

The Conscious Virus

First Novel in the Aedgar Wisdom Series

By MIKI MITAYN

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Trigger warning: Contains medical procedures, consequences of self-harm, consequences of domestic violence, abortion, miscarriage, infant death, attempted suicide, attempted murder, murder, deaths in custody.

Aboriginal people are advised that this book contains names of people who have died.

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Aboriginal language words and phrases sourced from: Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary (Revised 2nd edition), IAD Press, Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia, 1998.

Dhanggati Grammar and Dictionary with Dhanggati Stories (2nd edition) by Amanda Lissarrague. Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, Nambucca Heads NSW, Australia, 2020.

Aboriginal and other language and other local, medical or less-usual words are listed in the GLOSSARY at the back of the book.

NEXT PAGE: **Map of Australia** shows East Coast (from North): Brisbane, Byron Bay (and Lennox Head), Sydney, Wollongong and Narooma.

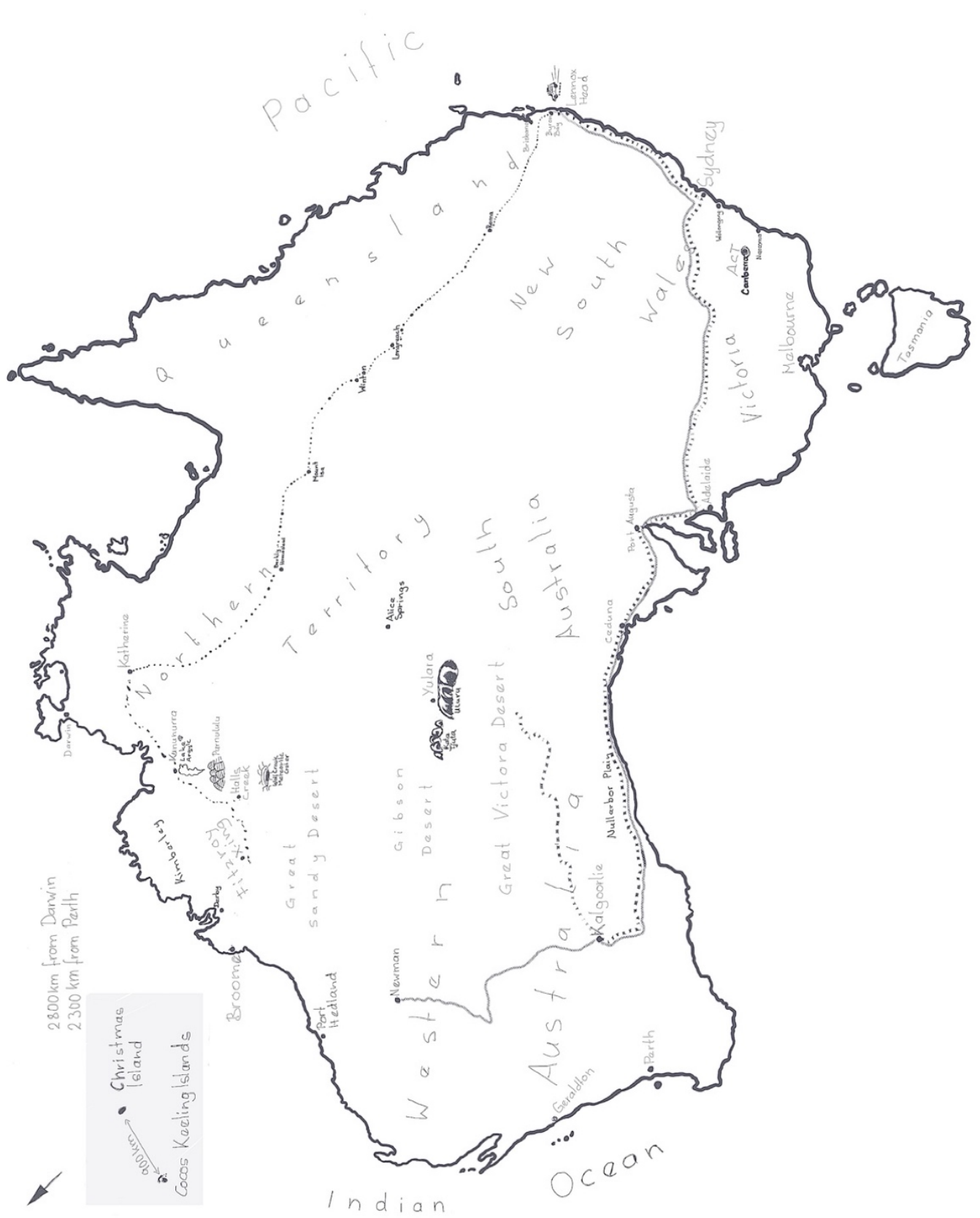
In Central Australia, Uluru and Kata Tjuta, Yulara and Alice Springs.

And Broome, Geraldton and Perth on the West Coast.

Newman and Port Headland in the Pilbara Region. Broome, Fitzroy Crossing and Kununurra are in the Kimberley Region.

Distance of each one-way, east-west car trip is equivalent to New York to Los Angeles; or Berlin to Athens and back.

Distances of Christmas Island and Cocos-Keeling Islands (Australian territories) west from Darwin are 2,800 and 3,700 kilometres, respectively.



CHAPTER 1

Newman Hospital, Palyku Country. The Pilbara, Western Australia

Thursday January 9, 2014

‘So, you drink a slab of beer a day?’ Dr Nerida Green asked with a barmaid’s smile. Her client, a ruddy-faced man who looked older than the age on his record, had headaches and insomnia.

‘Oh no, doc. I don’t drink much. A slab will usually last me two or three days. I would drink thirty-six cans in a day on the weekends, though,’ he admitted. ‘Less on Sunday because I get to church when I can.’

‘Is it a wonderful church? Kind people?’

‘Aw, not really. I just go because people expect it. Mum did. Now, she’s passed, I feel like I should. Her church was better though. She fit in. I don’t fit in anywhere except I’ve got a can of beer in me hand.’

‘Your body’s suffering. Can you be kinder to yourself?’

‘Like how?’

‘Find people who like you for who you are. You’re a decent person and good to other people. Have you ever tried giving up the grog?’

‘No, doc. Been drinking since I was 14, when I started work in a boiler factory.’

Nerida smiled sincerely now. ‘My first job was in a battery factory. Lead and zinc dust on everything. I was fifteen. I had a hole in my spirit I was trying to fill up. Loneliness. Confusion. I didn’t drink. Just ate too much and got fat. Nobody talked about feelings in those days. We hardly knew what they were.’

‘Yeah. Mum died when I was twelve. Everyone said she was with God. Thirty years later, never did find him at church.’

They sat together as equals. There was a hum, roar and thump of big machinery outside the thin-walled building. In the near distance, a child played the recorder tunelessly.

Nerida enjoyed her morning, even if she was tired. She spent fifty minutes with the man and asked him to make a long appointment next week. Alcoholics Anonymous didn’t have a branch in Newman. *I’ll talk to community health about employing a drug and alcohol worker*, she thought. Hurrying for a toilet break, the argument with her coffee-filled bladder got louder.

No sound, but instinct made her look into the treatment room. The patient was floppy. Her mouth moved like a fish drowning in air.

‘Anaphylaxis!’ Nerida’s voice boomed down the hall. ‘This patient has an allergy.’ Ran to the bed. Leaned on the red alarm button.

‘You’ll be all right. We’ve got you,’ she whispered. Pulled the IV out of the patient’s arm. Blood spilled on the bed, the floor. Brown iron splashed on Nerida’s dress.

‘We had her on ten-minute obs,’ the nurse said, rushing in.

Voice still low, Nerida said, ‘The trolley behind you. Top drawer.’

The patient had her mouth open. Air going in made a scraping noise.

‘Check this?’ The nurse showed Nerida an ampoule.

‘I need my glasses.’ Scrabbled for them. Noted the drug, the expiry, the dose.

‘Give it.’

The sister pushed the needle in the patient’s thigh.

‘This will make you better,’ Nerida murmured.

Nerida found oxygen tubing in a basket too high to see into. Felt for it. ‘Adrenaline again in four minutes. Find it. Draw it up, please.’

She put a mask over the patient’s gasping mouth. Connected oxygen. Turned it on full blast. Soft voiced, ‘You gonna be all right. That medicine made you sick. Breathe now.’ Touched her forehead.

‘Thanks, Doc,’ she gasped. Her brown eyes very wide.

