Saved by the Swell

Janne De Rijck

Edited by Jan Matthieu

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Chapter 1

A Perfect Day

It was a perfect day, the sky a bright, spotless blue. A mild breeze blew over the Indian Ocean, only gently swinging the tall coconut palms. Leonard Stolk and his younger friend Steve Warwick were in high spirits. They finally got hold of the sailing boat they had been trying to hire for days. By now, the steadily rising temperatures of March had chased most tourists from what would very soon approach oven conditions for the coming months. Just one European tourist was boarding a rubber dingy that morning, to visit the so-called ornithological island not so far off the coast, accompanied by two Indians she had met only the day before.

Steve had always dreamed of sailing. The day he met up with his friend, the plan had soon taken shape: Leonard Stolk would teach him how to sail. Very excited, they left the pier in the only affordable sailing boat available at the small marina of this Goan village, taking along just a few bottles of water and their two surfboards tied to the boat. They had hired it for a full day, hoping to not only sail, but also catch a few nice waves in one of the bays, if they came across a nice swell. Leonard had been surfing for four decades and had been a surf instructor in Cape Town for a few years; it was his biggest passion. Although it had been many years since he last sailed, he felt confident: "It's like swimming, once you know how to, you don't forget," he assured his friend. Leonard was right about that.

As soon as they got on board of the 18ft long vessel, they had the wind in the sails, the bow was flying over the ocean and sailing was a piece of cake. They were heading towards the horizon really fast, nothing crashable in sight. Steve hadn't felt this excited since he caught his first honker (high surf wave) a few years ago. They didn't think of it, when some clouds drifted in, making the colors in the sea even more intriguing, from deep turquoise to royal marine blue. They decided to steer towards a thinly populated island Leonard knew an hour or two away from the shore, where they'd get something to eat and then get some surfing done before sundown. The boat not being due for 24 hours, they would sleep on it under the stars that night; anchored near the island.

But the outlook of things can change fast in tropical climates. Though the monsoon season was still months away, it seemingly decided to give everybody a surprise preview. Just an hour after they left the peer, the wind knots suddenly doubled. Nobody saw the storm from far away, though back on the beach, some dogs started howling. Dark clouds blew in and soon the little pleasure boat was dancing on the waves like a toy. When on top of that the rain suddenly poured down, the two men braced themselves for the second part of the journey and put on their wetsuits. The island was now just a vague dark stripe in the distance. Leonard decided to keep both sails up for speed as long as possible, saving the tiny engine for the last haul if necessary. They had not checked how much petrol the rented boat had. Soon the waves were lashing over the gun-whale. Steve immediately suffered an attack of sea-sickness. Leonard steered the boat skillfully, the main sail tense as a tightly blown balloon. He felt exhilarated, flashbacks of a stormy experience many years ago going through his head, he remembered everything the old skipper had taught him, or almost everything. But fate had other intentions. Over the horizon the dark sky formed into a whirlwind, as if a vertical tunnel had made a path between heaven and hell. The swirling column headed straight towards them. The men quickly reefed the sails and started the engine. Now things got really wild. Waves rose like walls all in front and behind them. The boat was lifted up so high they seemed to be flying; the downfall shook their entrails vigorously. Leonard saw the tornado heading...
closer and closer.

“Get the boards”, he shouted over the fuming noise of the sea, and Steve helped him haul the surfboards on deck, the very minute the elements threw them in the air. The cyclone, like a playful cub, grabbed the little yacht like a toy, and the next minute existence as they knew it, earthed, dissipated. The boat tilted as it flew up high. Steve and Leonard clutched to the surf boards, flew through the air for what seemed the longest time, and finally thundered back into the furious sea. Of the boat there was no sign; the cyclone had taken it, thrown it back down and probably sent it to the bottom of the ocean.

One loses all sense of time when fighting for one’s life. Leonard had lost sight of Steve. He firmly held on to the board, realizing he had lost all sense of direction. It was the heaviest storm he’d seen for years, water walls dancing all around him, and he was very concerned about his surf pal Steve, whose experience was not half what his was. Night came, the waves kept pushing him under. It would become the longest night of his life; the Indian Ocean thankfully not too cold after a warm spring, not like the ice-cold ocean he was used to in South Africa.

The cyclone had been and gone, but the rains gushed down all night. When some semblance of daylight finally returned, Leonard was surprised to be still alive. The waves had calmed down a little, allowing him to sit up on the surf board now. Exhausted he looked out for a glimpse of the coastline or the island to paddle towards. But he saw nothing, only water. This continued for hours. He stretched out on the board and stared into the grey sky. Where was the sun, to orientate upon? Suddenly a black bird soared above him, way up high—no, two. Two crows. Leonard jerked up and looked around. And right enough, to the left, there was the contour of a blot of land. The current and the tide had favored him. With all the strength he had left he started to paddle, blessing the wind that blew to his advantage. About fifteen minutes later he was pretty close. This was clearly not the island they had set out for. This seemed just a small, green and hilly clump in the sea. And what was worse, it had a very rocky shoreline. The tide was jacking though. If he could see an accessible beach, he could possibly catch a wave and jump on the board and surf in. The elements played along. As the rain had stopped, Leonard was getting a clearer view of the land, and saw a gap between sharply pointed rocks. He jumped up and surfed towards the coast like a real professional. But as he flew past some black rock formations, he spotted a bright orange shape and tried to steer a bit closer.

Right enough, the storm had thrown something on the rocks. Something like... a swimming vest? He decided to let the wave go and paddled back to investigate. The swimming vest was not alone. It was wrapped around a body. Leonard worked himself closer and climbed onto the rock from the other side. It was a woman, rather thin, not so young, perhaps in her forties. She was bleeding from the head, but to Leonard’s surprise she was still breathing. He quickly thought up a strategy on how to move her. The waves seemed to calm down some more. With huge effort he got the lightweight across his board without tearing her skin open against the rocks, and pushed it towards the gaps between the coastal rocks. And, indeed, a small bay allowed their entry. Quite exhausted Leonard pulled board, and woman, onto the small, virginal sand-beach and passed out beside her.
Chapter 2

Shelter

Time doesn’t exist when you lose consciousness. You’re in a void. Through the haze, the bud croaking of a caw woke Leonard up. Salt and sand grinding between his teeth, he tried to focus. The storm had blown over now, and the pale sheet of cloud looked as if it was ready to break open and let some sun through. He acted on an instinctive impulse, and slid both the board and its load to a sheltered spot at the far edge of the beach. There was no sign of any huts or houses, no roads or trails, no sign at all of any human presence. The crows seemed on a mission, so he followed every move, knowing birds to be curious by nature, on the lookout for food and snacks. The people from India believe that they are the spirits of their ancestors, here to guide us. Leonard knew that where there are birds, there must be fresh water and fruit. He soon wandered off to explore the area, hoping to find a path or road towards a village. If the sun did come through, the woman would be in the shade of some trees and bushes.

He walked for the rest of the day, in spite of muscle pain and exhaustion, driven by adrenaline, but found no traces of any human inhabitants. Determined to give it a go in the opposite direction the next morning, Leonard returned. And then, all of a sudden, just before dark and pretty close to where they had come ashore, he stumbled across a well hidden structure. It was a small hut, built with thin tree stems and bamboo. Dried stalks, twigs and leaves covered the roof; everything tied carefully together with rope. The fragile bamboo door had been blown off one hinge and hung precariously, but still in one piece.

“Perfect!” Leonard shouted. The two crows cawed back, excited. After a quick inspection, the shelter revealed two thin dusty mattresses, a small bamboo table and two five liter bottles of water. Hooray! Strengthened with hope he hurried back to the rescued girl, his faith in miracles restored. Attending to her head wound, which was well rinsed by the salty water, he noticed it had stopped bleeding, and didn’t look quite as bad as he first feared. He carried her through the dense growth, settled her on a mattress and removed the swimming vest. To his surprise there was a bag slung across her shoulder. It contained a small camera, probably ruined by the salty soak, a plastic bag wrapped around a notebook with a suede cover, a pair of plastic sunglasses, a Parker pen and a stick of Labello lip cream. That was all. The girl was still unconscious.

Stripping off her wet shirt and purple baggy trousers revealed a Rastafarian colored bikini with a touch of blue. He stared, mesmerized by the coincidence. These were the colors of South Africa, his home. He covered her with one of the faded, worn-out Tibetan blankets he’d found among the scarce equipment in the shack and hooked her clothes on a stick to dry. The presence of the hut was a mystery, but, then again, it was probably used for illegal spear-fishing by pearl-divers or poachers.

After trickling some water into her mouth, and drinking nearly half a liter himself, sleep overwhelmed all conscious thoughts and he collapsed again into oblivion.
Chapter 3

The Awakening

Someone was waking up on a comfortable mattress, scratching herself where it itched. Where was she? A scruffy mosquito net drooped around her like an old unwashed veil. She tried to focus. How did she get here, in this seemingly primitive hut, and where on earth was 'here'? A blank covered her brain like the blanket had covered her semi-nudity. Needing air she tried to get up. The effort was clumsy and floored her. Looking up from a crouching position, she saw him suddenly in front of her. The man, his slightly greying hair dripping seawater onto his bronzed, hairy chest, was putting a surf board against the wall of the hut.

"Hello! You woke up!" he said, with a bright smile. She nodded. Who on earth was this? She had no recollection. But a sense of trust relaxed her. Maybe she had been drunk the night before and had a blackout. Nothing came to mind. She was obviously in a warm country. A gecko on the wall was not much of a clue. A shot of pain in the head and in the right leg soon told her more. She was injured. Her head was bandaged up with some sort of cloth.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Hmm, must have had better days", the woman answered. Her voice was hoarse, salty. He handed her the drinking water.

"That was a close call! What a storm hey? But we survived it, isn't life great?"

"By the way..." pointing at the small notebook on the crooked bamboo table, "I read some of your writing. Awesome poetry!" he said, his head spinning, wondering what they would find to eat here.

While her body was aching, her mind was elsewhere, feverishly trying to piece together who she was. She took the soft suede notebook in her hands. It felt familiar. Opening it up she recognized the name written in the front—Iris Natal. She knew that was her, even before seeing the photocopies of some pictures, bound in the notebook, of a child with blond plaits, who must be herself. She suddenly remembered who made it: her first sister! To her own surprise she heard herself say:

"Writing is my way of surfing through life, and through emotions."

Leonard smiled at her softly spoken words. They triggered his spontaneous philosophical side and he replied with sad wonder in his voice, "Sometimes I feel kind of flat, because I don't get emotional. Last and only time was the death of my father in-law. He was such a great guy. The father I never had. I hate tears. If my daughter tries to change my attitude with tears, I just hug her and tell her to stop crying. I don't think I've ever had a love that I would die for... or is that just normal?"

She decided not to mention her memory loss just yet, she’d figure things out as she went. But where was she? It appeared to be a sandy place, with lots of bird sounds outside. The sound and smell of the sea permeated the air.

"A love you want to live for, not die for, that’s the thing," she joked.

The man burst into laughter. "Makes more sense! Maybe I’m still looking?"

"They say love becomes an abstract thing, when you’ve been abandoned, like by your mother. Yes, maybe, just maybe, you are still looking."

"That's the crappy thing in my life. My mother never ever left us. One day my brother and I were just taken away. Over the following years, we were always a step in front of the social welfare, and every time we got caught we were put in another home. Eventually there was a court
order against my mother—meaning she would lose us if we ever ran away again. So the last time we refused to run with her. My mother was and still is the greatest icon in my life. She’s experiencing the early stages of Alzheimer’s, but she’s still a strong woman. She’s in a Home now. I look back on my life with absolute wonder, and happiness. Being the rebel, I was always in the thick of the fun,” he said, shaking his head and grinning, on reflection, “it was great!”

“Hm,” Iris thought aloud, “Head and heart turn out to be brothers, but always fighting.”

“I always follow my heart,” Leonard interrupted, “I’ve had great loves, four children from three women. I’m still friends with all the mothers,” he laughed, “and who knows, one day our lips may move in harmony.”

“You remind me of Aslan, my furry thick-tailed red cat” Iris added. “He was king of the roof and garden. He had been a city survivor before I rescued him and took him home. Another one I adopted could spell letters with his tail” It was the first thing she actually remembered clearly. What a weird association. She’d had cats! Where?

“I have six and a half cats.” Leonard continued. “The light ginger just comes to eat every now and then. He sits by the door, I let him in, he eats and I don’t see him for a week or two; then a dark ginger, two black, one black and white, one tortoise, and a mixed grill, the youngest. And two dogs.”

“They don’t substitute anything... For some people they’re like babies.” Iris mused. “I didn’t allow them in my bed either! Dogs are good for exercising, I guess. I like walking with dogs. Better than being alone all the time.” What a useless thing to remember when she didn’t even know who she was or if she had any kind of relationship with this man.

“Yes my pets are just that! Awesome animals. Cats love me,” he laughed aloud, “dogs adore me!”

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“Yeah, animals sense a heart, What about the women though? They didn’t?” Now Iris was laughing loudly.

“Honestly... I think it’s because I broke up with them, that we are still such buddies. Did them a favour! The mother of my first son I wanted to marry though. One of life’s hiccups...”

“You wanted to but you didn’t?”

“Long story...”

Iris offered to go outside as the clouds were opening up. Her leg was badly hurting and he had to support her. They were leaning comfortably against a tree before Leonard picked up the thread. After taking off his wetsuit he sat down bare naked, safe for a safari shirt tied around his waist. He was handsome, muscular and tanned.

“Personal history is most interesting. I’d like to know everything you care telling me and you can ask things too if you like. No secrets. How soon did you become a dad? Or is that phase five?”

He laughed, tickled by her interest. “Way down the line, I was living in a commune with about eight guys in a six bedroom house. We had painted every wall in every room, two bathrooms included, in a different colour! Communal living! I had long hair, wore a lot of bangles and necklaces, and surfed. In those days, the 70s, surfers were known as dagga smokers, can you picture it?”

Iris smiled. “Without any effort. Dagga is... weed?”

“Yes. In those days smoking weed was thought of worse than murder in South Africa. Amazing,”

“Oh My God, how ruthless of you!” she laughed in turn. “It’s illegal in Europe too.”

“Anyway, my friend’s girlfriend introduced me to this lovely British girl. Rich folks, very prim and proper. I think she was 18 and I was about 19, 20. They came to visit me at my house, took one look and said if I wanted to live with their daughter I had to get a decent house. I had a job, a car, so I got a nice two bedroom flat in an up-market place, St. James, in Cape Town, just for the two of us. We invited the folks for supper. Hahaha. We had no furniture. We put a towel over a suitcase and we sat on the floor, with absolutely no embarrassment. I lived a life!” he laughed. “They came, they ate, they bought us furniture afterwards. Not bad! So we lived together for about a year. Great
times! Rose was a rebel, awesomely pretty, not easily embarrassed. She taught me so much about sex, in fact she taught me all about sex! When I first met her I was pretty ignorant,” Leonard laughed. “She tried to change me, from too much laid back and no cares, into something else, but she gave up after a while. We had a great time together. “

“People do change all the time though,” Iris said, “We are not a stagnant mechanism. Our brain, feelings, insights, neurons, all move in constant growth and change. Some die too soon, haha. Sometimes we adapt without noticing, sometimes you just can’t.”

“I know what you mean,” Leonard added “but when people try and change the ‘you’ in you, then they just get the finger... never going to happen! Change must come from within, I would think? Then she fell pregnant and in those days we were busy fighting all the black nations around South Africa, so the army was compulsory, especially for whites, and I have a white passport. “

“That’s serious trouble!”

“Yep. One day I was surfing, long hair half way down my back living a carefree life, and the next day I was drafted. Rose went to stay with her family. The baby was almost due. I was in for three months at a border army camp. You go into the war zone and act stupid, and try and kill the opposition... madness. I was getting army pay and normal pay from my home job, and keeping in touch with the woman I was going to marry. Ah!!! for being young and thinking nothing can go wrong! Three months in the Caprivi is not too long, the war zone keeps you very much alive! It was the border with Namibia, Zambia and Mozambique. Scary place, the area where the three countries meet. You come back to city life and you think ‘What the fuck are these people worried about,’ you know? Money bonds, bills and so on; they should be happy they are alive. When I got back from these camps I would charge into fair sized surf for fun, that was breathtaking!”

“You didn't even let it affect you? That is strong!”

Leonard laughed again.

“Well I was always under the impression that I was coming out and getting married. We kept in touch through letters, so I counted down the last days... of freedom... Then the day came... Amazing, all the noise of packing and getting ready. Heading for home and romance... Then we got on the airplane and it was the quietest ride ever. We were all in our own worlds thinking about what we were heading for.”

“The homecoming.”

“I get home. I have a lot of money and I just want to ring my girl and ask her when we are getting married. I ring her and we chat a bit and then I ask the question... This was the mother of my eldest son, hahaha! Lekker youth. Anyway, she tells me she is already married. I am speechless! I’ve just come back from a war zone, so there is no screams or shit—I just said ‘Fuck I hope you enjoy it’. I put the phone down, a bit lost for what to do, so I go to one of our local surf spot clubs, come out and my buddy was riding his Yamaha scrambler 400cc. I asked to let me go for a ride. It was so very nice! I took all that money I had saved up and bought myself a similar bike.”

“You became a rider? Why not! How old were you?”

“I was about 20. She tells me her dad made her marry someone from his firm; he didn’t want a bastard grandchild. She divorced the guy about six months later and came down to be with me... Well you know, these blocks I built around me as a youngster... I just said ‘tough luck’. I wasn’t into marriage anymore! Then she went back up to her folks. We always stayed friends. She got remarried and is still married to the same guy. How is life...?” Leonard laughed again. It was his nature, his natural resistance to uncomfortable feelings.

“Did seeing the baby freak you out?” Iris wondered aloud.

“I had lost all interest. But she came down to the Cape at least once a year and we always got together. And every time we wanted to have sex and be together... but something always went wrong, hahaha, and till today she didn’t actually two-time her husband. Isn’t life amazing? From
the first day my son Shayne, aged 16 then, came to visit me, we hugged and stayed friends. We kept in touch ever since. He invited us to his wedding. So do I have feelings or do I shy away? I don’t know, really. Life goes on,”

Leonard laughed in a twitch of irony. “It must have been a guardian angel with a sense of humour, that set us up? I actually crashed my car a good few times while we were out together; Rose and I, we always went jollying and drank a lot. Then after a crash her sister would come and pick us up, drop me off and take her home; so no, we didn’t sleep together again. Rose and her husband live in Zimbabwe; he doesn’t like me at all. An amazing twist of fate: she was the only woman I really wanted to marry.”

“Sorry for you, but then, be consoled: I married the only man I wanted to marry, and it didn’t last either,” Iris tried to join in his cheer, while deep inside she could feel the hurt of a lost dream. Hey! Iris sat straight up, and smiled. She remembered this!

“I have no regrets.” Leonard sighed. “Shayne came to visit me about a year ago. We had a fun family time—me and three of my children. The two elder boys had never met, though they knew about each other. The best is to have friends with benefits, so my daughter tells me...”

“They laughed, and suddenly he kissed Iris in a spontaneous outburst of affection.

“How long were you married for?” Leonard asked. As if his kiss had opened a treasure box, she suddenly caught glimpses of a far away time. She looked at her hands. Those days of youth were over.

“I met Rob when I was 19, in Glasgow, on my way back from the Findhorn Community of Light. A few hours after we met I went to the bus station and postponed my bus ticket to Dover for two days. Some weeks later I sent him a ticket to come over. He came and stayed. We had to wait until I turned 21 to marry. I got no parental permission. A foreign hippie! We stayed married till 2002, that was for 23 years together.”

“Wow, you paid his fare?”

Iris smiled amused. “Yes, he wasn’t earning much as a plumber, and Scottish people love to hang out in the pubs on weekends, it’s their social life. I had to help him a little to get the ferry. I was studying and living with two friends at the time. It was all a bit complicated.”

Hunger made Iris feel faint. They clambered back inside to rest, and Leonard made her comfortable while ending his story. “I was married for 29 years; we were together for 33 years, only married once, hahaha. Madness! I only married Cherrie. We had a son and daughter. I lived a very free and easy life.”

Then, suddenly, Leonard jumped up, and headed towards the door. “Bathroom time! Going for a wash in the ocean... Sweet dreams!” He was hoping to still find some crab on the rocky shore, the moon gave enough light.

“Yes, see you later.”

He left, closing the door that he had fixed, firmly behind him, leaving Iris feeling rather bewildered. The sun was sinking, giving way to stars that would light up the night sky. She sat thinking on the mattress for ages—reflecting. The deep vacuum in her mind slowly filled with shadows from the past. She remembered, feeling the pain, like a black syrup poured over her... Aaron had broken up with her, without any apparent reason. She felt the loss, the missing piece in her life. Iris remembered that she had come to India to walk out of the zone of solitude and sadness that had swallowed her. A warm glow washed over the ache the next instant, when she recalled the blessing in Leonard’s words “a free and easy life”. Hers had been free, but not easy. She was too sensitive for this world. But why worry about the lessons of the past, when in this moment she was being reborn? A night-bird’s echoing call ‘that’s right’ acknowledged that something good was evolving out of a potentially disastrous, life threatening situation. She fell asleep feeling sheltered, privileged to taste life in its beautiful core again.
The next morning Leonard popped his suntanned head through the door, cheerful as usual. “Hello! I hope my kids remember to feed the dogs back home,” he kind of mumbled, his thoughts preoccupied with food as hunger was becoming a constant companion in his daily search for something edible. His food quest had not been very successful nor had he seen any signs of human presence. “How are you feeling, girl?”

“The headache is much better, thanks,” Iris replied, but she felt weak and the thought of food, any food, made her mouth water. Suddenly her own pets back home popped in her numbed mind. “What do you feed your dogs? Dry food? The cheapest stuff is not sufficient for animals, you know? They become listless, lacking energy, I saw it with my cats!”

“I cook a mixture of cheap dog biscuits, porridge, meat leftovers and powdered bones for my dogs. It’s a bit of a chore, that’s why I wonder if my son will keep it up daily. My five cats get dry food. They are useless when it comes to hunting, especially when they move as a pack. All they catch is an occasional gecko,” he answered.

Iris’s mind was quickly jumping to other things. She wanted to ask him so many questions, about who he was, who she was, where they were. But Leonard was the kind of guy who would rather talk light and easy than to mention his serious worries to her. He probably thought she didn’t realize how very stuck they were out here? Would she just ask him about everything now, what had happened? She trusted him, liked him. Yes, she even felt a surge of attraction welling up. Was she with him? Was he her new husband? Did they even have any connection at all? Leonard seemed a bit in a rush, but hesitantly he lowered himself on the mattress and relaxed, as if he sensed Iris needed a talk. She didn’t know where to begin. Meekly she continued his line of talking, so welcome after the overwhelming silence of the island, while trying hard to avoid raising the question about any food for themselves.

“There’s not a single mouse left around my place! When my female had kittens she caught field mice, a pigeon, a baby rabbit next. I discourage hunting though, and make them miss every butterfly they chase after,” she shared.

Iris was surprised. Were these her memories? She recalled her cats, but where was her home? She saw her white cat with the smiling Buddha silhouette on her back. This cat sensed pain, had healing capacities. Friendly conversation was sure a good memory juggler. She felt grateful.

Stopping cats from hunting seemed rather pointless to the surfer, who considered hunting a natural survival thing.

“Yesterday you mentioned you are alone all the time? Not very nice, being alone all the time,” he changed the subject, looking at Iris intensely.

“One gets used to it. I think some time in the past I must have overdosed on visitors,” she shrugged.

“I’ve always enjoyed my own company,” he replied, “but it’s good to have friends every once in a while. My daughter comes by and does all her washing at my place.”

“Things like that I like. The irony is, I don’t have a clothes dryer! In such climate it’s a drag!”

How amazing it was to have little facts of life trickling in, as if the syrup had been too stiff before. Iris now remembered her washing machine, her ex and her daughter. She had also read the notebook, some pages were like a diary and nothing had surprised her.

“Now my daughter comes and takes over the TV, Internet, and kitchen... I love her,” Leonard
“She takes over the kitchen?” Iris looked surprised. “How lucky is that? I always held on to the idea: who cooks doesn’t have to do the dishes. I lost that battle though.”

Of course Leonard laughed. He always got her jokes even when she sounded serious. “We still have our fights; the only guy who for some reason never does the dishes is Marco, my future son in law; lucky boy.”

“Your daughter will have to put the foot down: who doesn’t cook does the dishes!” she emphasized with twinkling eyes. “It worked for a few years!”

She could not get an image of his children at all. She was pretty sure she had never met them. “I don’t know what happens there, but she doesn’t take crap!” Leonard replied.

“In any marriage that can be dangerous,” Iris joked.

“If you’re not equals, you shouldn’t be together. It takes two to tango!” he added. His laughter was contagious. He seemed to have coped with all tough things in life by shaking it off with a laugh; the deeper the issues of pain, the harder he laughed, was her impression.

“That is true. It just turned out that the guys I was with were so full of crap after a while, so stubborn in their laziness; except for one—he turned out the opposite, more of a workaholic.” Iris reminisced and laughed loud too now, at the funny—or tragic—things she suddenly remembered. The negligence that had resulted in a lot of chaos during her 23 years of marriage and that had seemingly impacted her deeply. She saw coffee tables full of clutter and tobacco, wine stains, food scraps, the terrace a battlefield of dirt in the morning after an open fire barbecue, while baby nappies, smoked, were still hanging on the washing line, drying... In droplets, anecdotes started to trickle through the fog of memory loss. I must have banged my head not too seriously, she thought with relief.

“You go for the extremists?” Leonard asked, interested in her story now.

“No, I hate all things extreme! I think I feel attracted to men whom I feel useful to, whom I can use my energy on, to help them achieve something special, and who can love as passionate as me? But some of people’s problems are hidden and don’t show till much later in the relationship, under stress usually?”

“You are right,” he agreed, while he heard her stomach rumbling loudy. “Let’s have lunch, since you slept through breakfast!”

‘Something to eat? That’s fabulous! What a good idea, I am starving!’ Iris called out. He went out and came back immediately, carrying a banana leaf like a tray. Two mangoes caught her eye first. Was this not simply a dream? As she moved, her entire body ached badly. Some blue bruises showed up more vividly on her arms and legs. She must have landed hard somewhere.

He made a comical gesture and took a bow with the tray that made her laugh like a child.

“We have a special today madam! Bacon and eggs, toast, and bottomless coffee,” he joked. Beside the mangoes the leaf held a coconut and a bunch of small ripe bananas.

“So lucky I pulled my safari shirt over my wetsuit when that storm got wild. I always keep a Swiss knife in my zip pocket,” he explained, attacking the shell of the coconut vigorously. He managed to break the hard coconut open. Fresh coconut milk was the cream without the coffee, but it was refreshing, nutritious and exhilarating.

“I will cut a spear from bamboo after this and try and catch us a fish!” Said Leonard, with determination. “If you thought of just walking out for lunch to the restaurant, I’m afraid there is nothing on this side of the island. I think there’s nobody else here.”

He thought it was best to make her understand the situation. Apart from the water, they had nothing.

“That’s perfect for me! I feel like doing ‘niente’, a big Italian Dolce Vita Nothing, on an uninhabited island,” she sighed, having no idea that was exactly where she was. The seriousness of
the situation had not really dawned on her yet. The concussion still kept half her brain in a haze. “I’m going to do some yoga today. My muscles are so painful, and stiff, like I haven’t moved in days!” Hey, it started to come back, she knew yoga!

Leonard let his jolly boy scout laugh roll. “Well, you haven’t moved in days! Awesome lives we are living! All you need to do is rest and get well!”

“Yes, if it weren’t for the pain, I’d feel incredibly free! But my leg hurts a lot! You went surfing this morning! How was it? Did the swell jack in time for you?” What the heck!! Iris was baffled she knew these words.

“So you did hear me talking to you while you were unconscious? I knew it! It was just a small swell, no real surf; the water of the Indian Ocean is so much warmer than what I am used to in South Africa! I had a look around. I came here with a friend, Steve, you know, I have been looking for him. If you and me survived the storm, maybe he did too. He’d have a much better chance if he managed to hold on to the surfboard when the boat threw us overboard. The waves were so wild I lost sight of him. I will go searching again tomorrow. The other beaches of this island seem easiest to reach by sea. I’ll paddle and check out all the coastal cliffs. This is just a small bay.”

They tucked into the breakfast, while Leonard continued, simultaneously eating and talking. “That is so great about this place, there is fruit and other edible things everywhere in Goa, if you know how to find it. Sixty edible wild species of leaves and roots I read somewhere.”

Alright! Goa! That’s where this place was, that was right! And her daughter Maya had introduced mango to her not so long ago. Then the image of a young boy with dreadlocks appeared on the canvas of her mind. Her daughter was engaged to him. He was Portuguese, Iris recalled.

“It’s good that you like your ‘new son’, that’s so important. I love my daughter a lot too; we are best friends, though we are often apart. Her boyfriend is also cool, I like him. We have traveled together a lot, the three of us once. Tell me, why do you use that diving suit in this warm weather?” Iris asked, as her struggling mind jumped from one subject to another.

“They’re called wetsuits. A lot thinner than diving suits. Well it’s either that or naked. Not many clothes survived the storm,” Leonard laughed. “It gives some protection I guess. You never know what you bump into in strange waters. And yes, I love Marco, my daughter’s fiancé. My daughter gets him to say ‘I love you Len’ when she phones sometimes. We get on super well, as he surfs too. It’s fantastic for us that our children find happiness in love.”

As if a page in an unwritten book was turned, a new flow of recollection came gushing in.

“So true. My daughter was working in Lisbon for a year while her boyfriend was still at university there, but Lisbon didn’t suit her well. She quit a well paid office job. Well paid for Portugal, but not in comparison to back home. The work was boring, not teaching, though she has a bachelor’s degree for Art and English. So she left to travel alone for five months while her boyfriend was continuing his studies.” Iris spurted it all out, a thread of knowing suddenly unraveling, slowly starting to reveal who she was.

“Get some bucks together and think of South Africa as your next port of call?” Leonard suddenly said, gathering she was a well-traveled person.

“Do you still live there?” She grabbed the opportunity to get some concrete information.

“I do. I live near Cape Town; going back when the season gets too hot here, in a month or so. I teach surfing there, like I do here in India.”

“I will contemplate it, but tickets to Africa are not cheap I think.”

“You might be surprised; lots of competition between airlines.”

A stream of memories swamped her again.

“I travel alone most of the time. Africa did not appeal to me, I found it a bit dangerous alone. I was in Morocco five or six times, and in Tunisia. That was very cool. The north is a very different Africa from the south I guess. A bit like Sweden compared to Spain. Many Moroccans have worked
in Belgium and are more familiar with European people.”

That was it! She was from that tiny European country, the puzzle was coming together!

“Well I’ll always be willing to be your guide, so you won’t be alone.”

It became clear they had no past together; everything about this man was new and surprising. A surfer from South Africa! A completely unknown lifestyle to Iris. With childlike enthusiasm—that had to do with the chemistry that started to make its own story under the layers of her skin—she answered:

“Brilliant! Can I wear sandals there? I hate closed shoes, to the big dismay of guides in the desert. In fact, flip-flops are so easy, just perfect! For mountains I have sportive walking sandals with thick rubber soles.” She held her breath.

“Well, I walk barefoot. I haven’t worn shoes in twenty years! I will guide you to our beaches and awesome mountains. All you’ll have to do is pack,” he chuckled.

“Have you seen my sandals?” she asked, breathing again. Now he would tell her how she got here, she hoped.

Again Iris held her breath while he told her: “When I found you on the rocks you were only wearing these and a swimming vest.” He pointed at the clothes still hanging up; she only wore the blanket wrapped around her; being alone in this hot climate she hadn’t even thought of getting dressed.

“My sailing boat was taken by the whirlwind. What an incredible storm that was! It just appeared out of the blue. The morning after I found you, swept onto some rough cliffs. I took you ashore on the surf board and carried you here, used your t-shirt to bandage up your head wound. You slept for almost two days.”

“Two days? That’s more like a coma!” she exclaimed, but Iris didn’t want to drop the subject yet. It excited her. “So you will be my guide in South Africa? And what if I can’t keep up the pace? Will you leave me behind?”

“Of course not!”

A flash-back imposed itself, and she narrated:

“I am not too bad at finding my way back, actually. I recall one time in the Blue Mountains, in Jamaica. I wanted to stop for pictures every few minutes. Jim, the man I was with after I got divorced, got annoyed, so I said: ‘Bugger off, walk ahead! I’d rather walk alone!’ Jim Carp was my second partner; we lived together for four years. He was four years younger than me, and a walking story of his own… Wherever he walked, trouble followed. But I’m straying. My point is: I like to take walks slow.”

“So many stories to share,” said Leonard, stretching comfortably. “I am so laid back, no hurry. One day we went on to the Suicide Gorge, in Cape Town. Eight of us, walked for eight hours straight!. The guys were in a hurry, the girls wanted to take their time and take photos. I agreed and walked with them, hahaha. They still had to wait for us before we started the jumps.”

“I don’t like the sound of that much, Suicide Gorge. And jumping? I better make sure you like me, before I let you take me there.”

“You should look it up when we get back, an awesome hike! The first time we did it we got lost and were airlifted off the mountain by helicopter. Had spent the night on the mountain. I was just wearing a baggie, no shirt or shoes… “Leonard explained.

“Jeez! That wouldn’t happen to me. Where I go my cardigan goes, or at least a shawl. I was watching a couple of kite-surfers not so long ago. They were doing high jumps in the air above the sea. Suddenly a board flew way up high in the air. The guy was only holding on to the parachute, drifting in the water. It took him ages to find the board, or get to it, I thought he’d broken a leg and was fighting for his life. I waited and watched, looking out for the lifeguard, but there was nobody at all on that stretch of beach. After some twenty minutes he got back on the surf board and kited
after his friends that were already miles away, out of sight.”

“Life! Take a chance and it usually works out. Let me teach you to surf when your leg is healed up, you will love it.”

“I wouldn’t attempt high speed surfing! A very calm, snoozing swell is what I’d try. But I have to build up my leg muscles. I had muscle atrophy and a painful sciatic nerve. I lost too much weight.”

“Snoozing?” Leonard inquired, his eyes first widening and then squinting in wonder.

“Can’t you surf a snoozing swell? One of those calm, steady heaving rollers that take their time? In that case I will stay with the picnic,” she admitted her defeat with a grin.

Leonard was entertained. “Okay, you take the photos,” he patronized her.

“I’d love that. I got some cracking silhouettes in Croatia, last summer I think. Two guys of the adventure hut in action. Huge boards, and poles... No waves. They were moving by the force of paddling the pole. At some speed they tackled each other. Whoever landed in the water lost. Photos of motion is a new trick, I’ll have to try a few times!”

“Would love to see those photos. I love silhouette type shots. Awesome for the mind, very romantic.”

“Silhouettes are great, just the black contours of the body or face, a world where wrinkles don’t exist,” Iris laughed. “It so happened that the face you see now, was carved into this etch-like pattern in just a year’s time.” She paused a moment. How many pasts did she have at all? Another lover joined her returning personal, more recent history. “I didn’t take the last split up very well. His name was Aaron. I cried a lot, for months. On top of that teeth trouble started—which is a bit genetic—together with loss of appetite, which is quite normal for a broken heart; weight loss followed. When I saw my face reflected in the little camera screen I was checking out today, I got such a fright—you have no idea what a shock really.” Iris said “I have become old! So that’s the downside of being passionate, it also makes you too emotional.”

“Truly... you look like a gypsy woman... very in focus with nature. Age is just a number, and you should know the power of your inner beauty. If we respect who we are, life stays so lekker. We must love that person in the mirror.”

“Well, there’s always silhouettes or candlelight”, she joked. “You are quite right! But some bits are not so simple. Like my temper going up in interaction with my ex-husband Rob. He became an alcoholic. You know, akohol and its side-effects?”

Some species of bird was screeching loud, as if it was shouting a warning. Leonard got up. “I must get busy. Must think of dinner. But I have been there, I am clean and sober going onto thirteen years. I have a lunatic for a brother-in-law. He came around not so long ago, with a walking stick, coked and drunk out of his mind, and started performing. I thought he was going to attack me. So I was very laid back waiting for him to raise the stick. He must have seen how I was reacting, and never did. I would have just gently given him one warm clap.” Said Leonard.

Visions of stressed days swarmed the beach hut. Iris held on to them, a straw towards recollecting who she had been until she washed up on that rock.

“Rob, my husband, didn’t get violent, he only made you angry by what he said and how he behaved. I don’t hit easily, but I’ve given him such a shove out the door one time, many years ago, that he landed across the street—it’s a quiet country road. He was not hurt, but he just suddenly heard me, I mean, he really listened, unlike before?”

“Eish! Not a happy environment. Definitely sunglasses-face stuff!”

As the info rolled in, Iris kept talking, like a film was unfolding in her head.

“Rob lives in a small place next door now. Most of the time it’s alright. Very Zen, I don’t see him much. We split up a long time ago, in 2002.”

“Can I get personal?”
“Aren’t we already? Not sure what you mean.”
“Why do you let negatives rule your emotions? Your life should be a happy one, and you are the only one to make it so? At the end of the day our best friend is that person looking back at us from the mirror! Aren’t you hungry?”
“Yes, what are you planning for supper?” Iris joked.
“Some poems of yours? I love them!” he flattered, “or steamed lamb chops and butternut?” His sarcasm was of a friendly nature.
“Sounds good. What is butternut?”
“Kind of bell shaped pumpkin; you put sugar on it, very nice. What are you going to prepare” The fantasy food game was motivating him for the coming hunt.
“What about cauliflower in cheese sauce, potatoes and pork medallion, or merguez, why not?” Iris played along.
“What is merguez?”
“Thin sausages for grilling, paprika flavored minced lamb.”
“Sounds lekker, like you could braai it over a fire!”
“Indeed! Super tasty met salade, with a salad”
Leonard was very amused. “We talk like our coloured folk, very slang Afrikaans. They mix English and Afrikaans, just like you!”
“Oh dear, is that a good thing for my Public Relations there?”
“You’ll fit in like a natural”
Isn’t it so that laughter is the best cure for illness, as it raises the endorphin level in a very natural way? She was too amused to feel her head hurt. A new flashback streamed in. A natural, that made her ponder. She was a natural communicator, in any language. She recalled the strange clicking language of the Bushmen in Namibia. There was a video of her talking to a Bushman, in the Kalahari... talking about cellophane! In sign language of course. How ridiculous that sounded. Just a minute or two of it, filmed by accident.
“What, you were in an accident?” Leonard, who was only paying little attention now as he was focused on cutting a thin bamboo stem into a pointed spear, asked.
“Apart from getting lost in a quad in the wild tall grass, running into a grazing flock of wildebeest and getting chased by a gnu far too close by, not that I remember”, Iris smiled.
“Ha ha ha. That’s why they call it WILD life; your life story would fill a library.”
“Perhaps. I remember I wrote a story about the Namibia experience: An observation on capitalism. Shiver and shake.”
“You are an awesome woman. Why you would take shit from anyone boggles my brain. Any man should be lucky just to have you as a friend. Hello awesome friend!”
“I don’t take shit from anyone! That’s exactly why I split up, twice. I am not good at friendship though. I tend to lose contact.”
“I myself let any anger out at the moment, never let it linger.”
“Friendship is overrated; love is the thing,” Iris said with deep conviction.
“Great! But don’t forget friends always help each other. It is definitely a matter of opinion. Look, the spear is ready. See you as soon as I catch something! Hopefully we will have some lovely sushi tonight!”
The thought of raw fish had made Iris shudder. She got up to do some basic yoga and moved her thin mattress in front of the door as it was a sunny day. Imagine her joy when she found what had been hiding under it, the greatest treasure imaginable: a lighter! After some breathing exercises and asanas, yoga-positions, she could think clearer. She wanted to surprise her fascinating rescuer. She could only hope his spear had done the job! When Leonard returned some hours later he was indeed carrying a beautiful, large red snapper, sure to last them for several meals. He was beaming with pride like a schoolboy bringing home a first prize.

“Sushi!” he called out to her, his teeth glowing white in his happy brown face. His hunt had been even more successful, as it included some shellfish he had carried back in a banana leaf. But Iris didn’t eat shellfish. Now it was her turn to impress him. Playful as a teenage girl she told him to close his eyes and walk along with her.

Round the corner a perfect pyramid waited, built up around a blank page from her notebook and some thin dry twigs; some larger sticks and good-sized logs were stacked ready beside it. Dry coconut shell burned well she knew, and she had found three nearby. They could boil up the shellfish in a coconut shell. Leonard looked aghast, fearing for a moment Iris had lost her mind. They had no fire, the girl must have gone bonkers? Then she pulled out the lighter and triumphantly lit her fragile construction. Leonard shrieked with surprise and joy.

“Have I earned my supper?” She asked, self-satisfied and coquettish.

“Absolutely! What a fantastic find! Dinner is on the house!” Leonard cheered and he bent over to kiss her head, gently laying his hand on her shoulder. They silently watched the fire glowing up while they enjoyed the aroma of the red snapper grilling. It proved to be a most delicious rich fish. After eating almost half of it they crashed out together in a corner and slept soundly.

When Iris woke up the next morning her companion had already gone. He sure seemed to be an early bird. She ate a small banana and walked around a little, feeling much better. Around noon when the sun was standing high, her friend returned. He was again wearing his shirt like a loin cloth. Butterflies welled up in her stomach when she saw him.

“Oh, what about a cheese sandwich right now?” She sighed, immediately feeling guilty for her moaning. This fantasy game didn’t work every time.

“Coffee would be great too! To stay up a bit later so I don’t wake up in the middle of the night,” he joined in.

“You can always wake me up if you can’t sleep anymore, but if you want to go and tire yourself out at the crack of dawn that’s fine. Just be careful”

Iris had given it some thought, what she would have done if this man hadn’t been around. She would have been in deep trouble. A wave of gratitude overwhelmed her. It wasn’t clear if Leonard got her hint.

“I love talking to you, always. I also dream of homely food the last few nights. The evening before I came to India, James, my youngest son, took me for supper in the Steakhouse. I had some steak strips in a hot sauce with some tasty bread; he’s an awesome boy!” Leonard said.

“Without vegetables? That’s like in America! Back home we serve lettuce and tomato with steak. Steak and chips is our national dish. But steak in a chili sauce?”

“Hey, we also get the lettuce. Do you like hot sauces? The shopping mall is just down the road from my spot.”
“I like spicy food yes,” Iris grimaced, “but not Tabasco on spaghetti. It depends how hot you mean. I like to experiment with spices. I had some Creole fish, crayfish, in Texas that was delicious.”

“You love crayfish? I used to catch them a few years ago, made some good cash. Love braaing them on the barbecue you know. You must have some good recipes for Indian curries?”

Recipes? Did she say she made curries? No! She liked to eat them, not the same thing! Iris suspected he must have had some docile women in his life. In her marriage Rob had done most of the cooking, and she had been the main breadwinner, the traditional roles reversed. “This Texan crayfish was in a hot sauce, very tiny specimen. I can’t peel shellfish, shrimps nor lobster. I’m sorry, and I’ll never learn it. It freaks me out, the crunching sound it makes. Nor could I ever cook a lobster.” Iris shuddered. “They throw them in boiling water alive! They make these horrible screaming noises!”

“I was just going to tell you how to kill crayfish, but I won’t now. I will do that and you can cook it afterwards.”

“Okay,” Iris was delighted. He seemed to see her in his future life back home. The idea of it thrilled her. Or was he just thinking of lobster here?

“I used to paddle out on my windsurfer board and drop nets for the kreef, Afrikaans for crayfish. We are allowed four per person a day in the kreef season.”

“How big is your love?” she joked. “Will you also peel mine? Kroef is lobster in Dutch! Those are big! Peel my quarter of lobster I meant.”

“No, it’s just the Afrikaans word for crayfish.”

“I prefer fish,” she pointed out. “We have lots of red snapper left. Fancy some dinner?”

“Give me a nice juicy steak, charcoal-burnt on the outside and very rare on the inside.”

Iris shivered. Raw meat was not her thing either. “You would need it for your physical activity, red blood cells for strength.” She massaged her aching leg.

“How is your leg today, better?”

“Just some twinges this morning. It’s nothing serious. I found a big Aloe Vera plant right there,” she pointed into the bush, “The sap of it heals wounds.”

“How clever! Now we have fire, our condition doesn’t look so grim,” Leonard cheerfully remarked. “We can have a braai every day. Grilled fish is very tasty, especially snoek, a long flat silver fish. Wonder if I could catch one here?”

“I know the name snoek, the same in Dutch; that’s pike, they grow very large, no? That will be a novelty, I’ve never had it. I tried swordfish and red-fish also called bergylt, and sweet water fish from our rivers in the Ardennes. I like many different kinds, sweet-water trout and sea cod are my favorites.”

“Have you ever been fishing on a boat?” he asked. There was plenty of time for stories.

“One time only, in Scotland. The local Scotsmen believe women bring bad luck on board, but my friend skipper took me out on the sea loch anyway.”

“And you caught a swordfish?”

“No,” she chuckled, “that net wouldn’t have had a chance! We actually caught a refrigerator first, like a funny warning to the skipper, as I was already married at the time! I ate swordfish on Crete, the Greek island; it was pretty sturdy flesh, more like meat? The Scottish boat was trailing a net for a small type of lobster, prawns; we had to watch out for the Highland Coast Guards’ speedboat, for it’s illegal to trail in the lochs. If the Coast Guard spotted us and came towards us we’d have to cut the net and lose it for good. I was on the lookout for them and taking photographs for an article. We caught several crates full of prawns and a dog fish too! We ate three days from it, big catch!! The rest of the catch, all kinds of sea stars and smaller fish, they threw back in the sea.”

“I see! Yes, our trek fishermen row out in a dingy and throw nets, then they all stand on the
shore and pull the net in.”

“I helped here in Goa with that, the fisherman just waded in, laid the net out and came out ten meters further! The poor man caught only small silver fishes, the size of a hand maximum, possibly sardines?”

“These are big nets, and about ten guys on each side grab this heavy rope and pull the big net in. In the old days when fish were plentiful, the haul used to be as high as the beach huts on Muizenberg beach!”

“Wow! Don’t they get broken into? Those cabins I mean?” Asked Iris.

“They used to at one time, hahaha. In my younger days we would break in and smoke ourselves dizzy.”

“Robbing them is something else. Was that part of those times too?”

“I never robbed anything, just a place to smoke out of the wind and away from roving police vans.”

“Sounds like the best place for it. But I wonder, did nobody smell that out there?”

He laughed at her: “On the beach with howling wind? We never got caught there!”

“Sounds adventurous, so close to the sea in the howling wind. Me and wind don’t get on well”

“Gone with the wind, crazy times! The apartheid era was something else!”

“In what sense do you mean?”

“The black brothers had it bad; and us dagga smokers were hated just as bad, always ducking and diving, looking for safe places to smoke dope, lots of times up in the mountains of Muizenberg.”

