

Ten years ago, her life couldn't have been more different. Ten years ago, she was living on the other side of the globe, in her native Amsterdam, the city she cycled through most days and knew well enough to be a guide. She knew where the best croquettes and the tastiest herrings were sold. She knew the cheapest cafes where one could sit with friends and talk for hours. She knew where the theatres, the best bookshops and libraries were. At the time, Australia couldn't have been further from her mind. A continent on the map, a country in the Southern Hemisphere, not a country she knew much about, or was interested in. Not until that early April morning in 1988.

She was standing at the window, looking at the grey cloud sagging over the city, over the sticky wet cold. Below, in the narrow street, the breeze churned the puddles between the cobblestones and the reflections of the streetlights still on. The street was waking. Opposite, two shops had thrown their doors open. People, umbrellas, walked past.

It had been a long winter and spring was late to arrive. She stood there thinking that it would be a cold rainy day again, a day of long sleeves and jumper and coat and heavy shoes.

She longed for summer. She longed for sunshine and light clothes and bare arms and trips with her friends cycling through the fields of tulips and green land, and laughter and startled birds whooshing past.

The phone rang.

'Father, are you at work already?'

'Just got here. Clara, make sure to wrap up warm, it's cold out there.'

She smiled. He's mothering me again. She was used to him worrying about her, used to his caring words, which like a warm cocoon had enveloped her ever since she could remember.

'By the way, there's been a change in my conference schedule,' he said. 'One of the moderators is in hospital and I've been asked to stand in for him. Sorry, but I'll have to leave next Monday.'

'More freedom for me,' she laughed.

'Clara, make a list with all the things you'll have to take to Dafna, so you won't have to rush back and forth like you did last time.'

'I'm not moving to Aunt Dafna's again. I'm staying put.'

'I don't like you being on your own every evening.'

'But father, I'm twenty-two years old. Twenty-two, remember? I don't need babysitting, my nomadic days are over,' she said and held her breath.

The line was silent.

'Ok,' he said at last, 'but promise me that you'll ring her every day and go for dinner every now and then.'

'I will. So have I come of age finally?' She laughed. 'How about a celebration before you go?'

'This Friday?'

'It's a date.'

My coming of age. She smiled to herself and began packing her backpack. Coat on, she picked up the umbrella and opened the door; and there it was again, the putrid smell, the smell of witches' brew to entice back the departed. She rarely got angry, but now she was furious and headed to old Mrs Jansen's door across the landing. After the third ring, the door opened and in front of her stood a young man she had never seen before. He looked at her questioningly, Mrs Jansen was out, and he was from Australia, a friend of her friend.

A tourist in shirt and pressed trousers? Well, it takes all sorts.

Could he help with whatever she wanted, which was?

Help? Her expectation of a major confrontation well and truly crushed. 'Ah, the cat, but you can't help me.'

'I like cats ...'

'This one is trouble, and your friend can't be bothered to train it.'

'She's not my friend, she's my friend's friend.'

'Whatever. The fact is,' and whether for effect or because the pent-up anger had finally found an outlet, she raised her voice, 'her cat peed in front of our door. Again.'

He looked at her confused.

'Over there, next to the pot plant.'

'I'll tell her when she ...' Just then her dog appeared, barking loudly, trying to squeeze past.

'Oh no!' Clara retreated into her doorway.

'Don't worry, he doesn't bite.'

'But he's too friendly.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Everything.'

He looked at her puzzled.

'Well, you might think that being jumped on by this dog is a privilege, being licked by his sloppy, wet, tongue is pure love. Well, its love and my revulsion don't make for good bedfellows. So, can you tell your friend, sorry your friend's friend, that she either trains this mutt to keep to himself and her stinking cat to pee and shit inside her flat or ...' *Or what?* Her mind searched for the threat of all threats. *Kill the cat? But I couldn't kill a mouse.* 'I'll complain, to the authorities,' she said near enough shouting.

He laughed. His shiny, dark eyes narrowed. 'Come in, I'll make you a cup of coffee and we can talk about it.'

She had nothing more to say about the dog, or about the neighbour, but the idea of delaying the library seemed very attractive.

'I have a better idea, I've been inside that flat. Once! Let's go to the cafe around the corner. It's a mutt free place.'

The introductions over, Peter locked the door and they started out towards the cafe.

'Where were you heading before the cat peed on your plans?' he chuckled.

'To the university library.'

'You're a student?'