Nerida looked in the nurse’s face. Noted her purple-streaked hair. Repeated, ‘Have you got another dose of adrenaline? In case she needs it. We can give it every four minutes. I’ll put a sats probe on.’

‘I’ll put a cannula in,’ the nurse said. ‘Now that the doctor pulled your other one out.’ She smiled wryly, calming them all. ‘The right thing to do, of course,’ she added. Gave Nerida a direct look of gratitude as the needle went in.

‘What fluid do you want?’

‘Normal saline. One litre. Open it up.’ Nerida reached into the cupboard and pulled a bag out. ‘Are we alone here?’

‘Lunch,’ she passed Nerida a second vial of adrenaline, read her the expiry date.

Nerida wasn’t sure she would have coped with this emergency on her own. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.’

'I'm Sarah.'

'Nerida. I'm the doctor.' She touched the patient's hand. It was warm. 'How's your breathing now? You look a better colour. That was scary, eh?'

The patient breathed quietly. Deeply.

The room smelled of blood, iron and sweat.

'Sats are ninety-eight percent.'

'Good.' Nerida consciously put her shoulders down, took a deep breath, too.

'What happened?' asked the young woman. Her skin was a rich brown, fingers wrapped around Nerida's café au lait hand.

'You had a bad reaction to the iron. An allergy. If a doctor ever asks whether it's anaphylaxis, say yes. Because you had trouble breathing. That's the word they use for it. I'll write that you're allergic in big, red, letters on your record so that everyone knows never to give it to you into the vein again.'

'Yes, please. Thought I would die,' she whispered.

'You'll be right. You needed another medicine. Rest now.' Nerida held onto her hand. 'We'll keep you here to make sure you're all right. We'll talk about what happened when you've had a rest. I want to move you into a different bed, so you're closer.'

To Sarah, 'Let's put her in the resus area, just for peace of mind. I'd like her on a monitor for the next hour or two.' She skipped from one foot to the other. 'Excuse me, now. I must go to the loo.'

CHAPTER 2

A Western Desert Aboriginal Community

Thursday August 2, 2014

Mari sat on the edge of the bed and unclipped her prosthetic leg. She placed it carefully, foot on the floor, and briskly rubbed her stump just above where an ankle would have been.

Stretching on her back, she said, 'I took my leg off at school today. The kids loved it.'

'Oh yeah?' Nerida said, tipping water in the humidifier. She noticed the muscles in her wife's brown arms, her cheeky smile. 'What brought that on?'

'I like them. Even if Thomas and Stella are always cheeky and Misty is always late. They sit down on the bus for me. Getting on the bus every morning is a pleasure for them. And then they get so excited to go home.'

'What's that got to do with your foot?'

'Stella and Thomas went off chasing a lizard. I took my leg off to show Misty and Paul. So the others came running back.'

Nerida smiled broadly as she pulled her nightie over her head and let down her hair, running her fingers through it. She leaned over and kissed her wife on the mouth. Lay beside her, fell against her, on the saggy bed.

'Did you tell them a doctor chopped your leg off because he was an idiot?'

'I wouldn't tell them that. You're their only doctor. They love you.'

'They're scared enough of me already.'

'I told them it was a crocodile attack. They might be more careful when they go swimming now.'

At work the next day the clinic receptionist had a smile just peeping out when she said, 'Ms Snow from school wants to see you.'

Nerida finished the sentence she was typing. 'Who is she again?'

'The deputy. Says Mari did something horrible. Says kids are traumatised. Says Mari should have asked parents' permission.'

'What a load of bull. Why doesn't she talk to Mari about it?'

'She's scared of her.' She showed a dimple.

Nerida was earnest. ‘Just about every family in this community has someone with an amputation. Or gone blind from diabetes. Poor old Fred—two stumps and his wheelchair that won’t work in the sand...’

‘He wants to see you again today, too.’

‘Yeah, alright. Why don’t you go and get Fred? Maybe I can get him sorted before the school ma’am comes.’

Later, Nerida listened to Ms. Snow talk about her eczema for a long ten minutes.

Dr Nerida looked at a scaly red mess on her ankle. ‘That would itch like blazes at night.

‘This cream will help but you must only apply it thinly. You’ve got dermatitis on your scalp, too. I can give you something for that. You must be stressed.’

Nerida shifted in her chair. ‘I hear you’re upset with my wife?’

Ms. Snow flinched. Her pale blue eyes had a permanently startled look. ‘Your ‘wife’ has to understand. These children have been through a lot. She might give them nightmares. She’s only the casual bus driver. She doesn’t get to say what my teaching plan should be. It was all they talked about this morning. Some of them were hopping around in the playground, pretending they had only one leg.’

And you say that as if it’s a bad thing.

She leaned forward so that Nerida smelled mouth rinse and hairspray. ‘Was it really a croc?’

‘It was a story more terrible than you want to hear. We might need half a bottle of wine to share it.’ Nerida joshed. Wine was taboo in the Dry community. ‘Sounds like you’re doing a great job. What was your lesson this morning?’

The matron considered whether to share. ‘We were talking about how much sugar there is in cool drinks. Using that to reinforce arithmetic for the little ones and talk about advertising for the older kids.’

‘What a good way to teach them. Kids are interested in stories.’

Nerida ducked her head and spoke softly. ‘Most of the drama and disability they see comes from ordinary things. Alcoholism, depression, not enough to eat, too much stress and misery. People not going out hunting or tending their gardens because they’re too sad or overwhelmed. Diabetes comes from taking the land away, too, you know.’

Ms Snow snorted.

‘No, it’s true. Aboriginal people needed to keep their blood glucose high for a long time. Especially this mob, desert people. They might walk for days to hunt an animal. Might have a

few berries or yams or bush bananas to keep them going. People travel long distances between the fat-and-plenty places.’

Ms Snow tilted her head. She granted that. One of the old fellas arrived home after walking about eighty kilometres in four days, despite the desert heat, last Summer. He was fine. ‘Car broke down,’ he said. No one went looking because no one was expecting him. ‘I’m all right,’ he said proudly, when Nerida saw him at the shop. She bought him a hand of bananas to celebrate his survival.

‘You couldn’t be collapsing with hunger,’ she added. ‘It was an evolutionary adaptation. It makes those of us with European ancestry look maladapted, if you look at it that way.’

White people liked it when she referred to her English and Irish ancestry. It helped them with the puzzle of how she identified with her Aboriginality, with her fair skin and grey eyes.

‘Nowadays we like to eat every day—’ she continued.

The teacher looked down at her round belly, reassured that Nerida had one, too.

‘—and the foods people eat, well, some of them aren’t really food at all. No wonder Aboriginal people get diabetes now. Some of this mob don’t understand that you can be sold something as food that’s not nourishment.’

The teacher agreed. ‘Like cool drinks.’ That was the local lingo for soft drinks, soda. *She has to learn something from the kids.*

‘Exactly. Colonisation has only happened here in the last four generations. Some of the people my age—’ this woman was ten years younger than Nerida, even if she was bossy and fussy, ‘—born in the 60s, spent their childhood on the cattle stations.

She could see Ms. Snow’s eyes glazing over. Nerida was going to educate her anyway. ‘Their parents got flour and sugar and tea for wages. Maybe a bit of offal. Tobacco and alcohol. Chronic diseases of colonisation, all packed up and fed to people.’

She finished writing Ms. Snow’s details on the labels of the creams and potions for her dermatitis.

‘You’re doing well teaching the kids not all that’s sold as food makes them stronger.’

‘It’s not just white people’s fault,’ Ms. Snow said.

Nerida agreed. ‘The diseases? No. People from Asia brought leprosy.’ Her eyes widened with emphasis. ‘We’ve still got to check for that.’ She distracted Ms Snow from her defensiveness by scaring her.

Those startled blue eyes. ‘What? Here?’

‘No, up north in the Kimberley. People who were leprosy contacts in the 90s still need check ups.

‘But you’re right. Nothing is just white people’s fault. I’m not even sure if there’s any such thing as white people, really. Everybody comes from somewhere.

‘In my family Irish and English people married into our Aboriginal clan for love, for more than one generation. My mother is third generation Australian from England. She loves my Dad. My white grandfather loved my Goori nana, too. They were good together.’

‘One of my ancestors was a convict,’ Ms Snow said with quiet pride. ‘He went to live with the Blacks.’

Nerida put her pen in her pocket. ‘There’s always been good people. Always been English that wanted to learn. Open-minded people like you. You’ve probably got Aboriginal ancestry yourself. It’s not likely that a family lives here for two centuries without marrying into the Original people.’