“I see, like in Morocco, the older generation Berbers and Muslims really dislike drugs and alcohol use in public. Allah forbids it, it is against their Islamic beliefs.”

“Yes, it’s very similar the way they look at weed in South Africa. Hey my darling, I am getting very tired, I was up before daylight.”

They hugged before retreating to their shabby mattresses. The aches from her bruises and head wound were not too bad anymore, any pains disappeared in the background when she was close to him. Would he feel the same attraction towards her? Did making love not enter his mind at all, she wondered. In no time he was deep asleep.

Day 4 in the hut

“Hello sunshine! How was your morning? Did you see anyone? Any sign of houses or a road anywhere?” Iris greeted Leonard. She had come to appreciate the optimistic attitude of the stranger. He acted as if this was more a holiday than a shipwreck. He made her aware of the beauty around her even more, and also, the chemistry of the budding love in her made her get stronger really fast.

He shook his head, but babbled enthusiastically about his morning expedition.

“I walked across a large section of the island and found some vines. The grapes are small but almost ripe, look!” He took a small handful from the pocket of his shirt that dangled around his waist like a new fashion kilt; they were wrapped in a bamboo leaf.

“It was a lovely walk, some three hours there and back and then I went for a surf as the swell looked good. It’s easy with nobody around, I just cover my board with some leaves on the beach. Simply stunning water, warm, lovely waves, I feel totally laid back and relaxed.”

Iris brought him some bananas and water in a coconut shell. They were seated cozily on her mattress outside in the sun.

“Sounds wonderful indeed! I may try a swim tomorrow,” said Iris. “Salt water is good for wounds. The movement will do me good.”

“As soon as the camera is dried out you should take some pics of the sunset. Back home I live on
the West Coast. We have awesome sunsets! I built a deck in line with my roof, with a view on Noordhoek Beach. Beautiful sunsets from there.”

“You make me feel like coming to South Africa to see all that. Did the things I told you about me not put you off me yet?”

“Hey Iris, you are an awesome woman, why would your life put me off? A stunning life path you have had! Last night’s sundown was a deep golden setting all across the sea. We should go and watch it together this evening, if you are well enough.”

“You don’t know half of it yet,” she laughed. And neither do I, she thought. “I always said: if I die tonight and have to look back on my life, I will not have to say I haven’t lived! But what you didn’t tell me, was where your wife is now?”

“My ex, Cherrie?”

“You were many years with her you said?”

He laughed. “Fuck, am still trying to work out why. 33 Years! But today we are the very best of friends. Before I might have thrown her off a mountain, today I will always be there to catch her. We’ve been divorced for three years; she lives with her boyfriend… God is awesome, hahaha, He does answer prayers.”

“I guess that’s a rather unusual way of putting it.”

“She will always be the mother of my two youngest children, and we all get on very well. The odd girlfriends can’t understand our friendship. One said I thought more of Cherrie than I did of her, and I said yes I do, I have only just met you? That didn’t last, have to learn diplomacy, you any good at that?”

“I’m as diplomatic as the proverbial elephant in a china shop. I’m all for honesty. One thing I can’t stand is lying. For the rest, those strings were meant to be. I admire peace and broadmindedness, am not for possession of a person, and I understand loyalty. I could never understand those hateful, greedy divorces based on spite or jealousy.”

“I would never ever get sexually involved with Cherrie again, but I will always be there for her; I love her as my best friend. I take her shopping sometimes and I remind her: ‘Hey we are divorced; you must tell John he must do the driving now.’ He’s a very nice guy, good for her. The woman was rather surprised by my reply. But in the end it was to everyone’s benefit, to end the marriage.”

“It’s the best attitude, to wish the other happy.”

“Yes, when I first asked for a divorce, Cherrie was shattered. She just wanted to tear me apart. Then she cooled down. I wrote out a deal basically sharing everything. She changed one or two paragraphs. I went to court alone, and in ten minutes we were divorced, Amazing.”

Iris had the vague feeling her marriage had ended quite differently. Then with a sickening feeling she remembered: it bled, slow and dramatically, until it was no longer savable. “Wow, kok! Full moon tonight. It’s rising already!” she said, pointing at the celestial sphere.

“I could show you the moon behind four different mountains in my area, absolutely awesome! Woohoo… Madness reigns!” After his howl she wanted to kiss him, but she didn’t.

“You make a good wolf!” she said instead.

“More like an old dog,” Leonard mocked.

“And we all know you can’t teach old dogs new tricks? Maybe your old tricks will do, haha. Did you consider a new relationship? What do you look for in a woman?”

“Hey, I’m human, but I don’t want shackles, I don’t want a role to play, I don’t want to be anything more than just me. What I do want is to share an equal life with a loving female partner who is looking for the same.” He held her hands while he handed her some tiny ripe grapes. This gesture, with the silvery moonlight on his well exercised torso, reminded her of a classical Greek sculpture.

“I think every female would say yes to that! Girls are different. Young girls are more ambitious… they seek long term security. They either fall into slave or dominatrix allures, haha, forgive me the
gross generalization here,” she said.

“Phew, I wonder where they are?” Leonard laughed.

“I always thought all good men are taken... and stay with their wife.”

“So you don’t think I’m a good guy? “

“No no, you said you let the marriage go in order to make everybody happy? You are the exception to the rule. I am biased of course, the only two single men I found and fell for after the split up with Rob, turned out not quite right in the head.. and the few friends I liked best since then are all married. That’s what I meant.”

“Hey I love you Iris,” Leonard laughed. “I am seriously not right in the head, you are spot on with me.”

“Oh dear!” This man just couldn’t stop laughing. Iris joined in.

“So do we have a future with destiny somewhere on our paths?” Asked he, his eyebrows pulling towards the crown of his head.

“Who knows? It seems so, right now. And... the end of the world has always had a certain appeal to me.” Iris loved irony. Lucky he did too. “But I haven’t told you much yet, my last relationship for example. It just came to me. You will need to question me more to help me remember. That bang on the head made some scary gaps in my memory.”

“I would love to do that, but let’s get the fire lit for some cooking. I found these greens to go with it.”

Iris held the lighter towards the moonlight. Relieved she saw it was still almost full. By the time they had their second red snapper meal with some green edible leaves that could pass for a salad it was late again.

“I really enjoy our talks,” Leonard said, as if that surprised him.

“Did you ask if we have a future together, because you are interested in a future with me, or what?” she blurted out without thinking. Was she actually coming on to him with this line of questioning?

“Seriously, I would love to be with you in my life’s journey.”

“Hm... Sleep well” she whispered. Now Iris knew at least where she stood, today. She wondered if they were both free, as in single. No recollection of a present lover came to her.
Chapter 6

Dreams of Kundalini

“Hello lovely lady! What a great surf I had!” Leonard said when he turned up the next day. “I have some more things to do, so we will talk later today, at sunset? Don't forget to eat!” he said and off he went, while all she could do was smile.

It suited her fine. How lucky that he was so actively engaged in daily foraging, and seriously looking for a way off the island. She hoped he would find his sailing friend too. After quite a long walk and some yoga exercises she fell soundly asleep again. The next minute she was sitting on a terraced wooden construction, a typical outdoor restaurant beside the beach in Goa, where some music group had been performing. A young couple in front of her started to hug and kiss. She could actually feel their heat, so she slid back her chair a little. After a few moments she stood up, backed up a little bit more, till she had the bamboo railing in her back and couldn’t retreat any further. A good-looking, suntanned man about her age, around fifty, started talking to her. She knew him. He was a regular customer in The Dunes, one of many Brits hibernating cheaply on the West Coast of India.

“So, are you here to recharge your batteries?” the foreigner asked Iris, who was still thinking: “I must get out of this heat-zone. Not a good sphere for me right now.”

“No, not really. My batteries weren’t flat when I came here.” She answered, smiling.

“So what are you here for then?”

Iris was trying to think up a correct answer. A few moments passed. Suddenly a sharp prod in her kidney zone shocked her, as if she’d been hit by an electric current, and it jerked her awake. The yoga class! What time was it? Oh no! She’d slept in, the class had started nine minutes ago. She flew in her yoga clothes and ran to the shala. All were seated in a circle for satsang. It was evaluation time for the yoga-group, meaning all subjects were open for discussion and all unclear things explained. Yogi Manoj had a laptop opened and was showing a video to illustrate the days lessons. ‘What is the Chi?’ he asked. The video showed a man laying down, who made people jump up like they were getting an electric shock when they touched him. It was Manoj’s lesson about the Kundalini. With a shock she woke up, now back in the present.

As her body ached too much to get up, she closed her eyes again and tried to recall what she knew about the kundalini. Flashes of voices drifted in her memory.

“Kundalini is an energy that exists in everyone’s body, usually in a dormant state. This means that most people never feel it and never even know it is there. But in very few people, perhaps one in one thousand, this energy becomes aroused, activated. This can be a happy event or it can be scary and disruptive, depending on whether one arouses the kundalini on purpose or by accident. In Sanskrit it means ‘the rolled up one’, the name given to a tiny spiral-shaped energy channel not larger than half a centimeter, located at the base of our spine, and symbolized by a snake. In Eastern spiritual tradition it is described as an indwelling spiritual energy that can be awakened in order to purify the subtle system...”

She turned on her back and in order to stimulate the blood flow she went into shoulder stand. But against the purpose of any yoga position, thoughts kept slipping through. Doesn’t the same coiling snake appear in the pharmacy logo all over the world, as the kundalini is our built-in energetic healing center? As the blood rushed to her head she recalled more: “From the top of the tiny spiral an energy streams through the entire energy body and can reach the auras. This is like the energetic mirror double of the physical body, invisible to the eye and manifested as chi, also
called Qi, in yoga terms the prana. The Kundalini life force is also a trigger to the chi, which is active throughout someone’s entire life on a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level. It is the drive of courage and will power that helps people in times of change.

It can be awakened by intense meditation, intense breath control practices, and also by selfless acts of love. Hatha Yoga and Tantra Yoga, in their traditional forms, are designed to arouse kundalini so that the practitioner can use the tremendous energy thus released to increase the potency of his or her meditation and other spiritual practices. The Yoga literature cautions the Yoga practitioners, however, that they must undergo extensive preparations before attempting to arouse the kundalini. Otherwise it can cause trouble. It could shoot up and also burn you out if not geared properly. But our class won’t go into it in any depth.”

Iris had wondered if the stream of energy that ran upwards like a wonderful and magical current when she had an orgasm, was the kundalini snake unrolling slowly into a fierce snap. But Manoj had said it was also called the chi, and in her eyes that meant belief, dedication and willpower all combined, cradled in the solar plexus. To her the chi was perseverance which made the seemingly impossible things possible.

Leonard stayed away a long time. Nothing pulled her out of the fascinating stream of consciousness she was engulfed in. She knew the dream above had really happened for real. She also remembered raising her hand to pop a question that had been on her mind for a long time. Manoj gave her the time to tell her story that began with: “Was this kundalini energy? A telepathic force? The first time I went to sleep with my new boyfriend I asked, feeling a bit shy, if we could have the lights off. The next moment the bedroom was dark and cozy, and I thanked him but he swore he never touched the switch. The bulb had simply blown at the very moment I had wished it off. Coincidence? It had happened before in other situations. Is that the chi, our willpower, making things happen?” Manoj, the yoga teacher, looked her in the eyes and answered briefly: “Yes”.

She’d been dying to ask if he had woken her up by a mind-call, to hurry to this class? If that was also the kundalini in action? It was like a neuron-magnetic power charge had been sent to her mind, that had reached her like a light electric buzz. It was too odd to be called coincidence. He could also not have known; she never fell asleep during the day. This had been so unusual, as if it had been designed to help her become aware and to experience the power of chi, which had been restlessly waiting in her curious mind. Was it uncontrolled chi that had made the fuses of amplifiers blow when she got too intensely into the trembling bass notes...? So frequently she must have been charged with some static electricity, as though she had been exposed to regular tiny electro-shocks as a foetus, which was actually the case in her mother’s darkroom.

But as her sensitivity had electro-magnetic and visual results... she had hoped to find answers to these questions during the Upward Spiral Program with four or more different teachers in India. However, when she began to talk to him after class, he stopped her in her tracks saying: “If your dream was spiritual you should not talk about it.” She was stunned. This was not spiritual, it was rather an organic sensation she had felt. But this course was informative in a general sense, and not for discussing advanced experiences. It seemed Manoj had also quickly mentioned they did not cover the Tantra vision which focused on the lower chakras to alert the kundalini life energy. He also never involved his Hindu Goddess that represented this life force. There are many interpretations about Kundalini, he kept his to himself.

Iris who felt exhilarated after the shoulder-stand, stretched out on the mattress. She felt a warm glow around and under her belly-button. Her body yearned for a warm embrace, for release of all her insecurity, for making love. Nothing worked better to feel on top of things than that. Scientists had even proved it now. Touch, laughter and sex would make the glands produce the endorphins we need to fight illness and to feel happy. Perhaps an orgasm was that shoot of Kundalini energy
that rose two or three chakras high, and a start towards reaching higher, to the heart, to the throat, center of all communication... even to the third eye or all the way to the divine channel. Sometimes she wondered if the inexplicable flow of inspiration that produced her poetry was also part of the kundalini life energy that reached us through our crane, the divine channel, where our energy is connected to the life force in the universe itself. Some call it God.

Then a caw on the roof laughed loud, announcing Leonard’s arrival

Iris was baffled by the visually vivid dream that seemingly had triggered a different brain part. She looked at her body. Her head was still bandaged up, but the hurting had stopped. Her skin was suntanned, indicating her dream was in touch with reality. She knew now she had come to India for a yoga program a few weeks before, and alone, not with this charming surfer whom she was beginning to feel strangely attracted to. She was almost disappointed realizing they were not a couple. Would sleep and dreaming be the way to piece her past back together again? Now she only saw it as a misty wasteland, or worse, as if a crash on the rocks had wiped out all bridges back.

Iris didn’t feel like talking about this. It wasn’t everybody’s cup of tea. She’d been brooding over all this, but also about her daughter. Where was she? Why could she not remember this, while she remembered so many other things?

Both lost in their own thoughts, they ate everything edible they had left. Leonard had been looking for his lost friend, which seemed to preoccupy his thoughts. They went to bed, not bothering to light a fire again.

The uncertainty of their situation was starting to get to both of them, though Leonard carried the traces of ashes from many downfalls, he was full of positive energy, the energy of the phoenix. That is what Iris admired so much.
Chapter 7

Childhood Revisited

Next morning Iris was still in bed when Leonard returned from his early morning activities. "Hello lovely lady, I caught a great morning surf! Did some collecting too...

She woke up in the middle of a dream; her daughter had brought back the car and they had been talking and shopping together. When Iris dropped her off at her old friend's door, she had left bewildered. They'd bought paints and other stuff. Her daughter was going to do a large painting but she did not consider doing this at home. It was like Iris had held on to the nest, the old cottage, for no good reason. Iris loved her daughter, and also needed some stimulation to become active in housekeeping. Her daughter could give her that by just being there when she was back in the country. But she refused to sleep at home and Iris was upset. That's when Leonard's arrival woke her up. He was putting some carrot-like roots and spinach-like leaves on the bamboo mat.

"Wonderful! Vegetables! You know, I was dreaming... I've had to let go of every man I have ever loved, but I never thought I'd have to ache that way over my only daughter. She is my best friend." She told him her dream.

"We only keep what we have by letting go. So old and so true. I wish I could help in some way."

"You are helping by being here, right now. I know you are right, but I'd clean, shop and scrub to make a nice environment for my family whereas when I'm alone, I live in the mind, with books and films and writing, usually forgetting to eat."

"Hey my girl, I would love to go to Belgium with you. We all need someone to lean on. Would love to be there for you."

"That's very sweet of you. I do get on very well with my daughter you know. After all, it was me who took her there as a child, to my oldest friend's place. When we had no home for a while between removals back and from Scotland, we could stay there with them. It's an old, huge but comfortable house. I admire your lifestyle Leonard. You are so optimistic and you enjoy every day to the full. Even now you are shipwrecked on an empty island you don't worry. I used to be like that too. I know I am being silly. Emotions usually are."

"I can't say I know what you mean, because I just recently got some freedom. Like I said I would love to meet someone who could teach me or help me experience LOVE! I hear it's awesome, amazing. I always think I love the woman I live with, but when the break-up occurs I just carry on. Am I flawed?"

"No. Love doesn't stop after breaking up, if the damage was not too deep. I still love her dad, Rob, in a helpless way, but not the guy from my second relationship. He was too unbalanced and would always destroy everything we'd build up. My last lover, in America, said he'd love me forever, regardless of what I did. But when I went back to Belgium he stopped being the lover. Just like that! After a heartbreaking message he withdrew from all contact, not only with me but all other friends I knew of. I guess I was not right for him? Though I still love my daughter's dad—he was my true love for very long—I also hate him for not letting me help him to reverse his self-destructive lifestyle. Not so long ago he was playing a gig in Gent—yes, he was a singer songwriter besides having learned the plumbing trade, and played ever since he came to Belgium—my daughter was supposed to go but didn't feel like it. She said: 'He never does anything to make anyone happy, so why should I make an effort?' Sadly, alcohol ruled his life. He did quite a lot really, but children don't remember normality, they always recall the worst the most I noticed."

"That breaks my heart you know. Or did you mean you just carry on celebrating life after a
breakup? In that case, after my second breakup I reacted like you. It was like a weight had been lifted. It all depends how frustrating the relationship becomes. During my 23 years of marriage we also split up a few times. I did not break down, as I had my little girl to look after, and I didn’t want to damage her childhood. That made it a lot easier to be strong.” Iris was stunned, all these memories floated back into her consciousness with a clarity as if it had happened just yesterday.

“My divorce was a mountain! A huge roadblock... and now I am free. But with my other loves? I don’t know... I loved them when they were there, hahaha and carried on when they left, no broken heart, or anger or loneliness; I just carried on... “

“That’s very strong. Perhaps you realized they were not a good match? How many tries are you talking about here? How long did they last? Did you ‘live together’? Were you in love with them all?” Iris was fascinated, and wanted to know everything.

“No, I lived with five of them for longer than two years. Three of them had children with me, I only wanted to marry the one. But no hang-ups ever, like I said, loved them when we were together and carried on when they were gone. Sex was always great, but I loved in my understanding of love, absolutely no attachment, meaning, I never put a woman in any type of role. That didn’t exist in my way of life and still doesn’t.”

“And do you know why they left? Was it a re-occurring complaint? Surely one gets emotionally attached when you share day and night. It’s also caring! If you are not attached you cannot share feelings. It would be like a neighbour moaning?”

The talk was cheering Iris up, she was smiling already! Leonard answered:

“Well it wasn’t always them doing the leaving, I also left a few times, and cared, and then didn’t care. I have always believed that if there is controversy and no magic of sorts, we should move our separate ways and always be friends. That’s how I have lived. I don’t smoke or drink anymore, but that’s my life, and I would never expect anyone to change their lives because of me. We are who we are. Controversy would be unacceptable to me and for who I am. Trying to change me in any way, mentally or spiritually simply wouldn’t work.”

“I am by no means a Jehovah’s witness or any of the sort that needs to impose a religion or way of living. I have my own, unique thought patterns. Be warned, I am not ‘middle-of-the-road,” Iris confided.

“Hahaha, then we are equals.”

“I remember more and more stuff now. I can get very angry too. Normally I only shout when I’m not heard when talking softly. Even when I’m angry, I never do nasty things out of revenge. I usually walk away and weep.”

Leonard laughed to her again. “Then just make sure you have my attention when you want to tell me something, I am not quick to anger and I never bear a grudge.”

“Oh man, I have been so blatantly ignored in the past. Success and booze changed a kind man into a total ego-tripper. It went that far he challenged me, stroking his guitar saying ‘This is my baby!’ I lost it, and smashed it. Also, though he had five guitars, I paid to get it fixed afterward. But I am talking about more than 15 years ago. I am older and wiser now. Do you know how old I am?” Iris asked.

“You don’t beat about the bush! Tough on guitars though!” Leonard took her question as rhetorical.

“Haha, well, no, I had been tormented for months, not getting any help, being the improvised manager, and was also carrying the damn bad as a roadie! I love guitars. I would never do that out of light anger. There was a lot of booze flowing. Fans also brought hard drugs. I didn’t take those, only tried different things once. Then temper control gets harder! I had a blackout once... a combination of whiskey and a Rohypnol, a sleeping pill I had taken which was still in my blood. I got so angry, getting woke up by noise again, I yelled at the drunken visitors, and didn’t remember
in the morning, I didn't touch another drop of booze for the next four years, without any help from anyone.”

““The road trips sound kind of hectic! The guy sounds like a total dickhead, but which young guy wouldn’t enjoy the groupies?”

“He was moderate enough there. Most were male fans. And he was also seven years older than me.”

“Ouch, hahaha”

“As drinking friends, I mean! We married under our own strange rules, believing that one person could not fulfill all levels: emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, so we went for giving each other space.

Later I changed my views on that! Haha, I tolerated a few girls, short flings. With some I could understand the attraction he had for them. When I had to share my microphone with one that couldn’t sing—I didn’t even know why she was there, her boyfriend wasn’t playing guitar on this record—I really got annoyed. Honesty was part of our arrangement. He told me later: that he didn’t remember what had happened, had just woken up beside her!” Iris laughed. “In later years he lost all interest in other girls, we made love almost every night. Till today, eleven years after our split-up, he hasn’t had another girlfriend. I still asked to make love actually. He said he lost the interest.”

“Hermit or gay?”

“Not gay, and less hermit than me. Same old pals still come and get him drunk.” She sighed. “He says he only ever loved me, and that I was the best thing that ever happened to him. Now it’s possible he has a neurological illness caused by long alcohol abuse. Loss of memory, of strength and of balance, I don’t know for sure. A neighbour told me he walks like one with Korsakov. Cops picked him up after only two beers, because he looked drunk...”

“I used drugs and drank for thirty years, I’m so grateful for the condition my body is in!” Leonard threw in.

“What drugs were you into? Did you drop LSD?”

“I had so much! How’s this: at one time I had so many experiences on LSD, the only experience I hadn’t had was death. So I dropped some acid and walked up the mountain intending to jump haha and embrace death. When I got to the top and looked down, I thought ‘fuck, far too far;’ turned around and ran down the mountain again. Never negative, just a mad moment.”

“Sounds like you were a fan of the books by Carlos Castaneda, the South American writer, mostly on peyote, to have extrasensory perception...” Iris interrupted him.

“You are so on the ball! We all were there, sex, drugs and rock & roll, and always trying to be one with the universe.”

“Lucky you didn’t fly!”

“I thought I was flying.”

The longer they talked, the clearer the lost patterns of Iris’ past were forming a whole. She held on to the stream of revealing thoughts, and kept talking. Leonard knew she was recapturing her forgotten life, and listened with full attention.

“I was very lucky too, when we lived in Glasgow all our buddies, mostly music fans, were heroin addicts, or on speed. I tried heroin twice, tried smoking it, but it made my stomach so sick I really didn’t find it worth it. What, to sit with curtains drawn on a sunny day, to laugh at silly TV shows? No way! I ran away with my toddler under my arm, back to my homeland”

He didn’t comment on that. “The sun is past its worst heat, shall we go and watch for boats?” Leonard suggested, and held up his arm to help her up.

Halfway up the hill a magnificent view over the rather tiny sandy bay overwhelmed her. They kept walking, resting now and then, entranced by details of natural beauty. Trees high above them waved in the approaching evening wind. The sky turned a shy orange, then a cheeky red. A few
clouds made the sky picture perfect. After making sure Iris didn’t mind, Leonard walked off briskly
towards the top.

When he finally came back to the hut it was way after dark. He was holding a freshly caught fish
and a fairly large crab.

“Sorry it’s so late, it won’t happen again without warning,” Leonard apologized, “Do you still
want to hear about my drug and drinking times?”

“Yes I do. But if you were still into it now, I wouldn’t be interested at all,” Iris retorted.

Leonard found something funny, maybe her accent. He laughed.

“OK, here it goes,” he said, while getting a small fire going to start the cooking. “After having
been chased all over South Africa from the south and all over, we landed back in Cape Town. I was
sixteen years old. So I enrolled in a local high school there near the sea. I was warned by the head
of the school not to get involved with the surfing group, but they were the first group I met. In the
'70s and '80s, in this country, surfers were notorious weed smokers. Of course my buddies were
doing it, so I bought my first little bit and kept it for a few months before I dared to smoke it. When
I finally did, nothing happened. Did that ever happen to you?”

“The first time I didn’t feel a thing either. I couldn’t understand why my brother’s friend was
standing there grinning like an idiot, listening to the same records as usual. Haha. Second time, in
Amsterdam aged 15, it was so weird! My friend and I had laughing fits. She was more in shock
than amused though. I didn’t buy any until after I got married. Chased all over South Africa? What
did you mean by that?” she continued.

“Did I tell you about my youth, being in homes for the poor?”

“You only mentioned being on the run from the welfare. But I vaguely remember—hearing you
in that semi-coma I think—you told me that you were four years old and suddenly taken away. You
didn’t understand why only you and not your brother. Also that your mom ended up taking you
away from it to another location... That’s all I remember.”

“Yes, that first time I walked all the way back home on my own, barely five years old. Mother
just took me back. The welfare was after us. The last home was up north in Johannesburg. I was
just about to be sent to a reformatory, a place for bad boys. I was in high school and my mother
ran away with us for the last time. We went over the border to what is now Zimbabwe. My mom
couldn’t get work there, so we came back to Cape Town, hence Muizenberg. The school was built
high by the sea... are you with me?”

“Yes. Why did they want to put you in a reformatory? What were you up to?”

“Have you heard of The Salvation Army Church?”

Iris nodded, though not too convinced.

“Well, I was in a Salvation Army Boys Home in Johannesburg; was there from about 11 to 16.
Anyway, apparently the captain in charge had said I was uncontrollable. If I got caught doing
something wrong, which was often enough, I didn’t mind getting caned. That was part of the
course, but if I was going to get caned and I wasn’t at fault then I would refuse to bend. He would
try and make me bend or ask one of the bigger boys to hold me down, and the one time I was so
adamant, and all the guys agreed and no one held me down, he started chasing me around the
tables, and then I just ran out. He got me and slapped me in the face, so I told my mom. She walked
into his office and smacked him right off his chair, hahaha with me watching.”

“Jeez! Caning! That’s like in the ancient days! So your mum was there too, in that home? Great
woman, she stood up for you, and wonderful that she believed in you!”

“No, parents could only visit on Saturdays. By the time we got to the Salvation Army Boys Home
I was a total rebel, just enjoying the life I had. I think I had a great childhood. No mom and dad. But
that just slips out of the memory banks, and then you are just a child taking care of yourself, no
problem, and always on the move. I think I went to four different homes before we landed in the
“Salvation Army.”

“Did your mother ever explain to you why?”

“Apparently, my uncle wanted to adopt us. A wealthy guy from my dad’s side, and my mom said no. One day people came and just packed me and my brother off to a home. He was quite a deviate. Landed in jail for fraud.”

“But you said they only took you, when you were four or five…”

“That was the very first time in Cape Town, when I walked from Rondebosch back home to Muizenberg, twice. That’s when it all started, and many years later we landed up north in the Salvation Army. We were very poor, all staying with my grandparents when the two of us were taken away. My elder brother by a year and me. I have never questioned my mom. She was always there. Yes, my father drank a lot at that stage. I remember at one of the homes, I was somewhere between 7 and 9, and I had grown a vegetable garden with big mielies (pumpkins), cabbage, carrots, hahaha thriving. My dad came to visit, pissed out of his head, fell all over my garden and fucked it up. We just turned, walked away. He only came to visit when he was drunk. My mother is still the main icon in my life. I care for her, and because she has just never given up on life, I can do no less.”

“Is she still alive?”

“Yes, she is in a home for the elderly, getting demented now. I go and visit, take her out for the day. Sometimes she sleeps over, and asks me the same question ten times in a minute. I always answer as if it’s the first time.”

“You are a good man! That must be hard.”

“You got that wrong! My mother is an awesome person. If I can be half the person she is then I’m styling!”

“I miss my mom more as time goes by. She passed away in 2002 at the age of 88, just a year after my dad. I’m sorry now for having been such stubborn chikl!”

“Shit, I had to cut my mom’s toe- and fingernails the last time I saw her. We were walking on the beach and I just happened to see her nails were so long, I cut them all except the two big toenails. Hell, they were so thick the scissors couldn’t cut them! So I pointed it out to the nurse in charge, she said she would see they got cut. It’s awesome if they are strong and able when they pass over into heaven. My dad died in hospital. Not nice.”

“You bring back so many memories! Even the nail thing. A nurse came daily, as my dad was bedridden after two heart-strokes. His nail had curled up and grown into his big toe. They hadn’t looked after that! He often had complained about pain in his toe and nobody had taken it seriously. It’s an expression here for a hypochondriac, “His/her little toe hurts.” Isn’t that horrible? I feel a lot of guilt, because I was too absorbed with music and life. He died at 92, my mom at 88 the year after. What age is your mother now?”

“My mom is 79 this year, but if I don’t see her every week, I don’t feel guilty, I don’t think she remembers if I’m not there. It was very sad for me at first but now I know what’s happening and accept life again on life’s terms.”

“You have no reason to feel guilty, but I do. The things I did when I was a teenager! I wonder if my dad had a heart-stroke because of me? For example, I left to America without a word, when they thought I was at school; I had a student room at 18, the same year my father had his first stroke. They got a call I wasn’t at school... But also before that, having an affair at 17 with a married man... and before that, skipping church, and oh so many things!”

“Ouch! Can you imagine a different life to the one you lived?”

“No. I followed my own soul. There was a big generation gap. I am the youngest of nine.”

“You do know you have lived a perfect life?”

“In a way, yes, but in a way it’s like being a living legend. I was born to be free, and I fought to be
free. So now I can't complain about the side-effects,” Iris laughed. “The only thing that bugs me: I was so into love, I can't believe I failed.”

“Just stay free, especially your mind, it is still so awesome. When you put your thoughts on paper you are amazing. Don't ever be anything else than what you are now and have always been.”

“But I'm such a family-person, and now my own little family is gone. I enjoy things more when I can share them. I guess being raised on ten laps did that?”

“Now you have me, you can share anything with me that you would like to share, a shoulder to lean on, an ear to whisper anything into.”

In the flickering fire their lips reached. “Your drug stories might have to wait,” Iris whispered.

“Haha, I started out with sex, drugs and rock ’n roll, and ended up feeling awesome. I feel amazing now without it.”

“Hm, without sex too?” Iris probed.

He laughed, they hushed, kissed and let the warm night take the lead.
Chapter 8

Little Silver Linings

At dawn Leonard was still dreaming he was on a hired scooter and zooming across the Indian fields, over the hill into the next village which was more exploited by tourism. On the beach a group of sportive young talent was waiting for their morning surf class. He loved surfing, every aspect of it. It had brought back strength and youth. Paddling towards the wave, waiting for the swell to jack, helping the young girls onto the surf board. He loved their laughter and perseverance, each of them a gem. He wouldn't trade it for anything!! One of the girls called Leonard over for help. There was no time to waste. After the surf they'd go and brunch together as a group, or in pairs. His eye-lids, fluttered. The next moment he was mowing the lawn in a garden, reciting a poem.

As soon as he woke up his thoughts went to Iris. Would she try and fly on the waves with him once she was healed? Could she be his cosmic twin? How happy he was she had suffered no brain damage. The way she must have hit a rock could have been much more serious. It was like an angel had softened the blow. Would he tell her they should really find a way to get back soon? Maybe they should go and search where she'd been staying before the boat accident?

Iris spent the morning digging further into her past and present situation. Through some diary entries she was pretty sure now, her daughter was also in India, somewhere. She hoped she hadn't been on board with her, that day was still a blank. Thoughts rippled through her mind while she walked along the water line, her toes caressing the licks of sea that felt warm and healing, minerals rejuvenating her pores. What a stroke of good fortune that this special man had found her! On the way back she walked into Leonard, who was on his way to check the surf.

"Was just thinking about your poems! You are a woman to ride the river with," he laughed, "and we have some *lekker* rivers back home! How are you?"

"Am fine, basically. I was thinking of you too. Oh, I'm fond of rivers, but I guess your African kind are not really safe to swim in? *Alkemaal beestjes*, full of dangerous little animals?"

He didn't answer, his mind preoccupied with other things.

"Life is amazing, I am reborn in a thousand different ways. When I started my surf clinic for addicts and alcoholics in 2008, I taught one young guy, Larry Leven. He was 18 then. He is clean and sober going on for five years, and he just became attached to me. Over the years we've been on surf trips a lot together."

"Yes, it's amazing what you do, and I can relate. I had a very similar feeling, in 2002, with a new partner who actually liked nature walks and working. Felt like being reborn, inspired again to do things. And not so long ago, reborn again in America. This time it was an illusion, though. I couldn't be useful in Texas for long. His love just stopped..., stopped being the kind I needed."

Apparently undisturbed by her revelations—perhaps she reached a saturation point—Leonard continued:

"I ruffle Larry's hair and piss him off and call him my boy. I guess I'm just the kind of friend he's never had; wherever I surf, he paddles out. In the beginning he had some heavy wipe-outs, but now he surfs well. He's now 22. Now I only take the youngsters to one spot to teach... Muizenberg. About two years ago my clients and I started seeing this very beautiful young rasta girl, a surfer of course, and one English bloke was very taken by her, but too shy to make a move. So I got to know her and told her if she wanted to improve she should surf some better spots. A nice story to put a smile in your heart..."
Anyway, we got on great, but I’m not a pervert, though she was a stunning 22 years old. Amazing. I really tried to fix my boy Larry Leven with Ellen the rasta-girl. He tried to get more friendly, and then one day I saw her huddling up with her girlfriend.. Life! haha. So I told Larry about it. He wouldn’t believe me when I said: ‘Hey boet, Ellen is gay!’

Shortly after we were surfing together, and talking. We have a sex expo once a year in Cape Town, a huge affair. Anything you want for sex is there. So Larry asks Ellen to go along. She kind of brushes him off. But he can be thick-skinned and carries on telling her all about it. She gets upset and asks ‘Doesn’t he understand NO?’ Hahaha. Anyway, she’s got ALL she needs—that could be another story. Larry got defensive and went out. Eventually he accepted that she’s gay and we’re all friends now.”

“Great!” Iris was very amused.

“Ellen has some very pretty girlfriends. I think she tries to behave like a boy, and all her friends are in the 22 years age group. Now we all meet and I teach or give them tips, Reborn! Now when I go surfing and it’s not too rough, I invite them all: two guys and four chicks and we now surf as a group. They give me such awesome youth, and I share my surfing experience. It’s very nice. So in the water I’m surrounded by these lovely young girls all around me and they are so keen, especially now they have an experienced guy willing to take them all over the place and coach them. Isn’t life sublime or what?”

“It’s wonderful for you! I am trying to imagine what it would be like to surf.”

“Back home Ellen usually sends me a message on my mobile at seven in the morning. I meet the girls on the East coast for an early surf at Muizenberg. We surf for about two hours. I spend a lot of time with the one girl, pushing her into waves, hahaha and when she gets tired, I tell her to grab my leg and I tow her to the back of the waves. She was so stoked at first because she had the longest rides of her surfing career the last time we went out. Then some afternoons Larry Leven comes to fetch me and we surf onshore of the West Coast. Then I am surfed out, needing some awesome TLC.”

“I know THC, she jested. What’s TLC? Wow, I can almost feel the splashes!”

“Tender Loving Care. Your poetry is so much about what we are talking about and how I’m living, it seems like our spirits are somehow entwined. You seem to read me like a book, awesomely amazing!”

“Oh! You’re touching a sensitive spot! I had a good morning too, wrote a new poem and went for a stroll by the sea. I tried the water. It is warmer than any sea I’ve ever felt. Do you want to read it, the new poem?”

They had reached the cabin in its green decor and sat down while she handed him her notebook. He read, and she explained.

“It is totally me, all those things in it. I have slack-lined once, climbed a steep mountain without ropes... I use experiences for metaphors of the inner, and yes, I thought of your story on the cliff top too, as I wrote that line. You are a very inspiring person.”

“Amazing! I relate to all of it except seeing life in a negative aura. Just never thought too many negatives. It’s the little silver linings that become the all.”

“Yes, I admire that. But I’m not like you, I struggled with the blues, even as a young child” A little film of returning memories rolled off her tongue. “I saw all my siblings date, romance, marry and leave. I wanted a lover to be with too. It’s tough on me that I failed, three times. I had a bit of a relapse. But now it’s my daughter who worries me. I don’t know where she is right now. How could I not feel sad? Was she on that boat with me? I can’t remember! I want the best for her. Is it just selfish, wanting her near me, her all a grownup now? Right now I just want to know she’s fine!”

“Well then you should change your way of thinking, as in: no negatives, just experiences; and knowing you are doing right; and accept that God, as you know God, never judges. So how then can
human judgment have any effect on your awesome life? To God you are and always will be just perfect, and this you will believe then with all of your being?"

"If you want to talk in those terms, He sent me a bird today. He sang so beautifully while I was imagining flying on the surf board. It was very uplifting and happy. I imagine the scene you just told me; I can imagine how rejuvenating it must be!" Iris laughed, and planted a kiss on his suntanned shoulder.

"You are such a lovely lady, but I live my life according to that belief so I can do no wrong. It takes so much stress off my life. Rejuvenation so fills my soul right now, in this time of my life! You have to learn surfing from me one day!"

"I also had a spell of that, rejuvenation, about two years ago I think, in the States. My new boyfriend rode a Harley Davidson. I was so scared the first time on a motorbike! I kept my eyes closed, but I overcame that fear. Love makes you blindly reckless, and we were very much in love. Bikers don't wear helmets down in Texas, just a bandana. It felt like being in the movies. He was a lot younger than me, but he had lived through a lot. His mind was not really young. Fifteen years is quite a difference though. I must start working harder on my leg muscles! I'd like to try to surf, you've convinced me."

"Youth is just so special, it brings back that sense of free living again. Madness. Like just before I came to India, in our cold Atlantic back home, one day the surf was huge! I knew I wouldn't ride the big back ones but I still paddled out half way and got truly hammered by 6 feet high white waters rolling over me," he laughed, "the exercise alone was awesome! I surfed for 90 minutes and didn't stop paddling to try to catch a wave. I only got two!"

"Impressive! How daring!"

"You don't see negatives, that's nice. Ellen paddled too but stayed where the waves were really small," he laughed, "and when I came out I said what an amazing paddling exercise I had! They laughed and said I was the only one they knew who would describe a non-surf like that."

This was fun! "Jeez, I have no words for it! Admirable! Those are lovely experiences, I totally get it!"

"But you mentioned you were going through a relapse? Do you mean now? Like to talk about it? I try and share my enthusiasm. I'm a bit selfish, so please explain," Leonard invited.

"I guess it's just a physical relapse; slacking muscles, lack of exercise, that's all," Iris answered, and added she'd been having vivid dreams that were revealing her life but were also unsettling. That was the truth, but the entire truth was: she would have died for a joint and two cups of coffee. "Did you know surfing was your thing from an early age?" she redirected.

"My school in Muizenberg was on the mountainside beside some double story houses, overlooking the ocean. When we dodged school they could see us surfing from the classrooms."

"What an exhilarating youth you had! The most exciting thing on my walks was a cow running into the fence trying to run me down."

"So, no wonder I woke up in class one day and wondered what I was doing there. I asked the teacher what I had to do to leave school. He got upset and said I would have to see the principal. I said 'cool', got up and walked out, to continue on this amazing path I have walked, and kept walking since, I was 16, almost 17.

"I remember that very same sensation, in the 5th class of Primary School; I was 9 or 10. I saw the sun streaming in through the big window and I wanted to be out there. I was so frustrated I had to stay indoors and what I had to read seemed totally useless for the life I wanted. I wanted to be outside, in nature. Then the strangest thing happened. Through that restlessness a strange urge rose, like pressure rising."

I squeezed my legs and the next minute I thought I was fainting. I was feeling very dizzy, but it also felt wonderful. Not until many years later I realized what had happened. Life energy itself had
risen, yearning for the streaming sun, and I had released it. I’d had a spontaneous orgasm. It was the only time that happened until I was much older. Now I know that is the kundalini, the chi in us. So, did you get punished in school for leaving the class? What happened?"

“I walked out of the class and went to the principal with the same question. What was the use to learn things that didn’t interest me? Then I asked if I could leave but still play sports. He gave me two options: follow all classes or leave school. So the next day I brought him a note from my mom saying she was okay with me leaving school, but just doing it right. Two weeks later I started working as an apprentice.”

“Wow, that’s moving ahead fast. No hesitation when you know what you want!”

Leonard laughed, while he put aside a thick piece of wood he’d been chipping at.

“Right now I want the same as then: A surf! See you back soon!” he said and went on his way. Iris watched him from the beach with pure joy, how he played: being the man the size of an ant... close friends with the Almighty ocean. Leonard Stolk was pure poetry in motion.
Chapter 9

Beyond the Food

Leonard stayed out surfing for two hours and returned starving. Iris lit a fire to cook some greens and fish, and had more flashbacks. Looking into the flickering mellow glow threw some light into the corners of her hazy past.

“You know, I recall more things! I’ve been a free-lance journalist!”

“I’m all ears,” Leonard said and he sat down, adding a dry stick to the fire.

“I used to write about art exhibitions and did music interviews, although travel stories were my favorite. My very first one on India got published in a women magazine. This encouraged me to keep going. In summer I drove south and camped with my daughter and Rob, every year, sometimes writing about certain regions. Great fun! We used to busk the terraces and earn our petrol and food by playing music. A few months ago my yoga-teacher asked me to proofread his second book, and as some kind of reward offered me to join their ten day yoga psychology program, 'The Upward Spiral' in Goa. He wanted me to also write about it, which I did, but magazines and newspapers weren’t interested in publishing the reviews, saying it was not commercial enough. They said it would appeal only to a small elite, but they would consider a travel review after I had actually done the traveling. I only got a small announcement published in a national newspaper.”

“Now I recall my daughter coming to the program too, as a photographer. A major trendy magazine has also agreed to take it for their Wellness Special segment. I used to get a full double page in the national newspaper. But now that the new editor is a young chap and the newspaper has down-sized, I am nervous about them refusing my text. I owe it to those three teachers for their initial inspiration, you know. Aw, my muscles are hurting so much,” she moaned.

“You do your best, how can you be responsible for other people’s outlooks, like the editors? You should know your teachers will love you for who you are, not for what you can do.”

“You’re right. And they loved my daughter too. They let her stay in my double bed hut without charge. Her photographs turned out to be amazing. They can use them for promos for years! I remember it now. We selected them together, before she went back up North to Dharamsala after the program! At least she wasn’t with me in the storm!” Iris felt incredibly relieved.

“One day when you have some spare cash, come and take photos in South Africa. You will fall in love with the Cape.”

“But what if I fall in love with you instead? You’ve had enough women trouble,” Iris joked. “I’m always saving up for the next travel. The climate at home does me in. During winter, my cottage is damp and cold: no insulation. “

“What if you find your love and it’s not me, but Africa?”

“You never know, right enough. For the moment I am still in love with Goa. But Goa can’t keep me here. Maybe a man could!” Iris sighed. "What year are you born in?"

“What a sigh, what’s wrong?”

“I wonder how old I am, I really don’t remember.”

“Seriously? You look late 40’s? I am 58. I keep being told age is just a number.”

“It’s true, my elder sisters are 70, 68 and so on, and they are not old at all! Maybe just a little less adventurous. So annoying I know their ages but not my own!”
"If life is still an adventure for you, then we are just perfect!"

"Yes, we could have a ball! But even when I’m cured, don’t expect me to be as sportive as you are. Like one thing I’ll never do is parachute jumping. I know my limitations and I don’t like to take unnecessary risks. To my sisters, being shipwrecked in India and making love to a stranger would be one, big, unnecessary risk" Iris said, amused.

"I will never want you any other way, as long as you enjoy life. What right would I have to change you? We accept each other for who we are. Going to make some tea, I found plants on the way back."

He got up and got a small fire going. The water they had found in the shack had been rationed, but the storm had also left some water puddles on the dense rock surface, so the bottles had been replenished. Soon he had some warmed up in a coconut shell. Boiling was out of the question, the shell would go up in flames.

“What was the name of your youngest son again? He still lives with you in South Africa?”

“He does. James Stolk. My daughter turned my braai room into her bedroom, and when she left Jamie took it over. I think you might call it a barbecue room. It’s made of an aluminum frame and glass. Very nice, with plastic see-through sheeting for the roof. I have only used it the first year for barbecues, then lost it to my girl.”

“Better losing a room to your girl than losing your girl to someone else’s room,” Iris joked.

“Too late, I lost both”, Leonard laughed.

“But you see her often, right? So you haven’t lost her, you’re just lending her out. What age is Jamie?”

“My daughter Helena stays with her boyfriend Marco, just down the road, Jamie is 22 this year.”

“A fabulous but difficult age! You need to tell me all about them.”

“I will. Meanwhile, let me help you with the positives in life. Let’s have our tea,” Leonard said and he got up and kissed her forehead, then lifted the blackened banana leaves that were wrapped around the food out of the fire. A pain shot through his shoulder.

“You are doing great!” she smiled, and tackled the deliciously cooked vegetables and fish ratatouille with careful fingers. Her joy went much deeper than the brilliantly improvised meal.

Beyond the Fingers—Day 8

Half of the next morning Iris spent on yoga while Leonard took care of other things. She was just about to put her head down for a siesta after a walk, when he turned up.

“In May they start the SA national long-board surf championships. I’m supposed to be back in Cape Town for it,” he told her.

“Would you watch it live or on TV? I’ve never seen it. I wonder if our North Sea has suitable waves for surfing.”

“I’d be on the beach! It’s in Cape Town this year. As we have two coastlines they have a surf about, meaning they surf the best spot of the day.”

“Bad news for you then, if we would remain stuck here that long! Strange that no boats seem to come out this way! Like we are on a totally forgotten island. How is your shoulder today?”

“We’ve got to go to the second best place. Shoulder awaits your tender massage.” To his surprise Iris didn’t laugh it away.

“Okay, lie down, roll over.”

She massaged his strained shoulder as well as she could. He groaned a few times. The liquid she used smelled like lemon and coconut.

“By the way, our help in positive thinking bore fruit already today,”

“Hahaha you have a story for me?”
"On my walk today I almost stumbled into a hole. Don’t know if it is an old trap for animals, or if it is the entry to a tunnel or what. Could people have been digging for precious stones here you think?"

“Good you didn’t fall in! Will check that out first thing tomorrow! A few precious stones would be most welcome,” Leonard kidded. “And how are you feeling after a morning walk?”

“Good! I did some yoga too. It’s underestimated how much the muscles get exercised, because it looks so tame. It went quite easy, I was surprised. I am supple, and do a great forward bend, but I will feel it tomorrow, especially my arms. I gave 110%, that will surely cause some backlash. But those few daily exercises do help. See, I lost a lot of weight since I live alone; never feeling hungry, I simply forget to eat. The body ends up eating the muscles. I suffered from a kind of atrophy, about two years ago. The doctor called my BMI, Body Mass Index, ‘anorexia borderline’, just 44 kg for 1.72m. Before yoga I had only trained my body by carrying rucksacks and making love,” Iris caricatured herself.

