

*Merino*, a work-in-progress by [Merrill Findlay](#)

Six draft chapters as published in *Eucalypt* No. 2, Australian Studies Centre, Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya, 1<sup>st</sup> Universitat de Barcelona, Catalonia, 2002.



## **MERINO: A work-in-progress**

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## **I**

Bo's in her studio. It's morning and the long, dull boom of a fog horn is signalling the approach of another ship. A towering hulk nudges the sill of her far window and begins its slow passage across her view, the rusty bow and 'midship stacked with brightly coloured containers, followed by the lazy stern. The vessel fills her nineteenth-century window frames one by one, and slowly disappears, but the traces of its passing, the oily ripples and opalescing bow-waves, linger in the estuary, this City of Melbourne's port.

She returns her gaze to the 35 millimetre frames on her desk, five per strip, seven strips per contact sheet, then moves her magnifying glass across a ghostly image of human bones eroding from a Pleistocene dune. Lake Mungo, one of Australia's most sacred sites. She shakes her head. Nah, can't use that one, she says to herself, or not without asking the mobs who claim descent, but the simplicity of it, the everlastingness, like I can still hear the rustle of the dry summer grasses, the galahs screeching as they circle overhead, and that woman whose remains are being exposed grain by sandy grain, I can almost hear her sighing, whispering across the

millennia, all those generations of living between her time and mine, as if her very breath is fixed forever in these silver halide crystals.

Outside the black swans are grazing on the mudflats and an elderly pelican is preening herself on the bow of one of the moored yachts, lifting her wing to comb the feathers underneath with her pink and orange bill. A couple of tugs are chugging past an assemblage of hazardous chemical tanks towards their next container ship, and there's her own little boat, the Petrel, bobbing on the wash, rocking and gently rolling on its chain near Parson's marina across the road. You can just see it from the end window, an historic twenty-six foot half-decked traditional-rigged low slung wooden job designed for catching barracouta, those long vicious oily Bass Strait fighting fish which sustained the local fishing industry for years after the protected waters of Port Phillip Bay had been depleted of more pacific species.

The Petrel was a twenty-first birthday present from her paternal grandparents more than half her life ago, a consequence of all those long summers spent with them in their holiday house at Port Fairy on Australia's southern edge where her parents now live, the same old bluestone house on the River Moyne. That's where Bo learned to sail, although never well enough to navigate the Petrel through the Rip at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay to its present mooring. Instead, she towed it hundreds of kilometres by road behind her brother's farm ute, with a couple of red rags tied to the stern. Annie and Viv provided the champagne for the ceremonial re-launch and even brought their lines and bait for the inaugural fishing trip they'd planned for that evening, but, after the first bottle of champers they very wisely decided it would be safer to buy fish and chips from Elg's pier down the road and admire the 'couta boat from Bo's front veranda. With another bottle or two of champagne.

The tide was turning and it was late winter. The old magnolia tree in the front yard was beginning to bud and feral jonquils were competing with the weeds in what had once been a formal English garden, a perfect setting 150 years ago for an English gentleman's house with a quintessentially English address, No 24 The Strand in what was then a small colonial settlement named for an English king. William's Town. Willy for short.

No. 24 seems to have had an abundance of Williams in its past, like the lawyer William Probert who purchased the block as a green field site, removed all the pre-colonial vegetation and commissioned Williamstown's first surveyor, another William, to design an appropriately gentlemanly residence. The year was 1857 and The Strand was little more than a bush track along the estuary's foreshore then, but this was a time of great colonial optimism, for here we shall build, no, not a village, but a great and prosperous city, the founding fathers had said.

Probert called his new house Abberton, an appropriately colonial name, and sold it a few years later to his business partner, George Verdon, who became a politician, and later the colony of Victoria's first Agent-General in London. Verdon died in 1896 at the Melbourne Club, the semi-permanent resting place for Victoria's richest and most powerful men, and was buried, not in Willy's cemetery, but on the other side of the river in the much more fashionable cemetery of Kew. By then, of course, he was known as Sir George. Apparently he was a good mate of one of Bo's great-grandfathers, who was also a member of the Melbourne Club, as were many nineteenth century graziers from the colony's Western District.

Sometime around the turn of the century, the nineteenth to the twentieth, No 24 The Strand was re-named Mandalay, after the city King Mindon founded near the confluence of Burma's two great rivers, the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin, at what his royal astrologers had told him was the very centre of

the universe. By some extraordinary celestial convergence the new Burmese capital was established in exactly the same year that William Probert built Bo's house another world away.

'You think whoever re-named it knew?' Annie said.

'Must've', Bo told her. 'I mean, it'd be too much of a coincidence otherwise, don't you think? Whoever changed the name probably ran guns up the Irrawaddy or something, probably had a girl there, you know, all that Road to Mandalay and Burmese Days stuff. Or maybe he was some English jungle wallah getting rich on Burmese teak. Might've even known Kipling and young Orwell. There must've been some reason for the name change.'

They were sitting on Mandalay's front verandah, Bo, Annie and Viv, after towing the Petrel from Port Fairy to its new mooring across the road. Their second bottle of champagne was almost empty and the fish and chips from Elg's pier had long since disappeared.

'There's this paddock of little white pagodas there,' Bo said. 'In Mandalay in Burma, I mean. Hundreds of them around this huge stupa, like freshly shorn sheep, and each one containing a pure white marble tablet inscribed with verses from the Tripitaka. All those ancient Pali words about peace and compassion in one of the most violent countries on Earth, which has never quite made sense to me ...'

Viv winked at Annie. 'So here's to Aung San Suu Kyi, and all the oppressed peoples of the world, and my mob too,' she said, and clinked her glass against Bo's. Both women knew too well what champagne could do for Bo's endemic melancholy about the state of the world if they didn't lighten her up a bit.

Bo shifts her gaze from the tiny black and white frames of her contact sheets to the Yarra River again. That Viv, she's so good at distracting me with her ironics! All the oppressed peoples of the world, and her mob too! Oh Mea Culpa! And she's right, I do need to lighten up sometimes, but that's not why I think of her every time a ship goes by. It's what else she said on the verandah that day: like 'Have you ever watched them from the lighthouse at Point Lonsdale, Sis, those tankers and cargo boats? The entrance to the bay's so tight and narrow there, and the ships entering from Bass Strait, they're so big and long and ...'

'You mean Port Phillip Bay's this country's ...'

'Yeah,' Viv had said. 'That Olde English c-word. And those first imperial sailing ships, I mean the Rip had never been penetrated before, and now the whole country's well and truly fucked.'

Bo chuckles to herself. That Viv! But there's another ship and I still haven't decided what to print for this show, and anyway I'm too young for a Retrospective. You're meant to be old for one of those, and I'm still nervous about getting middle-aged. What's more, I don't have a theme yet, like I told Francis last night at the gallery, but she said a theme would emerge in time, something that made sense of what I'd been trying to say all these years, although I'm still not convinced. And hand-printed black and white seems so dated now, with everyone else doing full-colour digital. But I should've had my cameras last night, that drink in that alley off Little Collins, those Spanish guitars and Moroccan drums. Not quite i triana barrio in Sevilla, and certainly not Santiago doing cante hondo on the Rio Guadalquivar, but the closest I've been to Spain for years, and the memories ... Although it was the two Argentinians who made me need my cameras. That Latin Valentino, he gave me goose bumps! Tight jeans, checked shirt, pony tail and pointy lizard-skin shoes, and she, dark-haired and

very slim in a red halter-neck and black pants that looked like they'd been sprayed across her arse. Street tango straight from Buenos Aires, each step so precise, each gesture so controlled but so searingly, so spontaneously sexy. The flamenco beat, the heat, the sweat, she hooks her leg between his thighs, leans back, he holds her, releases her, turns, spins and catches her again, then lets her go to rip his shirt off and throw it onto a chair, a dark hairy chest beneath his white singlet. And, across his shoulders ...

He shouldn't have done that though. Spoils the look completely, the waiter had complained like he was the Melbourne style-police. Francis agreed, and immediately lost interest in the Valentino, but what's wrong with having a great big tattooed tiger roaring down your arm? Mightn't be ballroom tango, mightn't even be true Art, but what I do isn't Art either, as I kept telling Francis last night. I just photograph what I see the way I see it, and I've never had any pretensions ...

She glances at the only image she allows on her studio wall, a pre-photographic print her most eccentric late great-aunt gave her all those years ago, and Bo's reason for becoming a documentary photographer. Yo lo vi, the text beneath the etching reads. This I saw. A print from Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra* series. One person's agonised response to another invasion two hundred years ago: Napoleon's army despoiling Spain. But Goya didn't have a camera then either. He scratched what he saw into plates of varnished copper with nothing but an etching needle, burned the plate with acid and smeared ink into the open wounds. Like that street-dancer with his tiger tat ...

### III

Annie found the house first, No. 24 The Strand, also known as Mandalay. She'd been doing some fieldwork on her beloved orchids, those fragile, endangered and very sexy grassland natives of Victoria's basalt plain, like the virtually extinct Small Golden Moths Orchid last seen on an industrial site in North Altona, a petrochemical suburb in Melbourne's West. She passed the house every time she took her old Harley along the coast road to her study sites. When a For Sale sign appeared on the front fence she notified Bo immediately.

'You've got to see it,' she said. 'It looks perfect for you. There's even a jetty across the road for the Petrel, and it's so run-down it'll probably go for a song.'

Bo knew it was right the first time she saw it. She parked on the foreshore and gazed up at the first floor windows.

'That's where I'll have my studio,' she said.

She could already see herself watching the ships passing by, and at night, gazing across the river to the flickering lights of Melbourne's central business district. But, according to anyone who claimed to know anything about buying real estate, Mandalay was the very last house she should even consider.

'You'd be squandering your inheritance buying a dump like that,' her mother had insisted. 'Your poor old Gran didn't leave you that money so you could throw it away! And look at the garden! Not a thing done to it for years.'

The consultant Bo hired to take a closer look was only marginally less damning. He reported on all the cracks in the load-bearing walls, the dangerous wiring, the leaking roof, the floor that needed re-stumping, the

chimneys that needed sweeping and all the house's other faults, but by then the cracks, creaks and leaks, the undulating floorboards and the blocked chimneys were irrelevant, because Bo had made up her mind. And to her, the fact that the property looked almost derelict was one of its most attractive features. So the only thing left to do was make an offer.

It was the wildness of the garden that did it, she decided later. Some secret resonance that made her feel immediately at home. She couldn't understand it at first, but one evening while she was sitting alone on the front verandah after a day spent stripping pale pink and white embossed wallpaper from the downstairs walls and rolling back dull grey carpet to expose the original and very dusty Oregon floor boards, she remembered ... that heavy jonquil fragrance on the breeze. The seagulls, the lapping of the water, the moist chill in the air. No, it wasn't the carefully manicured rural expanse of lawn she'd played on as a child, nor the neatly horticultured European bulbs, roses, geraniums and other exotics that competed with the few eucalypts left around the homestead. No, not the old family garden which had been so assiduously sprayed, weeded, fertilised, raked, mulched and pruned over the last few generations that not even a grand old remnant eucalypt would dare to reproduce without permission. On the rare occasion a native seedling did poke its head through the rich volcanic soil it had been weeded out, or replanted to somewhere 'more aesthetic', because, according to Bo's mother, nature simply couldn't be trusted to get the vistas right. So no, it wasn't the garden on the family farm near Hamilton that Mandalay's feral jonquils reminded her of, but the other garden of her childhood, Griffiths Island at Port Fairy. Bo's own secret sanctuary where the lighthouse keeper's cottage used to be.

The old stone cottage had been removed long before Bo claimed the site as a ten or eleven year old, but the jonquils, geraniums and irises were still there, thick and entangled with over a century's untended growth. Who planted them, those very European flowers? she'd always wondered, and what nostalgic idylls of a country garden had that first gardener clung to, the lonely wife of the lighthouse keeper perhaps, as she dug into the soft sandy soil that was already littered with the bones of slaughtered whales and riddled with the burrows of mutton birds, those dun-coloured short-tailed shearwaters which arrive each year while the irises are in bloom and leave when the jonquils bud. The adult birds mate, nest and half-rear their young in this rookery, then abandon their chicks which have to fledge and find their way to the Arctic waters of the north Pacific all alone.

But that lush jonquil fragrance on the evening breeze, the seagulls, the lapping of the water, and yes, that afternoon, what was his name? A surfer. He was still in his wet suit, and carrying his board under his arm as he strode up the beach. It was school holidays, or maybe just a long weekend with the waves rolling straight in from Antarctica, Bo recalls. I'd had to escape my grandparents and their house, one of those awful adolescent days when you think no-one understands you, not even your grandparents. The jonquil hollow was my only refuge then. I'd hide there, or not hide really, because Griffiths Island is so open, just dunes of exotic marrum grass and a few Norfolk Island Pines, but my jonquil glade was a place where no-one else ever went much, especially not the boys, too girl-pretty, I suppose, with all those flowers. The boys hung out in the old bluestone fort on the other side of the River Moyne, the one built of local basalt to defend the colony of Victoria from those pesky nineteenth century Russians. They'd smoke dope and drink, even drop acid there, those who weren't into serious surfing like Simon was, or sailing, or fishing.

Yeah, Simon, that was his name. He wrote poetry too - but doesn't every adolescent? We could talk, just sit and talk. He told me how a really good wave feels beneath you, what it's like paddling towards it, turning, mounting it, the raw, primal energy, that moment of fear, but then you stop

thinking, stop being afraid, he said, your mind becomes very still and suddenly you're just doing it without even knowing. You're upright, the water's smooth and blue and clear before you, the wind, the spray, and then the change as the wave begins to break, and you shift your balance like it's instinct, like it's poetry out there.

I'd been reading a novel in my jonquil grove, one of those terribly intense Europeans, and was reclining against the trunk of an old Norfolk Pine. The flowers were in full bloom and we were both sixteen. He unzipped the top of his wetsuit and sat beside me. We talked like we'd always known one another, and then he took my hand, our fingers entwined and it was like a wave, like you're just doing it without even knowing, like it's poetry. We went sailing together several times after that, but never did much more than talk and pash a bit. My family really liked him too. Probably because of the school he went to, they're like that, my family. So we'd motor out beyond the estuary, hoist the sails once we were past the breakwaters, then head out to Lady Julia Percy Island to watch the seals, or hug the coast hoping we'd see a whale, but nothing too dangerous, because the waters can be so fickle off Port Fairy with the full weight of the Great Southern Ocean rolling in and all the cross-currents from Bass Strait. I've been nervous of those waters ever since the day I got caught in the fog. Must've been in late September, because the mutton birds were rafting off the coast, solid masses of them bobbing on the water. It descended so suddenly, like one moment I could see forever, and the next I could hardly see the bow. All the familiar markers, the lighthouse, the entrance to the Moyne, the dark bulge of the island completely vanished and I was left wallowing with all those mutton birds. Of course no navigation instruments on my first little boat, so I just hauled in the sails, dropped the anchor and sat it out hoping to hell that no other yacht'd ram me. Everyone said I'd done the right thing when I got home and the local sailors talked to me much more seriously after that, like I'd passed a secret test or something by not panicking.

But those mutton birds, they're what made me want to sail. Ever since I was a kid I've dreamed of following them around the rim of the Pacific, Arctic to Antarctica. Australia, South America, North America, Russia, China, Japan and back to Australia. And I'll do it one day too, Bo promised herself.

She often wondered about the stories the indigenous peoples must have told to explain the birds' annual arrival and departure, and the feasts they must have enjoyed. Because mutton birds taste OK, or the chicks do at least, she thought. That old fisherman gave me one when I was a kid, what was his name? I'd escaped to my jonquil grove very early and discovered him stretched out along a dune with his arm down a hole and a look of utter concentration on his face. He reached in, pulled a chick out by the neck, a large ball of grey fluff, stood up and cracked its neck like a whip to snap the spinal chord, completely painless he said it was, then tucked the head into his belt beside the five or six other balls of fluff already hanging like a sporran, down the front of his pants. He harvested the chicks each year, that old fellow, even when they were protected by the National Parks, and surreptitiously smoked them in an old forty-four gallon drum in his back yard. Everyone used to do it in Port Fairy, he said, although I suspect that was a bit of an exaggeration. My grandparents never did, but they weren't really locals, just wool growers who could afford a holiday house with a bit of help from their 'pioneer' forebears. The only place I can think of where birding's still legal is Big Dog Island in Bass Strait, but only if you have a license, and preferably only if you're a descendent of the very first birders, because Tasmania's indigenous communities own the island now.