‘Do you think so?’

Nerida rose, guiding Ms. Snow to the door. ‘If you can use me at school, I’ll come and talk to the older kids about diabetic amputations, people going blind and all that. Not to scare them, to help them understand. If the parents are happy. Would we need consent forms?’

That evening at home, Mari served up crumbed chicken. ‘What did you say to the snow queen? She was sweet as sugar this afternoon.’ She grinned, putting down their plates. ‘I got a commission today. Ryan at the Art Centre asked me to take photos of the artists doing their work.’

Nerida felt a thrill of happiness.

‘You should see the artists’ shed, though. It’s horrible. If it’s forty degrees outside, it’ll be fifty in there.’

‘No wonder people move slowly, eh.’ Nerida speared a potato. Broke and buttered it.

Mari sat on their second chair, within arm’s length. ‘Some of the paintings are huge. Like, as big as this house. The men make a painting together. The women make a different one. They each have their country and stories they paint about. And they connect them together. Ryan calls it a collaborative.’

‘Magnificent paintings.’ Nerida glimpsed the works as she walked by sometimes. She got up and poured them each a glass of wheat beer. It was non-alcoholic, but the taste made them feel good.

‘I can only stay in that shed for an hour though. It’s too hot for me. How do they do it?’

‘People here have stamina. And they were born into this climate. They pace themselves. Have you ever seen people walk so slowly? It’s magnificent. You’re right, though, it has got hotter here,’ Nerida said.

‘Ryan has to be patient. Everyone brings their dogs. A couple of the very old people have like a retinue of dogs.’

Nerida laughed. ‘We have fights in the clinic all day to keep the dogs out. Great opportunity to shout and wave my arms. I yell at them in Ngaanyatjarra. They don’t understand English.’

‘In the Art Centre, nothing moves them. Dogs walk on the paintings, sit on them, roll around. Ryan cleans the damage off and makes the artists start again.’

Nerida said, ‘I s’pose if people are paying tens of thousands of dollars, the painting needs to be very good. And entirely hairless.’

Mari chuckled. ‘I’m hoping the photos could be great. I’ve got the settings right to show people’s dark brown faces. It’s tricky because the light is so strong around them. A lot of photographers don’t know how to capture dark faces, you know?’ She pulled the last bite of meat around the sauce on her plate. ‘The beef here is so good.’

‘It is.’

‘Sorry it was sold out and I had to buy the chicken.’

‘Ryan told me he asked the old people to make smaller paintings. He thought they might sell more if they paint some, instead of, you know, these three by five metre masterpieces. “Come on. Try it,” he said, “People don’t have big houses for such big paintings!” But the old men say no. One said, “I’ve got big country. Paintings gotta be big for my big story!” They’re onto a good thing.’

‘True, people here aren’t silly.’ Nerida gathered the plates, turned around to wash them.

Later they lay together under the air-conditioner, profoundly relaxed in the darkness of the desert night.

Nerida felt the old mattress supporting her. The earth beneath the house holding her. *It must be after midnight. I’ll be tired at work tomorrow. But this feeling’s worth it.*

Mari, turned towards the cool wall, had fallen asleep without pain, for once.

She wrapped her arm around Mari’s waist, slipping her hand in the warm, sweet valley under her breasts, to feel her ribs rise and fall with each breath. Nerida moved strands of her wife’s damp hair to nuzzle the nape of her neck. She felt her life replete with riches: the joy of being alive, having purpose and love.

A breeze travelled all the way from Antarctica, thousands of miles to the south, over waves and whales, rattling the donga walls. Nerida got up, careful not to disturb her wife. Opening the

shutter and the small window in the bathroom, she inhaled the breeze, fresh on her face and chest.

The stars seemed near. Powerful enough to influence life on Earth. She saw colours in them, brighter than diamonds in the clear desert sky.

CHAPTER 3

TIME SLIP 1: Future

Gundungurra Country. Formerly known as, 'New South Wales'

Sunday March 16, 2036

On another night, the bed in their accommodation was hard, hot and lumpy. Nerida couldn't tell if she was asleep or awake. She heard Mari's gentle snoring, the distant dogs barking at the moon. But her brain or spirit generated voices and images in her head, racing away. Took her to a far place.

She saw a wide sky in her dream, felt herself travelling at speed:

Over the mountains, Nerida drives into plains of dry, silver-grey trees and straw grasses, heading west. She is in a car, but it's a different kind of vehicle. In this dream or vision, she knows her vehicle can connect with others, making a kind of train in urban areas, but that's east of the mountains. Here she drives it manually for the enjoyment of it. And, she realises in a flash, to be disconnected from the satellites, rudimentary as they are now. *So we can't be tracked*, she thinks.

'Straight into the sun. That wasn't good planning,' her wife comments as she flicks a switch to tint the windscreen. 'That's better. Can you see?'

Nerida realises that she is driving because Mari's vision is unreliable. *Sometimes she sees, sometimes she doesn't.*

Houses are few, far from their path and low to the ground. Kangaroos lift their silky heads at the rushing sound of the hydrogen car's tyres.

'What do people do for water here?' Mari asks. The sun lights her white curls, shows fine lines on her olive skin. She's wearing square sunglasses with dark green glass and a gold frame. Mari speaks seven languages, five of them fluently, and could calm a shark while diving. But life on dry land was opaque to her curiosity.

'They collect rainwater. And they pull drinking water from air.'

'But it's so dry.'

'The trees still breathe out moisture,' Nerida replies. 'Maybe you should come and stay here a while. Call the rain.'

Mari, head up, surveys the surrounding hills and the horizon. The earth opens to her senses like a bride.

'People living inland need a patch of trees,' says Nerida. 'To generate water when humidity is low. Condensation from the morning sun, you can catch that, too. It gets good and cold here at night. Makes a fog.'

'The underground water's poisoned, of course,' Mari coughs.

There's a scent of baked earth and dust from the drought-stricken country.

'I can smell apples,' Mari says. 'Somebody's brewing cider somewhere.'

Nerida can't smell it. 'We need to be in Naarm tomorrow, so let's drive until the light's gone,' she says. Mari's going to channel at a meeting of scientists, technologists, craftsmen. *And unclassifiable weirdos like us*, she thinks. People seeking connections between different disciplines.

Nerida wants to keep Mari happy and well for the upcoming meeting. *I'll brew herbs to help her sleep with that cough.*

And I need goldenseal on this breast. She lays a hand gently on her four-day-old injury. It throbs.

She mentally locates the bandages she'll need. Calculates where they'll next stay long enough to do a proper laundry before the conference.

Mari notices her pain. 'If I cross paths with the bastard that hurt you, I'll kill him. *Des kotzd me à!*' she swears in one of her mother languages.

'You can hate his stupidity, but it won't change him. He thinks he's Spock with a phaser,' Nerida says dryly. The pain of the wound is tiring.

'*Den knüpf i an de Eier nuff.*' Mari scowls. She wants to hang him up by his testicles.

She gently rubs Nerida's shoulder near the hole. Her touch erases the pain momentarily. Mari looks into her face, concerned. Nerida returns a quick, thin smile.

A roo leaps across the road in front of them. The car bleeps, slows itself. 'Just don't hit one,' Mari says. 'I know they're supposed to bounce off these cars, but I don't trust it. We're quiet and they get curious. This path should be fenced by now, really.'

The car is so noiseless they can hear each other breathing.

'*Dhunuwi yalaan,*' Nerida says softly in her Aboriginal language. 'The sun is going down.'

About the upcoming meeting, Mari says, 'What annoys me at these conferences is people who chase me outside of the sessions, telling me 'Ask Aedgar this,' or 'What does M'Hoq Toq think about that?'

I have to tell them over and over that I don't have a personal ear to the spirits. I don't hear what they say.'

Nerida turns on music: Bessie Smith jumps over a century, leaving grief and worry behind, her throaty voice deciding between lovers of different genders, taking none of them too seriously.

The clunking piano resonates in the vehicle.

'Should be right this time,' Nerida says. 'I've written it in the abstract. That they need to come to see you channel if they want to hear what our friends say. Or ask obscure questions.' She peers at the path ahead, around the white sun. 'It's scientists. There will be numbers people.'

Someone with a formula, for sure, that needs to be reduced to constituent concepts in our friend's response. Someone from the quantum club asking about the second gesture on the 57th dance of the muon.