“I did yoga too! In the army during my border camp. And I lost six kilos a few years ago just through sex! Fucking awesome! Hey, take care of yourself okay? Whatever else you do, you have to eat moderately to well. This island luckily has lots of healthy things. I could find more clams, maybe even oysters, and crab.”

“That doctor also spoke of arthritis of the lower back, where I was hurt many years ago, but I don’t believe doctors much, I hardly see one. I took Pilates classes for a while, learning to use the power house, that’s what they call our body that revolves around the solar plexus, using the belly muscles instead of straining the lower back. Yes, I believe making love is very healthy. When people asked me why I stayed so slim I always said: ‘making love’,” Iris laughed. “It’s known to raise the endorphin levels, which makes resistance to illness higher, and would even make you live longer. I’ve never been fat. Losing five kilos was drastic at the time and then tooth trouble, that didn’t help... But all is fixed now.”

“You’ve been through the wars, but you look stunning today, so keep eating as much as you can! That was one of my reasons for not getting as messed up in my older days as some of my friends did by taking drugs. Some who are younger than me look a lot older...”

“In winter my kitchen is freezing. I heat the house with coal. Since I live alone I don’t bother lighting the big coal stove, to save money and avoid carrying 20 kg bags almost daily. So the kitchen is cold and not inviting to cook. I can switch an electric fire on, but it’s expensive. I just got my annual bill. Some years I had to pay 800 or 500 euros extra. This year only 18 euros! It helped to save for the air ticket here. But when I do eat, I eat healthy.”

“It’s expensive, but takeaways are a good idea. Eat many small meals... That was a good massage, thank you. Let me go and get us a smoothie.” Leonard said as he got up and went out. Twenty minutes later he was back with two large bright colored juices in a coconut shell.

“Yum, amazing!” Iris exclaimed. It was super delicious fresh fruit he had squeezed by hand. “But about takeaways, I don’t remember buying any. Living in a small town there is not much choice other than a Chinese or the Italian. The Chinese use too many additives and I’d rather eat little but healthy. That’s how I can travel you know. I have the lifestyle of a hermit, not doing what others do.”

“In South Africa some of our supermarkets do ready-made meals: like curry and rice, chicken and chips, macaroni and cheese. You buy portions rather than one big meal. A bit better that the usual take-away. I like a nice muesli, banana and yoghurt for breakfast.”

“Yes, occasionally I grabbed a deep-freeze meal—before my freezer and refrigerator broke down. I love cereal for breakfast. I tried muesli again, very crunchy.”

“Hey, sounds like you are living between worlds.”

“In India I’ve been a vegetarian since I saw a Fresh Chicken Shop in Panjim. Those poor
chickens were more dead than alive with the heat.” Panjim! It was all coming back, piece by piece, first the past, now slowly also bits of the present.

“Never wanted to be a vegetarian; I love steaks on the grill, love a braai.”

“Me too, I have a grill on bricks in the garden. I live in a completely different world and have no money troubles like everybody else because I need so little. Several times a year I go traveling, and nobody understands how an unemployed person can do that. I say: it’s your central heating! We have nice sausages in Belgium. Pure meat and cheap. They are nice grilled. I make a campfire sometimes in summer I use wood to start it, and then char-coal. However, it is a bit of a hassle to do it just for myself. I don’t know if you understand that?”

He nodded. “I’m in a similar position, just making it. I signed a stupid contract with my money, lost what I had with my business, and only get the rest out in a few years. Then I’m going on a surf safari. I would love to go to the islands around China. Amazing how we adapt. I am really enjoying life with so little. I am also a bit of a loner. Only rarely will I start a barbecue for myself, but it’s no problem when the kids are around.”

“Wow, China? Would love to go there! It’s a dream for a photographer! I am actually proud of it, Leonard, because nobody can live like me, all thanks to the fact my rent has not gone up since I moved in there, twenty-five years ago. It’s surreal! I can actually save money by being in India: no heating, no petrol, cheap food...”

“Food can’t be cheaper than here” he laughed. “I would love to teach you to surf; then we can do it together.”

“I would like to learn, but just in case I am no good at it... I’m thinking of taking a course in professional massage when I get back.”

“Great idea! Bali was very cheap. You eat local food, it costs nothing and is usually very healthy.”

“And it’s beautiful I imagine! I was in Java once, traveled around with my oldest friend Ruthie whose man had a small business there. We tried to get a plane from Surabaya to Bali but all was full, the train-bus-ferry combination seemed too much hassle, so we rented a good jeep that came with a driver and drove south instead, to Pangandaran. Who did you go to Indonesia with? It’s far from South Africa.”

“I went in 2010 for two months, five weeks by myself. The last three weeks my daughter and her boyfriend joined me. Such awesome surf! But I would rather go somewhere different. Sometimes I feel like selling up and going to Thailand. My friend says it’s so cheap with awesome islands surrounded by excellent surf. The ticket to Bali was cheap; a bucket list thing. I always dreamed of surfing the spots you see in the surf magazines, so I went and surfed them. Stunning!”

“Sounds great indeed! I recall the South Coast of Java looked too dangerous to swim. The tide was miles out, there were black rocks all over. They also said that beach was haunted. Hell, it looked the part! Thailand is very pretty and cheap too. Only, it was the only trip in my life that didn’t work out well! I swore I would never go back, I was terribly scared.”

“I went to three different islands, Bali, Java and Lombok. Why scared?”

“A long story. I actually wrote a psycho-thriller after it, Hitchcock would’ve loved it. I flew alone there. In Bangkok things took a bad turn from the second day. The strong weekly malaria pills combined with... the culture shock when I landed in the red quarter. It made me need a drink. Mekong whiskey, and surely I had to try the famous Thai sticks too. I couldn’t sleep with the heat. After three days I got out of suffocating Bangkok, but I couldn’t sleep anymore and started hearing a lovely voice in the sea, but soon it changed to a mean voice, all the time. I flipped right out. Three weeks on the run, I couldn’t sleep nor eat. The first meal I tried again, a prawn risotto, I cut a prawn open and what spurted out was a white blob, like spermatozoa, hahaha it put me right off so I gave the plate away to a new customer after I had paid for it.

I lived on toast and scrambled egg for weeks. The last few days I got sleeping pills
prescribed by a doctor but they didn’t help any more. When I got back home every dog barked at me, pubs went silent when I walked in. Truly freaky! So I went to an aura-cleanser, a man I know. He said I had more entities in my aura than he’d ever seen!”

“Wow, sounds like such a bummer!”

“He did a good job; I was cleared and I wrote it all out of my system in a novel “Thai-fun and the cool breeze”, based on the notes I had taken. But I never dared to publish it, as I had promised the demon I would not give away the Thai-fun secret. Lots of things had happened there, including a rape; that’s where my back got hurt. I hadn’t even finished the small bag I bought in Bangkok and left the rest in the airport toilet bin. It was too strong that Thai-weed. I stopped smoking cannabis for a good while after that. I’d had enough of extrasensory perception.”

“Wow Iris, what an awesome woman, and still just living a great life. Love to walk by your side, sit by your side next to a campfire, sharing some of life’s wonders!”

“Thanks!” Iris bent over and kissed him spontaneously. “Well I am not a defeatist but I was a bit scared to travel in Asia after that... you know, opium smokers playing mental tricks and demons on temples... But two years later I went to Java. Not alone this time, but accompanying Ruthie who had business to take care of there. All went well. Sharing good vibes... yes, it’s wonderful. You make me feel safe you know, that’s a fabulous feeling!”

“As you can see I am a very average guy. I enjoyed traveling by myself, but to have a lovely partner like you with me would’ve been even better, especially after six hours of surfing.”

“As I can see? Haha, you are far from an average guy! Hm, what do I make of that, after six hours of surfing?”

Leonard laughed loudly. “Okay, we can settle for four.”

“I have no idea what good a woman can do for you after such exhaustion. Cook, and tuck you under the sheets?” Iris laughed.

“You think I am fucking old!” he laughed. “After a good session of yoga, would you go to sleep if I was by your side?”

“I come out very relaxed! Guess your scene is different, the turn on of all these young beauties around you must get your testosterone way up to your ears.”

“What about the wiser, elder ones?” Leonard threw in.


“So be the first!”

“I’ll be happy if I manage to carry one of those boards! hahaha, I can see the size of them.”

“I will be here to carry it for you.”

“If I am not capable of carrying the tool, I shouldn’t be using it. I will certainly try, and start arm-training immediately, beyond the fingers. I may never have had muscles, but I always had strong chi.”

“Just had a flash: many older women surf, especially long-boarding, and you with your small physique, you will easily learn. I’m a good coach.”

“I trust you, though I almost drowned once. You say small, but I am tall.”

“Tall doesn’t matter, the lighter the better for pushing yourself up. As soon as you are better we will try it. Get some rest Iris. I’m going to look out for boats on the ocean,” Leonard said. It was suddenly quiet.
Chapter 10

Meanwhile in Mumbai

Meanwhile in a dark, air-conditioned office in Mumbai, Kumar Rao is being held at gunpoint.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what happened, scumbag? You false hyena! You don’t lose eighteen massive diamonds just like that!”

“Honestly sir, I swear you! Two of my men went missing! For eight days already!”

“Speak up, dog! I brought the money, now I want the rocks! Your men are your problem not mine! I want their names! Where and when did you see them last? How did they get their hands on the diamonds?” the Russian Sergej barked, his fat jaws and belly shaking with anger.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the Russian mafia had been infiltrating the entire Indian subcontinent. They certainly seemed to have a nose for getting rich. They were dealing in illegal drugs and alcohol, prostitutes and cheap labor, nor did they turn up their noses at criminality when serious money was involved. Eighteen diamonds were worth a fortune. Kumar feared for his life. This menacing Mister Sergej looked genuinely mean, so did the bouncer guarding the door. Kumar felt his heart racing. His face and neck turned a deep red.

“Mr. Sergej Sir, honestly I’m telling you, they got the boat ready to pick up the cargo when I last spoke to them. They were heading out to an island off the coast to pick the package up the next morning. They said all was under control and not to worry.”

“What island? And what were the rocks doing there?” Sergej barked.

“They were delivered there by the smugglers. It’s a good hideout. Nobody lives on that island. It’s a natural reserve, they told me. There’s nothing there. We were afraid the stones might get tracked or stolen on the mainland, that’s why they were delivered and buried there. All was running according to plan. I saw the main man a few days before they set out to pick them up. I paid him to hire the boat. But some days later an unexpected storm swept the coast. They were due to return the night of the thirtieth, but they didn’t show up.”

“Have you heard from them since?”

“I called them a hundred times. Both phones are dead.”

“If you don’t find them real soon I will pay their wives a visit myself with my boy here. Do you hear me? You scumbag!”

‘My boy’ was the massive gloomy bodyguard who had not spoken a word since Kumar Rao had entered the office. He just stood there like a brainless robot, looking highly dangerous and extremely strong.

“And it won’t be a cozy meeting, I can assure you that! He has a special skill, my big boy! He loves hurting. Likes to kill. And you are on top of the list, you cheating dog!”

“Sir, I beg you! I will go immediately and find the diamonds! I won’t rest till I have them. I will leave this very minute.”

“You have three days. Then it’s going to get nasty, I promise!”

Sergej signaled the sadistically grinning bouncer who stepped forward and grabbed Kumar Rao by the collar of his shirt and lifted him up from the ground, throwing him onto the wooden door with a loud thud, and pushing Kumar out of the way with his thick metal capped boots to open the door. He proceeded to kick him out into the dirty hall. Completely baffled, bruised and pale like one who has looked death right in the eye, Kumar Rao limped out of the building. He climbed into his car and drove for the rest of the day and the entire night, from the buzzing city of Mumbai to the
state of Karnataka. He didn’t notice anything around him, apart from the few dogs sleeping on the tarmac he almost hit with his car.

The oldest of his hired crewmen lived in Bangalore with his wife and two teenage children. When Kumar got to the house he was amazed by what he saw. Compared to Old Baba who was toothless, a little dirty with long thin graying hair; his wife was a stunningly beautiful woman, with smooth skin and long black hair in a thick plait. She was dressed in a lovely gold-stitched sari, and looked at least fifteen years younger than her husband Baba. Her face showed grooves of long term suffering though, and of dehydration.

“Baba has not returned home for two weeks now. No, he has not telephoned either. I have called him and called him!” she moaned. “His mobile phone must be lost. But why did he not use someone else’s? Why didn’t he go to a phonebooth? His oldest son even went to check the e-mail in the cybercafe at the hotel several times, but there was no message. I am so worried something bad has happened. He may be in a hospital somewhere, fighting for his life!”

The gorgeous lady started to cry and didn’t say another word. Kumar Rao thanked her kindly and promised he’d find him. There was nothing else left to do than to drive on to Goa, where the other partner in crime, a young chap called Lawrence, lived in the city of Panjim.

Kumar Rao’s eyes were almost shutting on him. He’d been driving all night and all day and had lost precious time with a puncture. As traffic and light had tired his eyes, he finally had to stop to take a nap.

When he arrived in Panjim at last, tired and irritable, the address of the young man was hard to find. A maze of roads led him to a dingy hut, where the door lay open. In front of it three children were playing with toy cars made of plastic bottles. An old, silver-haired couple came out to greet him a skinny dog barking alarm. No, they had not heard from their grandson Lawrence for a week, they told Kumar, concern etched in their faces.

“It is highly important I find out where he was going,” Kumar explained. “He was going to get a boat for me. He must have said something to you.”

From a darker room in the back a young girl appeared. She looked very tired or not healthy, though she was dressed very neatly.

“My husband is away to Arambol,” she said. “He told me he had work for a few days. But he hasn’t been back. I am very worried.”

“Arambol! Did he leave an address?”

The young girl frowned and thought for a moment.

“No, no address.”

Kumar Rao bowed and prepared to leave. Then she suddenly said: “But I know where he was going, meeting a friend for a good job.”

“Tell me where he lives, please! I will try and find him for you!” Kumar said, almost begging.

“I only know his name. His name is Atindryo.”

“Atindryo who? What’s his full name? Can you tell me where to find him?”

“It’s all I know sir. I pray every day my husband will be alright! He is only 23 years old sir!”

“Oh, my dear girl! Think hard, you must help me find him.”

“If his grandparents permit me… I have been there at the beach with my husband, on our honeymoon three years ago. I don’t know the address, but I could show you where he lives.”

Kumar Rao could have kissed her! But kissing in public was not done in India. He bowed and thanked her and went straight to the elderly people. They spoke a Malayalam dialect, and it was pretty difficult for him to understand the accent, but they understood him when he handed them 500 rupees and said:

“Your son’s wife will come with me. Together we will find your son. I will also bring her back safely.”
The old folks nodded. The young wife packed a few things in a bag, kissed the smallest child—a tiny girl, perhaps a year old—and said: “Obey grandmother, be good!” and off they went.

Kumar Rao realized he hadn’t eaten a decent meal since leaving Mumbai, so he took the pretty woman to a restaurant. After a delicious dahl fry with garlic naan bread, followed by a vegetarian curry with sticky rice, they set off on their journey with a satisfied feeling.

From Panjim to Arambol was less than two hours drive, but the hectic traffic, hooting taxis, full public buses stopping in the middle of the road and motorcyle rickshaws caused them to stop and start with annoying regularity. Minutes after sundown they arrived in Arambol and drove around for a while and found a car parking from where they walked a few streets. The young lady did not recognize anything in the dark. There was no other option than to get a room for the night.

Kumar expected he would have to pay for two rooms, one each, as India was rather strict on marriage laws. But Arambol had been a famous hippie village since the sixties and had thrived on low-budget tourism, mostly musicians, cannabis smokers and backpackers passing through. In the hills there is the place where once lived the Beatles’ guru, though he left for the Netherlands a long time ago. There were windsurfers too, notorious for their illustrious, or should we say skillful romancing. The receptionist only asked for their passports.

The cheap room had a small window—overlooking a dirty backyard—and was furnished with two single beds covered with a rough sheet, and a threadbare blanket folded up on top. There was just enough room to stand between the two single beds. There was a common toilet with shower in the hall Kumar had a quick wash, tucked his wallet deep under his pillow and fell sound asleep, exhausted. He slept and snored for ten hours solid.
Chapter 11

Closer to the Rocks

Arambol had a very different air about it in daylight. All the makeshift security doors and entrance ways were transformed into small exotic boutiques displaying clothes and jewelry, sculptures and colourful spices. The streets were buzzing with traffic, bicycles and taxis. Local shoppers were bustling shoulder to shoulder in all directions with a sense of purpose, while foreigners and tourists pointed and exclaimed in wonder from the backs of rickshaws, aiming their camera lenses towards whatever caught their fancy. There were many aimlessly moving with the throng of pedestrians, sporting dreadlocks or newly shaved heads; girls were wearing fancy skirts and bandannas, boys in sleeveless t-shirts were showing off many tattoos. Kumar Rao and Lawrence’s wife Ritu were walking towards the car in the parking area at the edge of the towncenter. Suddenly the young woman exclaimed:

“This is it! I remember this street! We bought my wedding ring here! Look!” She showed him the ring on her finger. It was silver with a beautiful stone in it.

“Very pretty indeed!” Kumar agreed. “So which shop was it you think?” Before she could say anything, a salesman from the nearest jewelry shop approached them.

“Good day madam! You came to visit, how kind of you! Do you wish to see our exquisite jewelry inside? I make you a special price!”

“No thank you mister. We are on the way to the house of my husband’s friend, to join my husband. I was just showing my uncle here where we got my wedding ring.”

“Mister Lawrence is in Arambol? I haven’t seen him yet. How wonderful. So are you going to Atindriyo’s house? I heard he is gone away for work somewhere? I hope you don’t plan to drive there sir,” he addressed Kumar, “the road is closed for road works. It’s a better idea to walk from here.”

“In that case, would you be so kind as to explain how we have to go from here?” Kumar asked.

“Sure. You go straight ahead, take the second street on the right, then the one, two, third on the left, then you cut across the temple square, straight on, first on the right and you’re there. Only ten minutes. Sure you don’t want to buy a lovely bracelet for your lovely niece?”

They thanked the salesman kindly and started off as he had told them. Ritu was relieved. She didn't really remember where the house was at all. She had just grabbed the occasion to get away from the house, and wanted to see Lawrence so badly. It was unusual he did not send a mobile message for over a week. She was afraid he was with another woman, maybe a tourist? Traveling was better than sitting around waiting.

When Indians say ten minutes far, they mean as the bird flies. After half an hour they reached the temple; the road straight on was indeed closed for road works. Five minutes later they were walking down a narrow, dusty, scruffy alley.

“Is this the street?” Kumar asked. Ritu nodded. “I think so. One of the next houses,” she answered, not sounding very confident. She stopped several times, looking at the buildings that didn’t seem to have doorbells or nameplates. It was obvious she never knew the house number. But when they passed a house that, in its better days, had been painted in a bright green with purple windows, she halted. Her voice thrilling with excitement, she called out: “That’s it! This is the house where he lives, Atindriyo! I remember this tree.”

A tall bougainvillea had grown into a tree, flowering in front of the window, in the tiniest patch of soil you had ever seen. Its lilac colour made the house look like a fairy-tale, although the lack of
maintenance testified that the residents, or the house itself, carried the weight of poverty. Even here in Goa, where people thrived under the Portuguese reign up till 1964, the contrast between rich and poor was evident.

Kumar Rao knocked on the door. Nobody seemed to be home. They walked round to the back, where a small yard, sheltered by a tree, offered them a crooked wooden bench to rest on for a while. They waited, Kumar smoking some cheap cigarettes. About an hour later, they heard some noise. Ritu knocked on the back door and called Atindriyo’s name, twice. It took a few moments before it was unlocked from the inside. She stepped back a bit. When she saw the figure she got a fright. A thin man dressed only in a loincloth stood there leaning on a crutch. His face was bandaged up. Then Ritu gave a loud squeal.

“Lawrence!”

Then she fainted. Kumar just caught her in time and carried her inside, following Lawrence’s directions.

The two men sat on the carpeted floor to talk and drank a pot of chai—the Indian milky tea—while Ritu recovered from the shock on some cushions in the adjoining room.

Their host was a nice young man; very openhearted. It didn’t take long before Kumar, who told him about the seriousness of his visit, got the entire story. Lawrence had indeed been employed by the old man Baba from Bangalore, to pick up a parcel on the island. However, that was no news for Kumar. He had been recommended by Old Baba before accepting him as a crew member, and as Lawrence’s friend Atindriyo Chakraborti owned a boat, they had hired him to take them out for the day. Toothless Old Baba had told them it was an easy job, and in the evening before they left, they celebrated this opportunity to earn some easy money. They had gone for a couple of Kingfisher beers on the beach terraces in Arambol. There they had been addressed by a Western woman. “She was very nice,” Lawrence said, he liked her a lot. She was looking for a way to go out to the islands to take photographs, and when Baba boasted about knowing an uninhabited island she had become very excited and bought more beers for them. She said she was a travel reporter and ornithologist.

“Lots of birds where we are going tomorrow! All kinds of birds!” Baba had said. She asked how many rupees to take her along with them. But when the woman had gone to the toilet, drunk Old Baba came up with a crazy plan. They would take the woman with them, steal her passport and mobile phone during the journey, pick up the parcel and leave her on the island where nobody else came. Then they would contact her family and ask for ransom money. They would keep her on the island and return to give her food supplies and water every few days. It would pay ten times better than just picking up and delivering a package, which meant only a normal day’s wage. They would be rich in about a week! Lawrence did not agree with this malicious plan. When he told his partners the idea was evil and he didn’t want any part in it, they got into a fight. Some youngsters that looked like junkies joined in for the fun of it. They kept kicking him long after Baba and Atindriyo had left. Lawrence had lost consciousness when his head hit a lamppost. Old Baba and Atindriyo went back to the busy beach terrace where the woman had been waiting. They agreed to meet at first daylight, to board the motorboat. At that early hour nobody was around yet. It was a wicked plan. When Lawrence regained consciousness he was being carried into an ambulance. After emergency help in the hospital he wanted to call home, but his cell phone had been smashed in the fight. When it was time to go home and the hospital staff asked where he lived, he gave the address of his friend Atindriyo, as a taxi to Panji was totally beyond his means. Here, in his friend’s house, he would wait for the two men to return. And he was waiting still. He needed cash for a new mobile phone, and for a ride home. After all, his pal had not only deprived him of a nice little job, landed him in hospital with a broken leg, but also left him penniless in a place where he knew nobody! Whether the woman did go on board or not, he couldn’t tell. Nobody had seen them
“You are a strong and lucky man, Lawrence boy,” Kumar said after hearing out his story, “that fight probably saved your life.” Not only was the parcel red hot, dangerous property of the Russian mafia, and the sentence for kidnapping a Westerner very serious, but the two never returned. “You heard about the storm? It is possible they were shipwrecked and maybe even drowned. Let’s just hope that happened before they picked up the package, and not after, or both their families’ lives will be in danger.

Now don’t tell anyone what I told you. It is of the highest secrecy! The Russians will kill you if they know you’re involved. They think the parcel has been stolen. And now, my dear Lawrence, tell me: which island were they heading to?”

“Bird Island he called it, sir. We were setting out to Bird Island. It’s about two hours away from the coast they said, but I’ve never been there before. Atindriyo knows all the places because he was born here. He’s a boy of the sea, and clever too. He is a certified captain and pretty experienced navigator. Unusual for his age! He’s only 25.”

“Can you walk?” Kumar asked.

“A little. The plaster and crutch allow me only a short walk. The leg is broken.”

“Well let’s go and get some breakfast my friend. You look as if you haven’t eaten in days?”

“I’m fine! I managed to get a young boy to bring me some leftovers from the pizza-place... in return for drawing his portrait.”

“Your lovely wife here...” (Ritu had entered the room and sat down beside her husband with an expression of extreme concern on her face, without saying a word). “...has been very worried about you and needs to eat, and so do we, because we have work to do! We have to find another boatman who knows the way to Bird Island. And very soon! If I don’t have the parcel by tomorrow evening, all our lives will be in danger. The big boss doesn’t care about an Indian life or two. It is very important we finish the job that Old Baba and your friend messed up. When we get what we are looking for, you’ll get more than a new cell phone. I promise the reward will make you very happy.”

Lawrence then turned to his wife and, looking in pain, said:

“There was an accident on a building site on the first day of work and I had no phone or money to call you.”

“Don’t bother,” she replied, “I heard everything you told mister Kumar. Why would you lie to me?”

Lawrence looked like a scorned dog, his head hung low on his chest with shame. Kumar stepped in: “I will pay for a taxi for her to return home immediately. Here Lawrence, call your parents from my phone. They are waiting. Then give this sweet lady some attention. She has been very brave to come and look for you with a total stranger. I couldn’t have found you without her! Now let’s all go and eat. Come, let me help you.”

Supported by the two of them, Lawrence stumbled along to the nearest restaurant.
Chapter 12

No Taboos—Day 9

“Hello beautiful woman! I’m going to get some driftwood from the beach and check the swell. Take care!”

Shortly after he left, Iris went out too, away from the enclosure of the hut that was getting warm when the sun hit the roof, and amazed how being called a beautiful woman affected her pondering mood. But she didn’t see Leonard on the beach nearby. She walked alone. The sun was below its highest position in the sky before he returned.

“Fun waves today! Such a jolly good time. I surfed at the misty cliffs today, wondering how it would be to come out... and you’d be on the beach with your beautiful head of thoughts in the clouds. Fabulous!”

“The misty cliffs? Sounds mysteriously attractive. I was indeed on the beach during your surf session, looking out for you; but not that far from here.”

“It’s a spot along the mountainside. It has lots of mist in the early morning. An awesome surf spot! Wish I had a sail. I started by windsurfing on the lake,” he explained.

Iris’s attention was drifting. “Last night I had this rather special experience... Could I ask you a very personal question?”

“Sure, you can ask me anything. I am a free man and have no secrets for you.”

“Okay. Do you sometimes get so turned on that you help yourself? Or is that a sin? You mentioned God yesterday?”

Leonard laughed loud. This line of questioning he had not expected. His eyes twinkled mischievously.

“There are no sins in God’s eye, only in human eyes, and yes I am just an ordinary man, and you are an awesome dream!”

He threw his arms around her and kissed her face, her lips. Iris’s heart melted like ice-cream in the sun. She trembled on her legs. She knew that people often fell in love with the person that saved their life, but this seemed different. It felt predestined to happen.

“That’s cool! Or should I say... Hot! Did you last night too? Not all people masturbate, only a special fiery kind,” Iris laughed.

“What’s the use of going through all the squinty eyes, and not coming?” More kisses followed.

“Some just don’t have that level of sexuality I guess. Few women I know are into it, and many have never actually had an orgasm in their entire lives! Some even fake them,” she continued.

“So how do we tell?”

“Pick a good woman who doesn't like lies?” Iris joked. “I’ve always wondered if a man has a deeper sensation when the woman climaxes too. I’m not sure, how can we tell?”

“Hahaha. The only one man that I actually know of...” he hushed to kiss her again, as usual meaning himself. As they sat down on the mattress she continued the story.

“I once knew a man who didn’t like to come. He loved sex, getting turned on, touching intimately, and when he thought the woman was satisfied he stopped. He wanted to keep that built up energy.”

“Fuck, I can’t see the point of that! Coming, especially together, is such a climax, and something so very personal and such a feeling of... Hey I Love You.

“I agree with you. Most women have to try harder for it, I think. Like anything, it’s a trick; a trick for two,” Iris giggled.
Iris was surprised she was actually sharing such intimate things with this man she barely knew. She had turned 50 three years ago, she suddenly remembered. How close you could grow to someone on a deserted island. She wanted him... that much was clear.

"I think it must be what you want to do, not a pleasing someone thing. I know, when it's just sex, I don't always come but work up a good sweat! The exercise is fun," he gave his male point of view, with a knowing wink. An alien concept to Iris.

"Anyway, just wondered if it was my imagination, self-projection, or if it was synchronous with your 'state of affairs,'" she giggled.

"Oh, I was very excited, if that answers your question. It's been confirmed I guess, the heat is on." The hug that followed became very intense. They touched and caressed further and further.

"So, are we lovers in spirit?"

Leonard now roared with laughter. “Just awesome!”

This time Iris kissed him passionately. He responded full of enthusiasm.

"Let's sit on the deck" he pointed “that rock overlooking the beach reminds me of my terrace at home, and watch the sun set. It sets around 6:30 pm already.”

"Wow, that's early. How do you know when we have no clock? Awesome to be together in a timeless zone. All my best friends live far away. We only have internet contact and our life rhythms are, like 5 hours ahead or 7 hours behind each other. We're never doing the same thing. Not that I am amorously involved with anyone. But two years ago in April I met Aaron. He was my last lover. We talked a lot, mailed daily, and he flew over to Belgium in August."

"And?"

"It was great! Let's warm up some leftovers meanwhile. I am starving, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"So Aaron McKinley, an American with Scottish roots and a Scottish name, flew over to see me. It was not such good weather for midsummer, but it was wonderful. For someone 15 years younger than me, he had graying hair and was quite robust. He had a lot of experience in bed. He knew how to give a woman pleasure! He could only get ten days off work though, which was way too short. I picked him up in Paris by train. He was a bit nuts and extravagant, but in a very nice way. We laughed a lot. I went to join him in Texas in October for seven weeks. There it went fantastic too. In those four months we had talked about his financial problems—a money squandering roommate and tons of unpaid bills from a villa he had bought and had to sell with the loan still to be paid off. I helped him make a plan to solve the problematic situation. So he had moved to a cheaper house, and got rid of the roommate and put the house to his brother’s name, so he'd be free to leave anytime. He'd be sure they paid their share of the expenses, which they hadn't done when he was master of the house. When I arrived in Texas he had not slept in the new place yet. He had been staying in his truck. I helped to clean and empty the previous house, and cleaned and helped him install ‘our’ new bedroom. I loved being away from the cold winter. Texas was so nice and hot, and what I liked most of all, was that I had a garden to look after. But Aaron was always away trucking and often came home late at night, exhausted, watching noisy thrillers on TV to help him fall asleep. Then, after five weeks, we had a heavy argument and he had a truck-accident that night. His second trailer toppled over. The cargo was damaged, the trailer ruined, without apparent reason. He got the blame for it and after ten days of investigation, he got fired. He changed so much from then on. He became tense and focused on looking for new work. No, he didn't want to fly home with me to work in Belgium, having a huge house debt to clear in America. Towards the end he made it clear he thought we were not compatible for a long term relationship. I didn't get it!!! Back home I waited and wrote and waited and got short replies, distant. A few weeks later he said our relationship was over. It broke my heart, I cried for over a year."

"Wow, that seems the story of your life. The third time you love the wrong man huh?”
“I hate to disagree Leonard, but crying over lost love is not the story of my life.”

“Let’s eat,” Leonard said, and handed her a banana leaf with dressed crab meat he had cooked earlier and picked out of the shell for her. It was becoming cooler, as the sun sank low behind the palm trees. But Iris Natal’s mind was still on Texas, now that the phase of her life had presented itself to her memory.

“Actually, he said we would see each other again when we hugged at the airport, and had made love to me the night before... on the day he tried to tell me I was not ‘the right girl’ for a long term commitment. He had tears in his eyes, as if he was fighting the inborn urge to destroy it all. He had not even cried when his grandfather, who had raised him, passed away. I was on the porch with them when he and his brother got the news on Facebook from an aunt. I thought they were reading a joke, because they suddenly burst out laughing? I was stunned and cried alone, more over their hurt as children than for the death of an old ill man. There was nothing wrong with me, Aaron said, but he couldn’t stay focused on earth. It was a problem inside his own head, he explained. His new daytime job was exhausting him. So it was not like any other ending. I thought: Okay, short term is fine, no future is certain; and I was looking forward to some long distance communication till next time we would meet. But after crashing his computer—he spilled coffee all over it the last day I was there—and losing his mobile phone, he disappeared, cut the contact with all his Facebook friends, even after his computer was fixed and he just retreated. So it’s a unique story Leonard, the best affair I ever had. We rode out every weekend. But he was pale as milk; and his eyes could not bear the sun. We were each other’s opposite in many ways. That’s what he meant. He said he’d never known such a good lover and would never want one again, though he had innumerable short affairs. He’d been married twice, briefly, and had no children. Did not want any. It was actually on Christmas Eve he told me on the phone we were not lovers anymore, and took our status as lovers off Facebook.”

“Wow” not laughing. “Very intensely muddled. Awesome love. Your heads seemed miles apart, and yet it seemed so bright at the start. How does love compare to love? A natural mystery.”

“I will never compare love, just syndromes,” Iris laughed again. “I understand it now, after all the time I thought about it. It was who he was, hurt from birth. Sadly, his mum was a methadone addict, and he was born prematurely and given up by the doctors. They took him home. His dad fed him. Years later he and his younger brother were adopted by his grandparents. They learned to work very hard on a farm, but never knew any affection. How can you commit to love when you’ve never received any as a baby? He possibly also had too high an IQ to fit in anywhere. But perhaps he was right, about the future. I had not much to do there except reading books. I felt like a bit of a cuckoo. There was nothing growing in the garden except one thin tree in almost Mexican heat. His brother’s wife cooked daily and told me the kitchen was her domain, the garden mine. I did love spending time reading under the tree, and planted some flowers. His brother cynically called me The Outsider. Now it’s your turn, if you want. Tell me about your last affair.” Iris said while putting two coconut shells with water in the fire, balancing on two thick wet sticks, to make a cup of green tea.

Leonard took a deep breath, and began talking slowly.

“I was in such a false state of existence—married, a great job, worked night shift; hectic into drugs, sex and alcohol; had all day for surfing. Cherrie worked day shift. We hardly did anything together! I had such freedom!” he enthused, looking at Iris.

“I had two girlfriends, so a sexless marriage didn’t matter, so I stayed married. For one thing, it wasn’t a bad lifestyle, and secondly, I didn’t want my children growing up out of the family bop like I did. So I accepted my life.”

“Oh! wow, a wife and two girlfriends! Sorry, making me laugh here.” She giggled. “Did none of them know about the others?”
“Hahaha. They both knew I was married, and knew I was never going to get divorced. It was what we were willing to endure. Then, after no less than thirty years as a printer and colour corrector with the newspaper, I got laid off work as the printing process became digital. I dreamed of starting a surf clinic to help addicts and alcoholics through surfing. I was eight years clean myself by then. So got it going and had a rehabilitation center that took surfing as part of their program. It was awesome! Cherrie and my daughter worked at the rehab center too. It was great for about a year, but I am pretty bad with money. I also took the clients on mountain and beach walks. There was this one lovely young English girl. The first time I saw her, was on a walk to a waterfall in the winter. I remember looking at her. She looked so sad and lonely, and serious, I thought I would love to help her in some way.”

“Hold on, going a bit fast there. What happened to the other two girlfriends?” Iris interrupted.

“They stayed in touch. Anyway, this young woman she was 28 years old, like 25 years younger than me. She was a real rebel. Funny how our eyes always connected whenever she was in my presence. But honestly, I never did anything. Leonard gestured in self-defense. “I didn’t drool, or come onto her in any lecherous way. I always thought she was stunning, though. Anyway, she left and went to another rehab.”

Leonard’s eyes had become dreamy. He gazed in the distance as if back in that time. “Sounds like a beautiful girl! You never did anything... but you call it your last affair?”

“Hey, haha, I am getting there! Then one day she phones and asks if I would take her for a surf lesson. Of course! It was what I did! I picked her up from the rehab on a Saturday, took her to Muizenberg, gave her a lekker lesson, and then we went to another beach. My soul was trembling. Her name was Anamika. We were the only people there, even though the beach was full. You know those moments, when life stops and it’s just two people... I could see she felt the same, but I couldn’t do anything. Then I took her for a long drive around the peninsula, and then back to the rehab.”

“So romantic. High quality suspense.”

“The second time she phoned I took her to a far away beach, and we just flew at each other. Now remember she was still in treatment, and apparently this behavior wasn’t allowed. No one had told me. Hey, I just surf!! Apparently she was so much in love with me, that she wrote to her counselors that I was her God and she loved me. They never gave me any hints, as you now know I also had very controlled feelings for her. Then she left the rehab and got a flat in Muizenberg, and I was rejuvenated in love. I started charging into bigger surf. Life was just great. I was so young again! I would stay with her till the early hours of the morning, and tell Cherrie I had been to the casino.”


“Then there comes that time where you get to the crossroads. One night I told Cherrie where and what I was doing. She was shocked and started going off, so I said ‘Cheers’, and went to Anamika and asked: would she want me to move in with her. She said yes, et voilà!! And then my life became so amazingly fucking hectic. Cherrie was almost suicidal, my children traumatized, my daughter didn’t even want to look at me!. I still took them to school every morning, still took Cherrie shopping every Saturday. She would attack me and scream at me. Anamika and I lived such an awesome, sexually awesome life together by contrast. Whatever we did—beach, mountain, shopping, me surfing—whenever we got back to the flat we just went straight to bed, hahaha. That’s when I lost about 7 kilos. I was madly in love. I told the other two women about Anamika and said it was over. The Greek girl didn’t want to hear it. She still came to the beach and walked up to us and went off, started arguing.”

“Mama Mia!”

“At this time the director of my own rehab said he couldn’t use me for surfing for at least two years, so the clinic stopped. I had fifteen surf boards and twelve wetsuits. But hey! Life was good...
“Phew, and I thought my life was complicated?” Iris threw in.

“Then one day my youngest son Jamie phones, crying, and saying they wanted me back as they couldn’t handle their mom. She was using tranquilizers and walking around like a zombie, threatening suicide. Fuck, I felt so bad! Anamika was going back to England for a holiday, and like a coward—(I know this now, but at the time I thought I should wait for Anamika to be with her folks, and people who’d love to help lighten the blow)—so when she was back in England I wrote her an e-mail saying I was going back to my family, and then I paddled out to the surf. That day it was far out, and I was by myself. And I prayed... Hey God, let Anamika find the man of her dreams and let that man be me!

Iris saw the first star appearing and remained silent. She felt the load he carried as a touchable cloud hanging in the air. How he had hoped Anamika would have pursued him, in spite of his ‘temporary’ duties towards his children. Leonard continued.

“She cut off all ties between us. I heard she got pregnant and had an awesome little girl. I only realized how cowardly I was when my eldest son Shawn pointed it out to me a year later, when he came to visit me. Anamika was so traumatized she went to see a psychologist. I was the only man who ever dumped her.”

“What about the baby, was it yours?”

“No, the baby is not mine. I think she got pregnant on purpose from some rich guy. She didn’t want to get married though and lives in a flat her father bought for her. Anamika comes from a wealthy family, but she was a late baby, ten years younger than her sister and even more than her brother, so she was spoiled rotten.”

“Meeting her just showed me how shallow my life had become, and it would never have changed, if not for her. The last e-mail I got from her was last year in June,” he laughed, “I think she was using me as a backup plan, just in case. I was busy looking for work and didn’t respond the way she had wanted. She just threw me off her Facebook, her Skype, and changed her phone numbers... I didn’t pursue the connection. It was her right, and I accept, my last engagement of love.”

“You prayed to God for her to pick you, she mailed you again but you didn’t have time for her, while it sounds like you really loved her a lot? I almost get the impression you’re still hoping for her return. Perhaps you and me becoming lovers is a little premature? My heart is aching for you, actually. It’s all so sad.”

“No, she considered it but then must have decided I was an idiot and cut off all ties. Phew, it broke my heart when Jamie phoned that day. I found it hard to be in heaven while my children were dying. Hey Iris, life does go on, and I wish Anamika only the best, but I won’t be the one for her. But to me love is so weird! There I was given a true love and didn’t know how to keep it. Was it just bad timing? But then there are no mistakes in life. Maybe I needed someone to shock me back into living,” he laughed again, “and for that I am humbly awed by how the Spirit works through our lives. It’s just as strange that we meet, if you think about it. I mean, what are the odds? And I really love to be with you every day.”

“I’m taking it all in, like a big sandwich! I feel the pain.”

“Eish! You have had the pain as well.”

“Maybe that is why I recognize it, emphatically.”

“But then you know me and how I tolerate pain. I have awesome tolerance... until there is no pain. And then, if I am ever given the chance, I will love again.”

“But why did you end up divorcing Cherrie then, if she needed your help, and you went back for the family. When?”
“Simple, I was never in love with Cherrie, so there was nothing to put back together, and she needed to see that. And now for the finale? You want to hear more of my amazing life?”

“Fire away.”

“So I came back home and we tried to get something out of our lives. We had never gone on a honeymoon, because my younger brother needed my car that night to take some girl he met at our wedding home, hahaha. I saw my car on the front page of the morning newspaper, hahaha. He was going so fast down the road in the early hours, with the rising sun shining in his eyes... Apparently there were road works in progress on that part of the road, with big white barrels closing off part of the street. He braked too hard and landed on top of the barrels. The car was stuck on top of them, and was broken, so... Cherrie and I had no honeymoon. So, after all the shit had settled, I said,'Let’s go up coast together on a late honeymoon.' She agreed. Surf was great... yes, surf was great! We were just a lost issue years ago. We were away for a month. We came back and about a week later my daughter phones and says she has to speak with me. I pick her up... She asks if she can drive. She looks very nervous so I say: ‘What’s wrong?’ She starts crying and says: ‘Mom...’ and I say: ‘Mom has a boyfriend?’ She says ‘Yes it’s Joe, the Welshman.’ I look at my daughter and ask: ‘So why are you crying? God has answered my prayers.’

My daughter Helena didn’t talk to her mum for a long time. I tried to tell her it was alright, but she has her own ideas of right and wrong and said her mum, Cherrie, deserved the same respect as I got for doing the same thing. In other words: none! Phew! I was relieved that Cherrie saw the light, and now she lives happily with Joe. Isn’t life amazing? I was married, while having two girlfriends, hahaha, and now all I have is freedom...”

“So that is about three years you are alone now? Didn’t you go back to the two girlfriends? That Greek girl and the other? Look how red the sky is turning, in spirit with your story.”

“The Greek girl stays in touch. She’s in England now. I have had some lovers in the last three years, but no one I wanted to get attached to. I met another young woman, but that was mainly sex. She spoke about going onto the second stage. I asked: what was the first? She was very pretty, but maybe it was too early after all my freedom to think of settling down again..”

“You are a very desired, or should I say a wanted man!” she teased.

“Would you still want me now you know the way I treated all the women in my life? Am I not a bit of a shit head?”

“It wouldn’t be your life story that intimidates me. My first thought is that you are used to so much beauty and youth. I could never compete, or live up to your expectations.”

“Seriously, I would love to be with someone who still enjoys life and is full of loving, sexual spirit. What’s different this time is, you’ve had some nice young lovers. We could be both sides of the same coin. Such similar paths of life. Pretty amazing.”

Iris sat quietly reflecting on his interpretation for a while.

“I couldn’t stand lying or deceit. I’m done with that. You said you don’t want to be ‘changed’, if that is the true you... it wouldn’t work. I am a little baffled by it all. The casino bit perhaps the most. Do you gamble?”

“No, never went to the casino. It was only an excuse for getting home late. As far as change is concerned: take me for who I am. When I am with someone I care for, then I give my all. Now my children are grown up there can be no problems. You are taken aback... So, being open and honest, becomes a liability?”

“I don’t know what you mean by a liability. I told you, I am processing it all. My heart is aching a bit, I sympathize. And for your information: I never fancied younger men. I always said: any man under 40 is still a child!” Iris laughed. “Aaron was an exception, he was born old though he was just 35 and me 50. A big relief you don’t gamble though. I had wondered when you said you were bad with money.”
“Sometimes people get scared or put off by someone trying to say things from the heart, and all that person is trying to do is answer the other person’s fears? Hahaha, and sometimes not doing a good job. Hey, I love the Casino, but learned very early you don’t win. Now I can enjoy playing for nothing on the Internet. Saves a lot of money that way” he grinned.

“I appreciate you telling me all this Leonard, and I don’t judge quickly. What do you take me for?” Iris laughed. “Yes, the Internet is a good substitute. I always dreamed of a little farm, and now I have a virtual one in Farmville too,” she laughed. “I would hate working in stables actually. My back wouldn’t take the hay or shoveling shit.”

“Like I said, in a very awesome way you remind me of a gypsy woman. You are the woman I wanted to meet.”

“As you know, astrological Cancers are a very homely type. But I always said: home is where the fire burns.”

Leonard laughed full-heartedly. “I would love to wipe you down with a cool cloth when the fire scorches you...”

“But home is also where your family is. Now there is only my daughter, and she is not here so, that makes me a nomad in a way.”

Leonard watched her suppressing a sigh. “So wander my way in your stunning life, and let’s light a fire every evening”, he tried.

“That may be a good plan, Iris laughed, for the moment. But do you even have a fireplace back home in South Africa? I mean, for real, a stove or hearth to light on a chilly evening? They don’t have them in Morocco and I swear, those Casbahs are chilly at night!”

Leonard laughed at the idea of being cold. “I have a fireplace in the lounge, for those cold winter nights, and an okay braai outside for those nice summer evenings.”

“Nice! When is it winter there?”

“Winter is June, July, August, although our weather patterns have definitely changed; we have all seasons almost every week, and our winters are mild compared to the ones you must have experienced.”

“Wonderful! But we are still in India! And lost to the world for nine days now, and I am enjoying it! Imagine, we’ve sat here talking for almost five hours? hahaha. Thanks for being openhearted.”

They hugged warmly, and allowed some further venturing on the mattress. After a kiss in the neck Iris, overwhelmed, returned to her own corner to reflect on this new sensation, before sleep won her over.

“Sweet dreams! I hope my honesty opens a pathway for us to walk along,” Leonard said. Soon his breath took the rhythm of sleep, but not till after her quiet whisper: “I think I love you!”
“It is so quiet here, so peaceful,” Leonard said, getting up, ready for his usual swift morning routines. At home he would dive into his pool, naked, before anything.

“Hope you get a good surf today. Have fun! Look forward to some TLC when you get back.”

Leonard left to do ‘his thing’, while Iris enjoyed the beauty of the lush green bay. So many species of birds lived here. Kingfishers, little green parrots, crows and all kinds of water birds; buzzards circling in the air; even a tall white heron. It wouldn’t be so hard to catch one of those duck-like birds, she thought and began looking for something to use as a spear. She collected some good sized rocks for throwing, a useless idea. It was already late afternoon when Leonard returned. She welcomed him with a newly written poem. She watched his shining eyes while she read it to him. Her voice was melodious and a little husky.

“Hey, I love your poetry. I can relate to what you write and say. Sometimes I just let your words wash through my thoughts when I surf, occasionally I return a thought back to you. It was such a lovely day on the beach. Did you go for a walk?”

She nodded, not saying she actually found some mussels too.

“I had an hour long paddle and then watched the horizon for a while. No sea traffic at all.”

