watch Aunt Lucia contently sitting next to the dead body of her sister, Nona Flora.

“Aunt Lucia, can I ask you something?” I ask as calmly as possible.

“Of course, anything”, she replies.

“Did the village invade Nona Flora’s house in the middle of the night?”

“It’s not the time nor the place to talk about things like that”, she replies.

“So they did?”

“It was a long time ago. Let it be in the past where it belongs”, Aunt Lucia says.

“Let it be in the past where it belongs?! Nona’s, and mine, and Mama’s lives changed because of that. I never quite understood why we left so quickly, and why Mama swears she’ll never set foot in Punta. I could never quite put the pieces back together.”

“Your lives would’ve changed anyway. Your Mama always wanted to leave and it was time to Flora to leave that house. She was getting too old to take care of it. It was just a question of time.”

“She was chased out of her home just like the old shopkeeper and his wife.”

“I told her what was going to happen if she kept on in her ways like she did. I told her, but she didn’t want to listen. She always thought she was the smartest.”

“She wasn’t growing bloody praying mantises”, Gloria says lifting her head only half way to look at Aunt Lucia, her eyes black hollows. “You wanted the house sold. You wanted the money. You always were greedy, and a lot of good it’s done to you. You have no children to leave it to. You’ve eaten your money. Piled it on your back. Even your hips don’t want to carry the burden anymore. And the rest of the village, they just needed somebody to blame. Flora’s house wasn’t invaded, only her basement, and all they needed was a spark which you willingly gave them. You were the first to point your finger and at your own blood of all people.”

“She should’ve listened to me”, Lucia protests.

“You were her sister!” Gloria slaps her palm against the night table.

“Get out!” I yell. “Get out all of you!”

Silence pervades, eyes avert, heartbeats intensify. The battery operated clock above the dead body keeps counting on. The mechanism springs to life and intensifies the silence.

“You’re just like your mother”, Lucia says and pushes her hands against her knees to help her get up.

“And proud of it”, I reply.

The chair scrapes the floor as her body straightens. She walks past me, head turned low. The women follow. Only Gloria remains, sitting quietly, eyes fixed on Nona Flora’s dead body. Tears stream down her face, catching and filling the crevices as they flow down to her jaw line. There they linger for a moment, fill to the brim and then finally fall to the abyss.

In my only decent black clothes I step outside the front door. The heat of the day intensifies. It is a dreadful, sunny, hot summer's day, much like all the others. I close the door not bothering to lock it or to put the key into its hiding spot between the two stones in the wall. The praying mantis sits on the wall his eyes keeping a hundred and eighty degree view on the scene below. Green, spindly arms are rubbing against each other. The praying mantis is praying.

Down by the small white chapel a coffin on wheels awaits clad in colour. The candle within the chapel is burning brightly. Next to the coffin six men await: a priest, four singers and a gravedigger. Beside them Gloria is resting on a bench so many times shared by her and Nona Flora. She too, like the men, is clad in blackness.

"My condolences", each of them murmurs, eyes averted to the searing concrete. I extend my arm towards Gloria and help her up.

"We really should get going", the priest says, "the heat will bring out the smell soon."

I nod my head and the procession begins. A priest at the front is followed by a gravedigger pulling the coffin with many wreaths upon it. The death has brought out the coloured flowers yet the faces and the souls they represent have chosen to go to the Carnival rather than to the old, lonely woman's funeral. Gloria and I follow in silence. The singers shuffle behind our backs and break into a song which has fare welled so many bodies before.

Next to the fresh grave lies a tombstone. Engraved upon the black marble surface in white letters it reads: *As Flora I was born,*

As Flora I have died.

And everything I did,

Was but a dream within a dream.

Nothing left to chance, she has organised it all. The drumming from the bottom of the village vibrates high and low. It shakes through my ears, down my vertebrae to my feet standing on the scorched grass beside the freshly dug hole. As the gravedigger piles the dirt, a shovel at a time, upon a box within which lie the physical remnants of my grandmother, the vibrations shake the pastures of dirt. With each hit the pieces from the top flow down the pile and straighten it out. The sweat drips from the young man's forehead onto the dirt, staining it forever. A relief it must be to have the help of others. Faster the drums beat, faster he will finish, faster he will celebrate, faster he will forget the soreness and decay of a day's work.

