

Chapter 1

“Choices, chances, changes,” she said softly, smiling to herself as she lifted her case, her eyes and her spirit. She was finally here and as she walked away from the glaring tracks she had to laugh at the irony of fleeing now, a futile dash to freedom that could only mean death.

The old house claimed its form from the shimmering heat as she approached, the rusty red iron roof closely mimicking the red sand surrounding it. The shady verandah was a vision of cool respite. From this distance it could still be a home: safe and solid, but each step closer revealed the ravages of time, wind and sand. A passing wave of despair at the futility of those lives lived and gone tugged at her, yet there was the palm; dates ripe, rich and sticky, the one thriving sentinel to the hopes and dreams of her grandparents' lives.

She stopped amidst a swirl of fine bulldust and felt it settle between the gaps of her sandals. After all, what was the hurry?

To her left was a baked clay brick mound rising out of the otherwise dead flat surface: the entrance to the old well, guardian of life's most precious resource. She'd been assured of plentiful sweet, clear water when she'd asked; the one thing she could not carry. She dragged back the rocks holding down the ancient iron cover and lifted the lid. Cool darkness - musty and sweet - rushed to fill her senses and she marvelled again, as she had as a child at the miracle of wells so deep and unexpected in such arid land.

She felt around the rim till her fingers came upon the hook that held the handle of the old bucket. She lifted it out into the glaring sun with a wry smile as the rusted, holey bucket was revealed. There's a hole in the bucket dear Liza, dear Liza, came to mind as she rever-

ently put it down and reached for her backpack. “Well, I’ll fix it dear Henry,” she responded aloud as she unpacked a shiny, new, stainless steel Chinese version and attached a length of sturdy rope. She lowered the bucket down, down, down; slowly, ceremoniously, strangely aware of repeating an ancestral life ritual.

She grabbed the brimming bucket, lifted it high in salute towards the sun and poured it back over herself, squirming beneath the chilling flow, diluting the doubts and fears of this undertaking. Laughter, loud and unrestrained, burst from her as she spun about in pure delight, spraying waves of droplets onto the parched ground. Oh how she’d dreamed of this place, this space. Coming home to herself. Back down the line.

She staggered wildly, carelessly, back to the well, bubbling with spontaneous mirth. She sat on the sand-worn edge, arms still rippling with uncontained energy, hands caressing the warm and sensuous surface beneath her, sandalled toes creating cascades of flowing red sand.

Looking up she was caught by the view down the road: as if to nowhere, a scene engraved deep in her memory and unchanged through the forty years of her life. She wondered, are there really places where time stands still, while all about chaos reigns?

A parched, wild land with beauty and strength beyond measure. If she could become as unlimited, as if one with this land, she would be immense. A desire to just melt then and there, to flow out across this unending stillness, filled her. She took a long breath and sighed deeply. And again. And again. Long moments of grace.

The hot sun broke through her reverie. She drew another bucket of water and took a few tentative steps towards the house; drawn by the shade, haunted by the past. The pristine patterns of the winds in the fine layer of sand on the worn planks of the stairs compelled her to remove her sandals, to place a bare foot clearly and precisely onto

each and every step, fascinated by the powerful statement of personal claim in such a simple act.

‘Blinded by the light’ resounded in her mind as her eyes were released from the glare. Momentarily sightless in the shadows her vision was abruptly filled with the dark, cavernous, pain-filled orbs of her grandmother’s eyes. Eyes that had drawn her in and swamped her so long ago in a farewell agony that she – as a child – had been unable to comprehend. Her chest was clenched in a tight fist of memory.

Her vision cleared, revealing the doorway that had framed the old woman a lifetime ago. The door hung askew, a fragile protector of the inner stories. She sat heavily on the top step and leant back on the old railing post heart racing, glad of the hard, sharp surfaces that cut into her flesh with present and immediate pain.

“Enter ye at your own risk,” she muttered, even as a surge of determination overlapped the confusion of the past. It’s happening alright, this is why I came, she thought. I am all of this – and none of it. She drew up her knees and hugged herself closely in warm reassurance.