They went quiet for a while. No sea traffic meant no way of getting back to the mainland. But why worry when life was good here. Love was growing and turning it into a blissful and magical isolation.

“It was nice yes, but it clouded over. I came back to organize some food. I picked more bananas, and these... “ She showed the mussels. Leonard was pleased, instantly planning to grill them.

“It looks like rain approaching. I had just a little surf out front. The wind is picking up now. The water is even warmer here than in Bali. Imagine, there will be a lot of people on the beach in Cape Town soon, for the great surfing competition. I sincerely hope I’ll make it back by then!”

“National or international?”

“It’s a national competition. The beach will be packed, sunny or not. Some days we have a bit of each season.”

“You surfed in Indonesia too hey? I just remembered I have pictures from Java at home, from predigital days. One of Young Tarzan too,” she laughed. “He called me over: ‘Me Tarzan, you Jane!’ he shouted and wanted me to swing on the creeper after him.”

“Awesome! I’m going to look through your albums some day if that’s possible. Wow,” he laughed, “so what have you not done in your stunning life?”

“Yes, well, I didn’t do that! I thanked Tarzan kindly. My arms are too weak. I have pictures of him doing it though, swinging over a jungle crevice. It was a nice jungle trip. Ruthie and I hired a minibus together with two Dutch couples and two young boys for guides. The couples disapproved of our footwear. We only had cotton shoes, with thin plastic soles. Nice and light in that heat. However, they thought I’d slow them down. But guess who slipped on the boulders while crossing a mountain stream? Not me!” Iris laughed, “but those strong sportive couples in their thick sporty shoes that don’t feel the stones under the robust soles...”

“I went to G-Land in Java, and stayed there a week at the edge of the forest. You have to go far through the jungle to get to the sea. Had a stunning time there. G-land is a hot surf spot in Java, world renowned. The waves were 8ft and cooking! Awesome waves. The Indonesian girls were so
beautiful and so friendly. Ethnic class has never been an issue with me, even in South Africa's
darkest moments. Beauty is just beautiful, as your mirror should know. I want to do a whole lot
more surfing. It would be very nice to paddle out with you next to me.”

“I am always happy when I travel. Nature is what I travel for. Scenic beauty! The people just
come with it. You meet some extraordinary people though. That time in Java too. We drove up a
mountain with a panoramic view and had stopped at night to look at the lights, on the way to the
Merapi volcano. My cotton Thai-dye little rucksack with everything of value in it had dropped out
of the car door. All my money, two plane tickets, traveler’s cheques and my good camera, plus
passport too... all gone. We drove back up the mountain to declare it at a small village police
station. It took them hours to question our boys. They were accusing them of theft! They were
employees of Ruthie’s man’s firm, and were totally trustworthy. Typing the loss declaration took
over an hour; Ruthie and me had to fight fits of laughter; it was so comical. We returned to
Jogjakarta planning to go to the embassy in Jakarta after the weekend, and were staying in the
same cheap guesthouse as before.

Turns out a local boy had jumped on his scooter to come and look for us, 100 miles away. His
search was based on a business card of the Merapi Guest house in my wallet, and he had found us!
An amazing piece of detective work! He and some friends had found and returned my bag to the
police in the small village up the mountain. When we went back to get it he turned up with 30
friends. He said they’d all been walking together when they found the sack, so I had to give them
all a reward. ALL my cash, hahaha. Smart kid indeed, and loving his ‘brothers’. I was so happy to
get my Pentax back, because all my pictures of that trip were on there, plus the two plane tickets
and my passport! Nobody believed this really happened.”

“Wow, what awesome people! Most of them are.”

“I have always been extremely lucky. I have strong protection from angels, or else it is my
attitude that attracts good luck?”

“I had some crazy car crashes in my life, but no heavy damage. I think I have a super guardian
angel looking after me!”

“Wish I could show you the photos, because they all have stories in them. Did I tell you that I
used to be a storyteller Leonard? For lack of an audience I ended up writing. Photography is a
passion of mine too. Well... one of five passions...”

“You must have been a druid in another lifetime.”

Iris laughed. “Actually, if you want to know, a Seer once told me that I had lived nine lives and
was here by choice, just for the fun of it and to help the human race towards awareness. He said I
had been an Egyptian oracle in my last life, living in a cave. I didn’t meet him, this clairvoyant, my
sisters did. He worked with photos. He was quite accurate about all the rest though. Some people
see my cheap cottage as a cave.”

“Just how you talk to me about your life now gives the impression of someone who has lived
more than this life.”

“Well, if that’s how you see it. I am not very interested in social life anymore. I overdosed on
parties and crowds. Too many fans crowded our door when we were at our musical peak. I have
become a hermit, it’s true. But a shell is a safe cocoon. I make up for it when I travel. I’ve been in
India for winter, doing yoga. That’s a social step too.”

“What about eating? I’m starving! We will talk more later, okay? I absolutely love our talks.”

Iris showed the bananas and the mussels. He was very happy with it and said, “Hold on, I got
something too. We dine rich tonight.”

He came back with a large fresh fish he’d harpooned from the rocks. They refueled the campfire
and watched it till the wood was red glowing charcoal. The fish was grilled on two sticks above it.

“You see, I am not living in a cell! I have contact with Asia and America, with all sorts of people
all the time, but mostly written, by e-mail and on Facebook. It is communication and sharing. Mainstream people don't intrigue me. After all, I was a rebel against conservatism, materialism and the hypocrite Catholic Church, which makes me a hippie, I guess? Truth is, I have never left that era, and being a hippie doesn't have to mean being subversive. I've always been loyal. It meant not having a regular job, not being narrow-minded, not being rich, blowing dope, not showering daily. What else? I'll never wear high heel shoes. I hate the click-clack noise they make, like Gestapo boots."

"Hippies were never submissive. Absolute rebellion for peace through love," Leonard contributed enthusiastically, "and as laid back as possible when doing it."

"It is not so long ago I gave up smoking weed and hashish. I am still longing for it. I was quite a weed-addict."

"Christ, you should have seen how we ended up mixing ours! Have you ever heard of button pipes?"

"No."

"Have you heard of Mandrax?"

"That's some kind of pill isn't it?"

"You have? Awesome. You see the possibilities there. Suddenly he stopped and jumped up. Back in two minutes", he said and left the fireplace. Within moments he was back with some green leaves resembling those of dandelions, perhaps a bit bitter but edible. It would make a nice side-dish.

Iris knew that dark green leafy vegetables are sources of vitamins such as vitamins A, C, and K and minerals such as iron and calcium, and also of fiber. Dark green leaves were, en plus, good for the heart, just what she intuitively knew she needed. There was literally a shoot of pain when she thought about love. But the fact she was suddenly also remembering what appeared to be stored data made her feel ecstatic at the same time. It meant her memory would be just fine! She picked up on the briefly interrupted conversation.

"So, you mixed weed with Mandrax? That must have gotten you very out of it! Is that perhaps why you had many lovers and left them easily, like the sense of responsibility was numbed? I haven't always been entirely faithful, but I have always been loyal. Meaning, no matter what happened I'd return home and treat my husband better than before... Out of gratitude perhaps, that he gave me freedom to evolve? But I couldn't do anything premeditated, or sober. When I am in a relationship I don't usually feel like making out with anyone else. I loved Rob with body, heart and soul."

"I believe in unconditional love, no strings attached," Leonard said in a serious tone.

"But love is like a violin, you need strings to play..." Iris disagreed.

"Why can't it be the music? Love for all?"

"So, you are all for polygamy, is that what you mean?"

"Absolutely not. Why does one window shop?" Leonard protested, looking rather dismayed. Iris was not discouraged and continued:

"If you love, you care, and invisible strings stay attached. Like you said, you will always help Cherrie, even though you divorced her, right? That is what I mean with the violin. Strings keep it playing."

"I think I was relating to the hippie and our freedom of love in those times. My personal love with a special woman should be so natural and sharing that we are just one, and then we do everything together and for each other."

"Those times never stopped for me. I am pretty convinced, if Anamika turned up destitute on your doorstep you wouldn't send her away either. So, there are always still strings in the heart that are hard to ignore. I was a married hippie; we did everything as a hippie couple. Such fun!" Iris
Leonard laughed happily while she dished out the food on a fresh banana leaf.

“You are so right. I look at Cherrie and if she is down it tears my heart. So, I am chasing an illusion…”

“All I am trying to say is I agree to the theory of it, but what I experience emotionally is often not what I want it to be like. Being a free-minded ‘hippie’ I have morals too, but not the most common kind. I would not turn your ex away either; if I happened to be in your house and she turned up and you were out. Do you get what I mean? It would be down to you, not to my petty possessiveness.”

“So, all our loves will always be attached to us in some way? You are an awesome sage. I think my logic actually is very SELF motivated, and makes no sense. If I want to be honest, there are always threads, and no matter how thin, they ARE there, never-the-less. Eish! You have helped me grow a bit more. Thank you Iris.”

“We live to learn. You teach me too. I was thinking all day about what you have been telling me. It would have to be profound love not to become jealous of the beauty surrounding you. You teach these lovely young girls and they all adore you. I saw Cherrie in a dream. She is so gorgeous! But jealousy only comes when you are ignored. I find jealousy childish, is what I mean. If I know at the end of the day you want to be with me, then jealousy is a waste of time and energy.”

Her serious tone made him laugh again. “The mothers of my children were and are very lovely women, very much like you. You have kept your beauty very well. Jealousy is madness. If there is jealousy then something is already wrong.”

“Thanks, but looks never meant much to me, it’s really the mind that matters, the mentality, and the behaviour too. Having integrity, that sort of thing. I hate hypocrites, though I can understand keeping some things untold, mistakes that shouldn’t affect the other; and perhaps not important enough to hurt someone for. But there too are different levels? With your partner there should be honesty, always.”

“And that’s where a lot of guys fall short. They don’t look for the inner beauty or strength, just the Barbie doll image… I have been very blessed by the women who have accepted me into their lives, and I have learned that honesty should always be up front so there is no confusion.”

“Yes. And it’s true what you say, about jealousy. An inferiority complex or something, or lust for power? I have become jealous at one point, in my life with Rob. But it was professional jealousy; had to do with music, a long story, perhaps another time. A person is not someone’s possession.”

“I was just about to say I’ve never been jealous, hahaha, but then I remembered one party Cherrie and I were at. I remember acting like a complete idiot. Absolute madness in hindsight.”

“Every time is an individual case. But Jo, my second ‘partner’—though we never married—thought I was jealous because I kept asking questions about his female friends. He thought that was jealous, being curious. He told THEM I was jealous; which made me angry, you know? Some of them I truly liked!”

“You see how easy we lose control of our feelings, and blame the world?”

“Yes, but in that case, it WAS his fault,” Iris laughed. “I tried everything to make that relationship work for four long years! I worked very hard. I could tell some extreme stories about that period. He was a toxicomaniac, but I didn’t know that at first. We took to growing weed plants because his business in Pakistani antiques had gone bankrupt. He had been robbed, twice, but was rather bad with money too, hahaha. But Jo was also a bit paranoid. He imagined I went back home to ‘sleep with’ my ex who lived in the cottage half of the time. That was not the case at all! Rob and I even barely spoke to each other in those four years.”

“I could spend the rest of my life with you, and I don’t think we ever get to the end of the stories, hahaha. So if you want, I will be your audience. We could have a story each night, and then
“Or the other way round: first into bed, then after some action, a story?”
“You seem so much wiser; so, we do it your way and take it from there,” he laughed.
“I see why women trail you! You have that ‘something’!” He sure knew how to restore a woman’s self-confidence, somehow.

“Seriously?” he called out happily. “So we are heading in the right direction? You look very beautiful: You are so open with me... like magic in the making.”
“The magic has been happening already, in the past week. I feel reborn. But I am a very open nature. Perhaps you understand why I became a hermit now. Everywhere I go, people open up in no time and then they fall in love. But not many attract me in sufficient layers. I have a handful of admirers.”

“I see! So is this an ‘ouch’? Pinch me if I have only been dreaming?”
“You are dreaming, just like me, that you may be the right one for me.”

His face lit up and his eyes sparkled. That’s the dream I was talking about; so why would popularity make you want to hide such a wonderful person?”

“I don’t think I’ve been hiding! I had a very busy public life for many years, on stage playing music, being Rob’s manager, as a journalist, as a host to fans and friends. I simply need a good reason to go out and my friends became either wealthy and lived private, busy lives, or they blew tons of dope and drank like mad. Some were too straight and thought I should not smoke! It’s hard to explain. I enjoy being alone. I like doing things with a partner who appreciates me but I don’t have one. I’m a writer, a poet, I like lots of time to sit and think. Everywhere I slip away to sit and meditate in nature, even when in Austria with my sisters, or even with my daughter. We both like time alone sometimes! That’s why I love this island so much.”

“I can see... bullshit. I can actually feel your magic as I sit and talk to you. You are looking right through me. And... you are a very fluent writer”

“Oh! Writing is one of my passions. It’s the magic of creation itself you sense. In Texas, my lover’s brother’s wife said I made Texas look nicer than it was with my photographs. I love being in nature with the man I love, walking as a couple. But I can’t be in nature and talk non-stop. Five passions ruled my world, I never had a bored moment.” She expected a question, which five, but he didn’t pursue it.

“Just being your friend is surely a blessing,” Leonard said. Boring. His flattery was getting over the top. She changed the subject.

“You might be able to read my travel articles in Dutch, or at least the titles?” Iris was certain her memory was back totally. Except for how she got stranded here.

“Maybe. I speak some Afrikaans.”

“Tell me if you want a break, alright? I am very comfortable here! And no mosquitoes thanks to the wind”

“Hey, I could spend the whole night talking to you, hahaha. Not the best chair, this crate,” Leonard laughed and he stretched his back with a groan. “The pain we are willing to endure.”

“Oh no! In that case, I order you off to bed!”

“I would love to be in the same bed as yours, he said with a cheeky glance. It would be extremely difficult to be laid back though.”

“It’s worth a try,” Iris replied and they snuggled up on one mattress. Indeed not laid back at all! She had craved for it long enough, this passionate and intense love.

“Goeie nag mij liefie,” he whispered.

As the body cooled, and mingled sweat between them dried, Iris smiled into the darkness of the hut and stretched her arms and legs. A shiver ran down her spine. She looked around the shadows of familiar objects in the hut, and felt she could stay here indefinitely, cocooned away from the
outside world, re-energized in the sensations of intimacy and passion. All nerves relaxed as her breathing and heartbeat regained a normal rhythm. Her hands reached out to Leonard’s body, lying next to her, breathing deeply.

In the silence between the crashing waves on the beach she could hear him gently snoring. Propped up on her elbow, her eyes traced the contours of his shoulders, hips and back silhouetted against the dying embers of the fire... and thought: “Yes. I could stay here forever.”

A gecko scuttled out of sight. The night-birds’ final calls that filled the night air finally subsided, and all that remained was the endless echo of an early tide.
“Good morning sweetheart. Have you checked if your camera dried out yet? If it works again you could take a shot of me, the beach boy,” Leonard said. He always seemed to wake up in a great mood, today he covered Iris with kisses.

“Would be nice indeed! The role suits you, and such a great location! Although with that ten day growth you start to look more like Robinson Crusoe,” Iris laughed while she stretched like a cat. “I am into capturing nature’s beauty, and the atmosphere of people in it. Perfect setting and model!” She got up and looked out. Why hadn’t she tried her camera herself yet?

“A misty morning!” The camera remained stone dead. “I loved that Afrikaans last night! How do you say hello? Gooi dag?”

“Ja, nee wat, ek kan lekker Afrikaans praat as jy wil, en eerlik waar jy is soo baai pragtig,”

“Beautiful! I understand that! Hey, thanks!” she glowed.

He kissed her a few minutes, then Iris went out to collect some fruit. When she returned a while later Leonard seemed lost in thought. But then suddenly he spoke.

“I had a dream last night. Rose was in it. She drinks too much. ‘Down, dog!’ she said in my dream,” he laughed, “when she heard me praising your beauty. But what I have actually been thinking, from day one, and now I know without any doubt, is that you are a force of power, and people, especially men, are very attracted to you.”

Now Iris laughed at his rhetorical grandstand, not really wanting to reveal she had been called some kind of sexual healer before, a thread through her life she hadn’t been able to avoid. It was quite a shock to recall that. “Well I tend to hide my romantic and sexual side in the presence of others, that’s for private moments. The more I think about it, the more I remember who I am, and maybe I have a strong philosophy, and had a unique, non-materialistic lifestyle? Indians love me most because I combine the old Indian knowledge with New Age ideas, they say. One told me he did not see me as a Westerner, more as a Hindu or Indian. I laughed, said I hated the caste-system. If anything I am more of a Taoist than anything else, can’t go wrong with that. Following your own path is the only way to live. Tell me, what else happened in your dream?”

“I did something I haven’t done in years!” he said, trying to raise the suspense.

“What is that?”

“I was back home and caught the train into Cape Town, an hour’s ride from my house. Its railway line starts at the coast and then goes inland.”

“Was it nice? It’s fun to look out of a train window isn’t it? Strange, I dreamed of the city too. Did I awaken the explorer in you, the observer?”

“You cause strange vibrations throughout my body, hahaha. Has the inner me been asleep?”

“Awareness often slumbers. You worked so many years; the spiritual part in us takes a backseat. I’ve been known to alert the dormant, seems to be my mission,” Iris laughed. “It is the chi, the life energy, our soul connected with the cosmic energy and balance, awakening and more energetic than ever... It’s so important to live as consciously as we can, and stay positive in our thinking and living. Going somewhere, being in motion, seeing the world floating by like a movie triggers the perception, the brain; you see your own life in contrast or resemblance with that of others and appreciate it more I think.”

“No joking, my awareness has rocketed in the past few years. I’m awfully grateful for the people who’ve crossed my path and assisted me. And now I have met... You! Magical!”
“Magical, yes! That’s exactly why my loner lifestyle is no ‘hiding’, even if I don’t go out or see anyone for weeks. Those three or four travels a year give me enough material to think about, feed my inner self. If I get bored, I look at my pictures and I’m back there, back in time and space. It is normal, when all goes into routine, working daily to pay the bills and feed the children, you don’t have time to develop the inner self much. Some people I know, they talk all the time, never taking time to assess what they do or hear or even say. They outrun themselves. One day, before they die, they’ll wake up and realize they forgot to live. But go on, what happened in your dream?”

“Memories can be very powerful, I think I only had one extremely bad memory that made all the others so insignificant. That was being torn away from my family home and stuck in a home for the poor. That’s why I am more positive than a lot of people. Everything else will always be easier to handle.”

“All events are steps in our unique evolution. You have a strong mind, Leonard, a rare one! I am positive too. Many years I refused to admit I was not entirely lucky in love, becoming unhappy in my marriage though it started off so great. The first 7 years we never disagreed once! Any unhappy moments I considered to be life-lessons. Till my daughter said one day: ’Stop defending my dad, he is simply selfish.’ See, I analyze a lot, thinking is my hobby. When you look at two sides of a story, you understand more and forgive easier. I always pardoned his egocentric behaviour caused by too much alcohol. But it’s never sure what came first, the alcohol or the ego-centrism?”

“It seems your daughter favours your way of thinking over his! What happened on the train? After the sea I just laid back and enjoyed the shake of the train, very relaxing, then walked around town. The building we had the newspaper in has been sold and is now a huge shopping mall, and only the three highest floors contain the people working for the paper. I saw it all, an amazingly realistic dream! That was all really.”

“All newspapers are downsizing, it is global. And there are ten of them now instead of one.” Iris walked a few circles. “I want to go into the sea! My leg is much better now and I want a wash. I love bathtubs but don’t have one in my primitive cottage. So I bathe in my laundry basket,” Iris laughed. “I fold up in my rectangular plastic laundry tub and manage to have a bath anyway. Don’t you think that’s funny? I married a plumber because I loved water, and till this day never had my own bathtub. Guess he was better at songwriting, haha. Oh I feel like toast this morning.”

“Haha, I fried you last night” he joked, “that’s why you feel like toast! I am trying to picture you folded up bathing, how do you soap yourself, hahaha, sweet lady.” He walked over and kissed her neck.

“Lady?”

“It’s an appropriate word, lady: lady-lad in the washtub?”

She laughed. “Funny! It’s no problem soaping myself, I put the tub under the shower, I can stand up. Normally bath foam does the trick, and when I lie down on my back, legs stretched up against the shower wall, I can rest my head on the rim and snooze. It’s how I stayed flexible I guess, hahaha.”

As usual Leonard reacted like a young sport boy. “Amazing exercising!”

“Am going to the sea now,” Iris decided.

“Net so,” Leonard said and they walked together through the paradise-like palm forest towards the beach that started behind a green dune-like slope. There they discovered an almond tree. An eager coconut landed just in front of them, missing Leonard’s head by less than a meter. “Fresh coconut!”

“What was Rose doing in your dream?” she asked, while drinking the thin refreshing cocos-water through the hole Leonard made in the hard shell—he was so strong and inventive. She tilted her head back for the next gulp. “Hey look over there, that’s a jack-fruit tree!” she called out and ran towards it. “This looks like a good one.” She pointed one out that was not too large but seemed
just ripe enough. It was still very large, and the taste wasn’t exactly delicious, but it was definitely full of vitamins. Meanwhile Leonard was thinking of an answer, but it didn’t come. All he remembered was Rose saying “Down, dog!”

“Did she react like that in your dream because she is still jealous?”

“I strongly doubt that. The thing about Rose is, she loves the bottle, and her spiritual awareness isn’t exactly great. Wherever she goes she has a bottle and a mix, it’s been like that for a long time. I don’t think she even knows what she does sometimes.”

“A mix?”

“Vodka and coke.”

“So you still see her then.”

“We stay in touch, we’re good friends. After all, she’s the mother of my first son. She lives in Zimbabwe. But I very seldom talk to her and yet she is always on facebook. I usually play games just to relax, never wanted to talk on FB. Even my younger brother often says: ‘Hey boet, are you there?’ and I answer once in awhile,” he laughed, “but I will love chatting with you!”

“Ah, if we ever return to the real world away from this island, or should I say the virtual, or the virtually real world,” she joked, “I wouldn’t enjoy flirting in public, it embarrasses me. Facebook is only a platform for my poetry.”

“The whole world is allowed to know that I am just another man absolutely enchanted by your aura, no? Why would I keep it a secret?” Leonard smiled and kissed her. They had reached the beach and walked towards the waterline. The mist had cleared up, there was hardly any wind at all

“When and if we ever return to the world from before…” (it felt so far away, another lifetime. Iris wondered if her daughter would start to miss her after just ten days, they were used to being in different countries) “…don’t behave like a teenager in love on Facebook, is all I’m asking. Just keep the horn out, Cape Horn haha. Your dream was a good indicator of what could happen. I don’t promote sex on FB, don’t even read writers of erotic poetry, though I Love making love. Why demystify such a beautiful act? I think the world is oversexed enough, and India never had the sixties, a lot of them are in arranged marriages and hardly get any sex at all. And then HIV, AIDS? No wonder some people are into tantra yoga, or virtual love affairs, some kind of compensation. The sensation of love without the dangers and problems of it. How many have safe sex, really?”

“Unfortunately you are right. How people will relate can really be a pain in the ass, even though it is light flirting. Going to try and grow up. How do we do that again?”

They both laughed and walked into the water. It was a glorious sensation. Iris felt as happy as she could ever be. She totally surrendered to the weightlessness, the sheer joy of floating on welcoming water, 25°C, like a prenatal sensation, the womb of our planet but in blue. She was thankful her leg and head injury and the memory loss had not been too serious.

As the sea was surprisingly warm, they swam for a long time. The sky turned from silvery gray to blue as the last mist dissolved. When they finally came out of the water Iris was hungry, but Leonard sat down in the sand to dry up and asked:

“What do you mean by tantra yoga and virtual love affairs?”

Wonderous which parts of her tale caught most of his attention. A testosterone man.

“It means getting turned on through Internet contact, and letting the kundalini, the inner energy, rise towards intense orgasms, to feel the turn on of your partner regardless the distance, like being romantically involved with someone. I avoid sexy or romantic talk out of respect for the poor sexless or oversexed souls. Most of us there are writers and artists; we comment on the quality of the work or mention what inspires us in it. Some tantrics believe in getting turned on and then go for sublimation of the sexual energy, as a way to enlightenment.”
“It’s true and it sucks. Such apparently high spiritual morals, and they treat their women like shit. I won’t forget the whole world is actually logged on.”

Iris was quite surprised by his interpretation. “No, my page is not public, only visible to my 140 friends, cheer up! We can always inbox, that’s private.”

“Talking openly on FB can be so confusing, the way people relate to most things said on it. But you are the spirit, you understand everything,” the charmer said. “What about some food?” Her stomach rumbled loud in response, and they were in stitches laughing. “Why don’t you start a fire while I check my fish trap?”

“You read my mind! Got to show me your fish trap tomorrow!” Iris replied, and she returned to the hut in her red, yellow and green bikini, while he ran towards the far end of the bay where some rocks had allowed for building a natural fish trap. Three tiny sardines; a crab and..

“I love sea food. I am starving! Shall we have sushi?” Leonard said as he returned with two lovely sized blue silvery fishes, the crab and a handful of breathing shells. The baby sardines he had let go.

“I saw Japanese chefs grill fish alive for fresh flavour! Gruesome! I am so happy we found the lighter. Herring in vinegar is good, that is pickled raw. Best thing for a hangover, haha. But look what I found while looking for firewood?”

Happy as a kid with a new iPod she showed him the old, dent ed cooking pot, blackened by many years of flames, now filled with water and sitting on two good sized rocks above the nicely burning campfire. Tiny bubbles started to float to the surface already.

“Do you like spices like oregano, or Indian herbs? I found some leaves that smell rather good!” Iris asked.

“I like Indian curries.”

“It tastes better if made with love. I thank the vegetables for growing for me!” She showed him the strangely shaped things he had found and were simmering in the pot, like a cross between parsnip and carrot. It was a most welcome addition to the diet.

Leonard was very pleased. “Yes, let’s make love with it.” he joked. “It smells great! I will be forever in their debt. Let’s make a stew.”

He cut the fishes open, filleted them and added them to the pot of vegetables and aromatic leaves, also adding the shellfish. The sea salt gave it that extra touch, but the crab was too big to fit in too. They’d have it for breakfast the next day. Cool white fresh crab meat was a feast! Things preserved for a day without problem in a fresh banana leaf; at least it kept the flies off. How amazing, Iris thought, they were on the healthiest diet on earth, and had hardly been hungry since they had stranded here. It was cool to be stranded with Leonard Stolk, of all people! She was really getting into the drift of it.

“Mm... Unique!” Iris murmured as they ate. “It was difficult to cook in Texas, that cupboard held nothing I knew! Everything processed, canned or in powder form, even mashed potato...”

“Do you enjoy cooking at home?” Leonard inquired.

“I used to. I told you I went on a strike when my husband started complaining, remember? I still cooked when he was in Scotland, for months at a time. Do you like cooking?”

“Am much better at the barbecue, hahaha”

“Practice makes art! What about your son at home, Jamie, what does he like doing?”

“He was at college studying animation, costing 50,000 rand a year. I told him if he passed I would still give him the equivalent I gave his sister; but if he failed then that was his 21st birthday gift; he failed the second year; end of college. Now he is a waiter, but I tell him he must start somewhere and where doesn’t matter. He seems happy there, my cousin has shares and my uncle got him the job.”
“I understand your concern, but waiters get good money on tips and can climb up too. My daughter waitress-ed weekends ever since she was sixteen. Her knowledge of a few languages earned her good tips from the tourists. That allowed her to save up for her world travel—for a year and a half she went—as I let her save her earnings while I still paid for her college. I thought to teach her the ethics: if you work you earn money and can do more things. She is eternally grateful, and got her diploma to teach Art and English to pupils in Secondary School. She stopped it though, the restaurant work; having scoliosis caused too much backache.”

“I tried to teach that to my two, but where I wanted to pay them for a job done, Cherrie would give them the money behind my back, so they didn’t do much work.”

“Yes, it’s like dog training: two masters have to apply the same rules.”

“Helena was born with one hip out the socket. She was in traction for about a month and then had a special cast between her legs keeping the ball and socket in place; her one leg is a little bit shorter than the other.”

“Oh dear! Did Cherrie fall or something when pregnant?”

“No, I don’t think she did.”

“My daughter’s dad never made much money, I paid the bills from my unemployment benefit, and had a few jobs too. The money we earned with the music was invested again in musical gear; like a 4 track, a drum-composer, strings, or whatever he needed for his songwriting. Pure idealism.”

“But Jamie can become a manager, he seems happy. Hell here come the clouds after such an awesome morning. Jamie would say it’s cos I am actually cooking.”

“Hm, in my life it rains when I am very sad, ‘When I cry, heaven cries with me. He does’nt trust your cuisine does he?”

Leonard laughed. “Jamie always wants to know if he should get some takeaways just in case! I tell him to piss off, he is having stew or toast.”

“Oh, Cheeky lad! No need to worry, you are lucky he knows what he likes to do! My girl still doesn’t know; she has two bachelor degrees, in Art and English, but hates teaching. Basically she’s ready to have a baby but her boyfriend is four years younger. He interrupted his studies for that world trip with her, went back to university and has about a year to go in aerodynamic engineering. But being with her, he got good at playing the guitar—she taught him—which doesn’t promise much for a steady future.”

“My younger brother got his BA and never used it, now he has a surf shop on the island of Reunion.”

“Yeah? Great! I think she’d like a baby, a bio vegetable garden, a warm climate and a part-time job, with lots of time to be creative. At first, at 18, she was saving up to buy a house. Then prices skyrocketed, and she lost courage. So she decided to go and use the money to see more of the world instead. She lived and worked in Lisbon for half a year, where he took up studying again.”

“Hahaha, you should know, my daughter Helena told her boyfriend there will be no ‘Oops sorry I’m pregnant’; if she gets pregnant it will be because she wants a child; he says he wants two children; they seem an awesome pair. I’m gonna be a granddad in June. My second eldest son’s wife is pregnant. I will have a Muslim grandchild. My ex boyfriend sent me a message to let me know a few weeks ago.”

“Your ex-boyfriend? Hm. So you are bisexual?”

Leonard Stolk doubled over with laughter. “You think I’m gay? I mean my ex’s new boyfriend, Joe the Welshman. I’m learning many things in this place. And look! I am making a slingshot, having a go at the woodcarving. Now all we need is an elastic strip, and we’ll have roasted poultry on the menu my girl. Tomorrow morning I will paddle all the way to the other side of the island, hopefully I’ll find something there.”
“Smell this pot! You prove Jamie Junior wrong! And you are very skilled indeed, you have finger control. Talking of which... I am actually a qualified trilingual secretary. Every week I had to take a speed test in typing, and I made it, with two fingers only, sometimes three. There is a lot in will power! You should have seen me, hammering those keys as if my life depended on it, because I didn’t want to take the class, wasting time. I had to do this complete reorientation course full-time for a year when I turned 45, it was either that or losing my unemployment benefit. Let’s not wait for the veg to crumble into mush, time to set the table!”

“Not the best time for starting a career!”

Iris used two coconut shells for bowls, the aromatic steam resembling paella made their stomachs holler.

“Not such a bad time, after an exciting life playing music. They have contracts for 45+, the government pays a part to the employers. But wise-nose me, I wanted to work in the Poetry Center for the trial period, not in a boring bank, and after I had done the term twice, voluntarily, they had no contract to employ me, nor did they publish my work. My nine classmates were younger but all got long-term jobs out of it, at banks and insurance offices. To be honest, I was also preoccupied with something else at the time. Let’s eat. We can drink the leftover sauce as a gazpacho soup later? Enjoy.”

“It’s made with love,” he said bending over to kiss her on the lips, before tackling the steaming food. Such a success!

“You are becoming a better dad by the day!”

“It’s your influence that has entered my life! Amazing!”
Chapter 15

Memories That Shape Us

The day was only halfway, the free style paella eaten, and the rain seemed now so close they decided to stay near the cabin.

"Gonna invite me to come and see the snow some day? I'd love to feel thick snow," Leonard suddenly threw in out of the blue.

"Hm, snow is beautiful, yes, but painfully cold! And I'm afraid it's impossible to predict when snow will fall in Belgium, some years plenty, some years none at all."

"So tell me, why were you too busy to get a job when you were 45?"

"What? That story? Let's go and get comfortable then. Why did I not really feel much for a job as a secretary in a capitalistic contraption? Well, apart from trying to break through as a travel journalist, investing more than I was earning, I was with my new partner at the time, Jo. He'd been a professional and good-looking volleyball talent, but had broken his legs in a skiing accident. He was in a wheelchair for nine months, it was the end of his career. Then he became an antiques dealer, buying and selling Eastern antiques and artifacts. He went to Pakistan twenty times filling containers with furniture there, his shop in Ghent thrived very well. But he ended up the victim of theft and bad finance and went bankrupt. Jo had green fingers, he started to do the next thing he was good at: growing weed. First in my garden, with seeds I had from Sri Lanka. They grew tall, some 2 meters high, but they turned out not to be Indica but Sativa, the inferior kind, mostly hybrid and much lower on THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol) content. So we expanded with proper seeds, somewhere else. A year later we invested in lamps and built a space in one of my rooms, the climate being a pain for ripening outdoor weed in time before autumn. A mold brought on by rain on the pearly, ripening flowers called botritis could ruin the plants. The new Indica seeds grew well in the ventilated, moisture-, light- and temperature controlled room, smallish, but growing good heads thanks to additional bio food. It was intense physical labour, but I enjoyed it."

Leonard looked surprised.

"Really!"

"Jo started having crazy phases, drinking vodka, taking pills, he was admitted and stayed in a rehab for a month. When he came out he was fine again. One day he got so irritated by the noise through the thin wall: my ex lived in his old little music studio which made him my neighbour. Jo heard a drunken Rob shouting, 'I'll kill that bastard!' That's a common expression in Glasgow, totally harmless, but Jo lost it and ended up smashing up Rob's living room and doing crazy things like putting weed leaves on his doorstep, in full view of the street! I had begged Rob to go to Scotland during our harvest, as we normally stayed in Ghent but would have to be in the cottage full-time for a month, but he had refused to leave! This crisis was the result of his stubbornness. A year later, after Jo's second time in rehab, I hired a small cheap house for Jo and me in the countryside, a cheap place off the road, with lots of garden and land around it. Jo did love nature, like me. While I was at a study course in Ghent, he invested our last money without my consent and filled an entire room upstairs, with lamps and clones, a hundred small shoots, that would have to grow during ten weeks. They had to be watered by hand daily, one floor up. When the harvest was almost ready, he suddenly disappeared. I was driving a triangle, from Ghent to the other house and back south to the cottage, to cut the weed-heads that were packed with THC. I couldn't cope alone, normally two cutters would help out. Jo had hit the drink again and stayed unreachable. I started to harvest alone, taking the cut branches home to dry, as the cheap house was too cold to
dry them without any heating. The stress was so intense, I got this one long streak of gray hair in just one week!” Iris moved a little closer to show Leonard the silver streak that ran from the roots to the tips of one strand of hair beside her right temple.

“One day the drug squad came in civilian clothes to the school building. ‘Miss Iris Natal? Please take your things and follow us.’ They had busted us, searched Jo’s flat in Ghent, my cottage, and the other country house, and found around seventy ripe plants. They took both lamp installations, and also the lovely, fat drying tops at home. Luckily I had not started a crop in my house, had only some branches drying. Jo had been acting stupid, like shouting at someone outside the apartment block in Ghent, that ‘He wasn’t getting anything ’cause he hadn’t paid the previous yet!’ and such, he was really a lunatic when drunk. A car crash had given him seventeen stitches in the head, that could explain some of his madness too. His apartment-block neighbours must have called the police. The police officers admitted they’d had their eyes on us for a while. So we both landed in court. The prosecutor demanded 5500 euro and a jail sentence of three months.”

“Eish! He was spinning out. Badly.”

“Yes, as usual. As it was my first offense and my lawyer had shown the double page travel story on Sri Lanka just published in the biggest national newspaper, hence proving I was an honorable citizen and not a drug-dealer, they let me off with civil service spread out over two days a week instead of going to jail, and the minimum, 1/10th of the fine. They let me pick from a list of six places and I got a very nice job in the library of a quiet town nearby; I loved it. This way my criminal record would stay blank after a five year probation period. I am totally off the hook by now. See, they had taken my diary too with my bookkeeping, all sorts of cryptic information and heart-wrenching stories in it. After reading it they must have felt sorry for me. They said I was Jo’s victim, as he’d been busted for possession of marijuana before, and was also a known patient in psychiatry. ‘Stay away from him,’ the chief of police said, ‘he’ll bring you down into the gutter.’ I heard him say to the press on the phone: ‘It was a false alarm, just a small fish’.”

“Hahaha I had to go to a loony bin, and help bathe and feed the mentally retarded, for twelve months, crazy!” Leonard said.

“Wow, that’s a long service. What for?”

“Drunken driving. I was so drunk the police had to force me off the road,” he laughed like a naughty teenager, “and then I climbed into them, woke up in jail the next morning a bit bruised up... That’s about 15 years ago. They said if they had not stopped me I would have driven off the mountain, so they had to stop me before the climb. Not bad guys. The cop who came to the cell the next morning, his shirt was badly torn up. Cherrie still made him a chocolate cake, for being so understanding, haha.”

“If you didn’t remember it, you were in a bad state! Maybe they saved your life? But you fought with him? So lucky you didn’t get a heavy jail sentence. I doubt if they would be so mild here, that’s a criminal offense, not taken lightly.”

“In Cape Town as well, if you attack cops, your sentence is usually harsher than normal. At my drug-bust the dealer took the rap and I paid the lawyer fees, so got off not bad.”

“What did they find?”

“I was buying Mandrax, a sleeping tablet, produced in India. You crunch the tablet and mix it into the weed with a nice pile on top and then you suck like crazy and go completely off.”

“Jeez, sounds lethal!”

“It’s that guardian angel stuff again. I have been blessed seriously in my life.”

“Indeed. You agree it is madness?”

“Using it is absolutely pure madness!”

“Hey, using? There is a big difference between smoking some joints or mixing loads with sleeping pills, no? I always functioned normal on weed, did the course with a joint for breakfast,
lunch and dinner, and had finished before all others, haha. In fact, I functioned better with than without, better focus. I have seen some people going crazy after smoking good grass, I could never understand it. Must depend on the individual brain, like alcohol...

“You are absolutely right Iris. Addiction turns to madness. Many people can enjoy socializing in drugs, I went too far and got out of control. I always functioned well no matter my state, that’s why I was never fired.”

“I can’t see weed as drugs, it has been a relaxer for me. I stopped smoking six months ago, only for financial reasons, to save up to come to India.”

“Smoking Mandrax pipes turned from talking normally to frothing at the mouth and getting so tongue tied you could only slur.”

“Jeez, sounds like a pure brain killer actually.” Leonard laughed that remark away. “I worked the night shift. How’s this? The one night at our supper break we’d polish off a bottle of whiskey, now I am pretty buggered and on the way to my department—which was on the other side of the floor, meaning I had to go through a few departments to get to mine—on the way back from drinking, someone offers me a Mandrax pipe; afterwards I am so fucked I am crawling on the floor drooling at the mouth. The foreman sees me and starts going off, hahaha. I hold up my hand, say something like ‘shay worth be okasth’, and crawl to my department. 30 Minutes later I went back and said ‘Don’t worry boet, I’m fine.’”

“Sweet Jesus, you really did push your luck! Hahaha. What a metabolism! Are you a teetotaller now or what?”

“Yes, I don’t take drugs or drink, but that is me. I got away with murder, but then I was the best at my job, no bullshit.”

“You must have been! I drank rather a lot too, all drink came for free on the gigs! But when I really had too much, my head would spin when I got behind the wheel I would tell the boys to wait a while and would throw up that glass too many and be fine after it. I never crashed. I also drove rather slow, tried to stay aware of it. But running through red lights was my hobby at the time. I was convinced I could feel danger, traffic ahead or not, and I never failed. Gave that up too though!”

“You didn’t give anyone a heart attack?”

“Rob trusted me, he knew I knew what I was doing and he was usually too drunk to notice anyway. The others drove in their own cars, we lived too far out south. Never a car came that I had not sensed, guess I was a bit lucid.”

“What awesome lives we lived! We used to have an end of the year party, when directors would sort of socialize with the workers. The one year the firm hired The Big Bunny. It was a paddle steamer, about three stories high... The hotel put up a breakfast and lunch; the hotel put up a breakfast and lunch; we were taken there by bus, and of course we drank all the way there, about a 2 hr drive, so we were pretty smashed by the time we got on the boat, and I was drinking tequila. I still see me going to the top deck and all the directors and managers are there and a couple of guys. I’m about 23 or 24 years old. I grab the top director of the company—he’s about 60-65 years old—and hang him over the side of the boat, three stories high, and casually asks the guys: ‘Hey what should I do with this old man?’”

“What? Man! A blackout? I think South Africa must be a very different place. They would put you in jail or in a mental hospital for that where I live.”

The work’s manager is almost on his knees, hahaha saying, ‘Please Leonard put him down, you could lose your job!’ and I am just crazy and laughing and saying, ‘Hey come on guys what do you want me to do?’ Most of them are just staring, can’t believe what they are seeing. Anyway I put the old man down, his feet don’t even touch the ground and there he has me over the side and casually asks the guys, ‘What should I do with this young shit?’ Now we are 3 stories up on a huge paddle boat, it has this massive wheel at the back of the boat that goes round and round, you can imagine
this boat. So when he has me hanging over the side, I pull myself free of his hands, hahaha, and dive over the side, and disappear under the boat, come up and swim to shore. They say the old man almost had a heart attack. When the boat landed he came up to me and gave me a huge hug and we went and had many drinks, he always liked me after that.”

“Surreal! I’d laugh, but am actually a bit shocked, if I may be honest.”

“You see the awesome lives we lived? For some reason people let me enjoy my life with very little interference. Shocked as in...?”

“It sounds very wise that you stopped drinking, if I may say so. This kind of stuff is unimaginable where I live. My dad slapped me only once, for a good reason, in retrospect—I’d been very cheeky, using a mean expression I’d picked up on the bus, not even knowing what it meant—and yet I never really forgave him. Jo, on the other hand, was a bit crazy, unpredictable at times and out of control, like you there... Cocktails of vodka, sleeping pills and hash or weed, magic mushrooms, you name it... But he didn’t get physically violent towards people. He couldn't handle disagreement. Seventeen head-stitches after a car accident got the blame for causing that, though I seriously doubt that now.”

“I was brought up with beating, the only way to correct children. My dad hit the shit out of me when I was naughty, got constantly beaten in the homes. I knew no better.”

“But your story shows it is not considered so heavy over there, almost like joking around, I can’t imagine it Leonard. Compared to that I have lived in a porcelain shop, where slamming a door was highly offensive and unacceptable aggression.”

“Smoking weed was a heavy offense if you were convicted, yes, when I got into crack cocaine that was a slide into absolute darkness...”

“Crack? Even worse than heroin! It makes thieves of people. I threw them all out of my house, all the friends that used it. It all led to isolating myself. Been robbed a few times, by young people I was helping to a roof and food, and many hours talking. I never trust a crack-junkie. Were the races mixing in South Africa, or not?”

“Yes, parents come home and all their furniture has gone. Drugs have no ethnic boundaries, if that’s what you mean.”

“Can’t see weed as one of those things. For young people one leads to the other they say. Perhaps, but it didn’t for me. Though I tried some things, cocaine too, I refused to buy any. When were you on crack? Smoking it, right? Have you ever used needles?”

“Weed smoked in absolute moderation has always been a means of enhancing the spirit, and psychic connections, but it has been the start of many a road to destruction.”

“Because of the circuit perhaps. I don’t see it that way, and I was smoking more weed and hash than with moderation. I’ve been an absolute hash junkie, when I have it, I smoke till it’s done. Now here, that’s me being very honest with you! I was growing kibs you know, the tolerance goes up. Me and marihuana were always a great team, I do miss it sometimes.”

“Hahaha. By the end of my drug days, a normal day started: waking up, having a weed pipe, that is breaking the top of glass cool drink bottles, turning it around and filling the whole base with weed and taking heavy sucks, thus getting very goofed.”

“I see what you mean, no, I don’t like it that way, I’d go a whitey. I smoked say a gram a day, stretched into many one-skinners?”

“You are absolutely perfect just as you are, and your life is yours to live the way that brings happiness into it, I would never dream of changing you into some fucked up idea that might appeal to me. OK, trying to explain a normal day. I would be alone so I smoked the whole pipe alone; then I would go into the township just down the road and buy four quarts of beer, 2 crack chips, 2 Mandrax tablets and a fair bit of weed, get home, suck down a quart, get a crack pipe ready, actually it wasn’t funny, ever just shackles I couldn’t snap out of, depressing and death, hahaha, no
Iris, no laughing matter. I used to look into the mirror and truly hate the image looking back at me, the age of darkness was from about my late 30s till I was 45 years old.

“Wow. Cherrie did put up with a lot?” She leaned over to kiss his hand. “Fuck, she had stopped and I was still going ape... and I couldn’t stop...”

“I understand how shocked she must have been when you left her, now that you were finally both clean. Hats off to you Leonard, for stopping!”

“Amazing, I thought I was such a laid back dad, surfer, cool dude, no hang-ups! Now my daughter tells me there were times when she was scared of me. That possibility had never entered my head!”

“Good she told you; and good your kids did not follow your example! How would you feel, if they used like that? Would you say: Oh let them have fun?”

“I asked the spirit for help and got it, have never looked back. Our kids are a true miracle. They both drink alcohol, but Jamie keeps it in his little fridge in the garage, so they respect my situation, awesome. If my kids did drugs and got like me I would kick them out to live their own lives in their environment, not mine, and I would always be there if they ever called out for help, for from experience I know I can’t stop something that isn’t accepted by the addict or alcoholic.”

“I think looking back is a good thing. How else do you learn from life? We are lucky we can look back. You’d have been dead a hundred times, if you did not have a special mission in this life. Does that mean, you’d kick me out too if I relapsed and smoked dope, and sometimes, say once a month, got drunk on whiskey-cola? Hypothetically speaking? Cause when too much emotion creeps up, it is my medicine. Even nowadays.”

“Iris we are truly blessed, hahaha, even more so for having crossed paths. Hey girl, I would never presume to live your life, if we ever live together it will be as the people we are now. The wind is picking up, am going for an evening surf check. I might be your medicine, one day...”

“You have been so mistreated, I don’t know if I could heal that, for good.”

“Hey beautiful lady, I have never been so mentally, physically and spiritually healthy as I am now. I was offering to be your medicine, if you ever need a shoulder to lean on.”

“And I appreciate it. I will think about everything you told me, I like a lot of time to reflect. Thanks for being so honest and open. It is the only valuable way, the only way to something sincere. Have a nice walk, and hopefully a lekker surf.”