38

Gloria takes me into the garage. She wants to show me something she said. I cannot be bothered speaking, questioning nor arguing so I follow her. She goes to the back of the garage. Her old frame struggles to move the boxes out of the way. Weak, shaking hands are determined to reach whatever she has in store for me. They grab a handle of an old wardrobe, but the door refuses to open with the first pull. She braces herself. She takes a deep breath. Using her left hand as a lever she pulls with all her might and the door swings open almost knocking her over. She exhales quickly, the breath pushing the hair off her forehead, and smiles at me. Her head, arms and torso disappear into the musty wardrobe. Emerging slowly, one vertebrae at a time, Gloria pulls out an extravagant, colourful cloth.

“Is it...?” I gasp.

“You remember this, don’t you?” she smiles at me, holding the cloth up and revealing a dress of a time before.

“It was...”

“Yes”, she nods her head. “Flora fixed it for you. She wanted you to wear it tonight at the carnival, but seeing she’s not here anymore...Try it on.”

I take the dress from her running my fingers over the delicate fabric. Grabbing it by the shoulders the full splendour of it is revealed. The torso is rigid, but the skirt flares out pushed by the numerous layers of fabric. The top layer of the dress is scarlet red, with intricate yellow daffodils and incandescent blue seagulls floating between them. The bright, translucent green and white layers overlap and emerge below the hem. I slither the black clothes to the ground and let the dress sleek over my head and down my body. Gloria comes up behind me and pulls the zip up. I turn and catch a glimpse of myself in the window. The bodice fits perfectly over my waist and breasts, letting everything fall into its place.

“I almost forgot”, Gloria says, goes to the wardrobe and emerges with bright green gloves.

I pull the gloves on, over my fingers, palms, wrists and let them rest just above the elbow.

“God, you look just like her”, Gloria says looking at my reflection in the mirror. As I let the red lipstick run over my lips, my cheeks hollow out by the shadow of the growing cheekbones, my breasts swell, my hips become more round. It is no longer I in the mirror. It is my Mama looking back at me. She spins herself and the dress lifts showing the full splendour of the craftsmanship.

“You remember, she was the Queen at the last carnival you were here, don’t you?”

I run my hands over the dress, gloves not letting me feel the fabric of it. I do not move. I look in the mirror and notice the bottom layers squirming. There is no breeze. I look down

and notice millions of tiny little green legs making their way through the labyrinth of the fabric. As the praying mantises walk to their next destination the skirt sways like the tidal waves of the sea, slowly yet powerfully, showing the full plight of the nature to keep things ticking forward.

39

My feet stand the ground, but my dress leans forward towards the vibrating music. I put my left foot in front as a lever against the push. But the praying mantises are not giving up. Millions of tiny, little, green legs push towards the Carnival. They pull and prod the fabric until I lose my balance. They force me to put one foot in front of the other not to fall over. The momentum picks up. The wind intensifies. My steps quicken until I am sprinting down the hill past the little white chapel, past the graveyard, past the houses with red roofs, past the grey stone walls, past Auntie Lucia's house. The drums grow stronger vibrating through every particle of my being. The praying mantises are rejoicing. Their squeaks of laughter break through the thick fabric of the dress. Faster and faster they urge me forward. My steps get larger, springing my body off the ground and then letting it fall down with a thud. Faster and faster. My grandmother's old house, a place of grazed, scabby knees, becomes larger. I can feel myself falling, my knees buckling under the weight of the thud. I close my eyes and prepare for the fall, for the scream, for the blood. But it never comes. The northerly wind gushes across my cheeks, through my dress and into my bones. The little, green legs have spread the labyrinth of fabric using it to catch the flow of the wind. They have saved me. They have lifted me. They are carrying me upon their backs. The drumming is getting louder. My eyes are closed. My ears are full. The strong gust of wind has stopped.

There is stillness around me. Softly, gently, I feel the firm ground beneath my feet.
My eyes open.

I have come too late. The parade has ended. The order of the procession no longer exists. Groups of masks entwine and around every corner, at every table, in every shade, in every crevice the voices clamour, the glasses clink, the laughter resounds, the dancing sways. The crowd is one body, no individuality to the faces within. Masked figures greet me like a long lost friend with pats on the back or with kisses smearing my cheeks like a lover never forgotten. I try to get through them and escape to isolation but the current of bodies pushes me along to the left then right, forward and back, drifting by to their hearts content. Sweat blisters on my skin. The tumult of festivities blurs my eyes. My eyes close in despair. My knees buckle.