'Yeah, that Bass Strait trip I did with Cyn, there'll be some photos I can use from that, and some of those bomber mutton birds on Griffiths Island too,' Bo says to herself as she flicks through her proof sheets. One image in particular catches her eye: a child covering her face in what looks like a blizzard of black snow.

'Maybe that one,' she says to herself, as she reaches for a chinagraph pencil to mark the tiny image with a greasy yellow cross. 'That kid must have thought the birds were attacking her, hundreds of them coming in at once, but they're not, they're just trying to land. You'd think they'd have learned to do it with a little grace and dignity given all the thousands of kilometres they fly each year, but no, they crash-land every time and into anything that's in their way: a dune, a tree, a house, a tent, and even the Great Aunt and me as we walked along the beach. When the chicks are fledging the dunes and surrounding airspace are positively dangerous. We'd watch their nocturnal catastrophes together and laugh, but we'd never intervene, because that was nature, the Great Aunt said. She'd tell me other things too, about the class struggles she'd been involved in, and the campaigns for women's rights, and she even taught me Gorky's poem, Song of the Storm-Petrel. I still remember it. Between the ocean and the thunder/  
Between black clouds and the grey water/  
Speeds and floats and sweeps the petrel/  
Before the storm, before the wildness/  
Harbinger and mad foreboding. We'd recite it, she and me, as we negotiated our way between the mutton bird burrows, because mutton birds are petrels too.

How my reactionary old grandfather ever had a younger sister like her I'll never know, because she was so different from the rest of our mob, and the conflicts those differences caused! Like all those family Christmases at Port Fairy when she'd sit at the piano to play carols for us kids, and before you'd know it, Away in a manger, no place for a bed had been improvised into So comrades, come rally and the last fight let us face, as we shouted the lyrics of the Internationale. None of us knew what the words meant at that age, just that they made a really good song!

The results were inevitable in Bo's family, and the arguments weren't only about politics, because the Great Aunt had 'a past'. She'd run off with a man Bo's grandfather always referred to as her Wog-Comrade Don Quijote. And worse still, she was a Communist, or that's what everyone in the Western District believed when she disappeared to fight the fascists in Spain with one of the International Brigades - which is how she met her Comrade Don. She escaped with him to France after the fall of the Aragon front, those desperate days in the Ebro valley, then brought him back to Australia. But her Don didn't fit into Australia pre-World War II, and nor did the Great Aunt after all she'd been through, so they sailed away to South America to join the other refugees from Spain.

Bo's Great Aunt remained in South America with her Don until after World War II then returned, like a mutton bird, to the place where she was hatched. The family arguments continued even after her brother, Bo's grandfather, died because the next generation maintained the ideological divide just as strongly as the last.

Don't know how she tolerated them really, Bo says to herself. Guess that's how families are though, strong blood-bonds, even love, despite the unbridgable differences.

When Bo turned eighteen her Great Aunt took her out to dinner and, after several glasses of wine, talked to her for the first time about her two years in Spain. She'd joined the International Brigade with the highest ideals, she told Bo, believing, like so many of her comrades, that she was fighting for a just and honourable cause. For freedom even.

'I know it's a cliché,' she said, 'but no-one's ever honest about how war really is. How it changes people. My older cousins and family friends who came back from the Great War, they never owned up to the anxious, hungry hours, days, weeks waiting in mud or dust for something to happen, nor the gut-piercing horrors, the pain and stench when it did. Civil war's even worse because it's fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, cousins, daughters, sons doing it to one another.'

The Great Aunt told Bo to read Rose Macaulay's *And No Man's Wit*, and Hemingway, that to read Hemingway's stories about the Spanish Civil War was to almost forgive him his machismo because he could describe the deceits, the betrayals and moral complexities in a way that everyone could understand, although Macaulay was much more honest about what she called the 'cenotaph of lost causes and slain hopes'. When Bo did finally read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* she forever after saw her favourite relative as some kind of Pilar figure hiding out in the mountains with Hemingway's hero, Robert Jordan.

Silly really, Bo says to herself, because the Great Aunt wasn't Spanish, and she was much more sophisticated than Hemingway's character, but there was something of the Pilar in her nevertheless, the same stubbornness, the same compassion and commitment, the same vulnerabilities. And I imagine her to be as courageous, as compassionate, as dependable under enemy fire, but how can I know? I've been under fire myself, although not by choice like her, and I was scared shitless. War just doesn't turn me on the way it does some photographers, all those bang-bang paparazzi who're hooked on the adrenalin buzz.

War didn't turn Bo's Great Aunt on either. She was numbed by what she experienced in Spain but she never confessed this to anyone in her family, or not until Bo's eighteenth birthday dinner when she also told her great-niece about her war diary. After attending wounded fighters, or burying dead and mangled ones, the nightly ritual of documenting her feelings was all that had stood between her and total despair, she said, and she begged Bo to make sure their more conservative relatives didn't burn the diary after she'd gone. Bo told her she was being paranoid, that her family was really very proud of what she'd done, and she was right, because when the Great Aunt did finally pass away it was Bo's father who insisted that all her papers go to the State Library. And Bo was happy to see that they did.

Once the Great Aunt was sure that her war diary would be safe, she reached into the string bag she'd been nursing all night and unceremoniously pulled out a large manila envelope.

'Your birthday present,' she said, as she slid the envelope across the table. 'I think you're old enough for this now.'

It was the Goya etching, *Yo Lo Vi*. The Great Aunt had bought it in a village somewhere near Zaragoza, on the Rio Ebro, in Aragon, maybe even in Fuendetodos, the village where Goya was born. Decades later, when Bo visited Aragon herself and trekked around all the Goya-sites, it was her Great Aunt she saw gazing back at her from the artist's early frescoes, especially in the Basilica de Nuestra Senora del Pilar where the pillar is, that 180 cm long column of stone after which Hemingway's heroine is named.

Locals claim that Nuestra Senora popped over from Palestine and presented the pillar to her dead son's friend, a saint called Santiago, while he was proselytising on the river bank in what was then the Roman town of Cesaraugusta. How an aging Jewish mother got from Palestine to this far-flung outpost of the Roman empire with a heavy lump of rock remains a mystery, but the date of her visitation is precisely recorded by the Church authorities, albeit somewhat retrospectively: 2 January in the year 40 Anno

Domini. This chronology is based on the calculations of a Roman monk, Dionysius Exiguus, who incorrectly estimated the year Nuestra Senora birthed her son and called that Year Zero. In Cesaraugusta itself the year of her visitation would have been around 794, as counted from the foundation of the mother city by those motherless twins, Romulus and Remus.

According to the Church authorities Nuestra Senora's pillar remains exactly where she left it all those centuries ago, and of course this story's true - because Pope Callistus III said it was in 1456 when he approved construction of a shrine on the site a mere 1,416 years after the event. Pilgrims have queued to kiss the lump of rock ever since, and Bo queued too, not because of the pillar's association with Nuestra Senora particularly, but because it was a symbolic link with her late-Great Aunt, through Hemingway's fictional Pilar and Goya's frescoes. She soon abandoned her place in the queue however, because up close, in its prophylactic sheath of stolen South American silver, the pillar looked too much like a marble phallus and its relationship to her late Great Aunt was lost amongst all its other allusions.

Nuestra Senora, the little painted wooden Madonna standing on top of her lump of marble, didn't seem to mind though, and the burden of all the confused metaphors and worldly jewels she was adorned with seem not to have diminished her ability to perform miracles for her true believers. The best documented of these allegedly occurred on the night of 29 March, 1640, in Calanda, a small Aragonese town not far from Zaragoza. On this particular night, between the hours of 10 and 11 p.m. to be precise, a beggar named Miguel Pellicer Prasco dreamt that he was walking around her pillar on two legs like any other normal pilgrim would. For most people this would have been an extremely ordinary dream but not for Miguel, because the local barber had amputated one of his legs two years and five months earlier and, ever since, he'd been hopping around between two improvised crutches. When he awoke from his dream ...

The restoration of Miguel Pellicer Prasco's amputated leg was headline news in Aragon at the time, as it would be even today. The Archbishop proclaimed the event a miracle, a divine sign even that Nuestra Senora's son would soon walk the earth again in living, breathing flesh and blood, or that's what he told Pope Urban VIII and King Philip IV. Indeed, the king was so impressed that he and his court received the former one-legged beggar at the royal palace in Madrid.

Miguel's story is documented as The Miracle of Calanda, a mural painted in 1951 by an R. Stolz. Bo found this very traditional painting on the wall between the main vestry of the Basilica de Nuestra Senora del Pilar and the high altarpiece which covers the mortal remains of a Visigothic bishop, San Braulio, who himself must have performed a few miracles to win his sainthood. To Bo, as she stood gazing at the painting, the real miracle was that people still believe these stories, and with such piety, given all the horrors that have occurred in Aragon in the almost-two thousand years since Nuestra Senora del Pilar's alleged visitation. Like the man in the wheelchair who was also looking at Stolz's mural, but this man had no legs at all! A motor bike or car accident, Bo surmised. Did he ever dream that he was walking around the pillar on two fully restored legs? And all those other cripples from the last few thousand years, like the ones the Great Aunt tried to patch up, did they ever wish for two legs too? So why did Nuestra Senora fulfil just one man's dream, and in Calanda, of all places, the town where Luis Buñuel was born, my favourite surrealist? But Viv'd say I'm getting way too serious, and Annie would blame Goya and that etching on my wall. Yo lo vi.

## VII

And so she ran away and found herself in Goya's town. She didn't know why, except that it was something to do with Big Bob, or that's what she told Annie.

'When we split up, him and me, we agreed it was to find our roots,' she said. 'His black and mine white and non-indigenous. But then he bloody stuck that needle up his arm and the next thing he was dead. I just had to get away. From everything, but mostly from the guilt. And to somewhere I'd never been before.'

Annie didn't pursue the matter any further, but she knew Bo's reasons for going to Spain must have been far more complex than she was acknowledging at the time, if only because Big Bob had already been dead for years. The choice of destination was probably more to do with her overwhelming need to re-connect with the late Great Aunt, the only member of her family who, Bo believed, would have approved of what she'd been doing with her life - including her relationship with Big Bob. Her immediate family had given her little emotional support during the years she'd spent with him. Indeed, her father had made his position brutally clear ... 'On my property half-cestes and mongrels are shot or sold to the abattoir,' he told her. He was talking about animal husbandry, of course, pure merino ewes and rams and their progeny, but Bo got the message! She didn't see her father again for years.

The Great Aunt herself had never been to Zaragoza, or at least not during the Civil War, because Zaragoza was Fascist territory, but her diary mentioned many of the towns and villages on the Aragon front and she described how she bought Goya's print in one them: 'For all the cash I had and a ration of cigarettes,' she wrote. She didn't explain how the vendor had come to possess an etching by Spain's most famous artist: 'In war it's better not to ask,' she'd told Bo.

When Bo arrived in Zaragoza she naively expected to find a monument to the International Brigades, all those foreign freedom fighters, who, like her late Great Aunt, had gone to Spain to support the Spanish Republicans against General Franco and his allies, Hitler and Mussolini. She thought there would be a memorial of some kind to them, something she could put a bunch of flowers on and spend a few quiet moments before. But of course there wasn't. In Spain the anti-fascists were on the losing side, and throughout Franco's long dictatorship were considered enemies of the state. She did find a monument to a woman fighter though, her long bronze skirt clinging sexily to her legs, and her feet shod in delicate little high heels. Agustina was her name. She was standing over a fallen cannon, and wearing military epaulettes.

There must be a story here, Bo thought, as she photographed the young bronze woman and her monument, and, indeed, an old man feeding the pigeons in the little memorial plaza tried to tell it to her, but without a common language ...

The date on Agustina's pedestal was Julio de 1808, exactly when Napoleon's invading army was shelling the town, and its citizens were defending it in any way they could. Goya was working in Madrid by then but returned to witness the damage the French bombardment had caused. He even painted Agustina, but the French destroyed the portrait the following year lest it inspire further popular resistance. But what if he mass-produced her instead of painting her as a single image on a single canvas which could be so easily slashed or burned? What if there were dozens of Agustinas to inspire feats of reckless courage in his home-town? So he picked up his etching needle again and scratched and scraped her into the varnish-skin of yet another metal plate, a young women in a long white dress, her back to

us, the viewers, slim and sensual against a very long cannon, and surrounded by the bodies of her slain comrades. In her hand she's holding a lighted match and she's reaching for the fuse ...

There's no monument to Napoleon in Zaragoza, of course, because, like the Republicans in 1939, he was also on the losing side. But that other emperor, Cesar Augustus, is well and truly monumented: a bronze giant of a man wearing a toga miniskirt, the quintessential conquistador, although he is little more than another tourist asset now. The Zaragozans reap millions from him and his Roman ruins, as they do from the their Moorish past, and from Goya too. There are monuments to Goya everywhere, a bronze statue in the Plaza del Pilar, for example, near the entrance to Cesaraugusta's Roman forum, two thousand years of still-only-partly excavated rubble below present plaza level. Bo was lured there by another of the fabulously historical edifices fronting El Pilar's plaza: La Seo, the Romanesque Gothic Mudéjar and everything-else style Catedral de San Salvador which was begun in the 12th century after all those good Catholic boys bulldozed the mosque that had stood on the site for generations. The bell was ringing for mass, and Bo had to convince a grey-haired San Pedro, keeper of La Seo's great wooden door, that she wasn't just another tourist.

How the pious of this town must hate us infidels for invading their most sacred sites, she thought, as she joined the true believers on their pews before an ornately bleeding Jesus with his mother, his lover (the other Maria) and a large bowl of white chrysanthemums. She couldn't understand the liturgy of course, neither the language nor the medieval piety, but as she sat quietly amongst the worshippers, she glimpsed, very briefly, something, or someone that even she could believe in: Jesus's mother, as Nuestra Senora del Pilar, before she was appropriated by the patriarchs and their imperial Church. Maria when she was still a strong, bold, sexy symbol of womanhood, the kind of mother who would, in fact, have dragged a two meter stone column all the way from Palestine to the bank of the Rio Ebro, as an impulsive gift for her dead son's friend. By herself and in a boat, because she was a damned good sailor!

But the image quickly faded. Too many other stories were intervening. Because this imposing building, built as a Catholic supremacist statement after the conquest of Moorish Saragusta, was where generations of Aragonese kings had been crowned. Bo was so disturbed by their ghostly presence that she took advantage of the rustling, rattling distractions of the offertory to cover her escape to one of the side chapels where she lit three pagan candles: one for Nuestra Senora before the patriarchs got hold of her; one for her late Great Aunt and her Comrade Don; and one for Big Bob, her own dead lover. And then she left. San Pedro, keeper of Heaven's gate, frowned at her, muttered something in Spanish she didn't understand, and dragged the great wooden portal open just enough for her to slip out into the plaza.

She'd entered La Seo in daylight, and escaped it now into night, into the amplified sound of a trio of South American troubadours playing the songs of their native Andes. Two guitars and a Pan flute. The plaza was filled with their music, and the ornate Mudéjar towers and multi-coloured Byzantine domes of El Pilar's great basilica - soft blue, rusty yellow, clotted cream and lichen - were illuminated against the darkening sky. She felt a lump in her throat as that ancient door opened to reveal such flesh-and-blood vitality, a spiritual relief unlike anything she'd felt inside the Cathedral in which all those warlords had sworn themselves to yet more global conquests. Because outside, in Nuestra Senora's plaza, the empire was fighting back, albeit rather meek-and-mildly. For one brief winter evening the colonised had become the colonisers, and with their volume turned up loud.

Bo saw the same musicians busking on the Metro in Madrid the following week, very methodically moving from carriage to carriage with their brightest, most toe-tapping folk-songs, then, just before each stop, demanding a donation from their captive audiences. She admired their boldness and professionalism, although her companion on the train that day, a Critical Theorist from London, saw them only as beggars at the imperial table. There was nothing empowered or empowering in what they were doing, he told her.