“Very nice, you speak Afrikaans already! Lekker! If you are asleep by the time I get back, sweet dreams, Iris.”
Chapter 16

The Coolbox

There is a lot of commotion about the sudden disappearance of Leonard Stolk. The reception of beach-hut resort The Dunes is pestered by telephone calls. It is twelve days after the storm now, nine people did not return from the sea that day in this area alone. An army helicopter had circled the air looking for survivors for a few days but now the search was over. The Indian families accepted the presumed death of their beloved so easily, used to the toll of the ocean, and were praying for the souls of the deceased.

Every day the reception was called up by a certain Miss Esmeralda from South-Africa, inquiring about the blond surf instructor gone missing, and also a lady from Bangkok, whose English was hard to understand through the static of a bad telephone line, had called twice.

“I am his girlfriend, Monica, mister Stolk going to marry me,” she declared when asked who they were speaking to. Then a lady who said she was his ex-wife sounding deeply concerned, and a girl who claimed to be his daughter right after it. She was over-agitated and impossible to calm down. Then a woman with a very different accent, she said she was phoning from Manchester in England. This lady reserved a beach bungalow in The Dunes and was getting a flight over next week, to meet up with him or look for mister Stolk herself if he was not back by then.

“He is an excellent surfer and swimmer, he will turn up, you’ll see!” she assured the reception.

Then a chatty woman whose name was Rose Swift, the mother of his first son she said; and this morning his brother called from Reunion, the Indian Ocean island and not from a meeting, as the receptionist first thought, and his son James from Cape Town had called too. He seemed a very popular and loved man, this Leonard, answering his calls was almost a full-time job for the receptionist.

“No news from mister Stolk yet. We stored his laptop and other belongings from his hut in a safe place, you wish to keep reservation of his hut till he arrives?” Two of them had agreed and paid a week in advance, so the manager was very happy with the unexpected profits this disappearance was bringing him, though he had really liked the graying surfer a lot and hoped he was okay, like Lady what-was-her-name from Manchester expected. They all had money enough or they wouldn’t do it, was The Dunes policy. So while miss Esmeralda and madam Cherrie, the Bangkok fiancee, the Manchester dame and the English Rose all turned grey with worry over the man who stole their heart, Leonard Stolk was almost singing when he got up at the crack of dawn, grabbing his surfboard and going out for a paddle and more paddling, all the way to the other side of the awakening island. The Indian ocean was tranquil again, and so warm compared to the Atlantic Ocean.

The coastline on the east side looked quite different, rough rocks in different colours, from moss and eroded copper green to iron-indicating red, showing the richness of minerals all around, a geologist’s Eden. Lucky for Leonard Stolk it was a calm day, the sea was willing. After an hour he spotted this narrow passage through the rocky coastline towards a narrow strip of beach, all stony. Then suddenly some bright blue colour between the rocks caught his eye. He worked his way towards it.

“Yes!” he called out, and paddled even faster. There it was, the remains of a shipwreck: a blue pick-nick box, and some kelp riddled and tangled orange nylon string, thrown onto the rocks. That was perfect, he could tie the coolbox onto his board if he could untangle the rope. The day was young, he pulled it onto the beach and had a go at it. To his surprise the airtight coolbox held some
interesting stuff. There were two bottles of Kingfisher beer and two colas, a pack of rice and a tin of Swan sausages, a pot of Nutella chocolate spread! Naan bread in a bag, brick hard; that would do as bait for fishing; two packets of unopened crackers and biscuits and five sealed sachets of instant coffee. What a feast! Next he took a better look around the area. The vegetation was quite different, less bushy, but did he see papaya trees there? Some hardy flowers were attracting monarch butterflies, it was a joy to sit and watch them flutter. But meanwhile he worked his fingers to get the nylon string untangled, until he had a perfectly usable rope. Stiff from sitting in the wrong position he got up and stretched his arms high above him, and so he saw it!

It seemed a formation of boulders in the sand. As he walked towards the soft sandy patch near the rock wall, the shape of it left nothing to question. Big stones were laid in a rectangular shape, in the center small white stones about the size of an egg were placed in the shape of a heart, a seagull feather stuck in the sand for decoration. Leonard was looking at a grave. It could not be old, dug in the sand, the ocean would wash it away at the first stormy occasion.

This is strange, Leonard thought. Who made this grave? He investigated closer. There it was, right in front of him, the clear imprint of a foot, and a second one, feet nowhere as big as his own. His heart thumped. Maybe the motorboat Iris had arrived with had more survivors? He hoped there would not be an unexpected and temporarily forgotten husband; he was getting rather fond of Iris Natal. She still didn't remember how she got here or why, but the survivor’s footprint was definitely not of a tall westerner. Then he heard the sound of a breaking twig... he was not alone!

Well out of sight, a suntanned and uncombed slim youngster watches Leonard’s every move. His limbs ache as he crouches behind the cacti. For ten days or more he had been stranded here alone, and a strained ankle had impeded him from walking very far. He was getting very disturbed, not one boat sighted in all that time. How far had the storm thrown them off? Was this not Bird Island? His skills to find fruit, leaves and edible roots had given him the time to heal. The clear and pure ocean water was the best healer on earth, his streamlined body felt healthy and rested. The diet of nuts and sushi with all the papaya and bananas on top was working miracles for his condition.

He was getting over the shock of finding Old Baba’s drowned body, and digging a grave by hand had taken his mind off the situation. Why on earth had he let things get so out of hand, he thought? He had only taken this job to navigate his pal Lawrence and his man Baba to the island to pick up a package for some rich dude. Old Baba said the contact had left it in the old jade mine pit near the shack. Collect it, that's all they had to do. Baba knew what to do after it. The young Indian man had not questioned Old Baba about the contents of the delivery. When Old Baba suggested to give the Belgian lady a lift to the island, he had been very enthusiastic and pretty drunk; he had naively thought the talk about kidnapping had just been a joke. What had caused the fight with Lawrence he couldn’t really remember, something had pissed Baba off. But only three knots out from the beach he had seen Baba’s hand going into the tourist’s bag when she was not paying attention. He took out her passport and hid it in the bottom of the coolbox, under the beers. Only then had it dawned on Atindriyo, his new boss Baba was not kidding.

In no time the sky had turned into an ominous dark lead Krishna colour, the sun hurrying away from the high rising waves. The storm had hit them in less than twenty minutes. Atindriyo remembered slipping on the wet tilting rubber and hitting his head on something hard. More he didn’t see of the storm. Next he woke up, half in the water and half on the beach, throwing up sea water and hurting like hell.

Every day he just focused on finding food and water without having to walk too far, and looked out for a boat to come along. He had longed to see a human, but now that he did, he stayed hidden, watching the blond, tanned surfer come on shore and wondering how he could get his hands on that surf board. Looking at the interesting man, his muscular torso and engraved, serious face, he...
concluded he’d rather be friends with him than his enemy. But he had to find the parcel first. After all, Baba had said his family needed the money badly. He had an old and a new family with young children. He’d finish the job for him, find that man Kumar Rao in Mumbai and give Baba’s wages to his pretty, charming young widow and children. After all, he, Atindriyo Chakraborti, didn’t study Law for nothing. He just wished he hadn’t lost his glasses.

Leonard decided to let it go, and just ignore the breaking twig. If there was wild boar on the island he’d have to get a serious spear to kill one. A piglet would be awesome on the braai, but what about facing its big, angry, black-haired mama! It would be nice meat, they’d have to smoke and roast all of it, and now they had a coolbox to store it in, protected from flies and ants. He couldn’t wait to tackle the sea again to show Iris this treasure, thank God with the wind in the back. The load was slowing him down more than foreseen. His left shoulder was soon aching terribly. He planned to return there the next day, to find out who or what else was on the island. And hey! The Indian bread was tied shut with a strong elastic string, he would finally be able to try out his slingshot.

Atindriyo didn’t hesitate long. As his ankle was much better he would walk along the coastline towards the south end, starting first thing in the morning. He suspected that the hut with the little jade mine behind it would be at that side. He had to be fast so that surfer wouldn’t find the package, whatever it may contain, before him. He had silently hoped the European lady had survived the storm in their boat, hoping he and Old Baba had just been swept overboard, but now their pick-nick box turned up on the cliffs his hopes dropped. How would he ever get off this island where nobody else seemed to have any business, unless... that surfer who had turned up out of nowhere had a boat just around the corner?
Chapter 17

Fears and Danger

Leonard is probably out on the beach having a ball, Iris thought, one foot still in her afternoon siesta. She had dreamed of being with her brothers and sisters. They were together to celebrate their late parents’ wedding anniversary and were walking through the fields, talking, and had a picnic in her brother’s garden, near a pond. Over a glass of bubbles they were all telling stories. Her brother showed his latest bronze sculpture, a huge surreal concept. When it started to come alive, like a helmeted scorpion, it had scared her so much she’d woken up. She got up and went outside. There was a little welcome wind, and a delightful perfume of flowers and seaweed in the air. A few moments later Leonard turned up. He looked exhausted.

“What happened?” she asked. He rubbed his shoulder and made some painful grimaces.

“What a day! A light westerly wind, that’s not good for this side. I didn’t feel like paddling all the way to the east coast as the swells there are small, but I did anyway and... I just found us a little something. A treasure. Look! He walked around the bushes and brought the coolbox and the rope. Iris couldn’t believe her eyes!

“That is the picnic box from the boat I came here with!” she called out. She started dancing a happy dance of joy and Leonard joined in. “Did you find the boat too?”

He shook his head. Then they opted to share a coca-cola, and decided what to have for lunch and supper in one. What a delight! Even bigger was her amazement when under the can of coke appeared a burgundy coloured booklet.

“How on earth did my passport end up in here?” she called out. That was a mystery indeed. Leonard told her the details about his discovery, the blue box, the grave, the footprints and the swim home with his heavy load. Iris suddenly remembered.

“There was a young man on board, and an old toothless one he called Baba. The young man was most kind, and well-spoken. He had studied to become a lawyer but something went wrong, his father died or something, so he had to help at home. I hope the footprints are his, he’s a nice young man.”

Leonard asked about her activities. So she enlightened him about her wood collecting, yoga, a nice walk, then her siesta dream, which had made her wonder if her family would be worried at all about her. Probably not, the contact was scarce when Iris was traveling. They wouldn’t know about her going missing.

“Sounds like a nice day you had and a cool dream too. What does it mean though, a helmeted scorpion? Talking about family: are you close to them? I am close to my younger brother; not so with the elder two.”

“They don’t live near, so, being close is perhaps a bit of an overstatement. We keep the peace, and do share our passion for photography. Mum kept organizing Christmas dinners till the last year of her life, she was 87 then. She hired a large hall with caterer for the occasion, so we stayed all in touch that way throughout the years.”

“I don’t hear much from Bertrand and Mike, my two elder brothers, but Florian and I both surf a lot. I was very much a father figure to him in his youth.”

“My sisters always gave me clothes, second-hand furniture, whatever they didn’t need anymore. They guessed the music wasn’t earning well. A surfing young brother; that sounds like fun! I used to be close to the youngest of my brothers too, he was only five years older than me and was my soul mate; he painted all the time, and he drummed on our first LP too. We finally fell out over
Rob's drinking. Gigs meant free drink all night, and we never had to spend any money on it. It escalated. My brother had enough of my teary stories and said: 'just leave Rob then.' As if that was so simple, Rob being a foreigner in Belgium with no regular income or health insurance. You always still care, don't you? We did make up again, years later, but for some things it's too late. None of the family ever smoked dope or drank more than a glass with dinner, they thought I was poor because we didn't work. They just couldn't understand why he wasn't famous."

Leonard's mind drifted off, trying out his finished slingshot, aiming pebbles at a tree a few meters away. Maybe family stories couldn't interest him for long. The soft thumps of the stones hitting the bark hushed Iris up. She watched the rocketing pebbles. His thoughts had also flown back to home, South Africa. Back to the real world. After a while he stopped his target practice.

"Back home I'm driving up and down the mountains all the time. I had many a puncture too... but I still live to tell. Guardian angels? Mountain climbing might actually be safer," he joked.

"I see it this way: my angels have been so busy with me I grant them a rest. I don't push the river, if you know what I mean. I don't take protection for granted. I am scared of one thing, apart from snakes and spiders, that is: height plus metal. On mountain roads I cause traffic queues, driving that slow. Sounds to me that is not ideal where you live."

"You are getting to know me, I just do things without thinking of danger. I used to climb mountains with ropes, that was fun, with an American buddy and his wife. We did some awesome climbs. I will climb a mountain ledge but don't like standing on the edge of high buildings." Leonard told her full of excitement at the thought.

"Am not so scared in the mountains on foot. I wrote a story about a climb in the Lake District. That didn't involve any metal. But a road with iron protection from the steep drop makes my blood freeze with fear; weird, right? For example, one time the street in Ghent was dug up, you had to walk over a plank to get to my place, under it was a cement mill, I walked three streets round it, rather than cross it!"

"Hahaha, I caught a huge spider on my roof one day, caught it in a bottle and then threw it into a tree in my front garden."

"Not a tarantula, I hope. I had one in my bedroom too in autumn. This kind doesn't bite I think but they are quite tall. They make a noise behind picture frames. Years ago I'd have freaked and needed help to catch it; this time I caught it in a glass and carried it to the back garden myself. But when I walk through the bush I walk with a stick to see what's in the grass... never met a snake yet. Except once, I almost sat on a rattle snake that was sunbathing on a rock in Greece."

"My daughter will just stand and cry and shake, she is petrified of spiders, I don't kill them, hahaha usually throw them in my garden or over the wall."

"I never kill them either. We don't have too many, this type are house spiders. In Scotland it's bad luck to kill spiders, a story in their history... But hey, I have no experience with African insects, I'd need to be very careful there, like in the bush here. In Texas they said I was crazy brave to work in the garden without gloves LOL. I did once encounter a baby snake under the pebbles that I was moving bare handed, not much bigger than an earth worm. Glad I didn't meet mammy. On one of our walks, after a long ride on the Harley, Aaron stayed on the path while I went into the grass to get closer to a heron... He looked pale, waiting for an accident to happen. I walked on till I had to step over a dead tree trunk. There I sensed danger, so I stopped and turned back, but I got the pictures."

"Once in my army days on the border, we were doing a patrol of three days in the bush with rations and water etcetera. We carried it all on our back. My buddy and I took the morphine out of the medicine box and shared it. I just turned my head and told him to inject me, I hate needles, hahaha anyway, high as a kite I saw this puff adder on the side of the path and bent down to stroke its head, it kinda looked at me, turned around and went off into the grass... "
"What? Whoa... you ARE mad aren't you?"

"An absolute natural" Leonard grinned.

"I am basically very careful, never tempting fate. There are enough natural dangers to stay aware of, to avoid. I hate doctors and hospitals as I don't trust them much. How long were you in the army service for?"

"I don't tempt fate, I just don't stop to consider options," he laughed. "I don't like being hurt you know, like broken or sprained bones etc, it keeps me out of the water. Back then we were conscripted to war-duty for a year; and then had to do border duties, three months each, until the war ended and Mandela became president."

"But stroking an adder is asking for it, no? Like you don't pat a growling dog for example."

"Not unless you think you are father nature and all animals are your children, hahaha, had some amazing high times."

She thought about the Apartheid War for a while. Would she ask him what it had been like? If he had killed people? From films and war veterans on Facebook she knew this could be a sensitive subject. No doubt the chance of being blown to bits was numbing them for minor dangers like being bitten by a viper or any jungle animal.

"Yes, you are a very special man! Just listening to you makes me shake. Most people I know find me reckless, to travel alone. That's peanuts compared to what you do! I would rather think animals have their territory and I am the intruder, so, show respect and they may let me pass."

"I don't think so, not very special. Women who travel alone are very special, you are genuinely living your life. My daughter climbed mount Kilimanjaro, just her and a guide; you are both awesome women!"

"And she is so young yet! To Kenya alone!"

"Yes, my 21st birthday gift to her, and she still conned me into a party as well, the theme being Greek; a fun party!"

"Greek, oh, Dionysus huh, lots of wine... How far did it go? A rather promiscuous bunch, those old Greeks," Iris commented.

"All the young guys started jumping naked into the pool and the one friend was having sex between the cars," he laughed, "a smashing party!"

"What if Helena did that, how would you feel then?"

"I don't think I ever have the right to be ashamed of what my children do in their lives, don't know if you would agree... "

"I am not talking of shame. Just that extreme stuff, it's very hedonistic. It either makes you laugh and join in, or repulse you."

"I wouldn't be repulsed, if I was younger I would have joined in. Come to think of it, I did do something similar at my 25th."

"You may be surprised Leonard, but to me making love is the most beautiful thing there is, and I find it a real pity when it becomes animal-like. I would leave the premises. Not for the nudity, as such, but for the Bacchanal exaggeration."

"This was never a group thing I am talking about, but two people a bit out of it and having sex."

"Okay. I guess I'm getting old. I overdosed on drunken behavior, and there is no going back to liking it. I am more spiritual than hedonistic. In fact, me and hedonists, it doesn't work. I find it shallow, and below human dignity, sorry, am not gonna fool you in thinking I am something I am not. I did lots of stuff too, when young, things I couldn't do anymore now."

"Hahaha.. Like my experience, remember I was 25 at the time, a few of us turning 25 at the same time. We put money together and hired out an old chicken-shed up on a farm. The party was packed, and there was this woman I liked a lot, we worked together for the paper. So we went out
into the dark, found a quiet spot and had sex, hahaha. Next minute there were lights shining on us, we were in a ditch between the cars, a bit embarrassing.

“Haha, yes, I can imagine!”

“Almost another lifetime. I would just like to live with a lovely woman equal in sharing the magic of life...”

They both sank away in their own thoughts for a while. Both coconut shells filled up with more cold tea, Iris resumed the conversation.

“You got me thinking back of those days, I remember it all now. It is the reason why I stopped writing my autobiography. Immoral really, when I look back.”

“Do you have regrets?”

“I am not proud of it like I used to be. Like I was unconventional, free, and never made love without feeling in love. But heck, looking back, I was in love so easily, haha. Regret is a waste of time. It made me grow.”

“Wasn’t that typical for the era also, falling in and out of love, freedom of choice. And you know, Iris, what you say about regrets being a waste of time, exactly my idea too.

“No, I was looking for the right one. It was a search for love, nothing else. I like this era better. Am just as free. I don’t need to be promiscuous to be free! I would say now, perhaps I was oversexed.”

“Yes, I am still as free, sex was and is awesome, but you are right: finding the right one to enjoy it with seems elusive, for me anyway.”

“ Barely 17, I had an affair with a teacher, but quite innocent. We had some hanky panky in the car and such, not normal. I stayed a virgin for long though, afraid of getting pregnant, but I was so happy to have a lover. It made going to school exciting. I kept falling in love with cute boys, and after six weeks at the most we sat there, at some bar, with nothing more to say to each other... Every time. Earlier that year I was in love with a married man. I met him during lunch hour in a brown café where I used to eat my sandwiches, instead of in the school’s noisy dinner hall. He said he had nothing anymore with his wife. But he didn’t want to divorce her: they ran a restaurant together and had two children. So after nine months or so I broke up. He wanted me to run naked in his little holiday chalet. Hell, I didn’t see any fun in that, it made me cold and turned me shy, not on,” Iris concluded, laughing.

“You make me laugh!”

“I lost my virginity to him in the Flobecq woods, between smelly mushrooms in autumn, green parka time, but I didn’t enjoy it much actually. I thought sex was overrated after that. But I soon fell in love again.”

“It’s the old saying: love is not finding the person you want to live with, but the one you can’t live without. I haven’t been so lucky... Amazing.”

“Yes, I thought I did find that, for many many years, and could not live without Rob. I was so happy, playing the flute with him and everything, we were soul mates. But success changed him; drugs and especially alcohol, bad friends. I carried more responsibilities, for the baby, paying the bills; he went the other way, stopped working at anything. I drank and tried a little drugs too, but I had a big priority: my daughter, and my writing next. It felt like a mission in life: to change the world’s ruined mentality.”

“Hey, I had very good times with the women I lived with, but no train smash when we parted, for whatever reason, we always stayed friends, just moved on.”

“That’s cool, I am too sensitive a person. It took me seven years to leave my husband! Seven! He depended on me, he was a foreigner here, no income without me.”

“But you did, and your poetry is so awesome, I read it over a few times.”
“Rob’s songs were like my mission too. I discovered his talent, and said: Let’s go for the music. It worked well. The first record even made it into our national LP Top 10. Unfortunately he didn’t keep it together.”

“Hahaha. His songs might still change the world. Apparently we are moving into the 5th or 4th cycle, when the positive overtakes the negative? You could be a shining light.”

Iris didn’t know about the cycles but caught on to the last bit, “I’ve been that shining light already, in my top days. Playing music on stage, making the records, writing hundreds of articles, always writing against commercialism and consumerism, against racism and discrimination. I have done what I could. I feel I am on early retirement now, poetry is all I have left in me. I wrote over 250 poems in two years. You know, ‘Rob and Iris’ were a living legend as a musical couple. Small scale, yes, we never made it big. He was a foreigner; they promoted Belgian musicians in that era.

I once refused a television talk show “Boeketje Vlaanderen”, to talk about my first official poetry book in Dutch, ‘Vaarwel aan het kaf’. I couldn’t do it. That was a big mistake, it could have launched my career. I was just 20 then and a bit shy.”

“That’s wonderful! Some of my surfing buddies are musicians, Robin Auld plays in the UK and he lives there. He comes over for a holiday. We had a few over when my younger brother was over for a holiday, you sound like you could have been a super star!”

“I play by ear but was never one of the best and my voice was too quiet too. At the reception of the book, a reporter asked me, what does your title mean, “Farewell to the Chaff”, are you a fascist? I was speechless, had no idea how to explain anything. My brother replied for me, but it put me off going on TV! I was on television in Namibia one time though!” Iris laughed at the memory, “Some years ago our family, fifteen of us, were in Namibia visiting the Himba tribe near the Angolan border, when a third jeep arrived, NTB, Namibian Television Broadcast; they set up a big camera on a tripod and picked me out to do an interview, started asking questions, they liked my sarong I guess?” Iris joked.

“Namibia! It’s lovely both by the sea and far inland. There is a wave beach, one of the longest rides, I will Google it when we get back to mainland so I can see what time of the year is best to go there. Then you need a 4x4 to get there. Supposed to be an awesome left, perfect for goofy me. It would be near Swartkopmund.”

“Sounds brilliant! Everywhere in South Africa will be intriguing for me too. I know there are several national parks there. I won’t budge from your side though, too unfamiliar for me, and am a little wary of the ‘black brothers’ to walk alone. A lot of Aids there, if something would go wrong. In Texas they told me if you walk alone in the coloured area there at night you are asking for a gang bang. I didn’t believe it but didn’t test it either. Same in India, after dark. The newspapers are full of it now, rapes in India. Going mad, losing their religion, using drink and drugs, and the sex in all the imported movies...”

“You would enjoy an East Coast road trip. Lots of awesome things to see and great surf spots for me. I have only been in one national park other than the Table Mountain one, a new one up near Port Elizabeth, where my older brother lives. That’s also on the east coast.”

“I would love it. If you don’t drive as fast as usual!” she laughed.

“If it was just a surf trip, that would be different, but a nice slow cruise that would be awesome.”

“Yes. I enjoy observing. I am not an action freak, just sitting and watching amuses me too. Small details, never bored.”

“Every thing has its moment, you might not do the jumps at Suicide Gorge but you would get awesome photos.”
"I would certainly try, it depends on the light too, some days you get nothing good, like surf, and sometimes I am too shaky and can't hold the cameras still, it's a strange business, like painting, very moment- and mood-connected."

"Fascinating. I will stick to surfing. If surf's up I paddle out, simple."

"Haha, same thing, need the right wave like you need the right light. A lot of the so-called work comes after, selecting, adjusting on pc, like the dark room in the old days, and bring the best of them out."

"Yes, I did a lot of dark room work in the printing days. I ended up doing colour correction using photo shop."

"I prefer the colours as I get them, but contrast can help; and on misty days, you can save pics that are too dull."

"I had to correct all photos to go with whatever press and paper were going to be used."

"That's a great job! But mags and newspapers tend to saturate the colours so much they become unreal. Which is fine; I just try and not do that. I see it as showing people the beauty of the planet, not a fairy tale." She made Leonard laugh.

"I can change the complete look on your face, though wouldn't be able to mess with your beauty."

"I am not that good with it."

"It was a long paddle and tough swim back today, my shoulder is killing me, sweet dreams beautiful woman," he said and she made him turn over to massage his shoulders; he was asleep in minutes.
Chapter 18

Crooks in Trouble

Can crooks basically be innocent? Could they be protected or get guidance from above? Kumar Rao and Lawrence were on the road for just one reason, to make money, not out of greed but simply for survival, to help their family survive. And not just a wife and some children but an entire family. In India a son still takes care of his aging parents. One house is easily shared by three generations, like it was in Europe a hundred years ago. Most of them sleep on simple bamboo-beds; the fortunate ones like Kumar and Old Baba have carpets and cushions and a television set — of course but keep the furnishing pretty basic.

The narrow winding road took Kumar Rao and Lawrence away from the busy town of Arambol and its scooter-riddled streets. Soon they were driving through fields, small groves and poverty-stricken settlements where time seemed to have stood still. Now and then a buffalo cow, grazing along the road, decided to cross the street. Here and there a dog was resting on the tarmac, indifferent to approaching traffic. Women balancing huge packs on their heads were constantly on their way to somewhere. They were only making slow progress.

Life was quiet here, but if Kumar Rao, who was a Christian — like many in Goa, maybe the most enduring Portuguese heritage here — had been alone, he would now be praying out loud to his imported deity. His body still hurting from the roughing up by Sergej’s bodyguard, constantly reminded him that this man was not joking. And what was worse, the Russian was working for a criminal cartel that would not at all be pleased if the deal went down. He simply had to retrieve the diamonds. He eclecticly prayed to the Holy Virgin and to Ganesha, to Lord Shiva and even the Buddha, begging that the stones had not been picked up before the storm had taken the boat. His breath was shallow and too fast, sweat was running down his neck, staining his best blue shirt.

“Who is that friend of yours, Lawrence? You’re sure he has a boat, right? You do have his address?”

Lawrence coughed and took a sweetie out of his pocket.

“Well, I don’t need his address,” he said. “I know where his boat is, he’s a fisherman, always around on the beach.”

Kumar Rao tried to hide his irritation. This was India, he was born here, he knew it well. Just as they had crossed the town center of the touristy village of Ashvem, with neon lit supermarkets and large restaurant terraces that made it look like any beach resort in the West, the car began to shudder and sway. Kumar pulled over to have a look. He couldn’t believe it. He had a puncture. One front tyre was totally busted. He started to rave and swear at Lawrence.

“You don’t even know his address? You damn useless idiot! And now this!” He continued his tirade for about twenty minutes, then sat exhausted on a wall in the shade of a tree. He couldn’t believe it. He had a puncture. One front tyre was totally busted. He started to rave and swear at Lawrence.

“How far is it from here to your friend’s place?”

“To Ravi Battacharya’s boat? Maybe half an hour?”

“Half an hour’s walk?”

“No, by car,” Lawrence said dryly.

Kumar Rao went berserk. He felt like punching the youngster, but he didn’t. They were on a
quiet stretch of road, surrounded by farmland, no people or houses immediately around to inform about the nearest garage or tire-shop. So Kumar decided to walk back to the resort village and find out where to go from there. The more stars the hotel, the better educated the staff, he knew. He locked his car and they started walking back. “Three days,” Sergej had said. Three days! Kumar would have to contact him before the day was over. It took them some twenty minutes before they reached the first hotel. The receptionist gave them the telephone book.

“No mechanic in this area sir,” she said. “You’ll find one in there.”

Kumar Rao made five phone calls before he found a car-dealer who had the needed tyre size. A heated argument on the phone followed. Devastated he returned to Lawrence, whom he found sitting outside, waiting and chewing on his last sweetie.

“We are stuck,” he said, “stuck here, in this disastrously expensive hotel until tomorrow. The mechanic can’t get here any sooner. I must call my boss Sergej immediately.”

He called the Russian’s number. There was no answer. Fearing for the safety of his family, Kumar tried again and again. Lawrence was so hungry his stomach was aching, but he didn’t dare to say a word. He didn’t understand why Kumar was so upset. What was all this panic about? They managed to get a deal for the smallest room in the building. Almost in tears and dying for a drink he couldn’t afford in this place, he went to bed.
Chapter 19

Poultry

When Leonard Stolk returned to the hut, now twelve days after they had sailed out on their pleasure journey, it was well past noon, and Iris was not around. His hope of finding his friend Steve Warwick alive was almost gone. The footprints had been too small a size to be his. He took the slingshot and left bird-hunting, as the tide had not brought any fish into his natural trap. He had his eyes on some brown waterbirds, the size of a chicken with a slender neck and a long sharp beak, high skinny legs and a fat-looking body. They were picking in the sand for the tiny one-legged sand crabs that only appeared at low tide. It would be a delight to have a break from fish and shells, the swan sausages from the coolbox had been a great treat but were far from nutritious. Visions of roasted poultry made his stomach rumble. He walked to a narrow bay where he’d seen seabirds hunting the funny one-armed sand crabs. They looked like big, orange freak spiders with that single scissor arm. The birds were entirely focused on finding food and seemed an easy catch. He had seen them daily; necks bent and absorbed in their search, they would not even notice his barefoot approach.

"Hi there Leonard." Iris, on her way back from her daily fruit gathering, was bringing more almonds, more bananas and a coconut.

"Hello Iris, how was your day?"

"It was quite mixed. Some pain, and some wondering how we’re ever gonna get back home. And yours? Didn’t you go and surf? I see no board?"

"Today was good, had a nice surf! I’m so relaxed. Am stalking out those birds there, would you fancy roast chicken today?"

Iris smiled. "Mm, sounds good, though those ‘chickens’ are of the crane type family. But I’m not staying to watch you kill one."

"No worries, one sharp stone with the slingshot, right on the head, will knock it out instantly! It won’t even know what hit it."

"You must be a good shot, cowboy! Surfing sounds like such a great time! I must try it myself soon. This leg is much better now, though still hurting now and then. I went for a brief walk today. There’s a nice green, open patch at the back of the cabin. I love it, though some nutcase cut down some trees and mutilated the spot. There’s plenty of dry firewood there. The walk made me see life in perspective again, and I feel better. I feel happy here, shouldn’t worry. Worrying is a misuse of the imagination. Something will turn up, I’m sure."

"You know, I woke up today not being my normal bubbly self. But surfing is such a tonic, the spirit just always embraces me so absolutely. Even the other day when I got more fucked up than surfed out, I came out feeling so okay!"

"That’s magical! Being near the ocean is healing for me too, even without being in it, but a walk also reconnects me. Is your shoulder any better?"

He rubbed his shoulder. "I speak only for myself, but Cape Town is a very powerful magical spot. When there is no surf I take my dogs for a walk on the beaches or in the mountains, the spirit is very much there. But the water for me is the best. Cape Town will really tempt you to stay. I might just be a tiny part of the power there. The ocean is much warmer here though, perfect to teach you. I paddled for over two hours to check the Eastern bay again, didn’t find anything more; then two hours paddling back... It hurts, yes, are you coming to sort it out?" he laughed.
“Okay,” she said, approaching to massage his shoulder. “Let me try. I believe you about Cape Town. Some spots on earth have that. Some special friendships have that too. Join the two and you are flying.”

“Two out of two, fantastic,” he murmured and closed his eyes to enjoy her gentle treatment, her hands kneading away all the tension. Half an hour later she stopped, her hands were throbbing. They had both taken a long flight in thought. Iris knew exactly what she wanted.

“What about life when we get back, Leonard, are you in a relationship with someone?”

“Hey beautiful, am so relaxed I could sleep, but I must be going... to catch us a lovely bird for supper. I must find the sweet water source where these birds drink from. See you soon,” he replied, and off he went. Iris walked back to the shabby hut, realizing he avoided answering certain questions, like when she had asked if he had ever used needles. The answer had come out later, and had been positive. She swept the sand out of the hut with a dry palm leaf and started writing like a typhoon.

Only moments before dark Leonard returned, carrying a dead bird.

“The slingshot sniper of bird island! Good work, my man!”

Iris quickly set some straw and kindling ablaze, and used the pot for boiling sea water to make the plucking of the feathers easier. It smelled like hell, but the sky was turning a deep orange and took her mind off it. While plucking the bird, Leonard was thinking of old memories, pleasant ones. His eyes twinkled. The poultry was quartered with his pocketknife, the four pieces pierced on a green branch and hung across the char-coaling campfire. Soon the aroma of grilling poultry filled the air.

“When I was younger, when I had just moved back to Cape Town, there used to be bungalows in a farming area where there were not many houses. We used to go and have fun in the bungalows, with reggae-music and tons of weed. I have photos of my children, 2-3 years old, going over my back-wall into the bush. Now all the bushes are gone. In Goa the evenings are nice, but we have stunning sunsets there too!” Did she detect some homesickness? Or was he trying to melt her for the idea of going to South Africa when all this was behind them?.

“Talking of sunsets, in Croatia we saw breathtaking ones too, last summer! I used a photo of it for a book cover, can’t wait to show it. The back-cover held another picture, of a high moment, quite an adventure, to be mountain-climbing without ropes in the Lake District, North England. After a deadly day of climbing up, and descending in the snow, we reached the village. Waiting for our pick-up, the boys started to play a soccer game and made me goalkeeper. Seven balls I let in, only stopped two; it hurts like hell when that leather ball hits you."

“Sounds like a breathtaking mountain climb! I can’t wait to order your books, to take your poetry with me in the future, on walks when you are not with me,” he said. “I also played goalkeeper once, we also lost 7-0. It was so bad my own side started fighting over not passing the ball back to me, and this was in the over 45 team.”

Leonard was funny. Meanwhile he kept rotating the meat on the sticks, beside the boiling rice in the dented pot. Iris was about to tell him the story of her first time in Amsterdam, where she’d been lured into an apparent soccer game that turned out to be American football, which meant getting run over and knocked off your feet. But his mind was on other things already, probably staring into the fire had brought it on.

“The last time I spoke to my son on the phone, he said one of his bosses had invited him over to her place. Next a message tells him to bring some candles,” he laughed. “I told him it could turn into a nice evening.”

“His boss? That means promotion or trouble.”

“Hahaha, the start of an interesting learning curve; we had such a good laugh. I offered him to use my car, he declined in case it turned into a late night... Candles!” Iris laughed along. He had a
great effect on her mood! A candle in the hut would be nice indeed. But he was onto another subject already.

“So you also come from a huge family! I have seven aunties and four uncles, and between them there are thirty-eight first cousins. I think the only time we all ever got together was at the grandparents’ funerals. I didn’t recognize half of them,” he narrated. “My mom is now the eldest living member, 79 years old. Once grown up I lost contact with 80% of them. Do you know all your cousins on a good basis?”

“My aunties’ kids? Since I was a kid, rarely. My sisters’ and brothers’ children I do.”

Where was this conversation heading to, Iris wondered. Was he anticipating meeting each-others family? The barbecued poultry was ready. It tasted absolutely delicious with the rice. Iris packed the rest in banana leaves in the cool box. Tomorrow’s dinner was already taken care of. By the time she went inside, having covered the campfire with stones in a way it wouldn’t totally die and flare up easily in the morning to make coffee, Leonard was already asleep. But just a few hours into the night he crawled beside her on her mattress and made love to her.

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That same evening the shipwrecked Atindriyo sank down beside a big boulder. He had been walking all day. The path leading through the jungle had soon started sloping upwards. Then a steep hill had him clambering up on hands and feet. His ankle was soon hurting again. He regretted not having taken enough food; fishing had been easy at the butterfly bay. There had been a lot of edible things near the sea and in the bush there. But this hill was much more arid and bore no fruit trees. Except for some prickly pears from a cactus and some coconut he had not eaten a thing the entire day. It had been a very hot day to climb, near 30°C in the shade, no doubt.

He’d sleep right here, a little sheltered by the boulder and covered for the chill of night with the extra jumper he had inherited from Old Baba. He had not expected the other bay would be so far to reach. He missed the bed of leaves and dry grass he had improvised close to where he had buried Old Baba, and mouth-watered at the thought of his daily evening sushi. Soon he was dreaming...

*Old Baba was helping him to jump up on a surfboard on the sand. A blond surfer appeared. He was desperate and begged to trade the board they had found for all he had on him, being two bags of ‘Kentucky Fried Chicken’. He was smelling the delicious roast...*

A scurrying gecko, frightened by the sudden loud stomach rumble, woke him up. It was near the break of dawn when Atindriyo rose to continue his journey.
Chapter 20

Floating Memories

After that first time Iris would go for a swim every morning, but as Leonard had found traces of another survivor on the island, she would keep her bikini on. This morning she woke up before him. She waded through the small rolling waves and swam out as far as possible, wanting to take a peek around this bay’s corner. The view was similar, a dense green and rocky coastline. She made up her mind, one day she’d be surfing and fly on a wave like she’d only flown in her dreams. Floating on her back like a leaf, Iris felt light and happy.

You’d have to see the place to understand why not an instant of it was boring. It felt unreal, like living in a fantasy. How lucky, she thought, to have boarded that boat, to have survived the storm and be rescued by this golden tanned surfer who she was falling in love with. Was it crazy to believe in new love at her age? Was her heart, that got so attached when she loved someone, ready to move on? Would Aaron miss her and change his mind, or the man before him, her impossible love? Approaching the tiny beach of ‘home’ her thoughts switched back to reality. They couldn’t stay here forever, first the heat and eventually the monsoon would make it unlivable. If this was the south, and the west- nor east-coast were offering any chance to escape, maybe the northern coast would. She wondered if she could cross the island overland. Somehow they’d have to get back home, people would become worried. She spotted Leonard, sitting immobile on a rock, like Rodin’s Thinker, checking the swell. Lost in thought and trying to locate the origin of waves in the far distance, he didn’t see her approaching until she was pretty close, dripping wet and shivering. The morning air was still cool.

“Hi! The water is warmer than the air! Too quiet for surf huh? Do you want some more time alone?” she added, when Leonard didn’t react for a moment.

“Hello girl; I was just thinking of you! Looks like you had a nice swim!” He got up and rubbed her warm in his arms. She swooned. What a wonderful feeling, his warm, broad and hairy chest, his strong paddler arms and perfect, sandblasted hands, the curves of his salty neck so close to her face...

“That grave made me think,” he said suddenly, “how closely connected life and death are. Last night I was dreaming about a friend of mine who is always reminding us of her dead daughter; like the thoughts of her keep the girl alive. In my dream she was calling for help, drowning. I woke up before I could get to her. She lives in England and has all kinds of things wrong with her, is always dieting, and was in hospital for a while; I think her hubby is also not in the best shape. I wonder why I dreamed that, if something is wrong there. It’s fabulous being here with you, but some people will be starting to miss us. Was also thinking, this island seems to be sloping upwards, this side is flat, the east and west are both a lot rockier. Inland the terrain starts to rise, the northern side is mountainous, and possibly has a steep cliff coast.”

Their minds were working synchronously.

“Like the island tilted over by some tectonic shift, like a volcano under the sea bed erupted and later the island broke in two. One side broke off and slid to the bottom of the ocean? There could be real treasures buried in the lava, pirates may have been resting here for centuries.”

Leonard laughed. “I love your mind, you are absolutely inspiring! “

Spontaneously she landed a kiss on his forehead. “Let it shine when it shines...” she sang, an Ozark Mountain Daredevil song.
"You know yesterday at the east side I got such a good wave in. The drop was nice and then the wall just stood straight up, and I went flying down. My daughter once told me I look very casual riding a big wave. When I paddled back I still had such a smile on my face."

"I can almost feel the rush." Then she sighed in late agreement. "People may be getting worried! What about your family?"

"My children maybe? My grandmother lost a set of triplets, my one uncle had eleven children from about five wives, no he wasn't a Mormon," Leonard laughed, "nicely interesting family, I could spend a lifetime with you and just cover the basics. I have always loved the whole lot of them including my twin auntsies! But they won't miss me, we rarely have contact."

"Twins and triplets? Strong swimmers!"

"Hahaha. My mother once threatened a judge to give him the hiding his mother never gave him. She is a strong woman, dares to swim against the current."

"Contempt of court that would be where I’m from, man we do live in different worlds."

"There are only two surfers amongst us, three actually, my half sister doesn’t surf; four, counting my little cousin Ted having just got sponsored by Quicksilver."

"Yes, surfing is a special talent; we have mostly musicians."

"Speaking of court, I have two cases pending, going to do my own defense, no idea, just another learning curve."

"Fair is fair, just project your point of view as convincingly as you can, and call the judge ‘Your Honor’, they like that. What’s the accusation this time?"

"Both are for owing money from the business, the rehab clinic, shit, I’m an absolute cook at business. Now I know different. Don’t worry, I won’t threaten the judge at all," he laughed. "Life is good here, let’s just stay here."

"I had the judge laughing, in court. My phone went off and I apologized from the public benches, explaining it was new and I didn’t know how to switch it off yet. He said ‘I’d rather hear Cher’. Without thinking I replied: ‘I will take care of it for next time.’ There shouldn’t be a next time in court, right? The judge just laughed, and later started my case on a friendly note because of that. I’d been caught parked on the cycle lane, drunk, vomiting through the open door. Trying to persuade Jo to go into a detoxification program, I got very drunk on vodka orange myself; he’d topped me up without me noticing. He said he’d go in the next day. On my way home I felt suddenly very dizzy. I stopped the car to avoid the sharp bend onto the peripheral road that I knew had no emergency lane. Next minute a cyclist stops and asks if I am alright. I snapped: ‘Do I look alright?’ I was as sick as a dog, my head hanging out the door while I was vomiting. Next moment I see four black boots asking the same thing. Police. They made me take the alcohol test, it didn’t take a reading at all. So they took me in the van to the police station and made me blow in a new balloon, with the same result. I thought they’d let me go, but they drove me to the hospital and took a blood test. It measured 2.31 milligrams of alcohol per liter, where 0.5 pro mille is the legal limit. The public accuser in court was a stern woman with black-rimmed glasses. When I was telling about the critical moment of judgment to stop the car for safety, I looked her straight in the eye saying: “What would you have done? Beyond that bend, on the R4, there is no side-lane!” She nodded. I got off with the minimum fine and retention of my driving license for 45 days, but they let me choose the period myself, as I needed it to go to the obligatory reorientation course from the unemployment office, in Ghent. So I chose the period in which I was abroad."

"You would love my mother, though she has Alzheimer’s now."

"Old people become like children again, so give them back some years, buy her young vibrant clothes and take her for a hair dye is what I would do... ‘"

"Hey you are such a lovely person! You are always there lately, on my mind... "

"You are a romantic."
He got up to take some fruit. “Did you notice there are no mosquitoes here? Not the malaria type anyway, nor in South Africa. In Arambol I have a net I bought in Bali, so definitely no problem. Just watch out for snakes.”

“Snakes? Brr. The boy in the boat explained to me that when eye in eye with a snake you best freeze, grab it by the tail and throw it as far away as you can. With tigers you just look them straight in the eyes…”

Leonard laughed at the tale and added; “and sharks you gently rub under the chin!”

“Oh no, don’t tell me there are sharks here, I always wondered. Please, no!”

“The place I learned to surf and still teach in, back home, Falsebay, is supposed to be the second biggest shark basin in the world. The Great Barrier Reef in Australia is the first.”

“Oh God! The list of scary things over there is growing.”

Danger, or fear, seemed to amuse him. “I’ve had a great white shark swim right past me twice. I just said to the surf students: ‘Hey guys, don’t want to scare you but there is a shark here.’ We watched it swim past us, went out of the water for ten minutes and then paddled out again. Don’t worry, when I am teaching you, you will be on a board and I will be standing in the water, so no fears.”

“How come swimming with dolphins in Egypt with my Pilates class sounds like a better idea?” Iris mocked.

“Hey what’s your problem? A woman who climbs up a scary mountain, takes on the mountaineers in a game of soccer, hell my girl, sharks? haha. You just quote something and they will do a tail stand for you.”

“Something like: An old soul is what you are, admit it. One day we will see this life as a phase of its own. That’s my shortest poem ever. That mountain climb in the Lake District happened ages ago, I was just 18.”

“And then you get these days when there are so many dolphins and they come and swim between us. I often dive down and beat on my board or make sounds hoping one will come up and nudge me. They never approach us but casually swim between us no matter how many surfers in the water. They go from one edge of the bay to the other and then back again.”

“Fascinating! I did an interview about them titled: Can dolphins heal? They have extremely sensitive vibration detection, who knows, maybe they see auras in full colour too?”

“Wish they had seen mine and let me hold onto a tail and towed me into the middle of shark alley.”

“Those are home trained dolphins doing that,” Iris laughed, “and in the Mediterranean Sea probably because they throw fish at them. No doubt they say to each other: ‘Aha, those mad people who throw good food overboard are here again!’ when they see the boat.”

“I even tried yodeling under water, hahaha. It must have sounded horrible, none came near. But the feeling between the surfers in the water is so bubbly, nice! They want to blame chumming for attracting sharks, I think that’s absolute crap. Chumming is, they take the entrails of the fish and throw it in the water to try and attract big fish. But our fisher folk have been doing that since the beginning of time. I think the reason for more sharks anywhere is because we are raping their feeding grounds. The Chinese and Japanese do as they please and no one interferes.”

“Yes, massive ships they use. That swim made me hungry, what about you? I could make some soup from the carcass of the bird.”

“Yes. I’m hoping for a late afternoon surf here, if the wind picks up a little, just going for a quick swim now. See you later.” He gave her a quick kiss and ran into the water.

While the pot was on the fire, Iris observed the sky and the trees. An eagle, its wings stretched out wide, soared high above her; she spotted its whitish head. Then in one glimpse she saw the blue flutter of a kingfisher and a small bright green parrot, two so totally different flying styles.
Two black caws were chasing a third one. Were they mother, father and young playing, she wondered? How would her daughter be doing in Dharamsala? That was at the foot of the Himalayas, and she was all by herself. A lovely melody from an invisible little finch reassured her all was well. She took her notebook and wrote:

Never believed in blowing up bridges,  
yet I saw a few crumble at a second close look.  
I never believed in shooting crocodiles,  
would rather have learned to swim like them.  
In long wild grass a sand trail hides  
Where it leads, towards light, is a pool  
A puddle the size of a mountain  
Its heart beats like salty veins of blood.  
Through skin and sphere, chasing fear and cold thought.  
As a captain you sail, as a shark-friend you paddle  
The dolphins look behind and wonder at your noise  
It’s freedom to be taken to unknown levels  
May never waste our head again with a shot in the dark.

“Nice!” Leonard said when he returned from the swim and read it. “I think all sharks and dolphins would give you free passage in their waters. I thought of writing you a poem on the mountainside yesterday, thought it might be too petty compared to the way you write, but one day I will try.”

“You should do that. No comparing going on in poetry.”

“I used to write a lot at one time. My daughter read some and said she never knew I was so unhappily married.”

“Writing comes easier when you’re sad. It’s more urgent then, to release the tensions in our emotional field.”