A strong hand grabs my arm and lifts me up.

“I’ve got you”, he says tightening his grip.

Slowly, I open my eyes and am met with a sight. His boots are laden with gold. His trousers hidden beneath a lavish red, velvet coat trimmed with snow-white fur. On each of his fingers a large ring with a ruby, a diamond or emerald sparkles. His chest is laid bare but upon it intricate, ancient symbols mark him as one of the Gods. His head is clouded in wild, white strands of hair completely covering his chin, cheeks, upper lip and the top of his head. Through the swaying strands of hair a crown laden with precious stones shines.

“Who are you?” I ask him.

“I am the King of your fairytales”, he replies.

The King grips my waist and we begin dancing. Our feet move in unison, our bodies know the rhythm. The music intoxicates me. My feet are light as if though they were made only for dancing on this warm night. The crowd of masks becomes and extravagant body flickering with the waves of desire. It is a night when wild dreams come true. It is a night

when no actions have consequences. It is a night of freedom from constraints. It is a night to remember and to forget. We dance through the crowd, feeding from its nauseating rhythms. The music fills our every vertebra and resonates through every particle of our being. The King lets go of my waist and twirls me in a circle, like a marionette in master's arms. He lets me go and another masked man becomes my dancing partner. I dance with one man after another until the laughter starts to echo from my mouth. I no longer feel myself. All I am, all I can feel, is the effervescence of pleasure, laughter and music.

The King appears beside me once again and grabs my waist firmly. Face to face, sharing the same breath, he takes me out of the festivities.

"Look up. Look up at that window up there", he says.

A beautiful mass of black hair sways with the beat of the streets from an attic window.

"It's your great uncle Aleks up there. Sixty six years he has spent up there, waiting."

A white palm glistens moving from left to right.

"Wave to him. Your great-grandmother's memories have trapped him up there. He is still waiting to be forgotten. Wave to him."

"Aleks!" a call rips through the music.

I look up towards the attic window again. Up there a couple embrace, their bodies entwined. I look closer. A young woman with blonde hair is kissing Aleks' cheeks and laughing. It is a laughter I know. It is a laughter I have heard many times before. It is Nona Flora's laughter. They perch their elbows on the window sill and wave to the crowd, their palms reflecting the moonlight.

"They're together again", the King says smiling.

"They look happy", I say to the King.

"Look at who they're waving at", he replies.

I look down at the crowd and a stunning woman with dark hair is waving back at them. She laughs too. It is Nona Flora's laughter.

"Lucia is their blood too", the King says. "Once the memories are released the path forward becomes clear."

I laugh a laughter which shoots through the air. The King grabs my body once more and we dance. We dance with lightness, with vigour, with ease and passion. The faces around us look at us and laugh a laughter of million shades. I stop dancing. I look at them. Their masks have started to melt, paint running down onto their costumes. Red bleeds into the yellow, the yellow overshadows the blue creating a green of the lives long ago lived. My mouth is dry. My feet heavy as lead. The beating of the drums no longer creates a rhythm I understand. I have lost the King. I am entwined in the grotesque pleasures of those who I no longer know.

Pushing through the crowd with all my might I find a place where the water trickles down from the heavens. I cup my hands to try and catch the stream flowing over a rock, but the water evaporates as soon as it hits my scorched skin. Desperate with thirst I kneel to the ground, my dress stains with the debris of celebrations. I put my hands upon the rock and stick my tongue out. Like a cat I lick the rock dry, refreshed finally.

The King, like a wanted apparition, appears next to me once more.

"Your Mama's profession is one of the oldest of our history, you know", he says pointing to an extravagantly disfigured woman on a stage above the rest. Her breasts are bursting out of the tight corset, moving with each breath she takes. Her right hand is raised, pointing and gesturing, towards the audience who jeer her on, all eyes glued to the grotesque performer. With her left hand she has hitched her skirt high revealing a wide, soft, dimpled thigh.

"My Mama wasn't a prostitute", I tell the King severely.