'Majoring in English and French. My last year. After that, no more essays and exams. None for the rest of my life,' and she had to stop herself doing a celebratory pirouette. She did have ballet lessons when she was young.

As they were sipping the coffee, he told her that he was doing a Ph.D. in Physics.

Ph.D. in Physics? Wow, he must be clever, she thought, looking at the wisps of hair on his hand.

'It's not going well.'

'What's not going well?' she asked.

He looked at her, confused. 'My Ph.D.'

'Oh.'

'I took a month off to cool my brain, move my thoughts away from the same old track. Immerse myself in art and history. There's so much to see here.' He hoped that while he was tripping around, his subconscious would keep churning on his research and when he returned to it, he would see the problem from a new angle. 'New angle, new ideas. At least I hope so.' His eyes on a couple of photographs hanging on the walls.

'Do you like them?' she asked.

'They're very atmospheric.'

She knew it, black and white photographs, of lives long past, would be just the thing for a man dressed like his accountant grandfather. Still, he's definitely handsome.

They talked about Australia, they talked about his week in Paris, the five days he spent in Italy. He was especially impressed by the historic Bologna University library.

University library? 'Oh my God, my friend is waiting!' She picked up her backpack, 'I have to run.'

Nicole had been waiting in the student's cafe for nearly an hour and she was keen to get on with the essay. They discussed the structure, the main points to cover, and then the topic shifted from poetry to love and whatever else crossed their minds. Eventually they had no choice but to retire to the library and work on the essay.

Late afternoon, the next day, Clara was polishing the essay when the doorbell rang. It was Peter Steinberg.

'Would you like to go for a walk?'

'Uhm.'

'Come on.'

'Just give me an hour to finish my essay. You know what? I'll rush it through. Come back in forty-five minutes.'

That evening they walked around the canals and they walked around the cobbled streets. She showed him old buildings, churches, and bridges.

The following days they visited museums and art galleries. Peter knew a great deal about art, but then he seemed to know a great deal about everything. A twin of the encyclopedia, she thought.

'Clara, we've seen art, we've seen history, how about we visit the science museum now,' he said one afternoon.

'Science museum? No way. Science is behind me, thank Heavens.'

'Just one hour. Please.'

'An hour for you will feel a lifetime for me.'

'Don't exaggerate.'

'Peter, my father wanted me to become a scientist. I wasn't greatly attracted by it, but I took his advice and enrolled in a science course. It took me six months of university to realise that I don't care much about the ultimate truth. The relative truth, perceptions, are much more interesting to me. What motivates people, how happiness magnifies beauty, while misery diminishes it. Nowadays I live in the world of the arts and literature and I'm not straying. And poetry, all poetry. As far away from science as possible.'

'C'mon, you'll enjoy it. I promise.'

Instruments, machinery, facts, were not for her. She was a dreamer, her mind comfortable only in the domain of the unmeasurable and unclassifiable. In the fog of beauty, of literature, of intense feelings.

'You know what?' He interrupted her thoughts, 'let's go stargazing instead. We'll have dinner then go to the observatory.'

Darkness had descended on Amsterdam by the time they looked through the telescope.

'Wow!' She cried. 'The sky's studded with stars. Millions of them.'

'Far, far more than millions. Their number is unending. Infinite. Some are dead now, extinguished. What you see is the light they emitted when they were still alive.'

'So, some of these lights are the footprints of the past?'

'Of billions of years ago, isn't that sheer poetry?'

She did not reply, her forehead creased from trying to understand what he just said.

'Maybe the past never vanishes, maybe it never leaves us,' she said pensively.

By the time they left, the streetlights glimmered, their reflections playing on the Amstel River like tiny fires. The church spires pierced the shadow of the sky. That night Amsterdam looked to her a fairy land, people walking past more alive, more beautiful than ever.

A few days later she showed Peter the university and introduced him to Nicole.

‘Where did you find him?’ Nicole asked later, Clara told her the story.

‘I like cats, but I never knew that cat pee could bring you luck.’

‘Luck?’ She shrugged. ‘He’s too square, besides he’s leaving in a couple of days.’