'And there'll be someone asking the colour of their true love's eyes,' Mari says, reading her thoughts. 'You've told me before that Aedgar handles them all gracefully. It's true, isn't it? Much better than I would handle the stuffed shirts.'

We're going to meet people who listen, Nerida assures herself. 'People going to this summit do important work,' she says, flipping a sunshade down to her side as they turn, cruising south.

'They're desperate,' Mari comments coolly. 'I won't forget that *Grasdackel* that kept asking me about graviton spin at dinner the last time I channelled for physicists. Why ask me? Why ask anyone if you think you know it all?'

Nerida smiles. A *Grasdackel* is a moron, but literally a grass sausage dog. 'You never forget anything. I know.'

Her wife's curls are lit by the sun beside her now, making a frizzy halo. Nerida only glimpses Mari's strong, sharp-featured European face, but she feels her warmth beside her as the surrounding air cools. She puts a hand on Mari's arm, caresses it through her bamboo sleeve.

'They're interested in what Aedgar and M'hoq Toq and Bartgrinn have to say,' Nerida says with a buzz of pride.

'Yeah, it's good. Conferences aren't about free pens and tax deductions anymore,' Mari adds.

They cross a narrow wooden bridge where a deep creek runs after rains.

'Is your passport still valid?' Nerida asks, suddenly nervous.

'Of course, it is. It's digital. Self-renews unless someone decides to stop you. Are you still back in the 2020s?' Mari smiled, gazing across the plain. 'Look out.'

Nerida slows for an echidna ambling along the path in the grasses. The hedgehog triggers an alarm on the dashboard, which she switches off. 'I am a bit nervous. Sometimes I must remind myself we need our passports to travel here. Which names are we using?'

'We can use our usual names. We're legal here.' Mari keeps up with details of their legal status in different districts.

She coughs. 'Remember back in 2020, when the rental company offered us an upgrade? And we were pleased, but then the car had Victorian plates? Even though we were driving in other states.' Mari settles into her seat.

'New South Wales people gave us the death stare whenever we stopped at traffic lights. As if we were from the Melbourne outbreak. I thought that one prick might smash the car windows venting his anger on us. Did you forget how he pounded his fist on the hood?'

'I had forgotten that. Sometimes we felt like outlaws, then, already,' Nerida reflects. The sun is getting low now, turning orange. 'That was before the big Sydney wave. The states and cities still had their Colonial names.'

Mari narrows her eyes. She points out camels lining up to go back to their shed for the evening. The smell of them wafts through her cracked open window. She closes it, opens an air vent. Nerida notices that she sees well today.

It never occurred to either of them, back in the 20s, that someone might want them followed and wish them harm. That word of the 'voices and visions' could have wafted like incense from the cribs at Newman to the penthouse boardrooms in Meanjin. Nobody could be too careful since that moon fiasco.

The 'gougers,' an epithet for the remnant resources corporations, are still on the lookout for those that undermined them.

'I went to the Post Office that April to pick up my Australian passport.' Mari warms to her story. She has that Romany way of getting nostalgic about drama and conflict. 'I needed it to apply to get into Western Australia. And the woman there said, "Aren't you sweet? You know, darling, Western Australia is part of the same country."

'They wanted my Australian passport number in the permit application forms, though, so I could go there with you. I was right. I needed it. And she was the one who had no idea.'

'True.'

'No travel without citizenship!' Her eyes spark. 'We're all in this together,' she sings. 'Huh! One country where being a migrant or resident was never enough. So much meanness and

ignorance at the end of the world. Look at the way Aboriginal people were treated then.’ Mari scowls into the sun.

‘Some things are fairer now, eh,’ Nerida concedes.

‘We got the exemption because you’re a doctor. That was a good trip.’ Mari turns to look behind them to the north, where an eagle swoops, scooping a lizard or a small snake in its talons.

‘I remember lots of pressure,’ Nerida corrects her. ‘It was gruelling. We needed permits to cross Queensland and the Northern Territory, each lasted only hours. Getting up at 4am four days in a row to drive a thousand kilometres each day. I was exhausted by the time we got to Western Australia for quarantine.’

‘Well, I drove and I liked it. No one else on the road. Driving across the country, even passing through the cities and towns, took no time at all.’ Below the dashboard, Mari points to specks of reddening cloud on the horizon. Makes a gesture towards gathering them together for rain. But she is only playing. ‘And two weeks locked up with you wasn’t so bad.’

‘We were both crying by the end of that one,’ Nerida reminds her.

‘Oh, yeah. The bed bugs.’ Mari scratches at the thought.

‘After the summit finishes on Wednesday, we’ve got two appointments on Thursday. One for imaging, then in the afternoon we’ll see the scientist. About stem cells for you.’

Nerida mentally rehearses conversations with the researcher she’s never met. *The fella who’ll give us the tools to regrow Mari’s foot.* She feels the impact of the thought of it in her belly, hope surging from her heart to her head.

Solar lights by the path switch on. ‘Might be forty minutes of light left,’ Mari interrogates rest stops they pass.

A safe spot with food, fresh water and a view, Nerida visualises. She hasn’t seen anyone else on the road and feels relieved as the sky darkens. Keeping the cars lights off, she uses its sensors to navigate.

‘Aren’t you glad that they’re producing whole cars in that neighbouring country over there now?’ Mari ponders after a while.

‘You talking about *Palyku* country, in the Pilbara over west?’

‘Yeah. Not shipping out truckloads of dirt. They just make the whole car. Great use of sugarcane and chaff. People have the skills. Growing up and living where they’re born helps. People learn more in depth.’

'Plenty of room to store hydrogen in some of the old mines. Remember how it was all about the economy? All about the vaccinations? And now there are so many fewer people living on this planet.'

Mari swats at a mosquito as it comes through the vent. For a minute or two she's grabbing the air like a puppy, then smacking herself on the neck. She kills it. 'Bastard! Look, it's got blood in it already,' she says. 'Fly times finished. Mosquitos have woken up.'

'Some didn't believe in it. But they were forced to have those vaccines. They didn't work,' Mari says. She holds up a hand, hushing Nerida. 'I know you'll say they were a promising attempt. But they shouldn't have approved them all before the guinea pig stage, you know? All the humans were the guinea pigs.'

'We were in a difficult situation. Pressure to get vaccinated was enormous. All the evidence said it was the sensible thing to do. But our friends were telling us otherwise,' Nerida says.

Mari shakes her head.

'You know that virus is clever. It's got consciousness. It just changes. I wish it could have fallen in love with the mosquitoes. They could have eradicated each other.'

Sometimes Mari claims ideas she channelled years ago as her own. It seems like her mind opens to the Beings' ideas when she'd tuned in to the rainclouds. Or the country.

'Don't bring any rain yet. Just hold off,' Nerida says. 'I smell lemon eucalyptus. We'll make a smokey fire to keep the mozzies away.' She pulls the car into a protected clearing, the wheels crunching on stones. 'Let's sleep here.'

'No flames, hidden embers,' Mari insists.



CHAPTER 4

Resume Linear Time: Recent Past

Western Desert Community

Saturday October 18, 2014

It was Saturday. They slept in past the closing time of the community's only shop. Jolted awake by the roaring air conditioner labouring against the searing heat.

Nerida felt disoriented. Was that a dream or a vision? *Is my subconscious looking for reassurance that Mari and I have a future, feeling safe together? Or giving reassurance to me? From a real future?*

But we were fleeing surveillance. Mari had a problem with her eyes. I'd been hurt. Something about vaccinations... Fragmented images flew around her head as she got up, disturbed.

She went to pee.

Her eyes looked intense in the dull, metal mirror as she washed.

She filled the calcified kettle, feeling like she wanted to remember the vision's vivid conversations but leave behind the knowing unease of it. It felt so real. Cups clattered. The spoon chimed. She didn't care as much as usual if she woke Mari.

Soon after, a neighbour started their washing machine. The vibration of it shook their house because the shipping-container units they lived in were joined by a rickety metal fence. Mari got up, strapped on her leg, put on her shoe. She took the sweet coffee Nerida offered gratefully, her black curls wild as Einstein's.

Nerida put her head against her wife's chest and drew her into a hug, smelling the scent of her skin and the soft cotton of her worn t-shirt.

After coffee, Mari offered to go into trance. She slipped her spirit out her body easily.

That big blue waterhole she goes to must be cool today, Nerida thought.

The Medicine Man M'Hoq Toq flowed in.