“Look closer. Listen carefully. She’s a storyteller just like your Mama was.”

I listen carefully to the words spoken by the storyteller.

Descended upon us the praying mantis reign,

The crowd jeers at her and as she stops a choir of men takes over the pause. The crowd stands astounded but as the choir repeats the song the crowd joins in. The story of the rain of the praying mantis is buried in the past. To an unknowing mind it could seem to be a song of every carnival, buried deep within the minds and brought out by the polyphonic voices of the choir. **The women grab the first man near them and begin dancing. One foot in front of the other, bodies pressed together, arms lifted, necks stiffened, like beautiful swans they begin twisting and turning. The men twirl the women around; their dresses fan out like glorious whirligigs in unison. Their formation breaks and the men and women throw their heads back and let the laughter rip through the air.**

Screams of pain join the laughter and trace the flailing bodies to the left and right. The crowd tears in half. Through them emerge two glistening white horses heavily decorated with gold medallions of far away worlds. The horses prop up on their hind legs and let out a wild sigh. The crowd falls silent. As they retrieve, the horses move their muscular bodies, jerking with each step forward they take. Not even a breath can disturb the spectacle. Upon their backs the two horses carry a child each. The girl is dressed in a white dress long enough to touch the soiled ground below. Her long, dark, wavy hair bellows in the northerly wind. On a horse next to her a young boy sits. He too is dressed in white, but his bare, tanned torso glimmers by the moonlight. The horses grow impatient and begin pouncing on the spot, their hooves echoing through Punta, vibrating against the walls; the walls which we have built around us to keep the world away from our frail bodies and minds bolted up to our necks against the life which feeds us. As the horses lose

their tight formation the boy and the girl look at each other in pain, arms stretched towards the other, bodies carried by the white horses moving away from each other. I look closer. I listen. Around their wrists, tying them together, a hazel branch digs into their soft skin and stains the ground red. The King emerges from the crowd and brings the horses together again, patting them calmly on their necks, whispering in their ears. He looks up at the boy and the girl nodding coyly.

“We have gathered here”, the King begins, interrupting the silence, “to seal the wish of the destiny that these two children have been given. Have you forgotten Kataryna?” his laughter shoots through the air, “you too were once a child bride.”

I look closer at the girl. On her left shoulder a scar in the shape of a leaf. I look at my own shoulder. Touch it. The scar is still there.

“Tito and Kataryna!” the crowd jeers.

“Tito and Kataryna”, they chant. “Tito and Kataryna! Tito and Kataryna!”

“But the destiny played a trick upon you”, the King says and the crowd breaks into laughter.

“Look again”, the King’s voice echoes through the crowd.

I take my eyes off the crowd and look at the young couple on a horse. The girl’s hair starts turning yellow, slowly like a tie dye, the blond spills from her skull until it completely changes the colour of her hair.

“Destiny has changed”, the King says, laughing mockingly.

Once more the women grope the men and in the chaos the horses with children disappear.

“I’m leaving tomorrow”, a voice whispers to me. I turn to see who it is, but the mask has obliterated the face.

“I thought about what you said”, the voice continues. “I can do it”, she whispers, her mouth stretched into a smile. As the woman lifts her hands to the sky, her hand thrown back, her laughter echoes her last words. *I can do it. I can do it. I can do it.* The rhythm of the words resounds through the air, laughter creating the notes.

“Who was that?” I ask the King.

“Trust your instincts. Look at her breasts”, he replies. His head turns towards her, eyes measuring every inch of her twisting body. His tongues slithers out, beckoning her for an offer. She grasps at her breasts pushing them up and together, softly, gently, arching her back.

“Gina?”

“Your return has caused ripples far beyond your comprehension”, the King says to me.

His long thin fingers grab my chin and force my gaze into his. Old eyes with interlaying and overlapping images, stare back deep into mine. With a strong hand he pushes my head to the left. My body swings after it. By my hand he turns and twirls my body, my mind. I turn and turn; one image blends with another, laughing faces interlock and mock until they are obliterated.