'Well, I'm not a theorist like you,' she said. 'I just see what I see, and sometimes I photograph it!'

And she couldn't know how the musicians were feeling themselves or what would happen if the authorities got hold of them; or even what native-born madriliños themselves thought about these sudaça invading their trains - because she didn't know enough Spanish to ask. She felt very relieved to see a little colour on the Metro in Madrid though. Unlike Paris or London, or even Melbourne, where public transport passengers were gloriously multi-hued, the Madrid Metro was still monochrome and monocultured. All those years of burning or expelling anyone with impure blood, like Jews and Muslims, and refusing to let outsiders in, especially those coloured peoples from the colonies. Xenophobia runs deep and long in Catholic Spain, Bo decided, as it does in most other countries, including her own.

Our natural human condition, I suspect, she told herself, and any society in which diversity is spontaneously embraced is as great a miracle as the restoration of Miguel Prasco's leg.

Bo suspected Viv would agree, and the Great Aunt, and even Goya, too, with all his Enlightenment ideals, although she was never too sure about him. But Goya was how she found the monument to Agustina, the heroine of the siege of Zaragoza. She'd been trying to get to Fuendetodos, the village where the great artist was born but had missed the bus. She'd been at the wrong place at the right time because she'd misunderstood the directions some kind local had given her. When she finally arrived at the correct bus stop, the only bus to Fuendetodos was already halfway there without her. She was distraught. I've come all the way and this is my last day in Aragon, she moaned to herself. I just have to get to Fuendetodos.

She should have hired a car immediately and damned the expense, but Spaniards drive on the wrong side of the road, from her Australian point of view, and she didn't feel quite ready to cope. So she wandered around Agustina's little square with all its pigeon poo and pansies, took a few extra photographs of the old man feeding the birds, and very disconsolately made her way along Paseo de La Independencia, the street commemorating Napoleon's defeat by the Spanish people (and not by the English who also claim the victory!), then across El Coso, where the city's Roman wall once stood, and back into El Tubo, the medieval labyrinth of lanes and alleys around the Plaza Del Pilar, where she was staying.

Bo's hostel was owned by a Basque couple from Bilbao who spoke excellent Spanglish. 'How can I get to Fuendetodos now?' she beseeched them. I could hire a car, but I'm so tired I'd probably forget which side of the road to drive on and run someone into the gutter, or worse.

'Why do you want to go to Fuendetodos?' the hostelier asked, from behind his front counter. 'There's nothing there to see. It's only a very small farming village.'

'But I come from a small farming village too.'

The man from Bilbao disappeared into his back room, returned with a telephone directory, thumbed through it, bent to check the number, and dialled. The conversation was in Spanish, and he was nodding. He put his hand over the receiver, named the price and looked at her. She nodded. By that stage she didn't care how much the trip would cost.

'The driver will be here to collect you in 30 minutes.'

'Eskerrik asko,' she said, with genuine gratitude, in the only Basque phrase she could remember from her Lonely Planet Guide. Her host was too polite to correct her appalling pronunciation, but he smiled at her attempted thankyou nevertheless. Bo was smiling too as she rushed back to her little pilgrim's cell to re-check her cameras. This is it! she thought. I've walked my legs off visiting all the churches and monasteries and palaces to see his frescoes, but now I'll get to see something more than just another painting on a wall.

## VIII

The car was waiting in front of La Seo, the Cathedral of the kings of Aragon: the latest navy blue Mercedes Benz, with a driver in a smart tweed jacket, a large gold ring, and the most perfectly manicured nails Bo had ever seen on a man. He held the rear door open and she stepped into classical musak and the smell of fresh leather. This was not how she expected to travel to Fuendetodos, but she couldn't explain this to the driver, because they didn't have a single word in common except for her poorly pronounced gracias and no entiendo. Mainly no entiendo for 'I don't understand'. So across the grand Avenue de Goya, down Paseo de Fernando el Catolico, the boulevard named for that Catholic King of Aragon, around the Plaza de Emperador Carlos, and into Paseo Isabel la Catolica, named for Fernando's Castilian Queen, the brains behind the brawn of the Reconquista, that very drawn out subjugation of Moorish Spain, indeed of half the world after 1492. Christopher Columbus and all that.

The landscape she was so smoothly cruising through had itself been well and truly subjugated, and a very long time ago. Above her, stark treeless hills, limestone pale and sparsely covered in dry winter tufts of grass and herbs. How many tonnes of topsoil had eroded into this little river over all the centuries of deforestation? she asked herself, as she gazed through the Mercedes' sealed windows. Millions of litres of horticultural and industrial effluent must have flowed into the river too, she decided, because its valley was little more than a food and wine factory: rows of heavily pruned fruit trees, winter bare and leafless; domesticated fields of artichokes; and vineyards, as far as her eye could see, back-breakingly low bonsai stumps of knotted winter wood. Only the almond trees, straight and narrow files of them across the valley slopes, were beginning to protest their servitude. A few more weeks of longer, warmer days and their first exploratory buds would explode into a full-blown revolution of blossoms and lush green. But Bo would be heading home by then, to the end of a burning southern summer, brown tufts of dry grass and herbs.

As the road left the Rio Huerva and its fertile little valley the vines and fruit trees became neatly terraced hills of bleached and rocky furrows, some already exposing their first green fuzz of sprouting grain. On the ridges the wind farms, thousands of kilowatts of renewable energy being harvested from El Cierzo, the biting gale that rips down Aragon's valleys from the Pyrenees. Old Don Quijote (not the late Great Aunt's *campaño*, but Cervantes' fictional knight-errant) would've been totally bewildered by these flailing late-twentieth century giants, nothing at all like the squat

and homely mill he attacked on the plains of La Mancha all those centuries ago.

This ancient rural landscape was both intensely foreign and familiar to Bo. No fences, no paddocks as such, no farm sheds and homesteads, no free-range sheep or cattle like back home, and no trees: just layer upon layer of carefully sculpted terraces stretching bare bone-to-almost-pink across the slopes, and each one divided from the next by a stone retaining wall. Above the arable land, the white and rocky limestone ridges, striated and absolutely naked: a view that was nothing like the broad horizon-to-horizon hectares of Victoria's Western District, yet Bo felt she knew this land too from all the photographs she'd seen over all the years of her life. Is nothing on the planet not familiar any more? she wondered.

The next turn in the narrow road, the next hill and then her destination, marked with four heavy metal letters against the sky - G-O-Y-A - which means not art, but foreign currency in Spanglish, the Goya tourist industry. The regulation Mudéjar belfry reaching towards heaven; the rough stone cottages and barns tumbling down the slope, the gentle terracotta tones of their roofs; the steep and narrow medieval streets and lanes: so very different from Bo's own small farming community, and yet, from this distance, so very familiar too. The same rural isolation, the same conservatism, the same relatively homogenous population, she surmised, and the same natural rhythms and routines: ploughing, planting, praying for rain; waiting, worrying about the season, praying that it doesn't rain; harvesting, storing, carting the grain; ploughing again ... As familiar as the fresh country air she was once again breathing.

People spend their whole lives wedded to places like this, so why did Goya's family leave? Bo asked herself. Were they hungry for something more, or just plain hungry? And me? Is this why Fuendetodos is so important, to discover why I left my own village too, why I needed something more than a isolated rural community to survive? Is this why I'm here?

She reached into her bag for a camera, asked the driver to stop, and exposed a whole panorama to remember this moment, 360 degrees and many more years, then climbed back into the blue Merc. Up the hill and into Goya's birthplace.