Mari had been channeling his words for about fifteen minutes, with Nerida listening, mesmerized, when the spirit murmured, 'Something stopped—couldn't tell you what it was.'

Nerida's tablet had died. She was surprised he noticed. She didn't. 'It's a machine to help me record our conversation, as well as writing notes down.'

'It sounds like the flow of water when it runs on rocks—' he said.

That's interesting. To me, it makes no sound at all. She wondered whether spirits heard through Mari's ears.

She met M'Hoq Toq in 2012.

That was the easiest of his many names and she still didn't get it right. For a while, in the early days, she spelled it M'Hoq N'toq. Then M'Hoq Tauk.

Eventually she had to ask Monica about it, who accepted Nerida's spelling on the old man's behalf. Even if most spirits said names didn't matter (Monica was one of them), that old soul took his names seriously. He was the only spirit Nerida met who proudly recalled many of his names from manifold lifetimes. Names had significance in his cultures.

A noble being, he was a Native American Healer, and a man, in most of his lives. Monica had given her a list of about a dozen tribes and countries he'd inhabited in North America. He came as a woman only twice, he told Nerida when she asked, for the sake of a rounded education, but had found living in a female body hard.

Nerida felt a special freedom and sharp respect with that non-physical being. He expressed values and concepts that resonated with her Aboriginality. She used to be scared of him. Still was, sometimes. All three spirits Mari regularly channelled were direct, truth tellers. Each was confronting in their own individual way. M'Hoq Toq was able to scold her, to get her onto her path gently but powerfully, in just the way her Aboriginal grandmother, her father's mother, did.

She straightened her spine, marshalling questions.

Her mind was with people suffering on another continent. 'There's a terrifying sickness in Africa. Thousands of people have died already,' she said.

He took his time. 'There will be quite a few more.'

M'Hoq Toq kept Mari's eyes closed when he spoke. Nerida felt his energy shift, as if inside and far away, the way she sometimes felt a patient 'go inside' when they were seriously ill. Or, mundanely, the way they used to when she worked in the factory, long before she studied to be a doctor. She and her comrades would talk all morning as their hands moved over the metal plates, then say, 'I'm going inside now,' and become meditative on the production line. *It's as if he goes to consult a book or a scrying glass,* she imagined.

'It will spread—mainly south,' he foretold. 'You'll have a few sufferers in the other directions as well, but it will go mainly to the south. South all the way to the water, east all the way to the water.' He indicated each direction with a slight movement of Mari's chin.

The strange coastal desert of Angola and Namibia, all the way across forests and plains to tourist beaches of Mozambique. And then to South Africa. Ebola in South Africa's cities and townships? All this cannot happen.

She rocked to keep the blood circulating to her legs on the narrow, hard chair. Mari's form was opposite her, with the unearthly relaxation of her muscles that only came when she channelled, or sometimes, rarely, when she slept.

Pain made Mari frown and toss when she slept. It bedevilled her neck, shoulders, hips and legs.

Days she channelled, zoned in to her photography or paintings, or when they went swimming, had sex or got stoned, those were easier days. But then she did too much and it came back, meaner.

The heat outside made cracking noises in the metal and plastic roof. The small desert community of mainly Aboriginal people was deeply peaceful. Most were sleeping. The air conditioner and fridge, machinery of survival, seemed loud.

'Should be seen as a warning,' M'Hoq Toq said, focused on the Ebola virus.

'The trouble is, it's not the same as it was before. It has changed to spread more easily. You can catch it if someone talks to you closely. You don't even need to touch the person.'

'It comes with a breath,' he made a starburst with Mari's long fingers, 'out of the lungs.'

Ebola. The name made Nerida's neck prickle. Her shoulders ached.

'The trouble is it can survive in liquid and air. And it survives longer than it previously did. It likes heat and moisture, that's why it mainly spreads to the south. It can't survive heat when it's dry. Strong heat kills it.'

That's a relief. This place is hot and dry. The Australian western deserts had scorching summers, with winters cold enough to put the reptiles to sleep. 'What about cold?'

'It becomes inactive and will reappear if the temperature rises. Can survive in the ground as well as in fresh water. Doesn't like salt water or sea water.'

'I see.'

'Animals can spread it.'

'Really?'

'Farm animals, herds of animals, domesticated animals. Some wild animals, too. If you get too close to those, you'll rather get killed by the animal than the disease. Quicker.'

'Where does the disease come from?' She asked, thinking bats, monkeys.

'Created.'

'By people?' She sometimes found it hard to process the damage humans caused.

‘People started it, but it transformed. They lost control.’

Her morning coffee and bread sat in her belly like a stone. ‘So it’s true that they started it as a means of warfare?’

M’Hoq Toq sighed. ‘Many things are said to be done in the name of science. There were ideas about warfare, but it was not the primary reason.’

‘They tried to fight a different disease. They planned to strengthen the body’s immune system, make antibodies. Except the creation was stronger than they thought.’

‘Is it true that they got the virus from monkeys?’ She tried to recall. *Simian origins of Ebola—in science journals. Something about using the viral coat of monkey viruses with medicine inside them to treat HIV.*

Nerida was cautious about genetically engineered viral shells and fragments since what happened to Andy. They were medical students together in the 90s. He was by her side in some classes: his big, soft, easy presence.

That morning, they came out into the sunlight, onto fresh cut lawn, from their Biochemistry and Physiology lectures. ‘Are you coming to the experiment?’ Andy asked, his face open.

‘What are they doing?’ Nerida looked up.

Andy frowned behind his glasses. ‘Some kind of injection to see how your immune system reacts. Shellfish protein in a viral coat. Sounds delicious, eh?’

‘They take baseline bloods, then they inject you. Then you come back in six weeks to get your blood checked again. I’m gonna ask if they can check my liver function and get my valproate level done while they’re doing it.’

‘You can go to any doctor for that.’

‘Yes, but this mob will pay me for it.’

‘I don’t think it’s worth it,’ she said. ‘You know what a viral coat is, right?’

‘They take all the virus out of it. It’s only the shell—to get the good stuff into the body. All the viral DNA is taken out. It’s brilliant, what they do! It’ll be all right.’ He grasped her small hand with his giant paw, radiating youthful, male confidence. ‘They’re paying seventy dollars, sis. I need that money for food. We’ve got nothing at home. And the phone’s been cut off.’

‘If I’ve grown a prawn head when I see you tomorrow, you’ll know why.’

Despite his rich stories of spiritual experiences—he was an Aboriginal man with epilepsy and not averse to a toke—Andy was a man of science. He joined the experiment willingly.

We could never prove a connection between that injection and his illness, she thought.

CHAPTER 5

TIME SLIP 2: Past

A University near Sydney, Eora Country

Monday August 16, 1993

She heard about Andy before she met him. She wasn't sure how she would like him.

Nerida was finishing her science degree, completing compulsory subjects. She knew more about Chemistry and Physics now than she did the first time she studied them, and understood concepts her younger peers did not, but memorising facts for exams still came hard. She felt as if her teachers hefted her a bulky phone book, saying, "Learn this. We'll be testing you on seven of the numbers." Having a record of multiple failures didn't help her confidence.

Andy was already a graduate psychologist with honours, she heard. A Wiradjuri man, he'd studied on his own country at a small, rural campus before moving to Sydney to study medicine. She met him on his way out from their interviews at the medicine faculty.

He was like a glass of sparkling wine, bubbling with success. The Dean of Medicine was thrilled. A bright, young Aboriginal man with a first-class honours degree and a charming personality, Andy put anyone he met at ease. Who wouldn't love him?

Andy was tall, brown and cuddly. As they walked, he put his warm hand on her shoulder. 'We'll be right sis. We'll be in Medicine together. We'll help each other.'

Nerida had no such open door into Med, even if her grade average was high.

She gained high distinctions in Aboriginal Studies. She had distinctions too, in ethics, biology and the history and philosophy of medicine and science.

The Dean grudgingly agreed to admit her to medicine if she achieved credits in all the subjects she previously failed.

Maybe the Dean saw her shouting speeches and slogans out of a megaphone outside the campus library, demonstrating against Black Deaths in Custody, increased student fees or the Australian invasion of East Timor.

Andy claimed attention in the Aboriginal students tearoom that first day. He had a booming voice. He stood hands on hips, with attitude, full of joyous banter. The Student Centre's small lounge was overfull with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Many were studying law, eager to participate since the Mabo decision acknowledged Indigenous ownership of Australia, just the previous year. Some were aspiring engineers and accountants.