“I also wrote tons of love poetry, usually gave them to the women they were about.”

“You big romancer! There is an easy trick to improve writing poems. Read it a few times and replace all clichés by a metaphor. Now, coffee for me! So great you found that coolbox. Want one too?”

“Yes, without any doubt! Two sugars please!”

This was not the time for the sugar talk. As long as he used unrefined cane sugar, there would be no need for immediate emergency alarm, Iris thought.

“How come you are not surfing today? Are there no good waves?”

“The swell has dropped off a lot. Yesterday was magnificent. Neptune kept calling, hahaha—his laugh was like a waterfall, very inviting—so I had to follow the call, it led me all the way to the eastern point, a nice surf. I surfed in but didn’t see anything of interest to us there. I don’t think there’s a surf in it at all today. I could do some more bird hunting?”

“A fabulous three course meal today! Fruit cocktail, soup with oat crackers, and grilled poultry with rice, if all goes to plan! Plenty of new energy.”

“Wonderful. But let me tell you about the Ocean’s power of love: friendship. When I paddled out to the east side yesterday I recalled one time, there was a guy already in the water; we had been in a hectic argument in the water at another spot another time... so I just ignored him. During our argument he had started bragging about being a self-made millionaire,” Leonard narrated in his funny accent and usual laughing manner, “I just told him to go piss and play with the steam. He was highly upset and paddled out. And then I had that wave and when I kicked out and paddled
back he was taking off on a wave. He did a bottom turn and then the wave broke right over him
hahaha, he was tubed, you know, he got covered over with the wave and came through, nice. I was
already smiling and started hooting for him, and waited for him to come alongside and told him
what a nice wave he had just had. His smile split his head in half, and just like that we were surfers
together. Nice! Ocean power!

Iris smiled. "It takes a while to get a coffee here," she said and walked around the back where
she kept dried coconut shells. They burned well. "It’s amazing how little I actually miss here.
Maybe because at home I have cut the contact with most old friends? My social life was through
Facebook recently, except for the yoga classes in Ghent," Iris suddenly remembered, a wave of
being missed reaching her extrasensory perception. For an instant she wanted to make love to this
man, no matter who he really had been. He was a changed man, like a wounded bird that licked its
wound and flew up again. She pondered a moment how to bring it on, did she not feel his heat
rising? Leonard suddenly showed an unexpected interest in what she had just said, be it on
another tangent.

"Are you good with computers then?"

"No, am mostly self-taught. I was working on an electric typewriter, a Brother, the first with a
memory disk and a one paragraph screen, when one day I got offered a job at a magazine in town
and learned to work on a computer. I recall the printer was a huge thing with massive rolls of
paper and in the first week I kept printing things non-stop without even knowing how to stop it,
haha. I learned a lot from Germain De Rouck those two years, previously a senator, who was the
editor and publisher. Much later, in 2002, I took a year’s course in web scripting, in evening
classes. I wanted to build a website as a farewell gift to Rob, so that he’d have something to work
with to attract a new manager or get gigs on his own, since I was resigning as his so-called
manager. I scanned in a lot of photos I had taken at gigs and recordings through the years. The
course in HTML also included Photoshop, so my first website was made in html, the original way,
not using templates. Things are a lot simpler now. Only twelve students were allowed to that
advanced class. I had to bluff my way in. ‘Do you have any knowledge of Windows?’ the panel
asked. I thought of all the windows I had washed in my life and answered confidently: ‘Windows?
No problem.’ Next they asked if I was familiar with the Internet. I had an email address since a
week, so: ‘The Internet? Sure!’ I replied. I was admitted. Friendship saved me there. The boy beside
me was a genius on computers, he was just playing all the time. He helped me understand what
the teacher told us to do. I even learned how to make link buttons myself, it was a nice and
personal layout, very happy with the result."

While Iris poured the hot water on the instant coffee powder in two coconut shells, Leonard,
amused, took his turn to tell a story.

"A husband and wife are sitting in the lounge, and the wife starts swearing. The husband asks
‘What’s wrong my love?’ She says: ‘The fucking windows froze.’ He says: ‘Don’t worry love, put
some warm water on it.’ A while later she shouts: ‘Now the whole computer is buggered!’ Hahaha!

‘Hahaha, never do what your man tells you to do! For me it was an indication, if Rob said left, it
had to be right!’ Iris joined in.

“It makes me crack up every time I think of it. Why ask, if women do the opposite anyway?”

“I always listen to car mechanics, and to guides too. But once I showed a trekking guide who
was lost with a client how to get back down to the point where they had left; they had gotten on a
wrong path in the Blue Mountains after walking all night and day with a heavy backpack. I listened
to Jo too, he knew his way around the woods where I lose all orientation!”

‘Hahaha. Were you right about the road?’

‘Yes, I was, though I took a wrong turn myself after they left, cause they had confused me. I had
to clamber up a steep gravel hill to get back on the path... so roasting hot, I thought I’d faint there
in the Jamaican mountains. I had let Jo go on alone to the top, I preferred to wander alone and have time to observe nature in more detail.”

“It can be an amazing experience, being lost in the mountain.”

“Jo had an amazing sense of orientation, when he was not out of it. But in Jamaica he got a bad toothache, he drank rum with the painkillers, and we had a bag of local ganja too of course. As a volleyball player for the national team at age 17, a very promising talent, he was still very sportive and walked so fast I preferred to walk alone. On the way back down I got exhausted. Suddenly a motorbike came down, the only one on the entire mountain. The boy worked at the stall at the top, the paying entrance to a waterfall, and he had seen me there earlier, so he offered me a lift down. It was a light motorbike and the path was crumbling with erosion, barely wide enough for a wheel. I thought I was gonna die there, the drop was steep, the slope covered in dense tropical jungle. We were so close to going over the edge, nobody would ever have found me back if we did; after a short while he had to stop to maneuver his bike over a tree stem that had fallen across that narrow mountain trail. I got off and thanked him, happy I had the chance to get off before it was too late and I made it back to our little mountain chalet on foot and alive. Jo was back hours earlier and was sitting blowing joints at the chalet, not even worried about me, haha. My angels’ work!”

“Amazing! Every holiday was an epic adventure. Very adventurous life you had. Never a dull moment…”

“Adventures? Things really got out of hand on that travel. I had to give our driver and chalet caretaker boy my money for hiding! There was no bank in the nearest mountain village, only two tiny shops of which one was selling alcohol, and I had taken enough cash along, haha. But Jo went nuts up there because of this sudden tooth abscess, and drank up every penny he got his hands on. He never thought a day ahead. On our previous trip, to Morocco, he’d been so drunk he had been mugged and robbed of his money-belt, three weeks money in it, and cash to buy antique Berber carpets. After a crisis he didn’t stop getting drunk, he kept asking for money every day. I ended up renting a scruffy cheap room in Tarahzoute village for him while I stayed in Agadir to be safely away from him, and visited him daily by bus to give him just enough for food, till it was time to fly home. Still enjoyed the time on my own though, took great pictures.”

“Are we seriously not stunningly blessed with the lives we have led? Okay, your Thai trip was a real bummer, but how nice to come out the amazing woman you are today, hey you just can’t buy memories.” Leonard sure knew how to give someone an ego-boost.

After coffee and some breakfast they walked to the beach together to have a surf check.

“Have you ever lost your board in a wave Leonard?”

“I used to be petrified of the sea, as I almost drowned twice as a kid. Then one day when I was just starting to surf I was far out in the ocean and my leash broke. I had to swim in. When I reached land I thought: hell, just a long swim. Never been scared again…”

“Wow!”

“But isn’t that life, just another experience, and only differs on how the individual reacts? I am not the exception to most things. If I draw any parallels between you and me, and I am serious, you would be a mountain and I would be a hill, happy in your shade.”

“What a beautiful thought, but let’s be two slopes together?”

“Okay, equals.”

“If I ever come and see you in South Africa, I will never be out of your shade,” Iris laughed. “Are there also quiet beaches there or all busy?”

Leonard Stalk laughed again, then answered: “At Cape Point is a spot called Mary, a surf spot by a wreck on the beach. No one around at all, a beautiful long beach. There are baboons there, buck and ostriches. It’s part of the sanctuary, no one is allowed there. We park far away and walk there, 30 minutes down the beach from where I surf sometimes.”
“Buck? *Een bok* in Dutch is a male goat. Or are these like antelopes?”

“These are called *blesbokke eiland buck*. You understand that? Do you know what a kudu is?”

“Yes, wonderful animals, I saw them in the Etosha National Park in Namibia! A bles is a small beard, a goatee, or a tuft of hair I think?”

Leonard laughed loud. “*Bles* here is slang for bald, now *kudu* is a type of buck.”

“Haha, poor thing. In my village slang we say *blesj* too, for bald, *nen blesjkop* for a bald man, haha.”

“It’s fun being stranded with you. Wouldn’t it be great to travel together in the future?”

“If we ever figure out a way to get off this island? Yes, it would be!”

He kissed Iris Natal on her sun-dried, cracked lips, and left with the slingshot. Just before dark he came home carrying one large crab. He’d have to get up early to catch a sleepy bird.
Chapter 21

The Apartheid War

The day was still young when Leonard headed out towards the north of the island. Iris, whose pain in the leg had increased, decided not to slow him down and stayed. The mesmerizing beauty of the island made her want to swim, write, dream and be alone for a while. She was practicing some pranayama yoga breathing exercises when Leonard returned.

“Hello sweetheart! I couldn't get across the hill; a deep ravine cuts through it in the middle. I'll have to try a different route. How about teaching me some yoga? How often do you practice?”

“Stretching I do every day, and also some asanas, those yoga poses you know. I love the tree pose. Wait I'll show you.”

She moved one foot forward on the floor and bent the knee, clasped the ankle with her hand, carefully placing the sole of her right foot against her inner left thigh, then folding both hands against each other in front of her breastbone in prayer position, before lifting them to the sky.

“Balance is harder for me now, with this injured leg. At home I take two or three classes a week, these days you can chose, there's all sorts of yoga: hatha, asudra, some more dynamic, some more relaxing. I'm more into the challenging kinds,” she laughed. “But you said you did some yoga yourself? When and where was that?”

“At the end of the first army call up, in 1973-974, I was 17 going on 18. It was in the Caprivi, up between South Africa, Zambia and Namibia, in the middle of all three countries. It was considered no man's land, and we were told to shoot intruders on sight.”

“Wow, what a situation! The last thing I'd expect there is yoga!”

Leonard thought that was funny.

“A quick introduction to my army days: I had long hair half down my back, bleached blond on the top from sun and surfing. One day I was with the buddies, that night I told them, "I go to the army tomorrow." We smoked a ton of weed in those days, all through bottlenecks. It was a parcel half a man's arm and a bit thicker; we would smoke it up in a day between the four or five of us.”

“That's a lot of weed! Did they freak out at the news?”

“Haha, No, just: 'Take care!' and I was gone for a year. Anyway, I get there. I have the longest hair in the camp, the camp commander is impressed and asks if he can have a photo taken with me in my undies next to him, in the room where we were getting a medical check up, never a problem. The barber spot is amazing, all individuals going in, a bunch of sheep coming out. Can you believe some guys were crying because all their hair was gone, I didn't even notice it. So we all have our kit and sleeping quarters, being broken up into companies, I was in C company. We go on our first seven and a half kilometer cross country run, no exercises, just run. I thought from all the weed I was going to be unfit, but out of 300 guys I come in 3rd,” he said with the happy face of a winning child, “so they make me a corporal. The gift of life...”

“Wow, well done! The first and only Inter-School run I was selected for turned out quite different, I hadn't heard the start shot. All of a sudden they are all storming away beside me. Completely baffled I started running after them,” Iris laughed. But Leonard's ears were focused on his inner voice, he continued his own thread of memories. It was the first time anyone asked him to remember all this. The interest totally tickled him.

“The first three months are basic training. We are up at daybreak, running, exercising, mountain marches, parade marching. I was so useless at this, C company was the worst at the parades. Then to get our company's colours we had to do the mile and a half with half our army webbing,
ammunition clips, water bottles and such, and a rifle, and do it under 10 minutes...”

“Impressive, you are strong like Samson, even without the hair!”

“They taught us about guns and the terrorists, the ANC. All of my section, that is a corporal, me and nine other guys, ten soldiers make a section, we all got our colours except for this one fat guy, haha; his father worked in a chocolate factory and used to send him tons of chocolates.”

“What did the ANC want? A stupid question, what do terrorists want, but I forgot what went on there.”

“The Caprivi was were they crossed the borders down into South Africa, yet at that time Namibia was part of South Africa, it was called South West Africa... But just to show you what a great section we had, one of my soldiers was one of our cross country champions, so we shared the fat guy’s webbing and rifle out among the section, and myself and Jelly-neck the champ runner, tied the fat guy to us and we ran as a section, and dragged him across the line just inside the time, haha, he cried half the race, but we did it as a team, very nice.”

“Incredible! Who were the terrorists, where were they heading?”

“They came from Zambia. They were all the exiled blacks from South Africa, in hiding from the Boer government at the time...”

“South Africa was not tolerating black folks?”

“Hell my beautiful woman, in those days, from 1945 to 1996, the apartheid era, blacks and coloured folk were not considered worthy of a citizenship, second hand humans. They weren’t allowed to eat in the same restaurants, share the same toilets, even the companies had A and B end of the year parties, it was against the law to love over the colour barrier. My younger brother married a Muslim girl and was always demonstrating.”

“I vaguely remember my uncle Rene had to flee from Congo, Zaire at the time. All the white people were in danger.”

“So you still up to my story?”

“Of course, you just won the 1.5 mile with your section.”

“Okay, so the next three months we were taught war maneuvers in the bush, yes we were the best section in the bush, hahaha very kaka, bad that is, at parades. So after six months we get a 40 day pass, everyone was very keen to go home. I can’t wait to see my girl, Lilly. We have been together about 2-3 years. I get back and things are great, she asks me to stay after the 40 days. I AWOL for 40 days, meaning Absent Without Official Leave. In that period of time I learn that she has been screwing my buddy. I am so pissed off... I just go to the nearest army barracks in Cape Town and hand myself in. They were pretty cool and said they would give me a chance to go to Durban, that’s were I was based, and hand myself in up there. Hitch-hiking up to Durban up at the east coast in my uniform I got there in about three days. I still went to the beach in Durban first and met my section who were on a weekend pass there. They told me to go straight to DB, detention barracks, as all my possessions were there waiting for me...”

“I bet you were full of anger about your girlfriend? Were you not scared though? They could have shot you for desertion?”

“One of the longest walks of my life, getting off at Ladysmith train station and walking about one and a half kilometers to my base... not knowing how they’d take me on.”

“Were you sorry you went back?”

“I got to the camp, turned myself in to the military police, told them who I was and how long I had been away. They laughed and said to go to my barracks. I will be called in for my court martial. I wasn’t sorry, no, I had to do a year’s training regardless. You can keep running, which I wasn’t going to do, haha, shit, hey I did it for LOVE. I was always going to finish my training. Anyway, the next day they had handcuffed me and took me for my hearing, I almost burst out laughing. I had AWOL for 40 days, had smoked tons of weed and they are trying to march me on the double. I’m
tripping and stumbling over my feet, get into court, a big smile on my face... The top brass says: 'You have been with the girls, now you’re going with the boys: 40 days DB, Detention Barracks.' Everything in DB is done on the double, and it’s up early, polishing all the floors, then breakfast, then PT training for hours, then lunch, then work squads for the rest of the afternoon, back to jail for another hour PT, then supper, showers and lock up, all single cells.” Leonard laughed again. “I got super fit, though almost gave in on two occasions. We were doing pole PT, that is, a huge tar pole is placed on our necks, five guys to a pole. I was at the one end, on the other end were two huge guys and then the three of us smaller guys. When the OBI, detention barracks instructor shouted ‘UP’ we were doing push ups. The big guys lifted, the two in between couldn’t, that left the pole pushing my face into the gravel Eventually it got a bit butch and I shouted ‘Fuck!’ and jumped up, haha. The OBI screamed ‘SAK!’, means ‘drop’ in Afrikaans, and I dropped back down and carried on...

“So when my detention time is up it’s back to camp. When I get there, 80% are gone up to the border for war duty already, and only the sick and lazy and useless are left. After a week I can’t take this crap any longer so I go to the Commandant and plead to go to the border. He agrees. So on that day at the station there are four of us going to the border. The other three guys have all been in jail for smoking weed, they have all been caned and can hardly sit, their asses are cut open, and me from DB, four criminals going to war. They had a band send us off, hahaha, hey I still laugh; I wonder what the band would have thought if they knew who they were playing for?”

“I am speechless. Serious bodybuilding! Were you not scared to go to war?”

“DB was a great challenge, if you didn’t make the first week you were buggered. I felt sorry for the big muscle boys, they were usually the first to drop after a few hours of PT, all that muscle they had to carry, not good. And in DB if someone drops on the parade ground the rest is made to train harder and faster until they get up, and some guys—never me, I just wasn’t bothered—used to kick these guys messed up, we were exercising over the fallen guys... So now on my way to war for the first time ever... very apprehensive... not scared, always kind of another adventure... We get there, I am at last united with my section, now just a private, a soldier, not a corporal. Now the guys have been there a month already, so they are broken in. They know what’s going on, most aren’t scared, so I have no fear. The sections are running smoothly. Our sergeant’s name is Izan, nazi spelled backwards. The first thing I learn are two phrases in the local African dialogue: ‘Heenie la umslonga, heenie la whoppoo la umslonga’, meaning: ‘Do you know about weed, do you know where I can get the weed?’

Iris laughed. “Oh dear!”

“Before the month is over I have turned an efficient company into laid back mode. The sergeant got to hate me so much he tried to have me sent back to SA base camp. It got so bad I was sent from section to section... hahaha and disrupted them all. Now our post clerk Neil was a Buddhist, he refused to carry a rifle so he became the post clerk. He had his own big tent, and I landed up with him. I had to go and plead for them to take me on the four day patrols. It went like this: four days patrol, two days back and rest, two days guard duties and then back four days to the bush. When I was off, back at base, Neil started teaching me yoga. It was an unbelievable time for me; went over a land mine when we were driven to the area where we were going to patrol for four days in the bush at first; we were bombed the one night; went over another landmine; did a huge follow-up once, chased some guys half way into Zambia; if we had been caught I would most likely still be in prison; some hectic times! I think death is far from your thoughts then.”

Suddenly he went quiet. A film of memories was rolling through his head. But there were gaps, many of them.

“I’m going for a late swim, keep the fire going. Will be back in 15 minutes, if you have any questions...”
More like an hour later Leonard sat down dripping wet; the campfire was glowing. She walked over and put the blanket around him. In surprise he reacted, by stroking her leg. A warm shiver ran though them both.

“I do have some questions, yes. Was it hot up there, in the Caprivi? Did you sleep in the bush at night, on patrol?”

“Semi-tropical. I got up there just after the rains, the Zambezi River was in flood during the rains. A branch we used to sit on and dangle our feet in the river from, became a diving branch at 8 feet above our heads; that’s how much the river level rose and dropped! We slept where we stopped, after a hard day’s walk.

There was also morphine in our camp supplies, I found access to it. My mate injected us. I usually got the first shot, so got the biggest share. We would patrol the whole day and get where we were going to spend the night. The other guys were so buggered they would just about collapse, me and the other two morphine junkies would take the cards out and start gambling.”

“It’s like a movie! So you basically didn’t have time to think about your girl anymore, is that how it worked?” Iris said, while she quietly observed how little emotion he was showing. He was obviously proud he had survived the Apartheid war, and with good reason. He didn’t come out flipped or crippled like some soldiers did, Iris thought. Some veterans were pretty traumatized! War is terrible! And a broken heart is also a heavy burden to shake; you couldn’t blame the kid for using medicine to feed his stamina.

“That’s why Dunbar was kind of incredible. It made me realize you don’t own anyone. The girl had the right of choice and it wasn’t me! An important lesson! I have never forgotten it. I have never wanted power over anyone, not being the dominating type. So that is how I started yoga. Then when I went to write my trade test to get my printer’s diploma, I had to go and do it up north, and Neil invited me to come and spend time at the Buddhist farm. I spent a month there getting up very early doing all the mantras, it got so they wanted me to be the Cape Town Buddhist, but I said: “Hey I surf, won’t have much time to teach anyone.”

“That sounds like the best bit of the whole war thing, got you to do yoga,” Iris said.

She thought a while about how stunningly he had reversed the process of emotional devastation into a force of energy. To step into a life where every minute could be your last, and make the best of it. Was it some switch in the head? To go in not caring if you would die, but not wanting to kill anyone, it’s a noble start for a young guy in a war that wasn’t his.

“So, did you become a printer after your army service?” she continued after a while—suddenly recalling her father told her he had been a corporal, working in the library during the 2nd World War—meanwhile admiring his interestingly shaped legs and feet. They were just perfect, attractive, muscular, suntanned, and sexy, his calves full of strength just asked to be touched. And he wore several anklets. She quickly took her eyes off him to prevent looking any higher, her blood pressure rising by a few levels, she stared at the sky for a breather, and focused on his beautiful green eyes as he answered her question.

“You know how stupid I was? I could have done my time in the army printing works, didn’t even enter my mind, only found out much later!”

“17 is very young! Young and foolish. I am getting tired, are you not?” she said, as the impact of his story was begging for some digesting time.

“Sometimes talking with you gets my mind into overdrive. I was almost 18, but I was working, so I was eligible for the army.”

“Oh! We may have to take up some breathing yoga again, to empty the head; will help us fall asleep. That was very intriguing, traveling with you in the Caprivi!”

Leonard was obviously not ready to go to sleep yet. His mind went back in time, he was that young mad boy again, afraid of nothing and challenging fate without a moment’s thought. He had
been so lucky, and he was aware of it. Very grateful for life he felt.

“You know, some guys did freak out. Especially after we were bombed one night. One guy was so nervous they had to send him back. When we did the four days bush patrol we had to sleep in an ambush scenario, and keep absolute quietness. This guy woke up screaming and yelling someone wanted to shoot him, we being in the middle of the night in the middle of the bush, in the African environment, hahaha, for safety we had to be silent.”

“Sounds so dangerous! Did you get an adrenaline kick from the danger or from fighting?”

“I hated shooting my gun, and you always had to clean and oil the damn thing, hahaha. During my first border camp they made me carry the LMG, that’s a Light Machine Gun and as the carrier of such a weapon you always had to be on the high ground if there was any, your life expectancy wasn’t much in a confrontation. Hell, it was so heavy! I had a partner who had to carry his rifle and my ammunition. The next time I went to the border, they were looking for a radio operator. I put my hand up and said: ‘That’s me!’ I didn’t know they have the shortest lifespan in a confrontation, and the radios were big, had to share the batteries amongst the section to carry them... That time I chased a guy for hours back across the border and a long distance beyond it, I didn’t aim to kill him.”

“Clever switch, to radio-operator, you have good survival instincts, or should I say intuition, choosing for communication. The twentieth century is the age of Aquarius, all about communication and sharing knowledge, the evolution of the human species depends on it.”

“You had to see me in action to believe it. Imagine... We go out into the bush, we walk for a whole day before we get to the grid area marked on a map, where we are going to patrol for the next four days. I have a rock tied to a string, attached to a length of copper wire I use as my aerial. I throw this over the highest tree and pull the copper wire to the top of the tree and join the bottom end to my radio. I tune in to HQ ‘Here section X, all yours!’ Hahaha. I strip to my jocks and lay about in the sun. I missed three winters in a row, so I just got so black!” he laughed. “I was voted in the ten darkest guys on the border. If I wanted I would go and patrol with some of the guys, usually ending up at a cuckoo shop, bartering for the home made beer the locals brewed. I loved the border camps. Remember I would be getting two paychecks, the home job still paid too! Some guys would just take what they wanted, I always bartered their first price down, and always gave money in exchange for beer. Some guys are just born bullies. I really relaxed during my army stint, simply couldn’t understand the army guys who were fighting the system.”

“Fighting the system in what way?”

“If a soldier ran away he had to start his time all over. It was not a volunteer army, it was obligatory.” Leonard stopped talking and wanted a drink from the fresh coconut, a hard nut to crack indeed.

“After talking with you I always feel like making love to you,” he said out of the blue. She took his hand, led him into the cabin and said: “Last night I felt you very close for a while, were you dreaming or not sleeping yet?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you, and I had such a vision of Mary’s, the quiet surf spot, with a fire going, you are fascinating food for thought. We are really mentally linked.”

“I sent you my special ‘energy’ too, maybe that didn’t help to sleep, I couldn’t stop thinking of you either” Iris confessed.

“Hey girl, you got me going, that was for sure, I just couldn’t sleep, just laying there with a hard one and a smile; you get those times when you know you are not going to cum? All I could do was the laying awake scheme.”

Iris laughed happily. “Why did you not come over to me?”

“How do you think I came to realize the obvious?” he replied and moved closer and started caressing her. Iris melted, responded, opened her lips some more...
“I hope to sleep better tonight”, he said while taking a breath from kissing.

“Would it help if I offered a hand? We can either go for the yoga approach, or…”

“Haha, so cruel!” he flirted. “Just go with the flow…”

“That’s the story of my life, I AM the flow,” she kidded, referring to her state of arousal.

They giggled at the Buddhist innuendo and as if laughter and lightheartedness turned them on they got right into each other again, you could say ‘steaming’. Whatever pains had made them who they were today, the sensation of new budding love wiped away all insecurity and caution. ‘Could she be the right one?’ Leonard thought.

“Sweet dreams, dream-maker,” he said, after they had come to a simultaneous orgasm. It was way past midnight and they dozed off into a deep sleep, happy and satisfied.
Chapter 22

Pilates and Other Stories

The day started sunny, but soon it clouded over, a strong breeze blowing in from the north. Iris had walked to the beach early to watch Leonard surf. He was so good at it. Those waves looked huge, taller than herself, 6 feet high Leonard had told her. Then suddenly it calmed down. After riding another wave or two he paddled away eastwards. Soon he was out of sight not returning until close to nightfall. He explained he had tried to paddle all the way round to the north side, taking advantage of the wind to return, but he had not made it, as the current was not working with him.

“My back is aching,” he said as he sat down and ate the leftovers of bird, rice and more butternut she had prepared. She promised a massage after supper.

“Have you heard of the Pilates technique?” Iris asked.

“No, but I have a feeling you will explain it to me.”

“It’s a physical fitness system developed in the early 20th century, based on six pillars: centralization, concentration, control, breathing, flow and precision, based on the strengthening of belly muscles instead of the faulty use of the backbone. Joseph Pilates who invented it was a German asthma patient. It defies all old ‘back problem schools’ but it proved much more efficient!”

“I have so much to learn. When do the lessons start? Right now?”

She showed him the standing position, feet apart at shoulder width, slightly bending through the knees with a straightened backbone, the shoulders back a bit and head reaching high, as if hanging on a string, find out where the belly moves by breathing, find the muscles, there is the center of the power house. Then they did some basic exercises.

“They call the belly zone the power house, because it functions as a belt all round your waist, the back area included, once you strengthen those muscles.” Leonard tried it. “I only did level 1, ten classes, so I’m far from being an expert. But the idea is to diminish the strain on your back by pulling in the belly muscle,” she explained.

“This is fun. How long to hold the poses? Yes, once your belly is firm, you’re in pretty good shape.”

“Oh, you don’t hold too long, not as long as in yoga, since many injured people do this.”

“When is the best time to do these exercises? I often get a back ache after sitting too long, but then surfing, laying with a stretched straight back usually helps. Today I got it trying to stake out a bird for supper after I got back from the long paddle. But I missed, the bird got away!” he laughed.

“You can do this anytime. Some yoga is good for it too. Have you tried the child pose? You fold up on your knees, rest your head on the floor, arms beside you towards the back.” They both took the position. “Yes, like that. This is used after backward bends too.”

“No never did it before. Yoga is such a long time ago, I need a refresher. How long should I do it for?”

“It’s a relaxing posture, so when you do it, you breathe slowly and relax for as long as it feels good.”

“Okay, give me a few minutes.”

“Make sure nothing hurts, knees on a soft enough surface?”

“This is great! It stretches my back, will do that a few times a day, especially when my back aches.”

Iris felt happy. They went inside and snuggled up on one mattress.
“So, having two books out this year, does that mean you have a publisher? Have you signed up for a new book?”

“I just met my publisher from Canada in Bruges before I left. It was a friendly tourist visit with his lady, he asked what I was doing, when the next book was coming up. I said, who knows, maybe a novel by the end of the year? We had a good time in Bruges, we call it Brugge, we laughed a lot.”

“Stunning for you, an excellent opportunity.”

“Yes, he became a friend after we met on Facebook. I gave him quite a hard time with the poetry book. I didn't fancy the layout with the poems centered, so he had to start all over, page per page. I kept mailing corrections, changes, additions, he has great patience, I love him.”

“Lousy when you haven't got total freedom. I owned a surf magazine once, we had such fun doing what we wanted. It was called OFFSHORE, a full colour magazine.”

“You did? Why did you stop?”

“Bad management!” He laughed. “I did all the reproductions and took the final negatives to the printer, saved us a lot of money.”

“Great! It was still the old pre-digital way when I worked at the magazine too. I wrote articles, chose the illustrations, assembled it and drew out the layout for the printer. The magazine enhanced a lot and doubled in size, we evolved to a coloured cover within a year after I started working there. I talked Germain De Rouck into taking my travel stories too, with pictures in black and white, on glossy paper. It had an almost Afrikaans name, De Zuidvlaamse Kultuurkrant.”

“Yes, I almost understand that name. We had gloss too, we went for about three years. My younger brother being the professional surfer was in charge of advertising, and Post was our editor and main photographer. I put it all together for the press, 48-64 pages, great mag, I still have copies lying about.”

“Would love to see it! You need good advertisers to finance a mag! My boss, was so pleased with our progress he’d bring a bottle of J&B to celebrate. When after a year I told him I needed to travel again—there were exhibitions and video-courses involved too, many weekends and late hours of work—he said he couldn't miss me anymore! I almost panicked!” Iris continued.

“I often drank whiskey doing my work, hahaha didn’t need a reason.”

“Sadly enough, the April 1st issue had political comments and a joke in it, and poor Germain got very nervous about it being ready in time for April Fool’s day. He had a heart attack. He was in a coma for a while. I wanted to go and shake him awake, but his girlfriend wouldn't let me see him.”

“Wow, what was the final result?”

“‘You have done enough damage already’, she said. Seemingly he was not allowed any excitement nor alcohol, he’d had a mild stroke before. I hadn't known that. After a long coma he died.”

“So was that the end of the job?”

“Not right away, I made another edition, an In Memoriam number, with articles about him, his unknown poetry too. The nonprofit organization board got a new president, Germain’s girlfriend’s pal, a lawyer. I actually voted him in as I knew the bookkeeping was complicated and possibly muddled up. But he officially closed the mag as it was seen as a loss, and offered me a job as caretaker of a permanent small art exhibition.”

“I am so happy that I stopped drinking and using when I did, I was heading down a bottomless pit.”

Iris was getting used to his thoughts going off on a tangent, but she didn’t want to skip her apotheosis.

“But the lawyer messed up the papers, and Herberigs paintings were so dull I thanked for the new job saying I was a writer and had to write, and thanks to his error I ended up being paid for
six months instead of three, for doing nothing.”
“Wow, you’ve had some high doses of luck on your journey!”
“Yes, but I dare say I was good at the job too! An enterprising person might have tried to take
over the magazine. But I still had the music going on then, lots of gigs, and my daughter was only
six, what I needed most was more time,” Iris explained.
“Printing was the first job I walked into after dropping out of school, it was as if printing was
made for me, absolutely excelled in the printing industry.”
“I think it’s a wonderful trade! But now there are so many magazines, shops full! About surfing
though, is there still one in South Africa?”
“Zig Zag has been going for years. All is computerized, even retouching is just a program now. “
“There are also e-zines, now, mags on the internet. I appeared in a literary e-zine from India last
month”.
“Nice! Do you get paid for the use of your material?”
“No, it’s for the honour to get a public only, and if you get extremely lucky, a virtual publisher
pops up and flies in from Canada to buy you a meal! hahaha.”
“Is that why you are so slender, lovely woman?” Leonard laughed.
“Haha, yeah, the life of a writer, burn burn burn! I had shrimp-croquettes with salad, yum,
freshly made, and a Brugse Zot after it, a pretty strong local beer that is.”
“At home my daughter comes to cook often when her boyfriend is away. She lives in a flat
nearby. She also has a parrot to feed.”
“Really? Chained to a pole?”
“No, in a cage, and flies freely around the flat too. The previous owner didn’t have the means for
the upkeep and gave it to Helena. It only talks Afrikaans so they are teaching each other.”
“Cool, next she could put the cage outside and open it after a week or so. I’ll refund her if he flies
off. I don’t like animals caged up.”
“And then? Not many parrots around there, the tropics are a fair distance away.”
“It may chose to stay, that’s the aim, like in a cartoon we have, Jommeke and his parrot, the bird
is free, and talks, he rescues Jommeke all the time,” she laughed.
“Hahaha, sounds like a great parrot to have. Cherrie and her boyfriend also have a parrot, and
he has got out a few times but has so far always returned to them.”
“I have no idea how to deal with a parrot. The only bird I’d want is one I can let fly free…”
“We can learn many things from each-other. You can tell if animals are treated badly and
unhappy. My husky came from a home for mistreated huskies, now she is a very happy dog,”
Leonard elaborated.
“I watch Cezar, a really good dog-whisperer/coach on television. He goes and sorts out
behavioural problems with dogs, and ends up training the owners.”
“Funny, I watched that program too. If you want animals you must love and respect them. I have
five cats, feeding them twice a day.”
“Quite a luxury for most cats. I adopted a male ‘tiger’ cat that would sit beside me and spell
letters with his tail, hahaha. He did the L, then he did the O, and was practicing for the V, but then
he got sick, sadly enough. His belly bloated up with water, like a balloon; the vet had to put him out
of his impending misery. He never got further than spelling LOL, Lots Of Love. Seriously, I have
pics of it at home. Igoryn II was his name. I truly loved that cat.”
Leonard loved listening to her funny tales, like she enjoyed his.
“That’s amazing! Cats you can only play with when they want to play, dogs anytime. Hey, I am
going to crash for the evening…”
They made love again first, how could they not?
Chapter 23

Kumar Rao's Luck

India being India, the car mechanic didn't turn up until midday. Kumar Rao was highly strung, even more so when he heard what he was being charged for the tyre and mileage. But finally they got back on the road and with Lawrence's directions they reached the spot where he expected to find his friend. The boat was there alright, but no Ravi Ramanathan.

"Ravi was in the hospital. He had bronchitis that turned bad. Pneumonia!" a toothless fisherman told them. "He might be back home now, we're not sure."

They wrote down the address given and set out in a hurry. It was not easy to find. They turned into dirt roads in the jungle, no name plates anywhere. Three times they had to stop, chap a door and ask again, but finally they found Ravi’s house. The colourful paint was not new, the monsoon had left streaks of black mould on the cemented walls. A middle-aged woman wearing a lovely sari was hanging washing on a line. She nodded and called her husband who had indeed only been released from the hospital two days ago. It took a lot of persuasion, in rupees, to have him take the boat out to Bird Island, but by mid-afternoon they were rolling the old boat into the ocean with the help of four locals.

"We will reach Bird Island just before sunset," Ravi said, "and we'll have to stay till morning; tide is not right at night."

Kumar had no choice in the matter. Another attempt to reach Sergej on his mobile phone had been fruitless. The sea was a quiet blue plate, the sound of the engine almost lulled Kumar to sleep, as he had barely closed an eye the previous night.

Meanwhile in Mumbai, things had built up to a crisis. Sergej Ivanovitch wasn’t that big a shot in the Russian mafia, unfortunately for Kumar Rao the man was far from alone in this diamond business. His client in Moscow had sent a posse of three highly qualified security men to his office to pick up the merchandise, and when Sergei couldn't produce it, they had smashed up the place and kicked him so badly he had been rushed to the hospital with two broken ribs and a collapsed lung, one of the ribs having punctured it.

"We will be back!" one of them had barked before Sergej had lost consciousness. "Make your testament! If you don't have the goods by next week, you're a dead man, this is no game!"

Sergej was too bashed up to take any action for a few days. To make matters worse he didn't have his cellphone in the hospital. In feverish silence he prayed he wouldn't have to order Kumar and his help's family killed. They didn't know about the other boy, Atindriyo, he was just a hired boatman. Sergej Ivanovitch may have been a crook involved in some dirty smuggling business, but he was also religious. The last thing he wanted was having to kill innocent people. He had a wife and children of his own. He was hoping the mafioso back home wouldn't find out where they all lived. He had hired a small farm in the Russian countryside just to keep his own family safe, far away from his criminal activity.

Sergej’s misery was Kumar Rao’s fortune. The Russian being in hospital kept them safe for the time being. But he was not all that lucky! Forty minutes after the fishing boat had left the shore, the old engine started to sputter and cough, and suddenly died.

The silence on the water was ominous. A shark swam near, intrigued by the motionless shadow. Ravi got the paddles out and handed them to the youngest man on board. It was a heavy boat, two men had to use the oars at each side to get the vessel moving. They barely made it back before
sundown. Kumar Rao was almost in tears. Lawrence was not aware of the gravity of the situation. He thought his boss’s sorrow was about the financial setback. Exhausted they slept on the beach that night. Kumar would have to find another way to get to the island. Waiting to have the engine fixed was out of the question.

The stars shone bright that night, not a cloud in the sky. He called his wife and told her there was some delay caused by two blow-outs and that he expected to be back home in a few more days, so she didn’t have to worry.
Chapter 24

Leonard’s Second Son

“Well, did you catch the swell well?” Iris asked playfully as he returned to the hut the next day.

“I am so rejuvenated, I was flying!”

“I can only try and imagine. Ready for a hot meal then?” They sat down and had rice cooked with a mixture, strange but not bad at all. Iris considered to try the slingshot for fun but she hated the idea of having to kill an animal.

“No sign of Steve or the boat wreck anywhere. I made it to the north coast today. It turned out to be a steep rock cliff, just like I expected, no beach to access it. So have you been relaxing or writing?”

“Yes, both. I wrote for some time, and walked quite far. It’s stunningly beautiful, this island. I was thinking about a question you avoided the other day. What is honesty, between a couple? Is it volunteering all information or waiting till the question comes up?”

“I’d love to tell you anything you’d like to know about me and I’d love to share whatever you are willing to share about yourself, share as in all aspects of the word with YOU.”

“Well, a funny thing happened. I realized I had a ‘special friend’ too for a short while. I wasn’t in love with him, but he came as a gift from heaven. Maybe I was getting afraid of an asexual life forever after the last breakup, of turning frigid or something. I had tried to mend things with Rob, but Rob had lost all interest in love. So he came, saw and conquered, a simple man, hard working and in a dying marriage, deserving love too. The funny thing is, before we had sex I needed a few drinks, so I told him if I were to fall in love with someone, I would not be able to continue with him. We never had other contact, no calls or mails or Facebook, nothing. He was relieved I was not falling in love with him! We agreed that that would mean the end of it too, no commitment possible. But that took the passion out of it for me.”

“Ouch what a heart-breaker,” Leonard replied cynically. “Serious, how can that be bad news, we are only just starting to touch each other. I love hearing about your amazing life.”

“He is such a kind, hardworking man, took in a mother of three. She is not even friendly to his own son, let alone to him! He is by no means any competition for you. If you are at all feeling annoyed, I won’t go that far anymore.”

“It’s amazing what people are willing to suffer. How could I possibly be annoyed? You made my day.” He leaned over to kiss Iris.

“I did? How?”

“In my dream we made love in the sea, with people on the beach...”

“In the sea?” Iris laughed. “I didn’t think men could get it up in cold water, the idea doesn’t appeal to me much.”

“We first made love on a huge towel on the beach, then I went surfing and you were taking photos, and as I was coming out you walked out towards me, and we embraced and made love out in the water... Really amazing.”

“I’d like that! If we only had a towel,” she kidded.

“Hahaha. Better not comment. It was definitely a morning glory dream, truly exciting. Tonight it should be much better in a warm cozy bed.”

“I was checking if my memory was back completely, about the jobs I did, not sure if it is a story.”

“Would love to read it”, Leonard said and got comfortable to read in the fire glow.
“I agree, not much of a story. By what you have told me about your life, it would only equal about half a line, hahaha. If I didn't know better I would say: run of the mill stuff!"

“Hm, I thought it was quite funny, my first go at a job in McDonalds? Rob had just come to Belgium and we were very much in love. I was still going to college but we wanted to hitch-hike south for the Easter break, Morocco bound. While he busked the streets in Ghent, I took the first job I saw. I left after just ten days, thinking I’d made enough, haha. We made it south alright, but only to the north of Spain… that's another story. And then that second job, a year later, in the Highlands? Being taught how to clean by a homosexual in a leopard cloak?” She giggled. Leonard stayed silent. His attention had strayed from the scene. Iris asked what was on his mind.

“My friend Steve,” he said. “He is not much older than my son Michael, my second eldest boy who married a Muslim girl, the one that’s pregnant. I’ll be a grandfather in a few months!”

“A pretty girl no doubt. How old were you when Michael was born? How did he come about?” Iris asked in an attempt to avoid the subject Steve and possible death.

“Hahaha. Through intercourse? I remember coming back from one of my border camps, some of my buddies came to pick me up. I heard this chick say, ‘Is that Leonard Stolk?’ I found out later her name was Ingrid and she was my best buddy’s girl. We were just an awesome set of buddies, living in a communal house right across the road from the beach in Muizenberg. Ingrid and Ray were a couple. One morning she came into my room and I asked if she would like to get into bed with me. She said yes and we became partners. Do you see what I was trying to get at when I said a while back how openly love was accepted, no strings attached? But you have taught me better.”

“It came with that time, that age, we tried everything once. Finding the right lover is not a single track.”

“Definitely not the only one either… We lived together for about two and a half years, then she fell pregnant. I didn't want to marry, we both messed about a lot. Her mother paid the rent for the flat, everything else in it was mine… amazing. Then one Friday some friends said they had a nice house, would I want to join them… Ingrid didn't come home that weekend. Monday morning on my way to a surf I saw her coming back in a friend’s car, I phoned my buddies, asked if the room was still available, got home and told Ingrid she could stay with the other guy, I was moving out.”

“Hm”

“We tried to get together once or twice but nothing happened.”

“Coming home in a friend’s car makes you assume someone has an affair? Oh no!”

“This was a fact, they were together for a while and he was married. Enough was enough, his wife still phoned about it. I told what I had done.”

“You didn't see your kid grow up? What age were you when he was born?”

“When my first son with Rose was born, I was 21. With Michael I was 23. I paid pap geld for him, support, he used to come to me for holidays.”

“Really? Nice! Lucky to have that chance. Didn't you enjoy those days?”

“We had some great times together, but we were young and doing drugs, sex and so much joling, partying that is.”

“Yeah. I meant the days with your second boy, the vacations… I can assure you, if I were to live with you, I wouldn't do anything behind your back. You wouldn't have to be suspicious.”

“My son and I and Helena and Jamie had some great times, but Micky was living with his granny and she heard that some of my friends wore earrings and was most upset and tried to stop him from visiting. So we had a discussion and things were left as they were, but sad to say when my drug taking started to increase I became more self-serving and I didn’t think too much of the kids. Not my best time as a dad. Thirteen years I have been clean now. I think that if two people
want to share a life there should be no shady areas. Like me with no strings attached sounds good, but so impractical.”

“You could go for total honesty?”

“That sounds wonderful, to be with someone and live openly and honestly. I have been very open and honest with you about me and my life... But isn’t living together a bit different? I don’t want to change anyone, and certainly don’t want to be changed... “

“I am a one-person-at-a-time person, I would not have to change to be faithful. The only danger between us is misunderstanding. I have been honest too from day one, for as far as I remembered things.”

“That’s stunning, misunderstandings come more often just through distance.”

“You do know I am not a good financial catch, don’t you? You won’t be disappointed?”

“Seriously, I think we will have great times together when we get off this island. What I get from you is that you can enjoy your solitude, sometimes you want to be by yourself, not looking for a support pole. I am not a financial catch either, the rehab went bankrupt. I have put money away and can only get it in the flipping future..” Leonard said.

“Looking for a moral support pole maybe. It’s what you plan to do with that cash that matters, hahaha, like not calling a girlfriend in Europe thrice a day?” she laughed. “Every year I go to Austria with my sisters, I don’t have Internet then for a week, but we can use the cellphone.”

“I’ve been telling my kids I’m going to China in 2015, surfing, hahaha. I will text you twice a day.”

“How come I’m starting to have visions of someone getting attached?” Iris teased him.

“Who?” he asked. Was he being cynical?

“Messaging twice a day? I was kidding about the phone-calls to Austria! Who? You and me? You know I traveled a lot, without hardly ever any home contact. I really missed that, a bay at home. This was before cellphone days; they existed, but we didn’t have one and we didn’t have the cash to afford long distance calls.”

“Hahaha, early morning and late at night,” he insisted, full of enthusiasm.

“Hey, sweetheart, once a day would do! Is it true what they say, most of the fun for the man is in the hunt?” Iris retorted.

“I can’t believe that. If you find a love to share, what could be better, and that’s what the hunt is, finding that one true love!”

“Really? Fantastic! Did you sleep better last night, after making love?”

“Yes I slept much better. I had another dream, was also helping people, but I don’t remember much details...”

Iris assumed he meant their making love in the night and laughed. He put his arms around her, tender and caring. “I think I’m surfing the best I’ve ever surfed at the moment, what a difference this new board makes. My old one broke just before the trip, the fin broke. Do you want to try it tomorrow? And, could you really teach me yoga?” He was slightly exaggerating about the quality of the surf. He might have been at his best in South Africa before he left, but the Indian ocean was really quite tranquil most days, yet the strong winds more suitable for kite-surfing. Just paddling with or against the currents was the best he usually got out of it.

“What an amazing achievement! Yes, would love to try it. My leg seems better now, my head is healed up too. Let’s see later? Yoga, I have only been doing it since two years, I am not certified to teach a class, but I can show you some things.”

“That would be great to bosen up my whole system, sounds baie lekker. But I have a better idea for now...”

They kissed, tenderly first, then they flew at each other and made wild, passionate love.
Chapter 25

The Ocean Their Pool

Shortly after sunrise they woke up with the loud croaking of some arguing caws.

“Good morning lovely lady, it’s a beautiful day! Going to jump in the water to wake up and check the surf, want to come along?”

“Oh dear, I am amazed, I couldn’t do that in cold water. You are incredible, you have my admiration!”

“It’s never cold here; much cockier water in my pool, in winter.”

“You call the African ocean your pool?” Iris giggled.

The morning started good, they were having fun already.

“I mean my swimming pool, which in the winter is the coldest water around. I can just manage two lengths under water, then come flying out.”

“A swimming pool at home? Oh dear lord, now I am hooked, says the non-materialistic girl,” Iris mocked. “And I thought I had nothing in common with Madonna?”