But the village was empty. The narrow, winding streets and lanes, the rough stone houses with their shutters and geraniums, the cobbled courtyards with their wells and water fountains, all silent. Because Bo and her driver had arrived when everyone else was doing lunch. In Fuendetodos, at 2pm on a week day, they were alone, and the driver was only interested in his car. He stood and polished it while she wandered off with Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, a fellow rustic, to enjoy a conversation across the years, direct and unmediated. His mother's family's house, in which he was born, three storeys of local stone, and walls so thick you couldn't hear a baby cry except through an open door; the tight little streets in which he'd played as a child; the belfry and its bell that had tolled away his childhood; the church in which he'd painted Nuestra Señora and her pillar, that lump of rock she'd left behind in Zaragoza: all the same as Goya knew them, except for the paintings in the church, which were destroyed by the Republicans in the Civil War, and some of the names of the streets, like Calle del dos de Mayo, the street of the day he painted long after he'd left Aragon. May 2, 1808. A patriotic canvas of a very famous battle in Spain's Guerra de la Independencia. Napoleon's army occupying the heart of Madrid, his stolid Polish infantry and Egyptian cavalry in marmaluke turbans and billowing saffron pants fighting for their lives against a mob of madriliños with murder in their eyes. A patriot drags a marmaluke from his horse centre-frame, raises his knife, blood is already throbbing from the Egyptian's chest, he's most clearly almost dead but the Spaniard's

about to stab him again and again as another assaults his mount, a steel spike straight through the horse's heart. Blood spurts from the wounds and spreads across the plaza. Another already-bleeding marmaluke is attacked, his horse falls, collapses onto the bodies of the already-slain. An Egyptian raises his scimitar to defend himself, a mounted officer slashes with his sword ...

Back in Fuendetodos, there's music on the breeze, a wind-chime tinkling of distant bells. Bo climbs towards it through a gap between two walls, and emerges into a very different village from the one she left behind. Roofless, doorless buildings with empty window panes. Piles of rubble that had once been homes. Knee-high grass in what had been cobbled streets. The other side of the hill, and the other side of those high-rise flats on the outskirts of Zaragoza: what happens when people leave the country for the city like Goya's family did, and Bo herself, those who've betrayed their roots because there is nothing to keep them rooted any more.

On this other side of the village only a goatherd and his goats remain, silky brown ones, black ones, white, and a single piebald returning to their stalls, and each with a single bell tolling a different tone. Bo sits on the foundations of what had once been a stone house to put her cameras away and listens to their requiem. But Goya would've been a very unhappy goatherd if he stayed, she muses. And me too. I'd have been a very miserable shepherd if I'd stayed back home on the farm. But what's left now we villagers are gone? Because Fuendetodos is just a picture postcard now, a nostalgic facade to remind big-city tourists of their past. I thought it would be much more than this ...

And even Goya wasn't the man she imagined him to be. Or that's what Santiago the Myth Slayer said.

## XI

Bo first met Santiago in Sevilla, the ancient river port at one end of Rome's Silver Road, in what is now Andalucia. By the time she reached this city she'd overcome her fear of driving on the wrong side of the autovias, and had spent the best part of a week photographing El Quijote's Castilla-La Mancha, good stock photos of crenellated castles, historic windmills, bare winter paddocks, dead-looking grapevines, horizon-to-horizon olive groves, Manchega sheep, and far too many statues of scraggly knights-errant on skinny horses. All of which, she hoped, would pay for her trip - if her agency liked them.

She collected the hire car in medieval Toledo one mid-afternoon, the smallest Renault available, and spent the rest of the day trying to find her way out of the souk-like labyrinth that is this walled city's heart. Every turn she made seemed to be either the wrong way into a much too narrow one-way street, or into a dead-end alley, which meant that, by the time she finally found an exit, she'd both given the locals considerable cause for mirth and become extraordinarily good at reversing. Indeed, she claimed later that she'd seen more of Toledo looking backwards than she had through the little Renault's front windscreen; and looking backwards was the very best view you could get of that town, since the past was so much more real than the present. Or that's what she concluded after visiting the Plaza del Zocodover to look for the historic café in which her favourite film-maker had shot his *Tristana*, and found that it had been demolished, yes, for a Big Mac, fries and coke under the Golden Arches. All that remained of the café's seventeenth-century colonnade and elegant interior was the celluloid memory of Fernando Rey, Franco Nero, and the young and very beautiful Catherine Deneuve, two-legged and innocent at the beginning of Buñuel's film, one-legged and deeply corrupted by the end. The hollow

thud of her crutches still echoed on the old Toledan floors, but unlike the cripple Miguel Pellicer Prasco's scriptwriters back in Zaragoza, Tristana's didn't believe in miracles, so there could be no happy ending for her. Just a deaf mute pushing her wheelchair through the snow towards her recurring nightmare, and McDonalds, which, for all its sins, had the very best wheelchair-access in all of Spain.

Bo looked backwards again after she crossed the Rio Tajo, the mythical Tagus that half-encircles the rock on which the Romans built their Toletum so many centuries ago, and the view of this city's many pasts almost took her breath away. But she drove on into El Quijote's La Mancha, and then across the Sierra Morena into Al Andalus. Cordoba was beckoning from the banks of the Rio Guadalquivir, that place of pilgrimage for Muslims once, and of great wonder to everyone else, a library on every corner, but after Toledo she dared not risk any more blind alleys and medieval streets. Because she had lunch to get to further downstream, a friend of her father's, known within the family as Alfonso the Stud Breeder, and she didn't want to be late.

Alfonso bred his sheep on his family latifundio in the dehasas of Extremadura, the autonomous region between Andalucia, Portugal and the two Castiles. Bo's father had first met him at a merino breeders' convention in Geelong, way back in the days when Australia was still riding on the sheep's back, and had kept in touch through annual stud-to-stud Christmas cards, a very occasional face-to-face, and a phone call letting him know his daughter was on her way.

Lunch with Alfonso was Bo's only family obligation in Spain, and she was dreading it, perhaps because all she knew about Extremadura was *Las Hurdes: Land Without Bread*, Luis Buñuel's only documentary. She'd first seen this film at the old Sydney Film-makers Co-op not long after she'd left school, and the injustices it revealed still haunted her. How could a modern society allow its own people to live in such poverty and despair, and in twentieth century Europe? she asked herself then. People so isolated they didn't even know what bread was, nor cereal crops for flour, nor ploughs, only hand-held hoes and human muscle to scratch a living from their soil. Potatoes mainly, and never enough. Malnutrition was endemic and malaria too, even though it'd been eradicated in most other parts of Europe. Everyone had chest and respiratory illnesses, infant mortality was extraordinarily high, and the life expectancy of anyone who survived into adulthood was many years shorter than for other Spaniards. People in their thirties already looked old and haggard in this film. And they were all illiterate too. The outside world was invisible to them, and they were invisible to it - until Buñuel appeared with his cameras.

In the decades since Bo had first seen this documentary as a very naïve nineteen year old she'd discovered many *Las Hurdes* in many different parts of the world, but the ones she found most difficult to cope with were those she found in her own country - because, in nearly every case, they all were too intimately connected with her own family's story: the history of pastoralism in Australia. And the older she got the more difficult it became for her to repeat the question she asked at her first *Las Hurdes* screening: How could a modern society allow this ... Because the answer had become too painfully close.

As for Alfonso's family, they'd been breeding sheep in Extremadura ever since one of his many name-sake kings had rewarded one of his best-bred ancestors for winning a battle against the Moors. The reward was paid in appropriated Muslim land, vast swathes of frontier country that was ideally suited to merinos. The family owned many thousands of them once, along with a medieval empire of landless peasants who contributed their labour and other services for very little in return. But these days Alfonso's empire

was much less feudal and very much smaller: just eight hundred hectares of undulating dehasas, or meadowland lightly timbered with encina oak; one three-hundred-year-old stone hacienda which the family visited on weekends and holidays; a permanent staff of three workers plus their families who were accommodated in separate houses on the estate; some hundreds of stud merino sheep; some tens of blanca carereña, the indigenous white Iberian cattle with very long horns; a similar number of cerdo iberico, or big black Iberian pigs; two Andalusian horses; a pair of storks which returned each year to their pile of sticks on top of one of the chimneys; and two mastines, the Spanish working dogs that look like sheep and were bred to protect ovids from wolves. A very rustic mini-empire which was now almost entirely dependent upon EU subsidies as well as Alfonso's share portfolio and income from his on-going legal practice in Seville.

Bo and Alfonso had arranged to meet at Sevilla's Nautical Club on the Rio Guadalquivir. Bo arrived early, having walked across the city from the medieval Jewish quarter where she was staying, a backpackers hostel in a very narrow alley, but she wasn't going to tell Alfonso that. She crossed the river at Puente del Generalísimo, a monument to another recent past, near the Torre del Oro, the watchtower which had marked a corner of the city walls in the golden days of the Almohad caliphate. The road to the Club was lined with Moorish oranges, tall and elegantly cultured trees quite unlike the busy little bushes in the orchard of Bo's childhood. The fruit hung much too high for her to reach so she picked one up from the pavement and peeled it as she walked. Too bitter to eat raw, but excellent for marmalade, she decided, as she removed the seeds and slipped them into her bag to take back home. She could already see elegantly Moorish orange trees in both her own garden and in what was now her brother and sister-in-law's on the family farm.

Bo was thinking about her own wild garden back in Williamstown, missing it even, when she arrived at the entrance to the Nautical Club. The security guards were expecting her which must have been Alfonso's doing, and the grounds they were guarding were vast: broad avenues of jacarandas, acres of lawns, several swimming pools, sporting fields, tennis courts, outdoor bars, a child minding centre and a starkly white and naval blue clubhouse overlooking the river, along which the members' yachts were moored. She climbed the stairs into the members' lounge, ordered a glass of mineral water from the bar, and claimed a table overlooking the Guadalquivir. Before her all the splendour and spoils of this one-time puerto y puerta de Indias, the port and gateway through which all the wealth of Spain's misnamed Indies once flowed into the coffers of the Hapsburg monarchs and their cronies. All those lumbering, heavily laden caravels with all their associated global costs and horrors. Including plagues, one of which killed half the population of this city in 1649, and another 13 000 Sevillans in 1800, although, at the other end of the shipping route the death toll was much higher. Within fifty years of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean between fifteen and thirty five million indigenous people (yes, million) are believed to have died from small pox, measles and other imperial plagues and practices in South America.

Alfonso limped up the club-house stairs with an elegantly gold-rimmed cane which he waved vigorously towards the bar on recognising some of his mates. In his sports jacket, polo-necked jumper and designer-label slacks he looked remarkably sprightly for a man in his seventies, and every bit the aristocrat, Bo thought, with a touch of her characteristic cynicism. He was accompanied by an alarmingly attractive younger man in a tight black skivvy, old suede jacket, faded jeans and once-white runners. God, I'll have to watch out for that one! she thought, as the barman greeted the two newcomers and discreetly nodded them in her direction.

She rose and held out her hand for a formal introductory shake. Alfonso took it, lifted it to his lips and, with overstated charm, told her, in perfect English, that she was every bit as beautiful as her father had said she was. Bo blushed at this most gracious lie, despite her cynicism, and murmured something polite about how great a pleasure it was to meet him at last after hearing so much about him from her father. She held her hand towards the son who, to her great relief, gave her a very firm handshake. But the primary purpose of this encounter was comida, or lunch, a ritual that's observed much more fulsomely in Spain than in Australia, and Bo was far from acclimatised. She begged her hosts to take pity on her, therefore, just a few tapas del dia from the bar. They laughed, and insisted that, at the very least, she should try some merino cheese, and some jamon iberico de bellota, southern Spain's famous cured ham sliced sliver-thin, from the legs of Iberian pigs that had fed, free-range, on acorns from indigenous evergreen oaks.

Bread, cheese, jamon, good Spanish wine, and Cuban cigars overlooking the Guardalquivir, Alfonso promised. Plus some good conversation, which, as pater familias, he dominated of course. 'But we fathers have had to change so much,' he complained. 'Our children, you know, they don't always do exactly as we'd wish, but they do force us to re-evaluate our own ideas, like my son here, the anguish he's caused me! And I remember your father saying the same of you, because we don't just talk about sheep on the rare occasions we meet!'

Alfonso smiled and sipped his wine. Santiago was smiling too, sitting back very relaxed in his chair. Any tension between father and son had clearly been resolved years ago, and Bo was quite jealous of the ease they obviously felt in one another's company. She wondered if she would be as comfortable with her own father if this were him talking about her instead, and decided that no, such an easy conversation was not yet be possible, and, indeed, might never be.

'My son, when he left school he thought he could change Spain overnight,' her host continued. 'Dictatorship to democracy in five easy steps, and I had to use all my contacts to keep him out of Franco's prisons! You can't imagine what it was like in those days. He'd only just started growing whiskers on his chin, and there he was accusing me of being a Falangist, because I believed slow change was better than fast and was on the conservative side of politics, a monarchist even, to his great embarrassment. But I remember the Civil War and the anos de hambre that followed, those terrible years of hunger. I knew only Franco and his Movimiento Nacional when I was a young man, although of course people like me could travel, so I saw that the rest of the world wasn't all like Spain. But at home, we made whatever compromises we had to make to survive, and that's what politics still is to me, the skill of negotiating change only when you know the compromises you'll inevitably have to make will be more to your advantage than what you already have. But my son, he didn't want to compromise in his youth, and he especially didn't want to do national service for a country he said he couldn't believe in. So one night he got into his boat and sailed down this river here and around the coast to Marseille, without even telling even me his father. And you've no idea what radical ideas he pick up in France! When he finally got sick of university he sailed off again even further, to South America. To study the natives, he said.'

Santiago laughed. 'And I'd still be there if it weren't for my own son,' he said. 'I married a Peruvian, a fellow anthropologist. We had a child, but she was killed in a terrorist attack. The Shining Path. Maoists, who, ironically, espoused many of the same socialist values that both my wife and I held dear, although we chose a much less luminescent path! After she

was gone I brought my son back here. My mother takes care of him during the week, and I spend my weekends with him whenever I can. Often at the farm.'

Bo smiled at him. If the two of them had been alone she might have asked him more about his life in Peru, about why he had gone there, about his wife, and why he chose to bring his son back to Spain. She might even have told him about Big Bob, but not in the presence of his father.

'It was years ago,' Santiago said, as if to dismiss her concern. 'Her death changed me though, made me much more willing to compromise! Which is why this old hombre and I can tolerate one another so much better these days!'

Alfonso raised his hands in a gesture of Iberian exasperation. 'So why do you keep sailing off to all those inhospitable places then!' he retorted. 'I just get used to having you around and then you abandon us again, because some lost tribe is in trouble!' He looked at Bo. 'This son of mine, he thinks he has to carry the full burden of our conquistadors on his own back. I don't know where he gets it from. Certainly not from me! I like my little luxuries too much!' he said, and drew long and hard on his after-lunch Havana to emphasize his point. He let the smoke excite his taste buds for just the right time, closed his eyes, and ostentatiously exhaled into a long, congenial silence. Bo sipped her wine and smiled. But it was not only Alfonso's exasperation with his son's personal politics and frequent departures that amused her, nor his performance with his cigar. She was remembering another conversation overlooking another, more familiar river on the other side of the world. She, Annie and Viv on the verandah of Mandalay after the re-launch of the Petrel, their ironic mea culpa toast to all the oppressed peoples of the world, including Viv's own indigenous ancestors. That same conquistadors' burden. Like, have you ever watched them from the lighthouse, Sis, the tankers and the cargo boats? It's so tight and narrow at the entrance there, and those first imperial sailing ships ...

No, I don't know these two men well enough to suggest that the Rio Guardalquivir might be the Iberian peninsula's anatomical equivalent, Bo decided. We've talked sheep, history, politics, yachts, and even religion in passing, but feminine anatomical metaphors might really shock them. It's just a river after all. But I've heard there are flamingos in the delta marshes, that you have to sail through the marshes to reach the sea. I've never seen flamingos in the wild before ...

By this time Bo, Alfonso and Santiago had been sitting over their tapas del dia and wine for hours. The sun was already low in the sky and the now-reconceptualised Rio Guardalquivir was turning from brown towards murky pink. Bo had not only tasted jamon iberico and cheese made from merino milk, but also the espinacas a la Andaluza, ensaladilla de mariscos, aliño de lomo con pimientos, ensalada de pollo, heuvas con mahonesa, and her favourite tapas, the cazon en adobo, little white fish marinated in vinegar, spices and herbs. Alfonso rose to leave, but sat down again almost immediately. He'd clearly forgotten something.

'This weekend you must come and meet my wife and grandson,' he told Bo. 'And you must also see my sheep!'