She followed Andy outside for air. From the wooden verandah they could see part of the hospital. 'Isn't it grand? See that back door there, sis? That's where we'll slip out to see the sky when we work there,' Andy pointed to a dock where orderlies were loading laundry into a van.

At 23, he was six years younger than Nerida. Learning hard sciences and memorisation came easier to him. And he had no children. She was not prone to envy. But he spiked some in her.

Later, Andy told her about his honours project for his psychology degree. 'I examined the relationship between suppressed homosexual desires and religiosity. People came and did this survey, then watched porn.'

'You know how psychologists can measure people's sexual arousal? We put sensors on their genitals and their heads.' He indicated where the electrode dots would go with a grin.

Nerida couldn't help a smile. *This guy is bold.* 'So, what did you find?'

'The people who were most religious were most turned on by the porn. And the Christian fundamentalists were most especially turned on by the gay porn.'

'They got paid for that?'

'Of course. You can't ask people to make such sacrifices in the name of science without paying them.'

'Well, people being turned on by what they think is forbidden is not a new dynamic, is it?' asked Nerida.

'Yeah, it was fun though. And it's only an undergraduate honours degree. It wasn't supposed to change the world.' Andy chuckled.

Nerida enjoyed her studies that last semester in science. Chemistry was easier with two Nigerian women, far from home and their young children, tutoring her in the lab.

'We have over five hundred languages in our country,' said Adaku.

'That's brilliant,' said Nerida. 'Aboriginal people used to, before the British came. We have about two hundred left. My language has died. English was my first language. We still know our countries, though.'

Adaku and Nnenna had been well-taught by nuns. They modelled fluency in using burettes, pipettes and volumetric flasks. And they gave Nerida perspective on the sacrifices people made for education. Living in Public Housing an hour or two from campus and working part time to support herself and the kids was easy by comparison.

Nerida enjoyed being a student. *Such a privilege to be somewhere that ideas matter.*

When she met Andy weeks later for lunch, he'd already started some subjects in medicine. Nerida ate salad. He had two hot dogs and chips.

'I should be eating healthy like you,' he said. 'But this is so much cheaper. How much was that?'

'I'm just starting to like salads,' she smiled. 'You have to get a bit older and drier to appreciate them, I reckon. Salads and monogamy are for older people.'

Conversation with Andy was easy. He was interested in everything. In one of her elective subjects, she studied the history of the industrial revolution in Europe.

'I knew the English ruling class did to the Scots and the Irish first what they did to us,' she said, sprinkling pepper from a paper sachet.

'And did the same in India. And Canada. Fiji, you know. Divide and rule. Set people up against each other by favouring one group over another. Degrade people by stereotyping their appearance and culture.'

'But I didn't understand before how the English themselves were removed from their land and had their growing and cooking cultures destroyed. All their connections to their own histories were smashed up. It was the first place the factories started, right?'

'It helps me understand why Australia is so broken. And why the British food is so bad.'

Andy met her grey eyes with his hazel ones, listening carefully.

'Working class people lived twenty to a house, with big sewer pits in the courtyard. Drinking gin and beer with laudanum in it. There was alum in the flour.'

'What's alum?' he asked.

'It's a metal salt they used to whiten flour. Stops you getting vitamins out of the food.'

Nerida reflected. 'This is the 1850's, when Irishmen lived here together with my Aboriginal clan. They shared the land for about three or four generations without too much trouble. People with a common enemy in the redcoats, sharing drinks, songs and stories.'

'That's about when my English ancestors would have come to Australia,' Andy mused. He didn't talk about his white father much. 'Might be a clue, you reckon, as to why that side of the family was so violent?'

Nerida folded a piece of ham with her fork.

'In England, the children were the only ones who could work in the factories for decades because they fit into the machines. They built the machines small.'

‘They’d work for twelve hours, then sleep for four hours. Parents had to wake kids to go back to work. Can you imagine? Kids fell into the machines, asleep. It was barbaric.’

‘Whitefellas don’t know they’ve got intergenerational trauma, do they?’ he said.

‘They’ve got no idea. At least we know our history. Or we push to find it.’

Her voice hardened. ‘We know there were massacres. My great-grandmother witnessed a big mob of our people murdered by being forced over a cliff.’ Angry tears sprang in her eyes. ‘My aunty told me how the women used to go to man traps near the river. Big pits with sharpened wooden spikes. The men fell in to slowly die. Women took them food and water in the night.’

‘Why were they built?’ Andy asked.

‘The invaders used our river to transport timber easily to the coast. Cut down all the magnificent trees. Sent them to furnish Sydney.’

Across the cafeteria a noisy group of students played with food, getting sauce on each other’s hair and clothes.

‘They treated our men like vermin to be cleared out. Destroyed the hunting grounds and shut off access to water and fishing.’

They sat with the sadness for a minute or two. Their surrounds were noisy enough for privacy.

Andy put a blob of florescent orange sauce by his chips. ‘It’s supposed to be chili sauce. Just tastes like vinegar. And something bitter,’ he said, smacking his lips.

‘It’s the colour of cane toad ovaries.’ Nerida laughed.

‘Have you been dissecting cane toads?’

‘And tapeworms and liver flukes. And looking at spider’s eyes and sperm packages. Invertebrate zoology is amazing!’

Andy raised his eyebrows and gave himself more sauce from the single-serve plastic shell.

‘Cane toads are pretty inside. Orange gametes, bright yellow guts. And you don’t feel bad about cutting them up, since they’re so poisonous they kill everything that eats them.’

‘How do they kill the toads? Gas?’ Andy asked.

She shook her head. ‘Freezing. They go to sleep. There’s hundreds of them in freezers next to the morgue, downstairs in the science building. I’m glad we can learn from them.’

Andy understood. ‘Do they squirt poison at you if you try to kill them?’

'I don't know. I've never had to kill one. When we get them one of the lab techs has cut out their poison glands. They're still toxic to touch. They're the biggest toads in the world, you know. Easier to find your way around than the inside of a flatworm.'

She was warming to her subject. 'Cane toads live for ten or fifteen years in the wild. Strong animals.'

'The fella next to me dissected out his dead toad's heart. It was frozen, right?'

Andy nodded, licking salt off his fingers.

'When it thawed the heart started beating again! I showed it to the tutor, "What's that about?" "Oh, it's just a chemical reaction," he said. Those bastards are hard to kill.'

'There has to be some use to them. They're part of Nature,' Andy said.

'The skin was tough to cut. You could make something from the leather of the big ones, maybe. But they are toxic all through. Should never have been introduced here.'

'People say you can get high by licking the poison on their skin,' Andy said.

Nerida put her fork down. 'That's disgusting. I mean, we used to smoke the threads out of banana skins. Some of my stoner friends wanted to smoke broom flowers once, which is really dangerous.'

'Broom flowers? Causes neuronal death in rats, I remember,' Andy said. 'Kills the cattle.'

Nerida's lips curled in revulsion. 'It causes cardiac arrhythmias.'

Andy packed up his cardboard plate and serviettes, getting up. 'Yeah. And cane toads kill dogs, eh?' He laughed. 'The things people do to try and get high. They're always gonna do it.'

'I'll be a harm reduction doctor, Nerida. They should legalise yarndi. A bottle of wine and spliff and I'm feeling no pain.'

CHAPTER 6

Resume Linear Time: Recent Past

Western Desert

Saturday October 18, 2014

A hot, dust-laden wind was making the kids and the dogs excited outside. Nerida saw that one of the dogs had caught a lizard. The children were shouting, excited. *Probably planning to cook it.* She smiled.

M'Hoq Toq was still looking at Ebola. 'They tried it on monkeys.

'They created it from three different, what you call, viruses, taking the strongest part of each of them and creating a new one.

'They planned to test it on monkeys first. Back then, they thought the monkeys were closely related to humans. They were small monkeys, though, not tiny but small. Not very similar to humans at all.

'They figured it didn't work, so they stopped. Except their creation didn't stop.

'They realised. They noticed they lost control.

'From our point of view, they never had control. They were playing with things they knew nothing about.'

'That's why you say it's a warning, huh?'

'Yeah. Stay away from creating viruses.' He paused, and she felt him looking deeply. 'There have been some other trials in other places with other animals as well, much earlier than that.'

Out the window, Nerida saw a kite dive. The windows had heavy, horizontal shutters—for protection against sandstorms, lightning or kids throwing rocks—propped up in the daytime like an awning. She couldn't see much of the sky.

'Arabia, 1200, probably,' he said.