She’d forgotten the flies. Black, sticky hordes, ever-present, creeping and crawling over her skin in relentless pursuit of vulnerable openings and moisture. Like thoughts themselves, she supposed, buzzing round and around your head, waiting on any chance to feed and multiply. And just like ever-circling thoughts, enough to send you mad. So much to remember. She lifted her head and brushed the flies from her eyes. She must pace herself so as not to be overwhelmed by the process.

Moving her body into a more comfortable position she returned her gaze to the doorway, willing forth the image she had carried all those years of a grandma glowing with warmth and wisdom. The child remembers a cheek against her own, deeply lined, incredibly soft, tender and unconditional.

Remembering that memory is the multiplicity of perception; confusing and conflicting feelings. A child's guilt, a mother's grief, then *her* mother's grief, and even *her* mother's. How far back do we go? Choices that they, her family, had made with what they had then known and understood. Her own choice with this quest was release from the dark shadow of the past; that illusive hovering spectre born of a heritage laden with secrets and half-truths, untold, half told. Like stepping through quicksand, she had never been certain that she would not drown in its revealing, or that she would be better for the knowing. Till now.

Oh, to fully perceive the fear-filled beliefs with which she'd been raised, and step free! "Not asking for much am I?" she put to the silent house, her cheeky grin of anticipation vapourising the serious note. No more struggle. Her choice.

"Moment by moment" she intoned, and celebrated with a sumptuous swig of pure desert nectar.

She rested her head back on the railing as her gaze slowly meandered across the verandah, this time allowing lingering tastes of remembering. Peeling, blistered paint was everywhere as the aged, grey wood rejected the man-made cover, shedding the toxic camouflage. In a last gasp of recognition the wild, irrepressible nature of the timber could not be constrained.

Screens that had once provided a haven of fly-free outdoor living hung in tattered strips. She wondered which wildlife had contributed to their demise, or had the windswept sandblasting of the years been enough to consume the thin metal? Yet wind seemed a somewhat foreign element on this still afternoon.

Cane furniture, extraordinarily enduring, was the other remaining feature. The chair, stiff and high-backed, had been her grandfather's evening possie. She could only remember him at home in this chair, gruff and self-contained, his gnarled, tough hands creating endless

smokes from his leather pouch of makings. It was harsh rough-cut tobacco and a drift of the raw dusty smell of him filled her senses. Sometimes during the day when he was away she'd sat in the chair, never comfortable, always holding a fine line between persistence and pain. These chairs were never made for children's backsides. She had marvelled at how tough he must be as he sat there hour by hour. The cane ties were splitting now. It may not even take her weight.

And there, her grandmother's seat, the cane chaise-lounge. Funny that when she thought of the old man it made her sit up straight and self-protective. Yet when she turned to her grandma's couch her body almost melted towards it. She remembered curling up at its base, especially when he was away, and being transported by her grandma's stories and dreams that it seemed no one else heard. Hidden dreams of a lifelong passion for dance. Visions shared of paintings never brought to the tip of her grandma's brush. Stories that resonated with a yearning for a life joined with the company of those driven by an irrepressible lust to explore outer expression of inner worlds. All spiced with a desire for a breadth of life that surged with such deep longing through her own pounding veins. Yes, this woman was her blood, her line; a past echo of that which had called her here now.

Perhaps her courting grandfather had been charmed by his young woman's passionate and vivid vision. Yet, in the child's time, it had felt like a secret sharing, a special gift just for her. She could remember a sense of urgency, a need to be known that had crept round the edges of her grandmother's telling. Maybe he had never truly heard, or maybe he had just stopped listening. And she knew then, with that same pulsing intensity, that she did not wish to be remembered for the unfulfilled longing of her life-stories; to be consoled for the emptiness of her choices.

Even the glimpses her mother had seen would have become tainted in emotional entanglement. And didn't she know all about that. Her mother's death and the subsequent loss of any chance of further