Suddenly, without a warning, men in bright green costumes, complete with a large thorax, antennae, diamond eyes and praying forearms, emerge from every crevice. They jump over the walls, spring from behind the trees, squeeze through tight openings. Numerous and large they invade the Carnival like a flood encircling the crowd. Children scream, women laugh, men poke them. The crowd and the praying mantises intertwine. A siren rips through the air and the crowd crouches down letting the praying mantises tower above. A siren sounds for the second time and from the ground proudly leap children with bright red horns, waving their tails wildly. Old, saggy women with big noses, matted hair

and pointy hats lash out at the praying mantises with their brooms. A primal scream engulfs the air. Laughter of the old and the young accompanies it. The drummers smash their sticks against the cow hide. They follow the pace of the battle. The time between the thuds shortens. The pace quickens. The witches swing their brooms faster. The devils wave their tails quicker and quicker. The pain of the praying mantises fills the air. The witches and the devils begin stomping their feet led y the rhythm of the drums until, one by one, they squash the praying mantises turning them into bright green specks on the ground. The crowd claps ecstatically.

Beside me the King stands proudly.

“You see”, he says pointing, “it’s not impossible. The reign of the praying mantises has ended.”

And with those words the music begins slowly and sensually. I touch my skirt, pulling it up layer by layer. Little green legs are no longer making their way through the labyrinth of the fabric.

“They’re gone”, I gasp and smile to myself.

The King spreads his palm before me and beckons me to dance. A soft smile illuminates his face. His eyes mirror it. I grab his hand and let the music sway my body. Softly, gently, to the left and then the right, round and round we go.

A wooden barrel, battered and old, rolls through the crowd. The crowd claps and lets out shrieks of joy. The chaotic clapping slowly falls into unison, as thousands of hands clap at the same moment. Clapping intensifies as the barrel rolls towards me. The King grabs my hand and raises me on a pedestal. Thousands of eyes are focused on us.

“Ladies, gentlemen and children”, the King begins, “tonight you have created and witnesses a marvelous performance in the Kingdom of Freedom. As you are all well aware of, recently one of our own returned to us from the lands which lay beyond our horizon.”

The crowd rejoices and a thundering clap breaks through the air.

“It is time to remove the shackles of the past. It is time to let the memories rest. It is time to set our minds and hearts at ease. It is time to reconcile the differences of perceptions, to correct the reconstructions. It is time to release that greatest of our enemies!”

The crowd explodes in ecstatic applause.

“Release! Release! Release!” the crowd chants in unison, the drums following the beat of every letter.

Two men come forward and pull the barrel upright. Before they walk away they bow to the King and I. The King once again takes my hand and points to the ground. It is time to step off the pedestal. I jump off and take the King’s hand.

“No”, escapes my mouth.

“Excuse me?!” the King glares at me.

“Thank you but no. I’m not getting into a bloody barrel and rolling down the hill”, I reply.

“You must. That’s the tradition.”

“No. Get somebody else to do. I’ve had enough.”

“Kataryna you have to do it. Everyone’s waiting for you to step in.”

“What the hell are you on?! I’m not doing it Tito!”

“I’m not Tito. I am the King.”

“Your mask isn’t that good. Tito Borich! Screw this!”

I turn around towards the crowd and step with the right foot forward bending it slightly at the knee. The left foot bends more bearing the weight of my body. I bend over and bow deeply before them, my hands hitching my skirt above my waist, moonlight illuminating

my backside. Turning slowly clockwise I repeat the bow mechanically so as not to leave anyone out. A perfect night not to wear any underwear.

40

The left hand comfortably dangles beside my leg, scraping the skin occasionally. Last night's occurrences are replaced by throbbing headaches and dry mouths of the cheap red wine poured in gallons. I walk down the road towards the sea. The closer I get the saltier and muskier the air becomes clinging to the beads of sweat rushing down my spine. Emptiness illuminates the deadness of midday. The walls are up, the gates are shut, roads deserted. Not even the breeze dares to disturb. As I continue walking a strumming guitar breaks the silence. Down below, or high above, one thing is for certain – someone is unaware of the rhythms of Punta. By the time I reach Magistrala the sound echoes around me, bouncing from stone to stone, intensified and mollified by the distance. I take a seat on the wall. The sun heated rock burns through my shorts, slowly overheating the skin. The possibility of eternity is nonexistent. The end is near.