“I’ve made a pool attachment allowing to swim full out and stay in one spot, perfect for exercise. When I was retrenched in 2008, that’s when the newspaper went to digital printing, I got a good payout, so I put in a deck, you’d call it a terrace, a pool, lots of paving and a car port, ah and built an amazing braai room which as you know is now Jamie’s little flat.”

“A fabulous idea! Could you get a solar panel to warm up your pool?”

“Why? It wakes me up in the middle of winter, someone once told me cold water is good for the heart.”

“For polar bears and bodybuilders maybe?”

“I’ve always been built like a piece of biltong, tough dry buffalo meat.”

“After a Turkish steam room you jump in a deep ice cold basin, and after that a swim in the pool in the snow… I thought my heart was about to stop with shock in that basin. The pool was warmed up a little.”

He laughed loud. “That’s what I mean, supposed to be good for the heart, not attack the heart. Will be back soon,” he said kissing her and walked off to the sea. An hour later the gleam in his face revealed he’d caught a good wave. He felt hungry, and not for food alone. He took off his wetsuit and they made love.

“You look so beautifully tanned, like you were born that way?” Iris inquired.

“My colour has always been like a touch of humour from God, especially in South Africa.”

“Your second son’s name sounded German, is that your origin too?”

“Talking about Michael, the one with the Muslim wife? His grandfather was German. Shawn, the eldest, stays in the UK; both lovely children.”

“You really have the features of a Dutchman, if I may say so; one with a character that is! Only more suntanned.”

“When I was in Bali, after about a month I was really tanned. The locals started talking to me in Balinese.”

“That’s funny! How is the situation with apartheid in South Africa these days? Can you get on well with the black Africans?”

“Don’t say blacks when you are there, that’s considered insulting! I never had a colour issue. Had some very beautiful coloured women in my life… awesome people. I have a Muslim niece too.
With coloured we refer to brown, like an ethnic mixture, the darkest race we call black brothers. Tanned is always awesome, you have quite a nice tan yourself!

“IT feels good, that’s what counts. My sisters say the sun causes wrinkles and I shouldn’t be in it so much. But tanned or white, the wrinkles are there to stay,” Iris shrugged.

“Hahaha, healthier than pale people.”

“My skin did not take a sun tan at all until after I had a baby. The first time I came back from India I was just a bit reddish in the face. I didn’t have the patience to sit and relax in the sun like reading, dreaming, or thinking up poems when I appear to be doing nothing. Giving birth changed my hormones and skin, and ability to sit.”

“Yes, I spend a lot of time under my awesome African sun, you would love it. Summer is the best, the hottest sunny days, winter is from March to about August, but our weather pattern has changed so much! We have some lovely days in winter, so mild compared to what you have experienced. Just my pool water gets extremely cold in the early morning.”

“I’d need to put on some fat to brace myself,” Iris laughed.

“I will hold you very close, but then I’m not the most covered guy! We might need a duvet in winter!” he laughed.

“I can only hope you have a warm shower, we can meet there.”

“Awesome spot to get together, you can dance in it if you want too... small steps.”

“I am good at finding the warmest spots, or the coolest if need be.”

“Hahaha. That would be my heart and my feet!” Iris giggled. “But in Africa I will know nothing!”

“I will be your guide.”

“I hope so. Do you often disappear without warning?” Leonard looked puzzled. “I mean, when out together, you as my guide, like assuming I know the way and you get a phone call or something... hahaha, I’d rather be warned in advance.”

His happy face went serious.

“I will never leave you alone in an unknown situation, I will always be with you, guiding you until you know your way about.”

“I don’t panic easily you know, but I have no orientation in woods or bush at all. The lions I saw close up in Namibia got fed by the lodge to keep the people safe. On the safaris they wouldn’t let us step out of the jeep, or even stand up in them. We had to be very quiet. One elephant came very near, wanting to cross our path, and started flapping its ears and scratching the soil, staring us down, very scary.”

“Cape Town has mostly mountains and beaches. We have buck and porcupines, ostriches and zebra running free at the Cape Point Reserve where I surf sometimes.”

“Sounds wonderful. I need to get a better camera for there.”

“You will enjoy the fauna and flora there too, different from here.”

“You are such a bubbly man! I’m impressed. I am more dreamy than active.”

“Hey, a time and place for everything. Sometimes it’s lekker to relax, but tomorrow I want to get up at sunrise and check out the surf; am expecting it to jack up a little. A bit too much today, the waves, for your first lesson. But I still expect a boat to come soon. What are your plans today?”

Iris didn’t make any plans. She took each day as it came, the Taoist in her. But she started worrying they might never get away from Bird Island. She asked if they couldn’t build a sail on the surfboard, perhaps cutting open the wet-suit, or make a small bamboo raft. Leonard thought she was joking, but then consoled her:

“Time always brings a solution, and I’m in no hurry, are you?” He still had more than a week time before his flight home. Iris looked for distraction.
“Can I have the sling today? I’d like to try it. I could eat a horse!”

“You won’t find a horse here and if you did, a stone wouldn’t kill it,” he laughed. “Sure, here, take it. I will go and do some more fishing later too, it’s time I checked my ocean trap.”

“Fancy some yoga before you leave?” He agreed. They did some exercises and sun salutations on the beach. Then he took off with his harpoon made of bamboo and his surfboard, and Iris started shooting pebbles at the tree target, doubting very much if she would ever aim it at a bird’s head. The plopping noises on the bark were pure fun.

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Meanwhile the other storm survivor, the boat-boy Atindriyo Chakraborty was in agony with his strained ankle he had thought cured. He really had to return to his base camp near Old Baba’s grave. Here at least he knew where to find edible roots and leaves, crab and fish. He made a bandage from some leaves and took a long rest hoping the pain would subside, which it did, as nerves and muscles relaxed. Then he prepared to take a food supply before he set out again to find the smugglers’ hut and the mine where their parcel was waiting for him, and to see if that surfer was still around, and most importantly, the surfer’s boat.

He couldn’t understand why no other boats had been out this way, but then, it was the end of the tourist season in Goa, and cliffs and coral reefs around the island also kept all fishing boats at bay, at least at this side. He was sure he’d find more people at the south beach, that surfer couldn’t have come here all alone. Surfers always surfed at least in pairs. It was a measure of safety in case something went wrong. Atindriyo’s confidence he’d find a lift home was as strong as a buffalo’s neck.
Chapter 26

The Rossing Uranium Mines

Iris woke up to an empty hut. She started with her usual yoga routine, then hunger drove her to light the fire with newly collected kindling. She decided to start grilling the huge fish Leonard had harpooned the day before. They had both been too tired to bother last night. Gutting it with the big sharp shell was a new challenge for her, but she was toughening up. The day flew by, the sounds of nature around her were intoxicating, never had she felt such inner peace, especially since she had remembered some important details. Her trip in India was to last for two months, there was still time before her return ticket expired. After a tasty grilled fish breakfast she went for a brief swim. The ocean was not cold at all. Mid-afternoon Leonard turned up.

"Hello my lovely, so did you salute the rising sun? I was at the beach before the sun rose, had a great surf, 30 minutes walk along the coastline to reach the spot, warm waters!"

"Yes I did, and also did the warrior, a strong posture, it got me trembling. Caught myself smiling all through the morning. Any idea what time the sun rises here?"

"The sun rises about 6.40 am but I only went surfing a few hours later when the tide was out and starting to change, beach breaks need low tides, had some fun waves, and a few for you."

"I imagined that’s where the smile came from. Felt even the splashes, while grilling the fish. I must try it soon! Great lunch ready for you! That was one big fish you speared!" He laughed happily. "Warm splashes! Come here, the fish can wait."

Surfing seemed to activate the libido. Having proved that most satisfactorily he casually resumed the conversation.

"So do you hold these yoga positions a long time, or is it the stretching that brings on the trembling?"

"I held them pretty long today. It is the limit of the muscle strength that makes you shake. You have to relax in it or come back out of the position, or bend a knee, or you could tear a ligament."

"Very nice, to be doing something so physical and enjoying it. It will set you up nicely for surfing, being nice and supple."

"It’s all about feeling how far is good for you. Yes, the hardest for me is to stand still on tip toes, hands high above the head. I must cultivate feet muscles, but my legs have gained much muscle in a year."

"You don’t need bulk muscle for this type of exercise, just like me, slim and fit."

"You got it! Though I need to build some bulk on my bum, to sit on!"

"Today is a stunningly warm day, and no waves in this bay at all. We are so lucky in the cape, if there is just a bit of swell you can usually find an offshore spot to surf."

"That sounds great, no rocks to crash into! At the start of yoga my bum and thigh muscles were hurting a lot, so weak, and I was not sitting on the "sitting bones", didn’t even know they existed, haha. The tree position is hard on the buttocks and thighs."

"Let me give you a body massage to loosen those aching muscles." She rolled over and let him have a go at it. It did feel great.

"I watched a documentary on Congo not so long ago. What a mess there! I assumed South Africa was similar."

"Yes, Central-Africa has many war zones. Not Cape Town, though we have criminality, theft, rape, mugging and murder in the slums, like in every other city; we won’t be going there."
“You are scaring me. Belgium is so peaceful compared to all that.”

“I should go and check the fish trap and have a look from the hill for ships. Is there enough wood to make a big fire just in case? Smoke puffs could draw the attention.” He knew the chances were slim anyone would notice, they were not at the best side for ocean-liners to see any smoke. He’d have to make a smokey fire elsewhere.

“There is enough dry wood over here, and we can collect more wet stuff, to produce more smoke...?”

“Sure. Will talk again later,” he said and kissed her before walking off.

That evening the sunset was phenomenal. They sat and watched from a big tree trunk the storm had washed ashore.

“How many women are gonna be upset if I come with you and take you to bed at the end of the... surf?” Iris asked.

Leonard laughed but did not reply. He looked at the ocean in silence, picked up the two small fishes from his trap and went back for a late supper; murmuring, “No boats... “.

The next morning Iris had the blues. Something was wrong, but she didn’t know what. He had avoided a question that was important for her twice, and wasn’t saved by the swell this time. She was pretty convinced he was hiding something. Besides that, she missed being able to take photographs, her second biggest passion, and started to miss talking to her friends on Facebook, and to her daughter. But she didn’t say anything. She went along to get her first surf lesson.

It didn’t go all that well, she had thought to do a warrior on the board as if she was destined to surf. But jumping up on the board without falling in the water was pretty hard, and soon her almost healed leg was hurting. Then the speed of being on a wave had surprised her, she didn’t dare to let go of the board to jump up. Finally she got up on one knee, and her arms spread widely she flew towards the beach like on the Titanic’s bow. She loved that sensation, like flying. After going under a few times, her heart racing like hell, and standing up for just two seconds, and a wash out, she called it a day, and sat down on the beach to watch Leonard steal the show. He made it look so easy, catching one wave after the other. Beaming he came out.

“That was a very nice surf! And I had a flashback,” he said as they embraced. “I went to Longbeach, close to my place; the waves looked very small and I thought, oh well.. So I went to another spot with bigger waves but still not good enough, and almost went home. But Scarborough is only 7 minutes further by car, so I went there and was so pleasantly surprised, awesome waves, and just three of us surfing in front of the rocks, all the others were in the middle of the beach! I ended the day sitting on my roof taking some photographs, just doesn’t get much better! I wish I could show them to you.”

It was amazing how their minds were so often on the same subject. She grabbed the occasion to follow up on a vague intuitive suspicion.

“Could you really see me in South Africa with you? How would your children react?”

“My children only want me to be happy, and I would love to spend time with you, to get to know you better and see how we react as partners to life’s many wonders.”

“The idea is very exhilarating! Imagine how odd that would be, if we were meant for each other. Our spiritual guardians and the weather collaborated to have us meet. They always provide the possibility to find what we need, the next steppingstone in our spiraling evolution.”

Iris realized her life had always been incredibly lucky, magical, and wouldn’t give the credits to any capacity of her own, that would just be pompous. Most people explained mysterious events through their faith, religion. God had saved her. In that case: why? She knew there was more to it, the presence of some kind of protection was almost a certainty, she had escaped death too many
times. Yet God really had more serious things to attend to. Is intuitive knowing not the hardest to verbalize, and even more difficult to explain?

He laughed, the happy dude. “If we are meant for each other that would be awesome, never odd, and we both know how much we have in common throughout our lives!”

Iris having understood loves instead of lives:
“Yes, love is the best thing, in life?”
“No question about it.”
“We wouldn’t do it for any less. I love the planet, the greens, the blues, the colours, I love a man with tanned skin,” she smiled.
“You should write ‘The Adventures of Love through Iris’s lovely green eyes.”
“What, and see you as an adventure? haha. Hey, I look deeper,” she laughed. “It’s the one part in life I take pretty serious I think, love.”
“Glad you don’t see me as an adventure, wasn’t implying it but thanks. What’s the furthest south you have been in Africa?”
“I have only been in Morocco six times, close to Mauritania once, and in Tunisia, but south? Some place near Windhoek in Namibia, where the Namib desert runs into the Kalahari desert, and in Walvisbaay. That was very cold water indeed, they wouldn’t let me jump into it from the boat! Saw dolphins and a walrus colony there! The cold Benguela Gulf Stream passes there, wouldn’t surprise me if it came straight from the Antarctic. I guess the furthest south I’ve been is the Sossusvlei and Deadvlei.”
“I was fired from two jobs in Swartkopmund, the West Coast of Namibia, a little north from Walvisbaay.”
“What happened?”
“I just qualified in my trade, about 20-21 years old when friends told me about how much money they were earning, working at the Rossing Uranium mines up in the southwest at that time. Me just qualified, I wasn’t earning all that much, so decided with two buddies to head up northwest, along the coast on a surf and job hunting jole, a fun trip basically. So we left.”
“The first spot was Eilands Bay. We spent 16 days there, didn’t have much surf but had so much LSD we even cooked it in a stew. Then we left for southwest, tripping, listening to Janice Joplin. I’m steering, flying a million miles an hour; come over a hill onto a bit of flat road. The wind sends the car flying to the left, almost off the road, hahaha; I just add another finger to the wheel. What a wild road trip that was. Anyway, we arrive at Swartkopmund. We have no tools, so we go to the hardware store, and the owner is so friendly he swaps brand new tools for our new boards, and we head for Rossing. We spend the night there, have breakfast the next morning, and take lunch with us and go with the crews. They tell us: ‘Don’t worry, just take the job and the workers will teach you.’ It sounded so simple.”
“Like in a movie, that simple.”
“It’s one huge mining area with many different companies doing different things. I decide at the last moment to leave my brand new toolbox and just put my tools into my shoulder bag. We get to the first company looking for ARTISANS, craftsmen. The guy in charge looks at my tools. Lucky for me yogurt has spilled all over my tools, and I get employed. He looks at my buddies’ new tool boxes and tells them he doesn’t want any chancers and tells them to leave, hahaha. I am dumbstruck. They were going to teach me! The guy sees me staring at my buddies and asks if I am with them. I say yes. Next thing he says: ‘You are fired!’”
“We go to the next company. About ten guys in the waiting room, a little Frenchman walks in and says: ‘Who is a boiler maker?’ Hahaha. I have no idea what that is. Every one just stares and nobody does anything. Hey, in for a penny, in for a pound: I put up my hand and say: ‘That’s me.’
He looks at me and asks if I can weld? I say: 'Of course, just give me the job and no worries.' That's what we are supposed to do according to my info. All the way to the site he questions me and I say: 'You don't have to worry, just give me the job.' The fucking little Frenchman takes me up to some big metal thing, gives me a blowtorch and says: 'Weld that to that.' What the hell, I take the blowtorch and touch the one piece of metal and it sticks to the torch, hahaha. I'm trying to unstick the flipping thing. The Frenchman says 'You can't weld!' I say: 'Not really.' He takes me to some high construction and tells me to climb to the top and start bolting down some beams. About four hours later he comes back and tells me I'm fired, but I can collect a day's wages."

"Jesus! Crazy!"

"I thought: Bugger this! and tried to swap the tools back. Couldn't do that, hahaha, so I had to hitchhike back to Cape Town with a bag of tools I had no idea how to use. I still had my old job waiting for me. Awesome world experiences I've had, I'm absolutely blessed."

Iris was speechless. She just laughed, shaking her head.

"How's that for job hunting?"

"Top class! He thought sending you up a high construction was a good cure for your illusions of grandeur, hm? Iris remarked ironically.

Leonard laughed, content, and then went silent. Iris, hungry, was imagining a spaghetti Bolognese. While Leonard watched the fresh fish grilling, she went off to pick some fresh fruits nearby.
Chapter 27

The Weird Dream

The hot weather changed, wind was blowing clouds over. They both went ahead and did their thing. Iris went for a walk, the vegetation was so abundant.. she always felt fantastic in nature, looking at the different shapes of plants, leaves, creepers, insects... She never got tired of it. But later in the afternoon all colours faded, as the sun went into hiding. The sky turned an ominous grey and the wind was picking up. She hoped Leonard would be careful. She'd be so lost if he were to disappear.

The waves were wild now, she could only hope he had not attempted to go to the north again in this weather. A deep groan came from the sky, a slow, distant but rapidly approaching rumbling thunder. She quickly decided to return to the hut and cook the crab Leonard had caught, before the rain would make a campfire impossible. She had collected all she could, mangoes, bananas and nuts. To her great relief Leonard turned up soon. Highly charged electric flashes lit up the sky. A booming thunder clattered so loud it made the hut tremble. Yet there was only a light drizzle falling.

"First thunder and lightning I've seen in months. The storm that shipwrecked us was just black clouds, wind and rain, and mental waves," Iris said while taking the cooked crab indoors to eat as the rain was now picking up. It was not the time for monsoon in Goa yet, a month too early, but soon it started to pour down in buckets. At least they could collect lots of rain water, it was running down from the leaves and roof. The crack in the rock where he had found a puddle before would be filling up again too. Thunder blew up, like loud explosions right above the hut. Leonard showed her the great size of fish he had caught in his cliff trap this time. The rule being the deeper the water the bigger the fish, this unusually high tide brought his trap deep under the water's surface. He'd seen sailfish, dorade, king mackerel, wahoo, cobia, barracuda, GTs, large groupers, snappers, and threadfin salmon but today he had trapped a daddy king mackerel. Iris loved smoked mackerel and salmon most, so spirits were high at the thought of supper. He wrapped the king mackerel in banana leaf and put it on the low glowing charcoal fire. It was still hot enough to cook it. Next he covered the campfire with large banana leaves resting on 5 poles in a pyramid shape, hoping the rain wouldn't kill the fire immediately. They'd have a very nice supper again. But in no time the bamboo hut was leaking. Lightning struck down with an ear-deafening clattering, it sounded real close. A bird in distress shrieked out loud. They were not sure the bamboo roof would hold for long.

"We don't get much lightning in Cape Town. Further up north they do." The thunder rumbled nonstop for minutes, right close.

"Our rains in Flanders are usually mild, and go on for a long time. We had really heavy thunder last winter, during the night. Spooky."

Iris associated thunder with deceit, so she threw out in the open what was bugging her:

"We agreed to be honest, as I hate lies. But what is honesty? Does it mean we volunteer all information? Or one has to ask first? Both are honest. Which one shall we go for?"

Leonard gazed, as if he had not understood what she said. He saw nothing to associate it with.

"I am tired, am not staying up long," she said.

"Last night I was tired, but you were so part of my mind."

"Well, I slept deep... it wasn't me asking your attention."

"What do you mean?"
"I was not awake all night thinking of you or in a dream astrally visiting like I did a few times, so, I plead not guilty for causing you a sleepless night."

"Hahaha, all my fault. Do you know anything about interpreting dreams?"

"Not officially. I can always give first interpretations. "

"I had a really weird one last night, and remembered it! Very unusual"

"Tell me!"

"A bit sexual, you won't take offense?"

"Nope. You made me curious now."

"I was walking on the beach with a very pretty youngish blond woman, curls in her hair, lovely day at the beach. Then we were at something going on at the beach, a show or something, and we were in the stands watching people all around us, when suddenly she whacks some one on the ass... and his pants are down. Next minute she has pulled his dick backwards between his legs and starts giving him a blow job in front of everyone, they all are staring, then they look at me... I shrug and say, 'Hey I don't really know her'."

"Lol. But do you know who she was?" Iris interrupted.

"I don't recognize the woman. Anyway, she finishes and we are walking away together, and she explains she had to do that otherwise she would have suffered serious punishment from some connection of the guy. I tell her 'no problem', why should I be upset, I don't even know her. The next minute we are up on a stairway by the beach; she climbs up and goes out the window, for some reason I can't get down or up, I am stuck outside the window and don't know which way to go... and then I wake up. Weird?"

"Sounds like you were in strange company!"

"Hahaha, you think so?"

"Heck, I don't know what you do when you sleep," she smiled, "astral travels?"

"Usually, I close my eyes and hope to wake to the rising sun. So any ideas what the dream means?"

"Explain this? Haha, Guessing maybe. Could be a morality dream; seeing young women who can be victims of abuse or screwed up in the head, and more free in a way than you, bound by something, held back by the heart?"

"Yes, getting stuck in nowhere could be shackles of some kind?"

"Shackles of 'how far are you prepared to follow a mad young girl?' Ethics where you didn't expect them? A matter of taste, or common sense? Or, it was just the kind of dream that turns you on?"

"No idea why we were together, and why she had to explain herself, you follow?"

"Yes, maybe a vision in the future? Isn't there any girl of that description on the beaches, who may be dreaming about you, watching you?" Iris laughed.

"Hahaha, where? Funny, it was not a turn-on dream, no erection or feeling horny whatsoever. Two different people in a dream."

"Heck, I've not met your friends yet, hahaha"

"Hahaha, would she have to be close by?" he asked.

"Sounds like a strange, paranoid girl, maybe someone from rehab? A patient, close by, dreaming of you? I don't think so,"

"Could she maybe be across some ocean?"

"Youngish you said? Well, who knows..." Iris wondered what Anamika had looked like.

"It could never be me in any case, I'd never give a man a sexual treat because I was pressurized to do so! This girl sounds like Russian or something," Iris joked, thinking of the many marriage and sex adverts that popped up regularly on the Internet.
“Ouch, and there I was hoping for meaning... Russian! But what a weird dream any way.”

“Yes it is. Maybe just a fantasy that missed its goal.”

“What goal would that be?”

“Sounds like a dream that was supposed to turn any man on...”

He laughed loudly. “What, does that make me gay if it didn't?”

“No, just worthy of more decent behaviour perhaps, that young girl was maybe not your style.”

Oh, she was putting him on a pedestal, not capable of negative thoughts about him at this stage, the best proof for herself she was blinded by love. Iris was quite aware of it, but also cautious not to react too spontaneously. These were sensitive matters, and it was easy to offend someone. He might even have a good idea who appeared to play a role in his dreams, so corny and vivid...

“Maybe a troubled spirit whom I was supposed to help... and didn't do a very great job, thus me being lost?”

“But you were being saved, no? She flew or jumped out of the window and you would have been dead like a brick if you had followed” she consoled.

“So there is still some work to be done...”

“What do you think yourself? Is it a forbidden, a hidden desire, a young immoral girl by your side? Did she possibly represent your daughter, a fear in combination with our seventies talk?”

“Haha, you have a one track mind. No it didn't feel like any kind of sensual or physical attraction, but like something I had to do and failed”

“I am just brainstorming. Yes, that's why I said your daughter, needing moral guidance. But you didn't fail educating her, and she is not blond”

“My son has a book on dreams at home, but where would you start? It’s alphabetical A-Z.”

“Watching sex without a turn-on? Feeling trapped? Flying out the window? Maybe watching indecent behaviour without interfering? I have no idea, I’d let a page fall open and see what it says, like the I Ching.” hahaha

“I remember reading bits in it. 'Trapped' was in it, one of the things I recall. It suggests confusion or conflict about how to act in living life.”

“Yes, like what I said, a moral conflict.”

“...and a door meant a new beginning... something new happening in your life. Hahaha, what to chose?”

“Are you in conflict about how to act in life?”

“I’ll be 58 this year, no conflict on how to conduct myself, or what I want.”

“So you know what to do when you miss making love too much then. You have a special friend for that? Or is that a secret?” Iris pried a little more.

“I had a friend with benefits, we were good friends, but she has gone.”

“Sorry for you.”

“Why? Why are you sorry for me?”

“Well, if not for the sadness of breakup, for health reasons? Affection and love are great illness prevention?” Iris smiled, though she was puzzled by this man. Was it not evident that a failed relationship was a sad thing, and you regretted the pain it caused? “Not saying you should have sex just for that reason. In almost every case an affair leads to some kind of trouble, I found.”

“If it gets so bad, I masturbate, get it over with and carry on living. I never let myself get so far that frustrations interfere with my life, and make me go moggy.”

“It must be really worth it, the bond.”

“But life would be better, shared, without wanting change,” he said and kissed her as if to seal their confidence in a non-verbal layer of mutual trust. It was a mind-blowing kiss. The storm had caught up. Thunder clattered loudly above the hut and made the island tremble. The branches of
trees were groaning under the fierce jerks of the wind. Such weather had always coincided with heavy things in Iris’s life, things like treason, tough lies or deceit. Was this sky-burst an omen? Had Leonard been telling the truth about that friend with special benefits, meaning having sex and then each going their own way, was it correct that she had gone? Or was there something else, some other danger on the way, and her guardian angels were trying to warn her?
Chapter 28

Premonitions

Iris had a hard night, tossing and turning, bathing in premonitions, feeling pretty sure that this golden beach man was not telling her the entire truth, at least not about his present life. She had often been half lucid, sensing things, but it was never clear what her visions exactly meant. After some strong sensations, mostly during the day but sometimes at night, she was getting more and more convinced. What if he was only playing a game, just having fun, simply for being stuck on this uninhabited island together? He loved playing poker he had told her, so he was capable of deception, and she was seriously in love, what then?

After Leonard Stolk had climbed up the hill for his daily ship-spotting they warmed up some fish and over a shell of herbal tea she asked the question that had been bugging her for a while.

“This friend with special benefits you mentioned, will you tell her about me when you go back, or keep it a secret?”

For the second time, just as she had feared, he completely avoided a straight answer. “Hey, did you ever have real downers for any period of time?”

“Yes, I have.”

“I think our lives are awesomely close, but that is our biggest difference.”

“You were never down? That is mental! I am still growing up, learning to cope with being emotional. People keep changing, evolving. I always got too attached, wanted to make a relationship work so badly!”

“Seriously! It’s normal, an odd dark cloud hovering, but hey, along comes the sun and shatters it within a day or so.”

“I could handle set-backs and problems, I was always optimistic. But failing in love, three times, turning out really impossible, was hard for me. I live to love and be loved. Now I change my attitude towards it, who knows, I may learn yet... “

“So was I lucky as a child, to learn about pain so early and block it all away?”

“Not in my opinion. It just postponed a certain layer? You can’t block it out forever, you have to face it and replace it in your heart. You told me once you felt as if you couldn’t feel anything, that is not too good... and I don’t believe it either. You feel happiness a lot, so therefore, you feel, and must feel sadness too... It’s okay to feel sad. It’s part of being alive. You make me feel very alive. You see it as simple sexual attraction? Well, it is a way to love too I guess? A friend of mine, Matthieu, once said that ‘there’s no necessary connection between sex and love. Sex was there since the beginning of the species, if you want. Love came a LOT later. It was at some point coupled to sex, but it is something quite different really... it’s not inherent to sex and sex is not inherent to love. They can coexist in the best of relationships. You may come to love through sex, and you may come to sex through love. What do you think of that?”

Leonard laughed. Iris didn’t see what there was to laugh about. Then he replied.

“Sometimes when I’m reading, I feel real sadness for a character, and sometimes flashes of life bring about a feeling of sadness, but I replace it as soon as possible with goodness. I don’t like sadness in real life, and then, when I can share happiness with someone, especially someone from a world so far away, then there is hope for me!”

“Being stranded here with you has been a pleasure for me too,” Iris mused. “Maybe you avoided being sensitive or vulnerable? You can’t trust many women with private information, I know.
There are those who tend to judge, get angry, jealous, greedy or disappointed and can use that against you, or drop you at a whim. I hope I’ll never damage your trust in me, Leonard.”

“I will seriously bare my soul to you, you are such a lovely spirit, an angel up and running, stunning.”

“An angel who fell, and clambered up again, trying to be virtuous, and that with such a craving for making love,” Iris laughed and she moved closer to kiss him.

“My type of angel! Just like the phoenix! Where have you been all my life?” His face beamed. Their bodies moved closer, touched, hands caressed.

“I was living it up, waiting for you to gather enough experience,” she laughed. “I did mean making love, not having sex with ‘just a friend’. That may be fun, but is not fulfilling. I will have to tell Peter Pan the deal is off as soon as I get home. Can’t give my body while my mind is full of you.”

“Hahaha! Who am I to comment? You have to live your life to the best, and in my mind that is by always being positive, that is being happy! Until one day we could be happy again together. That’s why life should always be appreciated, we only have this one now, and only we can make it memorable.”

“Will you tell anybody about me?” A strange gulf swept through her. Iris felt their time on the island could suddenly draw to an end. She hoped nothing bad would happen, no more accidents or disappearing in the jungle.

“Yes, I will tell my children. My daughter will probably say ‘As long as it’s just friendship’; she doesn’t believe in long distance romance; Jamie will wonder why I don’t get involved closer to home.”

“Both very sensible, perhaps too sensible for you and me? I am thrilled, now I know you have true feelings for me or you wouldn’t consider telling me about them.”

“They would be thrilled if we got together. I don’t know if they worry about me, I think Helena would love to see me with someone sharing my life, afraid I’m going to grow up lonely.”

“It will be hectic, visas and such, to come and leave again, and return some months later. Could we, could our love handle that? Sorry if I jump too far ahead, I must try and be realistic, I learned my Texas lesson well!”

“Seriously, if we make plans and get together again sometime in the future, I think the love we kindle will see us through to our older ages, and a few months gap or break will only make it grow.”

“It is certainly worth a try!” Finally they hushed, and let their entranced bodies take over.

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Kumar Rao had decided to sleep on the beach with Ravi and Lawrence that night, expecting to see a couple of fishing boats beside them in the morning. But their broken down boat was still the only one there. Only two other men were here this early, laying out a huge net from the beach into the water, helped by three skinny young boys.

“Don’t worry Kumar,” Ravi Ramanathan said, “with your car we can drive to Panjim fast and get the engine fixed by tomorrow.”

First you had to believe the repair would go so quickly, secondly, that was too late for Kumar. He simply had to find a quicker way. So he took Ravi home and drove on to the nearest town to try his chances. It was a slow drive, the road was full of holes, all trucks possible seemed to be out this way today, and dogs and buffalo herders all seemed to want to cross in front of his car. It took them hours to get there.
He had come to a point where he was prepared to spend his last rupee on getting to Bird Island. He stepped into a travel agency to hire a motorboat. Lawrence said he could steer one, though he may be bluffing. Fate wanted that all three boats were hired out for a few days. It took two more offices before they finally found what they were looking for. “No problem”, the manager said. “Tomorrow morning at 8 am you come and get the key.” No matter how much Kumar objected, the boat had to get serviced before it could be taken to sea. That night, sleeping on the floor in Ravi’s home, the wind set up. Clouds came drifting in fast, the same clouds Iris had seen as an omen.
Chapter 29

The Find

A hard, loud thump on the fragile cabin roof woke Leonard up. He jumped up. The room was dark and gloomy, though it was way past the hour of sunrise. Sun there was none, the sky was dull. Fierce wind was shaking bushes and trees in frantic distress. Leonard went behind the hut to answer nature’s call, listening to the noises as he always did; no chirping or cawing birds, no humming insects in the air as usual, just whizzing wind. Then suddenly a dry branch snapped loudly, like a large animal had walked on it. Leonard froze an instant to locate the noise, then moved forward, quietly but quickly, lifting a firm stick on the way. Would he encounter a wild boar yet, or a stray dog who’d survived a shipwreck? How come he had never seen paw-marks or hoof-imprints in the wet sand, or droppings, he wondered.

For a while the bush was progressively thickening, then, in a open space just a few hundred meters behind the smugglers cabin, he noticed the soil had been dug, now overgrown with new foliage. ‘The hole in the ground Iris told me about’, it flashed through his head. ‘How funny I’ve never checked out this area.’

Then again he heard a sound, different from the wind-shuddering foliage, like a bock or deer or some big wild cat running through the growth. But this was not South Africa or the mainland of India where he’d expect to see a holy cow, a calf, a monkey or a goat, or even a lost cheetah. He turned left at a thick growth of palm trees whose stems grew from one root, the terrain dropped steeply as the almost invisible path curved. Then he saw it movement!

A glimpse of a figure, a brown youngster in loin cloth, running, caught in the corner of his eye. Leonard ran after him. He soon caught up with him and leaped. Leonard pushed him over onto his chest and held his hands together tight, wishing he had his treasured orange rope with him. A wooden box flew out of the young mans hands as he hit the ground.

“Who are you boy?” Leonard asked.

The ‘boy’ didn’t speak. Holding both wrists together tight and the wooden box under his arm, he pushed the young Indian forward to the hut.

“Iris,” he yelled as the approached. “Hurry up, bring me the rope!” Iris who was already awake and doing her morning yoga on the bamboo mat gave a shriek. “Atindriyo!” she yelled, when she saw the slim figure while she handed Leonard the rope. What a surprise on both faces! Atindriyo saw Iris and said rather emotionally:

“I was looking for you madam, you are alive!”

She was alive alright, and very exciting. How well she looks, the boy thought. A deeper tan brought out her greenish eyes.

After the boy was tied up Leonard took him inside. Iris had the pot on the fire outside to make herbal tea for breakfast. The boy made no effort to struggle or escape.

Inside it was story time.

“Why are you spying on me? And what’s in the box?” Leonard asked. The boy said he had no idea, he had just found it that morning after walking for two days. He had discovered it in the old jade mine, not more than a hole in the ground that had curved into a side tunnel years ago, but he had had no time to look what the box contained as the surfer had been after him. So he said:

“Atindriyo Chakraborty is my name, pleased to meet you,” the boy said. Iris came in and handed him a shell with tea, his hands retied to the font so he could drink.
“This is Old Baba’s job! This package has to be taken to Mumbai. He died in the storm, Old baba. His grave is on the eastern beach.” He didn’t give away that he’d seen Leonard there.

“His family is still waiting for him, and for the money this job would bring in for them.”

They all went silent, stunned by all these unexpected intrigues.

“Atindriyo Chakraborty is my name, pleased to meet you,” the boy repeated.

He was very well spoken indeed, as Iris had said. His English was fluent, obviously he was well educated. His skin colour was also quite pale, as if he had not ventured under the Indian sun much, or was he perhaps of mixed origin?

“Will you help me find his boss Kumar Rao, or his Russian boss, Mister Sergej? I want to finish Baba’s job and give his pay to his family!” Atindriyo decided on the spot not to confess to Iris that she had actually been kidnapped. She didn’t need to know. Though she may have wondered how her passport had ended up in the coolbox. It had been a desperate and insane plan, and Old Baba had been foolish. Atindriyo would never have gone through with it. Kidnapping a tourist would cause an international incident, a violation that held severe penalties. Having a master’s degree in criminal law did not give him immunity as an accomplice in crime either.

“Let’s have a look,” Leonard said, and banged on the lock until the box opened.

All they saw was a cloth. Iris went pale. They untied the string and opened the cotton bag.

Into Leonard’s open hand fell a bunch of incredibly expensive looking, sparkling precious stones. They counted them; eighteen fabulous diamonds! A pure crystal portal to wealth! All three of them went quiet. Atindriyo knew he was in over his head. Old Baba’s bosses would be looking for this. They were in great danger.

“You didn’t know this?” Leonard asked sternly.

“I swear!” Atindriyo replied.

“Who else knew about it? Or heard about this place?” Leonard continued, trying to get on top of this precarious new situation.

“Old Baba’s boss knows, a certain Kumar Rao from Bangalore, who in his turn works for a big guy in Mumbai, a Russian he called mister Sergej. Old Baba may have mentioned it to his wife too, who knows? Then there was Baba’s helper, Lawrence, a city kid from Panjim. He was supposed to set out with us to Bird Island but he changed his mind. I don’t think he knew what the delivery contained; he was naive, like me. Perhaps even Old Baba didn’t know what he was getting into. He was just a small time chancer who took this job only to please his young lady and children. Their children are still very young, I don’t believe he knew he was involved in diamond smuggling. It is just terrible he died. That’s karma, he should never have thought about...” Atindriyo stopped abruptly, but it was too late, Iris had noticed it.

“Thought about what?” she inquired.

“Did you not wonder how your passport got in that coolbox, madam?”

“Sure I did. I thought it had fallen out my bag, and you had put it in there for safe keeps when that storm suddenly started rocking the boat like mad?”

“Don’t you see? That storm appeared out of nowhere. That doesn’t happen just like that, not without a reason! It started the moment Baba was led by greed and stole your passport. It upset the balance of good and bad, and disrupted good fortune... His bad intention is what attracted the storm. Have you never heard of synchronicity? Of the discovery of the god-particle, that shows that the waves of thought patterns can trigger events?”

“As everything consists of electro-magnetic fields?” Iris asked.

They got into a difficult conversation, not based on superstition as Leonard first expected, but on scientific discoveries, leading into quantum physics. Iris loved it, she was no stranger to this thought pattern. Many a time the weather and her life events had coincided. Some New Age
theories she had occasionally come across had voiced similar ideas. She was happy it was not a religious approach; for once neither God nor any Hindu deity were held responsible. Somehow she believed her guardian angels might have helped the phenomenon to take shape a little too.

Leonard just listened, silently wondering if the ever re-occurring luck throughout his life, and even meeting Iris, possibly the true love of his life, was connected to this too, wishes taking shape. Finally down to earth again he said, “Alright. We will need to be prepared. When they arrive to look for the diamonds, whoever they may be, that vessel, maybe even a helicopter, will be our ride home. We will have to outsmart them. If the Russian mafia is involved, they are not small potatoes. Let’s think up a plan.”

The storm was only beginning and headed also for the mainland. Leonard put on his wetsuit and went out to take a look at the ocean and the beach. You never knew what the wild roaring sea would bring. The freak tide had swallowed the beach, the sea was roaring loud and moved with the fury of hell itself.

Meanwhile Kumar Rao was offering many rupees to the boss of the tiny tourist agency to let them take the hired motorboat out. But the man said: “No way! Big storm coming! As big or bigger than the one two weeks ago. Many boats went down. The boat stays ashore till the storm blows over.” Not realizing this stern decision was probably saving his and Lawrence’s life, Kumar cursed the hell out of the businessman, but he had no other option than to get a cheap room and wait, and pray. His mobile phone had no longer any reach.

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Atindryo reached into his mysteriously bulging loincloth and pulled out a package wrapped in leaf. It held a curious variety of roots and leaves, all very edible and nutritious. After all he’d taken biology as a second subject in college. Combined with the fish they had left, they’d have a good meal. Soon it was pouring down monsoon style, buckets of it. They huddled together on one mattress, the only spot where the roof wasn’t leaking and waited for Leonard to come back. As it rained, the wind got wilder and wilder and only after an hour calmed down a bit. That gave the cabin a chance to survive.
Chapter 30

The Deadly Yacht Trip

“What a fierce storm, I would hate to be at sea in this,” Leonard Stolk said, taking his wetsuit off and nestling beside Iris on her mattress. Atindriyo and Iris hadn’t stopped talking for a moment. They were obviously getting on great. All difference in age vanishes when it comes to philosophy. Iris was surprised by the immense knowledge of the young man. He seemed to have read just about every book on the list of world literature, and also a lot on current politics.

“We wouldn’t live to tell about a second one!” Iris answered.

“I was in a storm once before. Exhilarating! Didn’t I tell you about my three and a half month yacht trip?”

“No, you didn’t. Three and a half months? Wow!” Atindriyo moved a little closer to listen, the best thing they could do right now, with buckets of rain still pouring down.

“I answered an advert for paying crew members to sail around Madagascar. I had just met Cherrie, she was going to go with me, but couldn’t get the money. So off I sailed, it cost about R1000, that’s some 76 euro nowadays, including board and lodging.”

“Poor girl... “

“Just as well! Somewhere along the voyage the toilet broke,” Leonard laughed, “we had to hang over the side of the yacht, straining in tough conditions. It was during my border days. I told my company, the newspaper, I was going to the border for three months, but just before I left I went to the manager and told him the truth. He said go and enjoy, isn’t that amazing? I was well liked at work. You know we had to do 3 month camps during the war years and we got two salaries. We were called up randomly, a very hard practice for some families. But the companies never knew when, they just accepted the fact. That was amazing. I had done mine in 1973, when I was 17. It was in 1981 I answered the ad for paying crew. I had not been on a yacht ever, but loved the adventure. I was 26, I have some of the photos in one of my albums.”

“Anyway, I hiked up to Durban, that place on the east coast where I was born, remember? I had my surfboard with me, though that narrowed the chances to get a ride, so I got there a bit late. The skipper Fred was in a tight spot financially and needed the money, so he had advertised his yacht and him as the skipper, but still almost refused me on the boat. Later it came out he just was stalling. There were six of us all together: Fred about 60, Piet an older Afrikaans guy who just wanted to try it, he was in his mid 50s, Richard early 30s, the only other guy who had ever been on the sea, Bones an American of 26, Vic from Durban also 26 and me. Piet threatened to take Fred to court because it was already about 7 days after we were supposed to set sail, so I had nothing to do with the delays... and so Fred decided we were leaving. We were going in tandem with another yacht of fully experienced sailors and a woman on board, radio boffins, the works! They were friends of Fred. We thought he was spending our money, as we had all paid up front. So, fine, we decided to set sail straight to Reunion, that’s east of Madagascar, and then consecutively to Mauritius, the Seychelles, and back to the Comoros... those are the islands we landed at.”

“Paradise, as far as I know,” Iris threw in.

“It was a windless sunny afternoon, so we put the motor on and charged out to sea; we had to pair up, 2 on a 4 hours shift, and rotate, Fred and Piet, Richard and Bones, Vic and myself. It’s the middle of the night, we are miles out at sea, so you can’t see any shoreline. Vic had a spear gun and
had filled all his spears with weed. We are on shift, the motor is off, sails are just flapping, hahaha we have just made a pipe, and are goofed out of our minds... The next minute the storm hits us.

“In a small boat, sails up?” Atindriyo said, and shook his head.

“It was a 42ft Sloop called the Zingara. It made a 180° turn, we didn’t even know it, we’re shouting at Fred ‘Fred the wind has changed, what do we do?’ Hahaha. We are flying, the yacht is taking off, the wind is howling, the waves are spraying over the boat. Fred comes out and starts yelling at us to reef the sails, hahaha, can you imagine this? Vic and I look at him, we look around at the conditions and we shout he’s got to be crazy, we ain’t gonna do nothing, middle of the night, in the middle of a storm, he has to be kidding! He wasn’t kidding, ‘The yacht will capsize any time with those sails up’, he shouted back. Well, that sounded pretty convincing. This was the first time I ever changed sails. We had to put on safety cables, in the middle of the night in a huge storm, but we did it. I almost got swept over. I remember dangling on the boom as it went over, it was amazing, we reefed down and got back on track and we continued our shift...”

“Dangling on the boom, man man! I can see it before me, movie stunts! Hahaha, did you not get seasick at all?”

“Fred and Piet took over from us. What a storm! The wind is howling, it’s raining and all you look at your compass and just try to keep on the course Fred has given. You know those situations happen so fast you don’t have time to be scared, and I learned something about fear much earlier in my life... If you can share your fear, then you need not fear, hahaha, so I genuinely was in such energized mode. We had only been on the boat about 12 hours. So the old guys took over from Vic and myself, we went below. After about 20 minutes we hear Fred say: ‘Piet come about, you’re going off course.’ There is silence for a while, then again, ‘Piet! Come about! You’re going off course.’ 20 minutes later ‘Piet what the bloody hell, why can’t you keep course!’ Fred is upset, hahaha, Piet says: ‘I wear contact lenses and I can’t see in the rain.’ Hahaha Fred went off, telling Piet, if he’d known he would never have been allowed on the boat. So Piet never took the wheel at night again, but every change of shift he would have a cup of coffee ready for the pair on shift, all the way to Mauritius, a very good guy. Then it was the turn to Richard and Bones. Poor Bones, just puked and puked, did only that one shift for the first 7 days. We were such amateurs that we couldn’t turn around and head back for the harbour, so we ran with the storm for 7 days, just 4 of the able to steer the yacht. The other yacht later said they had turned back.”

“Seven days! Amazing!”

“So it was 4 hours on, 4 hours sleep. Bones couldn’t stay below, he found a place on the deck and tied himself down for the worst of the storm. Hell Iris, it was truly fantastic, we were flying! And then about the 4th day of the storm we ran into huge waves, swear to God, at least 40ft plus... and I was at the wheel...! I was screaming... our boat was only 42ft, I swear you, it looked like it could fit twice into some of the waves I was dropping down from... I was so flipping oozing with excitement! Imagine you are dropping down a 40ft wave, screaming with delight, the skipper can’t believe what he is seeing. All I hear is Bones yelling: ‘Fred, tell me this is the worst you ever sailed in!’ And as you hit the trough of the wave the top10 ft washes over the boat and me and Vic at the wheel. We just shake the water out of our face and get ready for the next one, just taking it in our stride. Piet comes up and takes a photo of me with this huge wave behind my head, also at this time the seas have gone smoother, not rough as before, just huge smooth mountains of water, just incredible. Fred boks like he is going to have a heart attack, hahaha. One of the most exhilarating adventures of my life.”

“When I hear this I must conclude: I am NOT adventurous!” Iris laughed. Atindriyo joined in.

“If that is not awesome enough, Fred is so panicked, he thinks we might broach—that is when we race down the wave and hit the trough, we kind of stop and the boat could easily do a 90 degree
turn and flip over as the top 10ft of the wave crashes over us. So he decides to do something called heaving to, that means, you take down all the sails, tie the wheel in one position, and run with the storm with nobody at the wheel. That was an impressive day and a half; I would go above and hook my safety line on and just enjoy the power around me.

Vic and I would talk, the wave would wash over us and we would carry on talking. Piet said I was a good sailor, and I think because I was not scared in the big waves he was not too afraid. Richard Bones and Fred were scared out of their wits. I think by now the guys knew Vic and I were smoking weed but nobody said a word about it.

“It sounds a bit wet to roll a joint,” Atindriyo remarked; they laughed.

“We never smoked joints, we had a tobacco pipe we would fill and took heavy sucks on it, hahaha it blew our minds, awesome. It got to such a bad state with just the two shifts, and nothing in the boat was dry, every bit of bedding and clothing was wet, that I put my wetsuit on for about 3 days, slept in it as well. And then as the storm was ending we were so tired and needed someone just to take the wheel for a while. We heard ‘I will,’ and there was Bones ready to help. He took the wheel and just dry puked, but he stayed at the wheel giving us a much needed rest. We had run with the storm for 7 days from that first moment of taking down the sails in the middle of the night, the only way for us to go, in the 40ft waves with no-one in control. Now we got as far south as Port Elizabeth, before we could turn east and head for Reunion; it took us 18 days from Durban to Reunion.”

“Now you must understand that by the end of the storm, nothing scared Vic and me. If the wind picked up and we were flying and it got towards evening, Fred would tell us to reef down, folding the main sail down a bit, making it smaller. So you with me? Now I am a sailor; I got so laid back on an average wind I would lay back and steer with my feet, hahaha absolute no lies, just trying to tell you how well Vic and I adapted. So when Fred tells us the wind is picking up and it’s approaching evening and he thinks it a good idea to reef down, Vic and I tell him if he wants the sails down, he must do it himself, we are quite happy as things stand. So we had more arguments. We all had turns in cooking; I would do at least a two course meal Fred would come to me away from the others and tell me to stop cooking so much food. I would tell him to piss off, ‘we have paid for board and lodging.’ After that first week Vic and I did exactly what we wanted, and the rest of the guys had full respect for us: we took them through the storm…”

“I’m stunned! I don’t have sailor legs, do you, Atindriyo?” The boy shook his head. “Aaron’s dream, someone I knew,” she explained, “was to sail the seas! I suggested we’d hire one for a day, hahaha but he meant for me to look for the money or a job to eventually buy a yacht together and sail round the world. I never cared for that idea at all. But, poor Fred! Mutineers him?”

“Fred was highly upset; we arrive in Reunion, at night, we dock and we just want to go joling. We wash and get dressed, and walk out to the dockside,” Leonard grinned, “and we try asking the local people where we are, so we can come back; wow what a language barrier! We ended up staying. Next morning Richard says he’s had enough, didn’t think sailing would be this bad and he’s flying back. Fred tells the rest of us that he thinks I am a bad element and wants me off the boat, hahaha. Bone laughs and says, ‘Fred! The only one that doesn’t belong on the boat is you!’ Fred gets all apologetic, and so I stay… I had a slight feeling in my guts, but only after meals. For the first 3 days I couldn’t eat below. On a Sloop all the living space is below the water line, so I ate above and let the food settle…”

“A bad element because you took too much risk?” Atindriyo asked.

“No, Fred thought I was a mutinous crew member, because I refused to listen to him once I got the hang of sailing, hahaha captain Lenny!”

“Captain Hooked, as in addicted. 18 Days at sea to get there, oh my… that’s forever!”
“I really enjoyed it. Before we left Durban he had refused to let me take my board with me, so just before we left I hid it under the lifeboat. When he had his freak-out at Reunion and then apologized, he was happy that I had brought it, trying to suck up. It was rather shitty for Fred, we didn’t even want him going into town with us. We had to go and buy more food and all of us had to add a bit more money. It was just the ethics, he wasn’t keeping to his side of the agreement, so we never invited him. We ate with the locals, got more weed from them, partied with them at night, you should have seen the ethnic disharmony there! The white French hated the locals, a lot of tensions at the nightclubs, hahaha, but we had great fun.”

“We spent two weeks there, never saw a decent surf, my brother Julian lives there and surfs a lot, just bad timing for me. Our plan was starting with Reunion, south east of the big island that is Madagascar, to sail north alongside the east-coast of Madagascar, then swinging west round the tip at the Seychelles, eventually to land at the Comoros on the west side. Reunion was great fun, the local girls fell all over the tourists, just wanting to get off the island. We had a very good time, me, Vic and Bones. We partied and ate mostly with the locals. This one guy had a car and the other a boat; we used to pay them to come fetch us from the yacht and take us back at day’s end, and then go out again at night... so that’s how we spent those two weeks at Reunion.

“You had a girl too then?” Atindriyo inquired. “What was she like?”

“Great! A lot of fun. She was a local lovely brown woman, very much like the Indonesian girls, very beautiful and no strings attached. She came to the yacht and knew we weren’t going to stay for long. Then we decided to carry on. We were just getting ready to sail off into the sunset, when the other yacht that was supposed to go with us just arrived from Durban. They wanted us to stay and travel with them, we had a sundown with them and headed off to Mauritius. The pros were two weeks behind us, we all felt very cool. It took us about 2 1/2 days to Mauritius, we stayed there for 2 1/2 weeks. We had to buy more food, Vic had brought some diving tanks with him and we all had fun, diving and scraping barnacles off the bottom of the boat.”

“Deep sea diving must be incredible!”

“A unique experience! In Mauritius there is a great point break, Tamarin Bay. I went there about three times to surf, but the surf was always flat. Again we mixed with the locals first and they took us all over the island. In the middle of the island are three dormant volcanic towers with people living on top. The amazing thing is that lots of those people never see the sea. The head man goes out and barter or buys for their needs. You look at them from the top of the roadside that goes right around the island, and look down into this huge valley with the three towers in the middle, amazing! We were taken into the sugarcane fields, where they grew their weed, where they gave us some. That night we all met in their village; they wanted to roll joints, we showed them how to break the top off a bottle and make it into a pipe, hahaha. The weed was so strong I almost passed out, just sat on the floor goofed out of my brain.”

The two listeners laughed. “I had that with Thai weed in Thailand, it gave me ‘the whities’. Being a female I wasn’t allowed in the opium den to score myself, but a German friend bought me a small bag. After four weeks of traveling around with it, I left the bag with the rest of it in the bin of the airport toilet; that strong I hadn’t finished it. Back home we have the boosted weed too, THC doubled by power-feeding and growing under lamps. I have never been on any of those islands. Mauritius rings like a paradise bell too. I almost volunteered to go to the Dominican Republic, as a volunteer, working in... a donkey orphanage,” she narrated in turn.

Leonard laughed. “Perfect for you!”

“Figured if I was going to be surrounded by donkeys, I might as well work for the ones who appreciate it.”

Leonard was getting used to her interruptions. Her vat of memories was refilling and bubbling
over. He continued.

“But I had been smoking for years by then, so got used to it very quick. The first local we actually met in Mauritius was an older guy about Piet’s age, and he took us around for a few days. He took us to a holy temple somewhere, with a river running through it. They actually believe it’s a tributary of the Ganges river in India, they believe it’s connected somehow. I’m trying to remember, it was an unfamiliar scenario, being inside a big temple with a small river running through it. Anyway, this guy took us around for a day or two. I think Piet must have met him first, similar ages, and we had just run out of weed, so we asked this guy if he knew where we could get some. Wrong thing, wrong person, he was pissed off that we smoked, he never came back.”

“How many islands are there around there?” Atindriyo asked, “are they not black folks, like next to Swaziland?”

“You have Reunion, Mauritius, the Seychelles, which is a string of little islands at the northern tip of Madagascar, then there are 4 islands making up the Comoros; and then there is a little one further south which we didn’t have time to visit. And, no Atindriyo, they’re mostly descendants of Indians somewhere along their history.”

“Not many people have done and seen what you did and saw, awesome man!”

“I just went around a small island, though for me it was nice enough... Some people travel around the world by yacht.”

“Am I hearing a silent wish there?”

“Hahaha, absolutely. Did Aaron ever sail anywhere by yacht??

“He was born in Maine, near the ocean, sailed as a kid in small boats, later on his shrink’s.”

“That must be so nice, learning it young. But let’s get some food going, will tell the rest after.”

Atindriyo looked at the tiny supply of fruit, nuts and cooked leftovers, with a barely noticeable smile. He asked if they wanted some food to go with that, and if they did, to untie his hands. They believed he wouldn’t run off; a bond had been growing between them. Then he took down his loincloth. To their surprise he was wearing excellent quality light brown shorts under it, safari style design, with several pockets. From his back pocket he produced a package that looked like something wrapped in a leaf. Iris and Leonard watched in wonder.

“I have clover and fireweed for salad, and this purslane weed. In the books of horticulture it’s considered an obnoxious weed, provides much needed vitamins and minerals in a wilderness survival situation like this. You know, Gandhi actually numbered purslane among his favorite foods. Then we also have a good portion of this Turshi or Pulum Musali. Eaten raw, supposed to be very nutritious. Nowadays tribal people do not use them for themselves, but collect them to sell to the traders. The young leaves are a nice vegetable.”

They were stunned. “They grow at my front door!” Iris exclaimed, “Fireweed!”

“What great luxury that you have fire! Snake is really nice grilled, isn’t it?”

Both just gazed at him. He offered to go out and catch supper, and Leonard suggested to build a cooking zone under the surfboard, covered by bamboo. Iris was glad she had remembered to take the heap of kindling and dry coconut-shells indoors before the torrential rain had started. One flick of the lighter and another page from the notebook would do it. She was starting to worry about the gaslighter being done.

“You intend to catch a snake?” She couldn’t imagine it. “Yes, want to know how to do it?” Iris thanked, Leonard nodded.

They went out through the rain to a location in the bush where Atindriyo knew he would find them; a drier place, the jade mine, or at least that’s what they called it. In a short time he had found a snake’s hiding niche. He approached the snake, focused on its movements closely—good thing he wasn’t stoned, because time lag might be fatal. Now he grabbed the black snake’s neck by one swift
movement of the right hand. He had the thumb below one eye, mid-finger below the other, and forefinger above the head, pressing it down.

“Cobra and king cobra can’t be caught,” he said to Leonard who watched closely from a meter’s distance. “This krait is highly poisonous though. Like all great and beautiful things, three fingers are needed for this particular venture.”

“Pressing the jaws and head kills it?”

“Nah, it renders it immobile. Then you pick it up like that, then you kill it with a knife, roast it, eat it. He proceeded to use the Swiss knife that Leonard had handed over to him as they had entered the miniature mine. It was a matter of pure trust.”

“With coconut and all it will suffice for three, around 300 grams of meat. Tomorrow you can cut the next one’s head off.”

Then Atindriyo Chakraborty discovered something else. While Leonard was climbing out of the muddy hole, he spotted a mucky cotton bag. It felt pretty heavy at the touch. Atindriyo observed that the walls did not reflect any jade, no deep green glow. India’s ground had many semi-precious stones and minerals. He had a good idea...

In Iris’s mind there had been not a moment’s doubt that he would return, she just checked: he had not taken the eighteen diamonds.
Back at the mainland of Goa, Kumar Rao had to bow to the fact there's no bargaining with a raging storm. They simply had to wait till it subsided. Luck provided sports on television, the soccer fans were all worked up. To Kumar it was a most welcome distraction. Lawrence was relaxing on his bed reading a book. Many restaurants in Goa had a stall of books left behind or donated by travelers that you could borrow for free. Some really good stuff was amongst it.

When Atindriyo's snake had been successfully grilled, just before the fire sizzled out from wetness in spite of their improvised cover, it was served with an amazing fresh salad of four different greens, and enthusiastically devoured. Iris asked Leonard to continue his sailing story.

"Okay, so we left Mauritius again on a lovely sunset. The thing about Fred the skipper was that he was a very good navigator, and every island we aimed for we hit dead on? But as a man in charge of the upkeep of his crew he was useless. Sunset was usually the best time especially if you are, hahaha, top sailors. We did a lot of fishing, caught lots, always had a line trailing from the back.

Richard and Piet had only paid half, to sail only as far as Mauritius, as you know Richard jumped ship in Reunion and Piet left us there too, so there was only the four of us left as we sailed away from Mauritius, the three youngsters and the old man... He was a bad captain because he didn't plan well. It took us a few days to get to the southern tip of the Seychelles. We anchored about 500 meters off the shore where an islander had to come out to direct us through the reef.

The biggest island is a huge palm forest, they farm coconuts. A ship comes once a month and delivers goods to the islanders and takes a load of coconuts away. We heard that you could get good black corral at the end, at one of the smaller islands, so one day the three of us strapped on our haversacks, jumped overboard and swam to the island. We did this most days, but this day we were going to fetch black corral. We had crossed three islands where we'd found lots of corral, when we swam back to the boat. For some reason I was a few minutes behind Bones and Vic, and when I started swimming, the tide was just changing and I got caught in a current. I swam and swam and was just stuck in the middle of the bay. I couldn't get to the boat. Just as well some time later Vic looked back and saw me and put a rope around himself and swam out to get me. Never fearsome, just a bit tiring, he laughed, lekker exercise. Lucky I was fairly fit.

On this island the captain of the island had a tortoise pen with four huge tortoises, they were about a hundred years old! Huge things a grown man could ride, that's how big they were. One day the islanders caught a turtle, also a large one. To keep it alive they turned it on its back and dripped water over its head, they had no electricity, just a small generator, and turtle was good food. When they finally killed it for food we were invited to a big feast, turtle soup, and turtle steaks, and nice salads, a stunning meal. In the forest lived the biggest land crabs I've ever seen, almost lobster size, and they hid under the dead leaves of the coconut forest. That could be seen as cruelty, but you know people who live such remote lives are definitely not cruel, killing animals is purely a means of survival."

"Though one does not essentially need meat to survive, let alone an ancient animal," Iris bit in, "but don't let me put you off your narrative."

"They had little veggie patches, and chickens, but the population was only around 40-60 people, so if they happened to catch something big from the sea, it was like a gift from heaven, and that's how they treated it. They mainly harvested the nuts. We stayed there for about a week, then
headed round the tip of Madagascar into the Mozambique Channel, and the last stretch before home.

So far we had no difficulty getting into any of the islands, and we came flying in to the Comoros. But the wind was so strong we couldn't get the right angle to get onto the little inlet that lets you into the Grand Comoros. We tried for a full day, trying to tack into the island. You know the tack is the line the ship travels on, tacking is following the line you are running on according to the direction of the wind. Like at the Comoros we were going on a north east tack, so we were going to the north or south, we couldn't go west into the inlet of the Comoros... does that help? No luck, and so we passed it and headed for Durban. About three days further away from the Comoros we hit the doldrums. Do you know what that is?"

They both shook their heads.

"Dol drums means no wind, not a breath, just dead still"

"Didn't you have an engine then, you could use to dock?" the boy asked.

"Yes we had a motor all right, but now Fred tells us we have very limited fuel as he didn't have enough money to fill the tank, so we're just lulling about. I loved it, I was reading an exciting book about the early Chinese, now you can imagine how small a boat can be... We find out we don't have lots of food, and very little fuel, we are very pissed off, in the middle of the ocean going nowhere and little food, and we are drifting slowly towards Madagascar. At that time the island was very pro ANC and very anti white South Africans, so if we landed there we might go straight to jail."

"Fred really almost had a heart attack. It was an African ethical balance towards the way the whites were treating the blacks back home, if South Africans were caught in any of the surrounding African states during that time of war, they went straight to jail. And Fred had had an earlier experience, he was a British citizen, skippering a South African boat and had been put in jail and had to contact the British Embassy to get him released. So he was almost freaking, and on the 5th day of doldrums we finally put on the engine and rode into the Comoros, a French naval base at that time, 1981. Fred went straight to the hospital for stabilizing medicine."

"Such distances!" Iris commented. "Reunion is southeast, Comoros is northwest, and Madagascar is so big to sail round it! And you had to get back to Durban still? That is far."

"A 3 1/2 months sailing holiday all in, really great!"

"Let's have some more tea, if I may use some of this water?" Atindriyo interrupted, and he took another thin bag from one of his short pockets. After building a tiny contraption of stones that served as a hearth he brewed up a wonderful concoction of greens and seeds, explaining these were also used in Ayurvedic treatment, a mixture of wild growing herbs. Fortunately Iris had moved all kindling and wood inside again.

"Would you not have to get through the channel to get back to Durban, wind or not?" Iris asked, trying to visualize the world map.

"Normally yes. The French Foreign Legion was there at the time, you heard about them? They were and still are a unique fighting force. Anyway, we dock about 500 meters from Comoros land and are just relaxing, taking it easy, when, in the distance, we see someone swimming towards us! It is a soldier! He comes on board and asks using sign language if we have any wine, and we did and we all had a drink together. That was the best thing we could have done. Every night this guy would come and get us and take us to the disco and buy all the drinks we wanted. Here the women just wanted any foreigner, as all they had was the French. We had four great days.

The French were so cruel to the locals on all these islands, especially Reunion, Mauritius and the Comoros. At night they would play a nasty game with their cars, they called chicken, trying to run over the local inhabitants on the roads!"

Flash visions of the atrociously cruel race war made them both go quiet.
“When you travel by yacht you have a seaman’s visa, and all ports are open to you? All the officials do, is come and do a random search of the boat, and stamp your passport and voilà, free to have fun…”

“Only Madagascar was so hostile then? Like NO white folks allowed?”

“No, a lot of the African countries surrounding SA at the time were very pro ANC and very anti white SA. But out of the islands? Yes, only Madagascar.”

“And so after four days we set sail again, and then we really let Fred have it. One day Vic is frying a fish we have just caught and Fred has been totally ignored now for a few days. A boat becomes tiny, no place to hide, hahaha, anyway typically human. He asks a dumb question… going to swear a bit because that’s how it was… ok? Fred asks Vic: ‘Are you cooking Vic?’ Vic snaps: ‘What the fuck does it look like?’ and turns his back on Fred. Fred used to write the daily journals at the desk just below the wheel, we were in the middle of the ocean as PAYING crew members, full board and lodging, and we had no food! It could have been organized a lot better. We didn’t even want to talk to him about navigation. In hindsight maybe we could have been more forgiving, but when you are very hungry and going the wrong way after 3 months at sea, you find something or, unfortunately for Fred, someone to vent you anger or frustration out on…”

“We started running out of food very shortly after leaving the Comoros the second time—I told you, the first time we went right past the Comoros, we still counted it as a visit, haha as we were sailing up and down the inlet to the island for a whole day. Missing the Comoros harbour had been an anti-climax really just a bad sort of sea luck.”

“Did you go for nice walks on the island too?” Iris asked.

“After motoring into the Comoros and meeting a soldier it was just drinking and nightlife that I remember most. So, about two days out we had to start rationing the food, and then we had the worst of winds, blowing us north, and we went the wrong way for a few days.”

“By this time we were living on a packet of Smash, that’s instant mashed potato, a tin of peas and a tin of meat to share between the four of us for the day. In the morning we put it all together in a pressure pot and filled it with water and had soup three times a day. Any extra cup we shared between the boys, and we were always trying to catch fish. Now Fred tells us he had worked out the menu based on 50% of catching fish! Absurd! Can you imagine trying to catch lots of fish on a moving yacht? Impossible, we were lucky to catch what we did!”

Iris’s stomach rumbled loud. “Talking of which… Am off to check the ocean and the trap before dark, back in thirty minutes,” Leonard said and while walking away he recalled his rebellious nature: “I once said loud for all to hear: ‘If I was the fucking skipper of this ship I would jump overboard.’ Poor Fred just put his head down and scribbled like hell in his journal.”

Iris was rather shocked. Leonard tried to justify it: “Remember this is 1981, a R1000 was quite a bit of money for us in those days…,” and away he went.

The fury of a storm surprised him again. The sea trap was out of sight completely, huge angry waves wiping out the bay’s beach all together. The wind howled louder between the cavities of the cliffs and the rain lashed out. There would be no catch today, even the birds were sheltering. How fortunate they found Atindriyo and his impressive knowledge of biology.

Though Atindriyo was tempted, he hadn’t told them about the other little, muddy canvas bag yet… It had been easy to keep out of sight in the bad visibility throughout the storm, though the weight of it had almost pulled down his shorts on the way back from the snake catch at the mine. He had to make a new hole in his belt, the time here had made him skinnier. He couldn’t wait to see their faces when he’d show them.

Leonard came back with news nor fresh catch, but a tasty cold supper was prepared by Iris and Atindriyo, waiting for him.
“So, what happened next on the yacht?” Atindriyo asked.

“You must have been VERY tense, and so far away from home yet?”

“Now we are going backwards, very little food, and to stop us going anywhere Fred does another amazing sailing technique called ‘heave to’. You take the smallest sail and attach it to the front, and reef your main sail to the smallest possible size, and allow the wind to blow between the two sails. You almost come to a stand still. Awesome! He was a great seaman. We didn’t see much action on the sea, you know like other boats big ocean liners, though the Mozambique Channel was and is a shipping channel.”

“So how come then you didn’t see any?”

“Going around Madagaster you miss the channel, now coming round the northwest we are once again in the channel. So now we are in the channel going backwards and out of food, and we see this huge tanker come onto our horizon; the diameter of sight around our yacht was 7ks, 3 1/3 either way. Fred is on the radio asking for help, but the skipper of the tanker says his time span won’t allow him to stop and help, so Fred asks him to relay a message to his wife, and the message is: ‘Due to unforeseen circumstances we are running out of food and are going to arrive a lot later than expected’. Hey we were a bit down then, I remember I was just laying inside on my bunk and staring at the roof, can’t remember what I was thinking about, when about 3 hrs later the radio went off. It was the tanker and the skipper had decided to turn around to come and help us, hahaha. We were reborn, jumping and shouting and going off, and another 3 hours later we saw the tanker re-appearing at the horizon.”

“Fantastic!”

“The tankers name was The Charles L D. It was incredible, their deck was crowded with all the ships crew, all with cameras taking shots, our boat was like a match head to a match box. They lowered three big sacks of food and 50 liters of water, you can see how happy we were in the few photos we took, hahah, like Christmas came early...”

“They were just happy to help, and so we eventually landed at Richards Bay, that’s about 100 ks from Durban, Vic phoned his dad to come and fetch us, we left. I had to get back to work, so Fred had to phone his sons to help sail the boat back to Durban. They got there a week later, Bones, Fred and his two sons. I hiked back to Cape Town. My boss said if I’d been a week later he would have taken me off the books, and he laughed and says ‘Whilst you were gone we had an increase in wages.’

I laughed and said: ‘I know. I got it as well!’ I still had my job, an awesome adventure.”

“Bones girlfriend worked for the local newspaper in Durban and wrote an article about us. ‘Novice Sailors Dream Turns to Nightmare’. Hahaha, I don’t know where she got that idea from...”

“Speechless,” was all Iris could say. A strong gust of wind shook the dilapidated hut. She sincerely hoped it wouldn’t blow the shabby roof off and leave them exposed to the elements.
“Good morning Mister Rao, I have some good news for you. Also some bad news.”
Kumar had slept very well. He braced himself for the bad news. He had surpassed about every
limit of his patience and anxiety on this job.
“Come up with it, whatever it is” he sighed.
“Well, the bad news is, our speedboat was damaged in the storm last night, though it was
harbored safely. The pier and all about it were swept away. The good news is, my nephew has a
better boat ready, waiting for you in Vasco Da Gama, the Goa peninsula. If you leave now you can
set out to sea before noon. The storm came and went fast, you’re in luck.”
Kumar wobbled his head in the typical south-Indian way, and checked the map. It would be
slightly over an hour’s drive, depending on traffic conditions. He had called mister Sergej several
times, and only this morning the call had been answered. Sergej had been walking the hospital
garden in rehabilitation and was due to go home the next day, a nurse had helped him to a new
mobile phone, which he was only allowed to use outside. Having money was ever so handy. Kumar
Rao told him he’d have his hands on the gems tomorrow. Sergej, still out of it on morphine for the
pain, didn’t object. He said, “Make it the day after, I’m too busy now,” forgetting it was another day’s
drive to come to Mumbai. With 18 diamonds Kumar Rao couldn’t jump on a plane.

So they left Ashvem as quickly as they could, Lawrence in an excellent mood: the hotel had let
him keep James Redfield’s ‘The Celestine Prophecy’ for free, and he loved it. As they drove out of
the small town, an Indian man at the bus stop waved. Kumar Rao recognized the interesting, short
man he met at the bar the previous night, watching the soccer game. He even recalled his name:
“Hey, Archie Varghese!”, he called while he waved at him through the window. “Where are you
heading?”

The Indian man adjusted the spectacles on his nose and gave a charming smile. “The road to
Panjim,” he replied. Kumar looked at Lawrence for a second, then said:
“Hop in, we can give you a lift.”
They got on very well Archie said he was a teacher and poet, but the truth was: he was also a
journalist. He had a nose for exciting stories. His timing was spot on. In no time the two men were
exchanging life stories. Then Kumar said they were going out to a bird sanctuary by boat. Archie
then came up with an interesting issue.
“You must know the sea well, to navigate there yourself.”
Kumar was dazzled. The question hit him like a bomb.
“Lawrence, you do, don’t you? You know how to get to Bird Island?”
Lawrence shook his head. “That was Atindriyo’s thing,” he replied.
“Well heck! We need a pilot who knows the way, how could I not think of that earlier?”
Varghese laughed. “I can help you,” he said. “I can navigate you there.” He checked his pocket to
feel for the chrome compass, his treasure. “I just have to arrange a few things...”

He went on line on his mobile and googled a while, taking down some notes. Detailed maps with
locations of coral reefs, sea routes and miles written in sea knots. Archie saved his research in a
map for later reference. By the time Kumar’s car reached the marina of Vasco Da Gama, he was
totally prepared for the job as a sea navigator, though he had never steered a boat. That would be
up to them; then again, how different could it be from a scooter? He felt like a trip on the ocean.
According to the maps they would be at Bird Island in perhaps three hours. He had a compass, and had taken a look at what board navigation looked like. He liked that kid Lawrence for some reason, he reminded him of his own son, also a poet.

Kumar Rao’s luck seemed to change, the atmosphere in the speedboat was great. Lawrence took the wheel over from Archie after a while and with extreme caution, kept the speed very low. The two older men were soon engrossed in conversation, not paying attention to him, apart from Archie getting up, checking the compass now and then, his saved maps and the control panel of the boat, pointing with his finger where he had to steer towards and then returning to a fresh beer. This was a great boat, in the neat cabin they had a fridge, filled with cool drinks and some lagers. No need to say they loosened up a bit, and the ride towards crime turned out feeling like a joy ride. But in his pocket the gun was hurting Kumar’s leg. It reminded him of the seriousness of the job. He’d have to be prepared for anything, once they had found the stones.

The blue was back. Blue sky, blue waves, blue name on the boat. They were a little dizzy by the time they saw the island appear. For a while they went around it, to see where it was easiest to anchor the boat. They also were saved by the swell moving them in the right direction: a narrow blue bay attracted them. Archie Varghese calmly steered towards it.

From the top of the hill, doing his daily ship check before surf or after surf, Leonard saw the small speedboat coming in from far. He ran down to warn Iris and Atindriyo, and they ran over the details of the action plan.

So when the time was there, expecting not more than two men, they all took position. Iris would be behind the hut, Leonard would watch the boat crew come ashore and follow them to the hut, Atindriyo would be in front of the hut, to greet the men. They wouldn’t know who he was. He couldn’t anticipate they had picked up Lawrence again for the mission. He would invite them in and offer them tea and keep them distracted till Leonard would jump the biggest one from behind and tie him up while Atindriyo would hold the second man down, long enough to convince them they were not malignant and all for cooperation.

So that is what they did. And it would have worked, if Atindriyo hadn’t yelled:

“Lawrence!? You?” and Kumar Rao had not rolled over after Leonard had jumped on him and knocked him on the ground, and had grabbed his gun and had started shooting.

“Don’t shoot! Let’s talk!” Leonard loudly pleaded, and Archie, who’d stayed with the boat and had heard the noise, came in. He overlooked the situation but remained his usual calm self. He greeted the strangers by touching his chest and said to Kumar:

“Don’t do anything stupid! Come on! Let’s all talk, I have a great malt whiskey here.“

But Kumar yelled:

“Lawrence, get the rope in my bag! Lawrence, hurry and tie them up!”

To avoid more shooting, Lawrence slowly moved to get Kumar’s rope on the boat. When he returned with it, he clocked Iris, who then decided to walk out to meet him. She saw no harm in this still beardless kid. He recognized her from the terrace the night he had been beaten up.

“It is you! The lady from Belgium! It was all Old Baba’s idea, I didn’t want to do it!” She had no immediate idea what he was talking about. Hurrying back with the rope, he knelt down beside Kumar who still held Leonard on the floor, and, knowing he had to do something, he said, “These people are not crooks, I know them! Put the gun down mister Rao, and let’s do what Archie suggests: let’s talk.”

Atindriyo, who had let Lawrence go when Kumar had pulled out the gun, suddenly spoke up, giving Kumar Rao a fast course on civil, criminal and international law, pointing out that being charged with kidnapping a foreigner was not a good way to appear before any court. He talked about penalties and jail sentences, and explained neither of these two people would turn them in,
as they had agreed to let the entire case rest if they all made it back home from this island. It took some explaining before Kumar understood what the youngster was on about. Atindriyo told them about Old Baba’s mischievous plan, and had thought Kumar was in on it too.

“We were all stranded here for almost three weeks, dear friends, give us a break. Miss Iris was never kidnapped, she survived the storm, but Old Baba, he didn’t make it, the boat crashed on the cliffs in the storm. His grave is in the east bay.”

Lawrence was deeply moved. Old Baba had been a friend to him, almost a father, a benefactor who helped him earn some money... So sad he’d come up with such an insane idea that had made them fall out... This mission had cost Baba’s life.

“Sorry to hear about Old Baba,” Kumar said. “We tie them up a bit until we have the package! Start tying! And by the way, glad you are alive Atindriyo Chakraborty, God blessed you!”

The man is religious, the clever young lawyer thought. The next three minutes, as Iris Natal walked out of the hut with Lawrence and Archie Varghese by her side, Atindriyo gave his final and decisive commentary, mentioning corruption and justice, and democracy, heaven and good karma in one breath. He had an eloquent way of getting through to people. Finally Kumar put down the gun he’d been pointing at Leonard’s head. He turned his aching right shoulder. Four witnesses was too much, and none of them a crook at heart. Atindriyo spoke the final persuasive words:

“Let’s go and have some whiskey! Alright Archie? And don’t worry mister Rao, I have the box. We finish the job and we can all get paid and go home.”

And so they did. He added some super relaxing leaves, for the crossing. Atindriyo apologized for not stepping in when Lawrence had been punched out by Old Baba in Arambol, but Lawrence said he remembered. Those mad street junks had busted him up to steal his phone and wallet, after Baba had dealt him a couple of drunk punches and had left him behind, shaking his head. He simply had offended the old man by some bad choice of words, when he’d called him an old nutcase to think up kidnapping. It really hadn’t been more than a father’s hiding for a son’s cheek. They’d both liked the old small time crook, so they re-bonded.

Kumar Rao’s eyes watered when he stared at the beautiful stones, he would take the eighteen diamonds that same day—after the sea crossing to the main land of Goa of course. Now Atindriyo was there to steer, the speedboat was flying nice, and Kumar planned to drive on twelve hours non stop to reach Mumbai, with just a few hours of rest alongside the road. He’d pick up a spare wheel too, and pay the boys for their help and extra time, he had credit from the city bank. On the phone Sergej had sounded calm, he hoped he’d be in the same mood when he got there.

Archie didn’t want to stay around after they arrived. He got paid for his help, promised not to bring the story out—he was a newspaper journalist he’d told them over a dram—and he left immediately to get a bus to Doña Paula; saying he had some unfinished business there. It was safer not to get involved any further; he was a wise man. Iris wanted to head for the nearest lodging first, before returning to the people they knew and getting swarmed, and Leonard was all for that too. It felt surreal, returning to so-called civilization.
Chapter 33

All Puppets Dancing

The joy of being so close to civilization, to a bath and shampoo, made Leonard and Iris euphoric. They shook hands with Kumar Rao, Lawrence and Atindriyo, and asked if they wanted to get a room here too, which they declined. When a woman, carrying a bundle of lungi’s, approached them. Iris chose a burgundy red kind of shawl, with the Hindu God Ganesha printed on it. The elephant deity brought good luck she knew. Leonard took a bottle green lungi with a thin golden thread woven through it, and asked the Indian woman if she had change. From his buttoned pocket he pulled out a note. Change was no problem. Iris tied her new garment around her chest like a dress, very acceptable beach wear for tourists in this westernized part of the Indian coast at least. Luck would have, Leonard always kept some rupees and his credit card in a zip pocket of his shirt. It was warm enough for him, he said, and he would have his clothes in Mandrem the next day.

The nearest hotel was situated behind a large terrace, decorated with colourful lampoons and looked attractive, though not very clean to Western standards. It was such a luxury after weeks in the smugglers’ shack. A gecko scurried away at their approach in the doorway. A hot shower was the first thing they went for, washing away the salt. How magnificent it felt, making love in a clean bed with clean sheets, the scent of soap almost intoxicating. Then soon the aroma of curry drifted in through the window and made their mouths water.

“Doesn’t that smell like heaven’s kitchen my love?” he called out. “Let’s go and eat.”

They passed the reception desk and Iris, who assumed her daughter might be worried, not having heard from her in three weeks, even though this was not really so unusual as she had been living abroad many years, asked the receptionist if she could use the phone. Then she realized she didn’t know her daughter’s cell phone number. They’d be on the Internet tomorrow.

“Can we buy a cellphone here?” Leonard asked.

“In the small shop at the bottom of the street,” the man said, “but for a charged cellphone card you need a reference of someone living in India. They are strict about that.”

“I know”, Leonard said. “I’ve been here a while.”

After some discussion the receptionist agreed on a price and gave his name and address to Leonard. After a delightful meal they walked down the street to the nearest cash dispenser, drew some money from the wall and went to buy a mobile phone, with the references of the man from reception. Happy as two children on a school outing they walked back and sank down on two bamboo sun beds on the beach, in the shade of an umbrella.

Leonard bent over to kiss Iris, said “Heaven!” and then proceeded to type a message home, to Cape Town.

“I only know one number by heart,” he confided, “my daughter’s”. One minute later his phone rang. It was Helena. With her eyes closed Iris listened how Leonard told his daughter everything that had happened in speed tempo, she had never heard him talk so excited and fast.

“Don’t call me again, sweetheart,” he said before hanging up, “text me, and I will be on the Internet tomorrow as soon as I get back to Mandrem.”

Only a few minutes later the phone rang again. Iris was sitting close enough to hear a woman’s voice, going from “So happy you are alive!” to an anxious tone, and next she was almost shouting. They spoke a mixture of English and Afrikaans, which she could understand a little. The peaceful, heavenly vibe changed; he didn’t laugh anymore, his face tensed up. She understood there was
some lawsuit, a court case coming up, about bills and money. After he hung up it went so silent Iris hardly dared to breathe, let alone ask what was happening. But when Leonard didn't utter a single word, she couldn't bear the suspense any longer.

“Was that your ex-wife, Cherrie?”

“No, it wasn't Cherrie, but she will probably call me in a minute, when Helena passes her this new number. Maybe I should have waited until tomorrow?”

That sounded like a rhetorical question, but he looked seriously worried. Gone was the spontaneous and free lover. Iris's nerves tensed up a little. There was something going on he had not mentioned before.

“I'm going in,” he said; he collected his surfboard and walked briskly outside, towards the ocean. He wondered if he had told Iris that the house still belonged to Cherrie? He was secretly hoping Iris would find the resources to buy the house from them, so he could live in it as caretaker and pay off the bond, and be free to go and surf in China. But would Cherrie agree to selling the house? He seriously doubted it.

“I'm seriously thinking of selling the house”, he confided. The mortgage is hard to pay off without my old job. Would you or any of your family be interested? Iris thought for a moment.

“I could ask around. Perhaps my friend, who is looking to start a diving club somewhere? Personally I don't even have to think about it.”

“A perfect location for a diving club,” Leonard replied, and went on his way.

A little bewildered Iris watched his tanned back as he paddled out over the calm waves. He was only gone ten minutes, when his phone rang again. She didn't answer it. Restless she sat up and called the waiter to order a cool beer. Who was more important than Cherrie, that Helena had given her dad's new mobile number to her first? An ominous feeling engulfed her. Then the hotel clerk approached.

“There is a lady at the reception to see mister Stolk,” he said. “Will I ask her to wait until he returns from surfing?”

“No at all,” Iris answered, “let her come over here.”

Soon the lady appeared. She was wearing a flamboyant straw hat with a red ribbon, covering her short, blondish hair. Sunglasses hid half of her face, as well as her age, though Iris suspected from her taste—check shirt blazer type of jacket—she was in her late forties or even more.

“I am Suzannah Clearwater,” she said, “I'm here to see Leonard, and you are?” Iris, taken by surprise, shuddered at the unmistakably Manchester accent.

“I am Iris Natal, from Belgium,” she said, “We were both shipwrecked. Leonard saved my life.”

Just then Leonard returned to help her out of this awkward situation, dripping wet and gleaming from a few nice waves.

With his three weeks beard, she didn't recognize him immediately. And he barely recognized Suzannah, until she spoke: “Hello there Leonardo, my surfer man! I was getting pretty worried this time!”

Leonard was speechless. He just gasped at her.

“I could use a drink,” the woman said. “What about a cup of coffee?” It was directed to Leonard only.

“Will you excuse us, my darling?” Leonard said to Iris, escorting Mrs. Clearwater to the bar, where they sat down and had a long talk. He was holding her hand.

Iris tried to focus on the book she was reading, but to little avail. The phone Leonard had left on the small table rang again, another international call. This time Iris picked it up. A highly pitched voice squeaked: “Leonard, my love, is that you?”

Iris's face paled, her heart missing a beat as she pressed the OFF button.
He returned after a while without the Manchester dame.

“What’s going on then?” Iris asked.

“It’s a long story. Before I met you I flirted with every woman I met and wanted to marry every one of them. But we have only one life, I came to realize. It was just patter, but Suzannah took it seriously. I have just told her that I wanted to stay friends, but want to be with you in the future. So she stormed away quite angry, saying she was breaking up with me in that case. I was never with her really. But there is some more you should know…”

“And who called right after Helena?”

“Esmeralda. She is just a friend, a friend with special benefits. I’d had a short fling with her some two years ago, after I left the coloured girl and Esmeralda was looking for a place to stay with her son. I rented the spare room to her. She moved in, we shared the bed some nights, some nights I’d sleep in my room. The house was put in mortgage to finance the Phoenix rehab center, but that went bust around New Year. Now the bond has to be paid up for another ten years, that’s why I was thinking of selling the house and be a foreigner's caretaker. So she helped with the bills, but I’m afraid she’s still in love with me. If she doesn’t back off I will end her contract at six months. I don’t love her and she knows that, it just doesn’t seem to go in.”

Iris was stunned, he had kept this a secret all that time. He was not living alone. There would be no place for her to go to his home. Her face didn’t betray the surprise.

“Are there more girls who think you’re theirs? What am I in for?” she laughed, thinking of the voice she had heard.

“Not that I know of,” he answered. At that very moment a boy from reception brought a message.

“Phone call for Mister Leonard Stolk, a Miss Monica, calling from Bangkok.”

Leonard’s face slightly flushed. This island worked like a truth serum. Silently he promised himself that he would make his life much simpler from now on. No more complications, just go for one love totally. It was true he had dreamed of going to Monica’s country, had promised her marriage and all for some two years. Long distance love, a game of creating hope really, but that was all in the past, not recently. He had just turned his back on his way to the reception-phone when Atindriyo turned up and waved.

“Hello Iris!” he said, and ordered a coke. The two chatted like old friends. “I have a surprise for you,” he said. “But let’s wait for Leonard to return.”

The call with Thailand took over half an hour.

“I am leaving,” Atindriyo said, “to join the fight for justice in the wild, remote areas of India. There are some real poor tribes up north, and they don’t get a chance at education... Many tribes are discriminated against and treated horribly under the corrupt juridical system in our country. The revolution needs me, even tho’ I’m even younger than Che Guevara.”

Iris was impressed. What a noble cause for a lawyer to be.

Leonard was not smiling when he returned, though he was trying to hide any emotion. Iris postponed her inquiring. Seeing Atindriyo quickly cheered him up.

“I came to show you something! I found it in what you call the jade mine. It may not look much now, but wait till they are polished! Not jade, my friends.” He showed the seven pieces of rough stone that he’d found in the smudged canvas bag.

“It is raw emerald, my dear friends! Emerald! The most wanted and precious out of stones, second best to diamond, mostly found in Brazil. It’s the stone of love.”

Their mouths dropped open. He counted: “One for Old Baba and his widowed wife and children. One for Lawrence. One for Kumar Rao who wants to retire from crime after this, heart problems he says. One for you, Iris, one for you, Leonard, and one for me. That still leaves one. Any
suggestions?”

“One for the cause?” they prompted simultaneously. “Yes, one for the fight against corruption!” Atindriyo confirmed, his face beaming with excitement and idealism. “It’s a pity Varghese had to leave so suddenly, I liked that clever man! He stormed off like a ram, a date he told me, but hey, there are only seven emeralds, it must be karma?”

One stone each was enough for each of them to solve their financial problems and a bit more. Freedom laughed and winked, and they were all grateful for the existence of such good hearts as Atindriyo Chakraborty, and for the luck their paths had crossed. It surely would leave its mark on their inner evolution and the pursuit of honesty.

“Couldn’t we come back together, in some time? It could be a rare miniature mine, there could be a rare, thin vein…”

They laughed the idea away and asked for the menu again, and celebrated till late that evening, over the moon with happiness.
Chapter 34

To Rock and Then to Roll

After Atindriyo joined Kumar and Lawrence for the drive to Panjim where he would get a bus to Bangalore, Leonard wisely left his new cellphone in the living room, but he prepared for the flood of emails he would find.

One thing he felt pretty sure of: Iris Natal was who he wanted to spend more time with. He'd gladly give up all other flings for that. As a friend he could still give help and hope to lonely people, he was sure Iris Natal would understand that. So what if he offered them his everlasting love and friendship, without strings... and abstract...

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When a lover offers 'love and friendship forever, no strings attached', you know it's over. Nothing else to do but to let go. Some just don't give up so lightly. Monica and Esmeralda turned out to be of that second type. Iris sat back and watched the plot unravel. Talks to his ex whom he responded to with 'Love you very much too,' and hours on his computer, chatting to Rose and Michael's mother and God knows who else from his elegant, loving following. Iris Natal Skyped with her daughter too. She was safe and well in the Himalayas, learning tai chi. Her siblings were glad to hear from her by e-mail, not aware she had survived such a risky adventure. And one good day a happy surprise awaited Leonard. Steve Warwick suddenly turned up! He had survived the storm, clinching to his surfboard, without paddling, and was spotted by a patrolling rescue boat the morning after the storm.

Kumar Rao drove all night and reached Mumbai without any more problems. He saw Sergej, gave him the 18 diamonds and got paid. He was planning a simple but crime-less life, especially thanks to the rough emerald Atindriyo had given him. What a decent young man he was! Mister Sergei, still bandaged up, had given him a very good price for it.

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Six weeks later Leonard Stolk was back in Cape Town, and ended Esmeralda's boarding contract and she and her son moved out. So now he was living alone for the first time in his life, or rather almost alone, not counting his son James, and sharing the house with two new boarders, two strangers who had responded to his ad this time. This took care of the monthly down-payment to keep the house secured. It had been Iris's idea of a solution, once she had assured him she could never afford to buy the house. Not that Cherrie would consider selling it, he realized once he was back home.

By the time Iris was ready to go to South Africa, Leonard had found a new job as a tourist- and taxi driver around the Cape Peninsula. He loved it. Sadly he recalled the morning after his arrival back home. He had decided to go to town and get the rough gem—which had passed customs without being detected—estimated. He'd go there after the surf.

He went off with the board and met up with two young friends he was teaching to surf. On the small parking spot near the Kommetje surf spot, he hurriedly took off his t-shirt and shorts, as
South African surfers do, a towel wrapped around his waist not trying hard to conceal what he called 'a healthy reaction'. The two young girls did the same. Leonard was over-eager. In an awkward move grabbing his wet-suit, the towel dropped down to his shorts onto the ground, leaving him standing naked, much to the amusement of the two girls who shrieked with laughter. It was a jolly moment. The surf was mellow and perfect for beginners. What a kick for Leonard, holding the bare, freezing ankles of the girls tightly onto the board to keep them on it, going over the first rollers. It is what kept him young, if anyone asked... After the lesson they all went to have breakfast at a cozy terrace nearby, beaming.

On the Kommetje parking lot a young African boy was sweeping the tarmac. He was brooding, worried about his seventeen piece family, his coughing father; it gnawed at him. The sun played, a flash of light! A rare pebble... He knew just a little about stones, rocks, unpolished gems. He could not believe his eyes! This looked like the real thing! A piece of land he would buy, build a house for every one... The wheel of fortune had spun.

Much later, back home, Leonard suddenly remembered the rock. It had been in his short pocket and he had forgotten all about it. He looked and looked, but it was gone. He was devastated. It took another few surfs to come to terms with it. "You can't win them all", he finally concluded. But all was not lost. He would rise again out of the ashes, he was still loving life, as always. And apart from that... Iris still had her emerald, and she was arriving in South Africa in a few days...

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In a brand new big company car Leonard picked Iris up at the airport when she arrived. Her passport allowed for three months. They ran into each other's arms, Iris dressed in winter clothes, Leonard barefooted in shorts and a yellow t-shirt.

Smiling towards her new future, her new 'home', her new daring today, she was also to learn about the spirit of the Phoenix, as Leonard's rehab had been called. To rise from the ashes of hurt and even self-destruction and finding joy in purely being alive, kicking on the beauty of life and the strength of the soul. Surfers didn't worry much about the future, as each time they went out into the wild ocean could mean the end of their mortal existence. She was startled that this simultaneously eccentric, popular, sportive, handsome hardworking man had ended four relationships to go for love and complete sharing with her. Not that she had asked him to do that! He just wanted to try something new, like monogamy?

Iris got on well with Jamie, and also with Cherrie who treated her as a friend when they met. She adapted to different habits and also introduced some, like eating around a table. Their relationship evolved pretty well, though serious hassle with two court-cases, non-paying tenants and bailiffs at the door caused quite a bit of uproar within the household. But that's another story.

Iris had a wonderful time, swimming in the pool daily, pottering around the house, bringing more order, coziness and healthy dinners. In his spare time they walked in the Table Mountain National parks or on beaches. Enchanted by its beauty and taking photographs, she built a website for Leonard's employer; took care of most household tasks, taught him some yoga, gave massages almost daily and... took surf lessons from him. Her raw emerald safely sold in Goa, the money invested wisely at home, she had arrived in Cape Town full of optimism and love. She bloomed, rose like a phoenix, again, winging sun-scorched decks, heat-blasted beaches, reckless winds and freezing ocean waves this time.

South Africa was absolutely breathtaking. But what would the future hold? All I know is that a year after they had met, they were both single again. A disagreement based on a silly cultural difference had brought out that Leonard seemingly found it too difficult to live together full time,
and on top of that stated “he didn’t really believe in love...”, stopping all communication next. Her allergy for the term ‘friends with special benefits’ kicked-up; nor did she have the kind of cash to spend on a Bed and Breakfast near Long Beach for months at a time. She canceled her return to him and cried with disappointment for quite a long time. The experience however, for both of them, could never be taken from them. The free lessons of life! At least they had lived the poetry in motion to its full potential.
About the Author

After performing music for many years, Janne De Rijck became a freelance travel, art and music journalist in 1990.

Originally from Belgium, she has written in English since 2010. And has published five books of poetry: Magma in the Breeze, Through the Crystal Veil, A Hundred and One Ripples, Traveling Light and The Trail of the Tree. Her poetry has also appeared in many poetry anthologies.

She is also a keen photographer.

Her website is: http://jannederijck.wordpress.com