Bo protested that she hardly knew a good merino from a bad one these days, that it was her father, brother and sister-in-law who were the experts, but Alfonso assured her that she would surely be able to tell the difference between Spanish and Australian genotypes, because Spanish merinos were now bred like beef cattle for meat instead of wool. All shoulders and rump.

'And if you don't accept my invitation, your father will think very badly of me,' he warned.

Santiago agreed, and offered to drive her to the farm, but only if she first allowed him to show her where he lived during the week: the yacht they had talked about over lunch. At which point Alfonso discretely disappeared, to leave Bo, alone and slightly tipsy, with his alarmingly attractive and apparently single son. And the very sleek wooden yacht which just happened to be moored downstairs.

## XVI

'No, please don't,' Bo said. She was leaning against a great slab of rock, the remains of a dolmen that had been built by neolithic farmers five thousand years ago, on what was now, in Australian farm-parlance, the back paddock of Alfonso's family latifundio near Mérida, the old Roman colony of Emerita Augusta. She and Santiago had ridden the two Andalucians out to the dolmen where they dismounted to explore the megalithic sepulchre on foot. Santiago had just taken her hand, caressed and kissed it and clearly wanted more of her. She unconsciously turned her face from him. He dropped her hand and moved away.

'Non entiendo,' he said. 'I thought we were getting close.'

She grimaced. 'I'm sorry. I'm just a bit overwhelmed at the moment. You take all this for granted, but for me ...'

She waved her hand to encompass the view from the dolmen: the merino ewes with their new-born lambs; the mastine dog asleep under an encina oak; the black Iberian pigs rooting around the trees in the next paddock; the native cattle in the distance, big and white, with very long horns; the endless, undulating native meadows, bright green and already dotted with the first wild-flowers of Spring; the blue hills in the far distance; the two horses waiting patiently, their bridles looped over a low encina branch.

'I don't know how to explain it,' she said, 'but, everything here, the grass, the trees, the sheep, cattle, pigs, even the horses, they're meant to be here. Their hooves are meant to tread these grasses: these trees are meant to give them shade. Because they're all natives here, they've co-evolved as a single community. Like all those prehistoric paintings on all those cave walls around Spain of quadrupeds that look almost exactly like your cattle in the paddock over there. For you it's normal, but for me this is the first time I've ever seen sheep and cattle where they belong. I always feel so guilty about them back home, because Australia only ever had soft-footed marsupials until my mob arrived. In my country sheep have been a disaster for everything indigenous, human and non-human. Do I sound mad?'

Santi laughed. The hurt had disappeared from his face.

'No wonder you were looking so luminous when I tried to kiss you then! You were having a religious experience! About sheep, of all things!'

'Is that a New Age variation on the You're-so-beautiful-when-you're-angry theme!' she joked, and slid down the smooth face of the stone slab she'd been leaning against, to sit, legs outstretched, on the early Spring grass. Santiago followed.

'But seriously ...' she said, as she absent-mindedly stroked the fallen megalith beside her. 'The people who built this dolmen, they're probably your ancestors, you still carry their genes, and, in a sense, they're my ancestors too, or people just like them were. Farmers and herders who trekked or sailed all the way from Anatolia, or wherever, over many

generations with their wheat and barley and their tame sheep and goats, or else traded them in some way from the drovers. Not sheep you could call merinos, of course, because you guys bred them here with a bit of help from your Berber and Arab ancestors, but some kind of domesticated fluffy ovid things you could shear each year and base a wool industry on.'

She plucked a stem of grass, examined it but, in this foreign environment was unable to tell whether it was endemic or introduced, bitter or sweet. She put it between her teeth anyway and gently bit it to release the juice, as rural people everywhere have always done. It was sugar sweet and tender. Santiago remained silent, even meditative, and stared out at the land that had been in and out of his family for hundreds of years.

'But those neolithic farmers and herders, they were invaders too,' Bo continued. 'Because there were people here before them, all those controversies you guys have about Neanderthals and Cro Magnons, your hunter-gatherer predecessors. And hunter-gatherer is such a loaded term for us white Australians with our sheep and cattle. And our guns.'

Santi reached for her hand again. 'It's hardly any consolation, I know, but the same thing happened in South America, at least in terms of the impacts on indigenous peoples. I've never really thought about what ruminants must've done to a continent that had only ever felt the thump of kangaroos and koalas before, and of barefooted people. But despite the fact that deer and wild cattle have trodden Iberia forever, so to speak, you mustn't think that the wool industry has been benign here. Many people argue that sheep are the reason Spain's so deforested now. They say that in the not-too-distant-past a squirrel could have hopped from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean without ever leaving the tree canopy. These days a squirrel would have to consider itself very lucky to even find a native tree in much of this country! I exaggerate, of course, but Castille and Andalucia must've shocked you!'

'They did! What hit me most was the lack of remnant vegetation along the roads and rivers, and some of your rivers, they're so re-engineered they're just drains or sewers. But Alfonso says the opposite from you. He says merinos are saving the natural environment in Estremadura. '

Santi laughed. 'Papa's rusticity argument,' he said. 'It's not about conserving the dehasas as much as preserving what he calls the very essence of Spanishness in an increasingly globalised market that doesn't want what we produce. Dad argues that Spain's very identity is embodied in what he calls our rustic species: merino sheep, native pigs and cattle, Andalucian horses, and mastine dogs, all of which, the old man believes, are as much part of Spain's cultural heritage as Goya's paintings, or Cervantes' Don Quixote. If we allow these rustic species to become extinct simply because the market has no need of them, then we can no longer claim to be Spaniards. And who are the caretakers of this authentic Spanish identity? The people of rural Spain, the farmers and villagers, of course. Dad and his stud merino breeders are forever meeting with politicians on all sides to tell them that if they don't keep rural Spain economically viable then they're sacrificing the whole country's cultural identity to the so-called free marketplace and will have to answer to future generations. And some very unexpected alliances are being forged, as you might imagine! It all sounds a rather narrow definition of what it is to be Spanish though, but if it's saving these encina oaks ...'

'I'd never have picked your father for a radical!' Bo said, and laughed. 'Wonder if it'll catch on back home? Because our regions are being stripped too, our smaller communities are dying, and many of our ecosystems are on the point of collapse. But I haven't heard the rusticity argument yet, except perhaps from some of our cattle producers who want to graze their

**Merino, a work-in-progress by [Merrill Findlay](#)**

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stock in national parks. They use those cultural heritage arguments to support their cause, but it's all very Man From Snowy River kind of stuff, pretty misogynist and racist. Sheep farmers haven't got to that point yet. They still think free trade's going to save them. You should hear my brother and father going on about all the subsidies you guys get for your farm produce, and all the barriers to Australian farmers selling into your markets! The big rural organisations are still promoting the free trade line, but I wouldn't be surprised if a new political movement emerges to scare the shit out of the big boys. Because there are so many small Australian towns and villages like Fuendetodos, say, that are losing population and services. Even my own village. And as for isolated Aboriginal settlements, I can't even begin to talk about the things I've seen ....'

'Try,' Santi said. 'I'm carrying the same conquistadors' burden as you, remember! I've seen exactly what you've seen in every indigenous community I've ever worked with. Dispossession, exploitation, impoverishment, even outright genocide, because that's what colonisation's all about. Here too. The Basques, Catalans and Galicians are still actively fighting what they see as Castilian colonisation, although what they suffer can hardly be compared with the thoroughness of the imperial processes in other parts of the world! But have you ever seen Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*?'

Bo laughed! 'You too? You know, that film's why I was so nervous about meeting your father! It was all I knew about Estremadura, and I know this sounds really naïve, but I'd always asked myself how come such conditions could exist so close to where the wool industry had generated such wealth. I know the answers deep down now, and I don't want to think about them. They're still too difficult. Especially in my own country.'

Santi's expression hardened. 'What Buñuel presented wasn't so unusual in the rural Spain in my parents' generation. Even when I was a child there were workers on this property who were illiterate, who'd grown up in what could only be considered a feudal relationship with my family. That's one reason things became so confused and brutal here during the Civil War. You couldn't escape it in Estremadura, even up to the 1950s when the last guerrilla groups were suppressed. The old people remember where the mass graves are, but no-one talks about them. Some things are still also too hard in Spain.'

To be continued.

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