'Hmm.' *Does he mean 1200 BC or CE? Does it matter? Long time ago.* 'How did that go?'

'Bad.' He whispered. 'There are remnants still there.'

If it was Common Era, she realised, that's less than a thousand years ago.

‘If it gets activated again, that would ‘solve’ a lot of other problems in the region. People would have to reunite, no matter what religion, to fight it, to survive.’

What a strange concept.

‘Just as well the climate is much drier there now,’ he said. ‘If it gets humid again, as it was back then, there will be another ‘creation’ emerging again out of that dust and sand.

‘Nothing to look forward to.’

‘No.’ She had trouble comprehending the idea that a thousand-year-old human-created virus could wake up out of the desert sands of Arabia. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. It wasn’t something she could call anybody about. *It was humid there a thousand years ago? People created a virus there then?? When did humanity start experimenting with diseases? Could any of this be true?*

‘It will take a while. But the climate will change more. It will get rougher.’

In the Arab countries? How could that get any rougher? Or does he mean on the planet? There were floods in Brazil recently. An avalanche at Mount Everest killed sixteen Nepalese guides in April when the snow melted due to global warming. Thousands of people were buried in mudslides in Afghanistan and India. Wildfires in California were the most destructive on record, destroying hundreds of homes. ‘It’s getting rougher already,’ she said.

It goes on and on, she thought. Last week there was that cyclone. An avalanche and a blizzard caused by the cyclone killed 40 people in Nepal on Wednesday.

‘You think? You have no idea. This is just the beginning. Tiny beginnings.’

I hate him saying that. ‘Is that because the earth needs to sustain or protect itself?’ She tried to see the bigger picture.

‘The planet needs to regenerate some different energy, to get back into some kind of balance,’ was all he replied.

Perhaps he senses my difficulty in comprehending all this, she thought.

‘So,’ she said, ‘we were thinking about travelling next month to the other side of the world.’ They planned to travel with the money, or credit really, that they earned from working in the remote community. When she was working, Nerida topped up her credit card balances then used them to travel again. They might go to Germany to visit family. From the western side of Australia, where they were, they could go via South Africa.

‘Don’t travel to that special part of the world, especially not south in this part,’ M’Hoq Toq warned.

‘The south of Africa?’

‘It’s affecting a big part of this continent,’ he said.

‘Is there anything we can do medically to help these people?’ She asked.

She heard children playing. Out the shuttered window, they built a tree house with a cardboard box in a long-dead mulga tree. The tree stood tolerantly in the yard between the desert dwellings.

M’Hoq Toq took a sharp intake of breath. ‘We have to think about this some more. This will be a challenge.’

She realized she was impatiently clicking her pen.

‘We are thinking of a combination of fungi. Two.

‘With minerals. Three... Silver.’

Kids shouted and laughed as their treehouse fell out of the tree with one of them in it.

‘And one acid,’ he concluded. ‘Two fungi, three minerals, silver, one acid.’

She was curious. Was he really suggesting a formula for treating Ebola? ‘Silver is one mineral?’ She knew silver as an effective antibacterial.

‘No.’

‘The fungi, are they the ones that we are using already to kill germs, to kill bacteria? Those sorts of fungi? Antibiotics?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘The disease weakens the body. The body eventually can’t fight the bacteria—that’s what the fungi are for.’

‘How do the minerals work?’

‘Blocking the connections of a disease on the tiny base of the molecules. Like a blocked pipe.’

He says molecules slowly. Perhaps it is a new word for him. I wonder what Native American concepts of quantum physics are?

The sound of a lizard moving on the roof brought her back to the moment. ‘Uhuh. Stops the disease connecting, so to say?’

‘Ya.’

‘Is the acid one which is normally eaten, like a vitamin? Or is it something to activate the other ingredients?’

‘Activate,’ he agreed. Then added, ‘Charcoal as well.’

Am I the only one that knows about this? That can’t be. ‘Are there people working on this already?’

He took his time to answer, as if he surveyed the globe. *Looking for what? An energy connected to the endeavour? Researchers' thoughts?*

'Two groups, working in one direction each,' he said. 'They should combine what they have.' Then, 'I can see a yellow colour acid.'

She saw sulphur yellow in her mind's eye and blurted, 'Sulphur? Sulphuric acid?' *Sulphur is yellow, but the acid isn't.*

'No smell. From a plant.'

'Like lemon juice?' *Vitamin C, ascorbic acid?*

'No fruit. Root. Grows in the Americas—in the big southern part.'

'Does it grow in the forest or on the plains?'

'Forest. It can be found in the bark of that plant as well. Root is stronger.'

'But it's not cinchona, for malaria? Different one, eh?' she asked.

'Different but similar.'

The neighbour's washing machine hummed and shook their house like a wire. Nerida felt it in the metal chair. It was too hot outside. The kids had gone into one of the big family houses, looking for iceblocks.

He continued, 'Acts like a poison if you use too much. It will be a challenge now—because that thing has changed—to find the balance.'

'So those victims don't get killed by this acid. But you need enough to kill the creation—the virus.'

'The other thing that kills it is fire. So, if you have the disease on other things, you need to burn it.'

Nerida visualised health workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo online, wearing hazmat suits, burning everything that belonged to an Ebola victim. She asked, 'Can it live outside the body on objects? You said it can live in the dust.'

'Yes, it can live in the water as well. High temperature and moisture, that activates it. It can sleep for a very long time. Until you get the exact factors that wake it up.'

'So, in areas where there's lots of it, they should find this medicine for the victims, mix it up for them. And burn the area. It can't survive dry heat.'

‘We tried sometimes to kill things with a breath of boiling water,’ he said.

Steam. I love expressions from his lifetimes on Earth. Experiences on Earth matter, we take them with us. We never lose who we are and what we learned.

‘It doesn’t work for this because it’s not dry,’ he mused.

‘Mmm. What about the chemicals that we splash around to kill germs and viruses? Do they help?’ she asked.

He shook the head.

‘Nothing?’ All her colleagues, cleaners, nurses and doctors, using their enormous bottles of acrid chemicals to clean and disinfect, believing lives depended on it.

Lives do depend on it. Basic hygiene is the most important force we have for good public health. She rebelled against being associated with a stance that disregarded the benefits of disinfectant and proper cleaning.

She also knew Mari, a fastidious cleaner, would hate that.

‘They help people with their thought.’ M’Hoq Toq explained. ‘They think they do something that helps. It makes them feel better. If they feel better, they might not feel weak, so they might not get it.’

Okay, so there’s a placebo effect.

‘The disease itself is not impressed by it. Just goes to sleep again for a while,’ he said.

Nerida leaned back in her chair, trying to understand the bigger picture.

She could be scholarly. At least she tried hard with books, like all doctors.

She studied channelling as best she could.

She read some of the *Seth* books, trying to understand the phenomenon when Mari learned to control her channelling in 2012.

They travelled to the US then, so that Mari could find out if she was a channel, and whether she could negotiate with the spirits. So that they would talk in English, at least.

Monica helped them then. Magnificent Monica was a non-physical being, channelled by Dawn, a sweet-natured and sharp-witted, former sports teacher. Nerida found her on the net, found that Monica, in phone consultations, knew things about her that no one else did.

She remembered the inner happiness she felt when she woke the next day, thinking, *So, we really do have past lives. We are souls. Spirits in the material world, she sang to herself.*

She had told some friends about her discovery. Most never spoke to her again. That still hurt. She felt sad that they couldn't tolerate the change in her when her worldview expanded. It made her cautious about sharing her experiences now with other doctors and scientists. Or old friends she didn't want to lose because of a difference in ideas.

In her reading that year, Nerida was impressed by how many fundamental New Age concepts came from Seth. He was a non-physical being. Perhaps he was another kind of Earth spirit, as Nerida sometimes thought of the beings Mari channelled.

Monica referred to Seth's writings. Her endorsement of another spirit's body of channelled material spurred Nerida to grapple with the books.

The idea that thoughts create reality, that consciousness precedes manifestation, that we are all immortal souls having an adventure to learn in a material world: all this was there in Seth's sometimes austere writings.

She was encouraged and inspired too, by Seth's medium, a fiery, talented poet named Jane Roberts. Her dedicated husband Robert Butts, an artist, transcribed the Seth material.

Robert used a typewriter and carbon paper, sometimes writing from notes made in shorthand, he documented and created a huge body of work.

The couple had the earnest openness of the 60s and 70s. They were not pure. They were not religious. Jane chain-smoked while she channelled Seth.