He turns towards me and continues singing. His hair is long and matted, bleached to a straw brown by the sun. Despite the heat, long pants reach all the way to his ankles. They too have seen better days. The sun has bleached the navy blue to a murky purple. An inappropriate colour to wear for a man, in this world anyway. His torso is bare, also showing the signs of exposure to the elements. Around his neck silver, gold and coloured threads entwine and reach towards the chest hairs. Different tastes and souls collected along the way. Perhaps a reminder of what was and what is yet to come.

The heat from beneath becomes unbearable and as I stand up he sits down. I cross the road and stand in front of him. Opening a packet of cigarettes I offer him one before I take my own.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“I’ve lived in a lot of places.”

“What brought you here?”

“The road,” he smiles, “you’d be amazed at all the places it goes through.”

“Why did you stop here?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s not the best place.”

“You from around here?”

“Born here”, I reply.

He inhales, cheeks drawn in, and lets smoke escape his mouth and travel up towards his eyes. The piercing green I have seen only in my veins. Same shade. Same shape. Moving with the invisible currents underneath the surface. He is a drifter in his thirties with no ties, no connections, just a backpack on his shoulders, a hat on the sidewalk and a guitar beneath his fingers earning the next meal ticket.

“You know there are two kinds of people?” he asks.

“Are there not many shades of grey?”

“No. The grey has nothing to do with it.”

“What two kinds?”

“Those who stay no matter what and those who keep going no matter what.”

I can feel it sometimes. I don’t want to let myself feel it. It still washes over me though. Like a tidal wave it just comes. Unannounced. Unwanted. I can feel it has run its

solitary course. No compass to point the way. A sparrow flutters past and lands softly on the smooth, white stone of the wall. I soften my gaze and let the picture come out of focus. The wall melts until it reforms again to turn into a white, pebbled beach full of crevices and shadows. The shadows of the leaves sway in the afternoon breeze until they ameliorate into the glistening, blue sea. My memory excavates a story my mother used to tell me when I was a child.

“Hey, wanna hear a story?” I ask.

“Go on. Tell me a story”, he answers.

One beautiful late summer’s day, the kind which only comes after a big storm, the grandfather takes his grandson for a walk. They walk down the steep hill towards the pebbled beach. The grandfather gently holds his grandson’s hand, their fingers entwined. As they come to the beach the grandfather lets go of his hand and looks out to the sea. The grandson starts picking up the pebbles and one by one throwing them back into the sea. His grandfather sits down and watches him.

All of a sudden the grandfather stands up and walks over to where his grandson is carelessly throwing the little rock back down to the bottom of the sea.

“See this”, the grandfather says twirling the pebble between his aged fingers. “I control its fate”

“You know why?” he continues.

“No”, the grandson answers.

“Because it is capable of going only where my skill sends it. Whether it gets to the desired point depends only on whether I have the skill to send it there.”

“I don’t understand”, the boy says his eyes squinting as he looks up towards his grandfather.

“If I take another rock”, the grandfather says picking up a new grey stone, “like this one for example, it does not change the possibility of me hitting the target better. It does not matter which rock I throw out of my hand. A rock has no individual personality, there is no variable to change the outcome. A rock has no mind, no will of its own so therefore I control its fate. If it were a living, breathing, thinking thing I would not have control over it. It would do what it wants.”

The grandson takes the smoothest, whitest pebble beneath his feet, holds it tightly in his hand, closes his eyes and imagines it lithely jumping across the surface of the water. Without opening his eyes he throws the pebble feeling the movement of his arm. As he opens his eyes he catches a glimpse of the pebble before it sinks to the bottom to join the others. The pebble did exactly what he wanted it to do.

“That’s a beautiful story. Thank you. You are a good storyteller”, the drifter smiles.

He picks up the guitar and lets the song break through. A deep, soulful voice sings *Big wheels keep on turning, Carry me home to see my kin...* The midday bus goes past and stops at the bus stop. No one gets out yet the bus remains. It is the bus which goes towards the north. I can feel it come over me. It takes me over. I try to ignore it, to cast it out. But it doesn’t leave. It lingers in the background, pouncing, waiting to come undone. Sometimes reality seems like a parallel universe, complicated and lonely. To dream, to imagine, to twist the reality and mould it into a shape which is acceptable. At what point do I stop living the life and continue dreaming the dream?

My blood no longer flows within these rocks. There is nothing to stain them, to make them my own. Let the dead sleep. It isn’t what it was. It never really was.