Not long after Peter left, a letter arrived thanking her for all the sightseeing. More letters followed. Her answers were short, she was busy finishing her degree, and afterwards? She had no idea, but she was not ready to bury herself in a job. She needed a holiday, a long holiday. Amsterdam felt claustrophobic. Maybe it was the sameness of her days, maybe she was bored by her all too familiar surroundings. The grey old buildings looked at her, heavy and tired. She yearned to breathe a different air, see a different sky, absorb the colours of a different world. She had to spread her wings and fly. Peter kept inviting her to Australia. *Australia? Too far. Then where, another European country?* She had tripped around a few, the others she could visit on a short holiday, even on a weekend. Peter wrote to her about the places he would take her, about the miles-long beaches, the rainforests, the snakes and the crocodiles. *Steady on Peter, steady on. I do need a change, but I’m not wild obsessed.* But the sunshine, the beaches and rainforests sounded like Heaven and six weeks after finishing her degree she took off to Australia.

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Two days later she was looking through the taxi window greedily, staring at the Southern Hemisphere. The sky a brilliant blue, the sunshine reflections of diamonds, and in front of her the promise of a real holiday. The taxi was flying past houses and mowed strips of grass. Not a soul on the street. Is this Sydney? she wondered.

Peter squeezed her hand, ‘We’re going to have a great time together.’

Australia. No tired old buildings, none of the narrow streets of Europe, no history weighing down its people Clara thought as she

strolled around Sydney, the next day. The multi-storey buildings, their age measured in decades not centuries, looked uninspiring, but the mere contrast to her home city was so refreshing.

The following Sunday, she and Peter, hands interlinked, walked around Sydney Harbour, past the wharves where ferries took off, past restaurants and cafes. In the distance, yachts sailed drowsily, as a hydrofoil sped past. The Opera House looked on; the sails of its roof flooded with a sunny glare.

‘Clara look, look how architecture and nature amplify each other’s magnificence. And the result?’

‘Is heavenly. And those speckles dancing on the water ...’

‘Maybe they’re celebrating, celebrating beauty and the joy it brings. As Keats said, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”’

She looked at him, *Peter, poetry and beauty. I never would’ve guessed.*

It was past two o’clock by the time they got back to Peter’s mother, Eszti, a small woman, quick and opinionated. Cute in a way, Clara thought. Lunch was waiting, the kitchen table set. It was not the sort of kitchen she had at home, but huge; the floor covered by worn vinyl, the room lit by a fluorescent ghostly light. But as they ate and talked and argued about the state of the world, Eszti forever coming and going, serving and contradicting, while Peter, sometimes serious, other times with a smile, winked at Clara as he teased his mother. And Clara could hardly keep a straight face.

The days rolled on; Peter saw to it that each was a new experience. A trip, a visit, a different beach, a concert.

Ever since she arrived the sun had never stopped shining, but one day the weather turned. A strong easterly blew grey clouds towards the land. By evening the rain began to fall. It was Saturday and they were due at Peter’s friends for dinner.

Ed, Peter’s best friend, was a man of few words and long pauses who took time to venture an opinion. A man older than his age, Clara thought at their first encounter. Toni, his wife, a tall, thin blonde with the boundless enthusiasm of an adolescent, was a refreshing contrast at first, but at times her relentless enthusiasm would grate on Clara like a never-ending high-pitched operatic voice. Theirs was a perfect marriage, he set the rules and she obeyed them. Not a submissive woman, just an indulgent, accepting one.

That night the wine must have untied his tongue because Ed was unrecognisable. He talked and talked. He was telling her what it was like to be the sons of migrants in Australia, in the early seventies.

'We were different from the other boys, and being different was a sin.'

'Different in what way?' Clara asked.

'Well to start with, there was the serious issue of our strange sandwiches.'

'Strange sandwiches?'

'Yes. As they unwrapped their neatly packed white bread slices held together by a thin layer of peanut butter or vegemite, we unwrapped our slices of brown bread, no two the same thickness, loaded with salami and pickled cucumber. You should've seen the disgust on their faces ...'

'The pickled cucumber wasn't our only problem,' Peter said, 'Most boys lived for cricket and rugby. We tried to play cricket, tried very hard, we were hopeless. And rugby ...?' he shrugged. 'We had as much interest in it as a tree in a dog. So, we were not friendship material. Lucky us, as it turned out.'

'Lucky?' Clara asked.

'Yes. Since we didn't agree with them on most things, we had to think for ourselves, form our own opinions.'

'Clara, we got ourselves two strange boys,' Toni said with a conspiratorial smile.

'Strange?' Peter pondered aloud. 'I guess difference can look strange to some people,' and after a pause, 'Was my mother strange? Because in the seventies no one would have stood out more than my mum. You should have heard her stories every time she came back from a parent and teachers' night. I cringed ...'

'Go on,' Toni said.

'Don't think I can. Don't like laughing at my mum.' He winked, his face one mischievous smile. 'Except privately.' But then he turned serious. 'She's been through a lot.'

'Tell us, we won't tell anybody,' Toni said. 'Would we, Clara?'

'Of course not.'

'OK. Some of it she told us, some of it I pieced together. It went like this: My mother, not an inhibited soul as you well know, would always ask a question. "I beg your pardon?" the teacher would say and

my mother would repeat the question louder, her accent even heavier. To which the teacher would say, "Sorry Mrs Steinberg, I didn't quite get what you're saying," at which my exasperated mum would repeat the question again. As I listened to her 'w's replaced by 'v's, and 'th's' by 'd's, I could see my teacher's face crumpled from concentration. I wanted to vanish from this world. "These teachers can't even comprehend a simple question," Peter said in a heavy Hungarian accent, then turning towards the corner whispered, "Sorry, mum. No-one'll tell anybody about it."

Laughter.

'But she wasn't going to worry about anything, because to quote the teacher, "Peter's doing well." She said this again and again.'

'Doing well?' Ed asked in astonishment. 'You were not, "doing well," you were doing brilliantly.'

'Anyway, that's what the teacher said, and my mother would declare that she'd save herself the time and not go to the next meeting. I felt sick with embarrassment. My mother's accent was close to impenetrable. I never told her; I didn't want to hurt her.'

'Peter, you're exaggerating,' Clara said, 'I understand her perfectly well. And you know what? Her English is excellent.'

'It is now, don't forget it's fifteen years since then. And her accent's reasonable, but when she's flustered, or dealing with authorities ... But back to me and Ed, it wasn't easy to be the son of migrants, but talking to Ed about it lightened the weight.'

'On both of us,' said Ed. 'We didn't understand our parents. When they told us about their life in Europe, they talked about so much misery and yet there was a longing in their voices. It seemed to us that the youth of our parents had been so much worse and so much better than our own. Now I have some insights why, but at the time ...?'

Ed filled their glasses. 'To our friendship,' he toasted and through his heavy lenses his smiling blue eyes diminished to a slit.

'Look at him,' Toni said. 'He looks like a big happy boy.'

Ed objected to being called a boy, and Toni laughed and so did Peter and turning to Clara he looked at her with eyes teary from laughter, or love, she could not work it out. Meanwhile the champagne kept flowing. 'Just one more,' Ed replied to their objections and poured each one a glass. Then another.

'Once we started university, cricket and rugby took the backstage. Science took the foreground. Finally, we were among like-minded people.' Ed paused in contemplation. 'Those were good times. When you're eighteen nothing seems impossible. Deciphering nature, glimpsing the universe was all within our reach. Wasn't it, Peter?'

'It was. But I didn't know how enormously difficult it is to advance the boundaries of human knowledge. I've spent nearly two years on my PhD and what have I got to show for it? Nothing. Maybe it's time for me to pack it in, get a real job.'

'Don't you even think about it. Sometimes it takes many years to get results.'

'Ed, university research is not for me.'

Ed stared at him in incomprehension. 'I find that hard to believe. No, not hard. Impossible.'

The conversation shifted to the next weekend. Should they stay in Sydney and go to a concert, or go away for a day?

'Let's see what the weather'll be like,' said Ed.

On the way to the car Clara wondered whether Peter would give up on his PhD. She understood why he might. She couldn't imagine working for years without a result, without accomplishing something. But Ed didn't think he should, was he right? And the way he looked at Peter ...

She had met Ed twice before, he was so serious, so grave, he would intimidate her into near paralysis. He tried to make her welcome, chat to her. Nothing interesting, nothing to nourish her mind, just trifles. He couldn't keep it up, but he went on trying. Their chat more and more embarrassing, made her shrink into herself. But tonight, she saw another side of Ed. Tonight she saw that he can be good company.

'Penny for your thoughts,' Peter said.

'I didn't realise how close you and Ed are.'

'We're like brothers.'

'More like twins. Identical background, same interests, at times you even complete each other's sentences.'

'Careful, we're not interchangeable.'

'Non-identical twins, silly.'

'That's better.'

Late afternoon, next day, it was raining again. Coming out from the movies, her hand in his, they huddled up under an umbrella and walked

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back to the car. They walked in perfect step; their bodies close to each other as if it had been one. And she knew that with Peter next to her she would never, ever be alone.

* * *

Her holiday was coming to an end. It had been a dream, but the time to wake up, the time to say goodbye to Peter, to Eszti, to Australia, was approaching fast. She would soon be back in Amsterdam, back with her father and her friends. But what about Peter?

‘What is love?’ she remembered Nicole asking in one of those aimless, meandering conversations they used to have.

‘Love?’ She had not been in love with Hans, the young man she spent a few months with, neither had she been in love with Jan, Hans’s exact opposite. They were like a few weeks of sunshine after months of rain. But then the rain set in again.

Who would have thought that in Sydney, so far away from her father and her homeland, she would find out what love is? When Peter kissed her, the world seemed filled with goodwill, the birdsong even more enchanting, and when they made love their bodies melted into each other’s, lost in the ecstasy and the contentment of one being. And she knew that if he left her, she would grieve for years. But how could she leave her father on the other side of the world? How could she leave Nicole and her other friends? But she couldn’t leave Peter either. ‘What should I do? I can’t go back to live in Amsterdam any more than a baby can go back into its mother’s womb.’ But she had to, her visa was about to expire.

So, she returned to Amsterdam. To Amsterdam and its winter, got herself a Dutch–English translator’s job in a publishing company and tried to settle down to her old life. But Peter’s weekly letters unsettled her and a missed letter unsettled her even more.

Spring arrived. The renewal it used to bring fell flat on Clara. And then at the end of May her father departed to a conference just as Nicole and her boyfriend were in Norway. Clara felt as if she had been suspended in the middle of nowhere and abandoned. Abandoned, and ashamed of her thirst for company. She was an extrovert. Loneliness, solitude, made her restless and sad, and that Sunday she felt lonelier than ever. She walked

into her father's study, looking for something to read, when she spotted a small globe on the shelf. She could not remember seeing it before. Absentmindedly, she spun it around. And there was Australia and midway in the south was Sydney. She stood there lost in memories. Of sunshine, of togetherness. Of love.

Somewhere a door slammed. The image vanished. *No, I'm not with Peter. I'm thousands of miles away. Thousands!* To her that was not just a number. She had travelled that distance. She had flown over oceans and continents; she had felt the suffocatingly slow passage of time. Sydney forever hiding. Distant, unreachable.

I'm in love with Peter. So why am I still here? Why am I a world away from him?

Two days later her father was back. Next morning, when Clara walked into the kitchen, he was sitting in his dressing gown, busily writing.

'How's the paper going?' she asked and began setting the table.

'It's coming along. It's only in the conceptual phase. Plenty of time, it isn't due for six weeks.

'It's my last for this year,' he added, 'No more papers, no conferences. I'll be staying put.'

'Practicing being a lounge lizard?'

'Why not?' he smiled, not his usual smile, but a thinking, pondering smile.

There was a thick silence. A silence viscous with words, which neither had the courage to utter.

'Clara, what have you decided?' David asked finally.

'Father, I've agonised for months. I don't want to do it, but I have to. I have to emigrate. I miss Peter. Painfully.'

He kept looking into his cup, as a fortune teller looks at coffee grounds.

'I'm very, very sorry,' she added.

He didn't reply. Slowly, he spread the marmalade on his toast then as if he had finally found the words which evaded him, he looked at her.

'My dear daughter, it's the way of the world for the young to adventure away and the old to be left behind, but I wouldn't be doing my duty as a father if I didn't warn you that emigration is a huge step. You might be bewitched by the novelty of Sydney, by Australia, but eventually you will miss your country, your language, your friends. You will even miss me.'

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'No, Father! You're the one I will miss most.'

Silence returned to the table; a silence thick with sorrow. She too was sad, sad but relieved. She had told him, she had cleared the air, and she would emigrate.

'I can only say that if you love Peter as I loved your mother, you should go. Apply for a visa and go.'

She knew that his heart wept. But so did hers.

She told herself off. 'You've agonised enough. Can't you see that you've outgrown your old life? You have to do it; you have to emigrate.' And it surprised her how cold and detached she suddenly felt. As if a curtain of ice had dropped between her and her father. That curtain would not melt for months.

A year passed and the much-awaited visa finally arrived and so on a cloudy September day, David loaded her suitcases into the boot of the car. They picked up Aunt Dafna and headed to the airport. The memories of that day stayed with her, the images vivid as if she was still at the airport, standing in front of the departure board, checking for the Bangkok flight, the parting, Dafna crying, her father's tired face and then the flash of an encouraging smile as she crossed into the no return area. Into her future.

Did she cry? If she did, it wouldn't have been for long. Peter was waiting for her on the other side of the world.