Some people came to sessions stoned or tripping. Some people came to channelling sessions to talk to and listen to Seth every week for years.

The group made experiments to try to fathom the reality and reliability of the channelled material. They brought questions from their lives and from the broader society.

Jane and Robert had a passion for each other. They had sex before she channelled, every time. *That sounds good. But exhausting,* Nerida thought.

Nerida was relieved that Mari was able to 'let go' without that. Without any ritual really, beyond fasting, quieting and grounding herself. And the spirits Mari channelled were restrained and dignified compared to Seth's loud flamboyance.

Above all, Nerida appreciated Jane and Robert for showing a way, their own personal way, to respond to and integrate this strange phenomenon of deep trance channelling into their lives.

For Mari, as for Jane, the ability to channel was an unsought gift.

Like Mari and Nerida, Robert and Jane were atheists before they began their spiritual work.

And for Nerida, Robert served as an example of a partner whose life was devoted to sharing and promulgating the channelled material. Seth's words had an effect in the world.

She learned a lot in her reading, even if she didn't agree with everything asserted there.

Nerida struggled with the concept that each soul's death was a choice. Or that people enduring injustice had chosen to do so, whether to learn or teach others. *Such human misery and so many deaths are wrong. All that needless suffering. If it's true that each soul has made their own choices, what's the point of fighting injustice?*

Monica told Nerida years ago, before she even met Mari, that she had lived over 256 lifetimes on Earth.

Nowadays, she wondered if Monica was toying with her then, telling her any random number to teach her the concept of many lives lived. *And make me feel wise. It doesn't matter.*

The point was that she'd been born in the company of other souls she knew, had lived as a child and then as a parent, as a gay and a straight person, male and female and in between.

She'd been diverse races: Aboriginal, Asian, Central American, Native American, Polynesian. Different kinds of European and African. Even Lemurian and Atlantean, names she'd barely heard and thought to be fantasy before she talked to Monica. Continents that were still unknown to her.

She lived rich lives and poor, bright and simple, successful and hopeless. She or he had been handsome and plain, able-bodied and not. He'd suicided, she'd been the murdered and the killer, they'd been the inquisitor and the victim. So many ways of being human.

The spirit that was now Nerida had been and learned from them all. *Haven't other people?*

CHAPTER 7

The Donga in the Desert

Same Day

Now, out in the desert where she worked to keep people well, Nerida asked the ancient spirit: ‘Tell me about the lives of the people who are suffering, those contracting Ebola and dying from it—what things are they learning from this experience, those souls?’

‘Surely most of us have been through plague already in other lifetimes?’

‘Some have,’ M’Hoq Toq reflected sadly. He took a breath. ‘Our people died from what you call chicken pox and the measles.’

‘That’s right. Terrible.’ He triggered memories of the mass deaths in Eora country, now called Sydney, when the British arrived. They brought smallpox and influenza. Syphilis, too. Tears suddenly pricked her eyes as if the ancient being shifted her intellect into true emotion.

Still the intellectual, she asked, ‘What does a soul learn from this kind of experience?’

There was a deep quiet.

I wish I hadn’t asked him, she thought. When he eventually replied, the words were slow and grave. She had visions of the desperation, of people enduring plague and genocide, as he spoke.

‘Nothing is for granted.’

‘Never feel safe.’

‘Observe what’s happening around you.’

‘Try to learn from what you see.’

‘Try to choose a different path that takes you somewhere else.’

‘That’s horrible,’ she said. *You can tell he’s been there. Does he mean choose a different path in a new lifetime?*

‘You can’t see everything as “souls have chosen to die there,”’ he explained. ‘They will learn that they suffer or leave this planet because of other humans’ actions.’

‘It doesn’t take a war to kill someone. Many are only in the wrong place.’

‘And most likely, it wasn’t them that created the rise in temperature and humidity that made them vulnerable.’

Nerida saw her neighbours, seventy metres away across the red earth, preparing a fire on their concrete verandah. The grandmother sat down in a camp chair with a cup of tea. Nerida recognised her height and shape. The children teased the dogs, who barked and jumped, throwing up dust in the late afternoon light.

Summer's approaching. It's getting too hot to live here in Summer now.

Nerida thought also about people on islands. She'd been to places in the Indian and Pacific oceans where people watched sea levels rising, their homes disappearing forever as the Earth warmed. As the planet tried to adapt to poisoning, to changes made by industries, and cars and cows, far away.

'It's about learning that, if you do something on one side of the planet, you will see results on another side of the planet,' he said.

'If you create something here, it can seem like nothing happens. The result will be seen in a very different place, which can be very far away, in your understanding.

'This planet is a tiny place in the universe. But you can have effects from this miniscule place happening in a different place in the universe.

'That is why this planet needs to be in a better balance, creating better energy—which is not necessarily the same thing as creating a better world for humankind. It's about the planet.'

Nerida nodded. 'If humankind doesn't learn to look after the planet more respectfully, the planet will look after itself without humankind.'

'It will. This planet needs gentler creatures living on it.'

Nerida felt a cry in her chest when he said that. 'So,' she said, 'we're engaged in an endeavour to see if humans can be those gentler creatures or not.'

Outdoors, the dogs took off, thundering across the yard, shaking the house as they passed. They ran like greyhounds around the houses. The smell of the dust seeped in through the vents. Kids ran off excited, the adults calling them back.

With a deep sigh, M'Hoq Toq explained. 'There is a new, almost like a new species, of gentler individuals emerging. There will be more and more of them.

'But you still have these (we would call them) 'classics' around. They're bad.

'They just need to learn quick and leave. So, they can recollect what they've done and come back in a different way. Or not come back at all.'

'Are you talking about a gentler kind of person coming, or are you talking about another animal, like the whales?'

‘Everything has to become gentler. Treat each other and other species with the respect that’s needed,’ M’Hoq Toq said. ‘Manmade belief systems don’t support this. They teach who is superior to someone else and who’s not. They don’t teach respect and tolerance.’

‘They need to defeat others, because they feel superior to them. This is an old problem. It has started many wars—eliminating whole groups of living beings.’

Nerida agreed. ‘The people here in the desert have a particular story. Their land was poisoned for thousands of years. Atomic bombs were detonated on it. It happened when I was a child. The people had to move away. They found this place to come and live, far away from others.’ Her fingers entwined. She rubbed her thumb against her palm.

Some of her patients were survivors of the British-Australian nuclear bombings (‘tests’) in the desert nearby in the 1950s and 60s. Everyone there knew someone, most had a family member, affected by the blasts. A couple of her patients were dying of the effects of exposure as children.

After decades of degradation and difficulty, the people chose that place and built the town in a heroic exercise of self-determination. It was remote, almost 700 kilometres from the nearest town. Nerida was used to working with other Aboriginal people in remote places. That was a reason they chose her.

‘It is a good place for them,’ M’Hoq Toq said. ‘Except there are others who want this place.’

Nerida took a moment. *Others want to take control of this land back. No matter how hard they tried to get away from the exploiters, there’s no escaping it. The invaders think this whole island belongs to them now, to use as they please. For the mining companies, the people connected to this place are just surface scrub, scree to be bulldozed. Insignificant in their measure of tonnes per vertical metre.* She felt anger and unease for the people.

‘They do have a chance to keep it. And to keep the ones away that want it. But some people in this area have to be convinced, to understand that the ones that want it have reasons unrelated to those of the original people. It’s not about caring for the place. It’s about greed.’

‘Yes. And destruction,’ she added.

‘This one always comes with the other one, no matter where and how,’ he agreed.

The donga baked in the mid-afternoon sun. The fridge revved.

‘A place of strange noise,’ he observed.

‘It’s the technology we have, I’m sorry. It’s the machine for keeping the food cold so it lasts longer.’

‘Hmm.’

‘So we don’t have to hunt every day,’ she explained, even if the hunting and gathering that she and Mari did was at the community’s single shop.

‘We didn’t hunt every day,’ he said.

‘I know. You could dry your meat,’ she said.

‘Or put it in the snow.’

How lovely it was to think of snow, now. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Much quieter!’

M’Hoq Toq made a sharp exhalation of breath. ‘I might go for now. I might need to think about medicine.’

‘Thank you. It’s been a pleasure to see you, as always.’

‘I am delighted. Glad I could talk to you. I hope I’ve been of some help. We’ll talk to you again.’

END OF EXTRACT

Thank you for your interest.

The Conscious Virus is available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble