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In 2005 *The Albanian* won the prestigious T A G Hungerford Award for an unpublished first work of fiction.

# the **ALBANIAN**

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*'You won't give me a chance of life, you mean,' she said sullenly. 'However, I'm not helpless, yet: I'll open it myself.'*

*And sliding from the bed before I could hinder her, she crossed the room, walking very uncertainly, threw it back, and bent out, careless of the frosty air that cut about her shoulders as keen as a knife.*

*Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë*

# One

*Dubrovnik*

*October 1989*

# 1

Along by the sea is a city of stone with columns and statues and marble stairs and salt in the air. It is a walled city and the road winds around the perimeter and sugary parcels fall from the fig trees. They rot sweetly all around the limestone walls and on pink-veined marble. It is silent and a salty breeze blows.

I am facing the great white walls of Dubrovnik, a fortress-city that clings to the floor of the sea. I walk across the drawbridge, under a pale guardian saint that stands over the Gate of Pilê and into a portal of steps. This is an ancient city. I stand in a dip worn into the marble step. The stone is almost conscious, exhales its history into the soles of my feet. My breath is distinct, this is just the beginning, I will stand upon history all over Europe. I can hardly wait, the thrill of it shakes inside me.

I feel like my future is gathering before me — new and wonderful. I have built it from desire, from the things I dreamed, I map it out with my footsteps.

My feet may yet be soaked with the contents of my heart.  
The map may tear apart.

I take the stairs slowly, they are slippery and well trodden.

Now I can see within, to a wide, white street of marble and old buildings, creamy as veiled flesh. I emerge into the sun inside the walls of the city. It is more golden than I imagined, the light reflecting off walls and pavement. There is a burble of conversations, and I wait for a moment, try to gather together the strange feelings, fragments of thoughts. There are no cars inside the walls, I've never been anywhere this old before.

I walk to a low dome; it is a fountain that looks like a small church, made of terracotta segments with sixteen spouting heads. People sit around it and the water trickles behind them. I lean over and drink from my cupped hands and cold water spills over my fingers, trickles off my elbows. I have longed for this chill on my skin, longed to wash away the sweat and fear of my journey. I wash my face in the fountain but the feeling pervades me. I will walk, try to forget how far I have travelled from home and the anxious, shaking feeling inside.

On either side of this main boulevard, which stretches the length of the town, there are alleys crossed with washing lines, shops and restaurants, and I can see long, narrow stairs rising up to another level of buildings. I walk in a long furrow meant for rainwater, so it will flow to the sea or the moat and not leave puddles, slippery mirrors on the marble. If I slipped, nobody would know me. I wonder if they would help. Even the thought makes my footing unstable. I walk the length of the Old City, to another gate where the sea appears. I turn around, not ready to exit this space, and walk the length of the Stradun back to the Onofrian Fountain. I follow a path to the right, up and down stairs, past heavy wooden doors and potted plants until I wind my

way to a stairway that leads right up to the top of the city walls.

Endless steps, narrow as a ladder, go up and up to the rampart walk. I can hear my heart bulging in my ears. I glance downwards, waiver; my mind soars out into the air, swings back and around me. *It is 22 October, 22 October ...* I whisper to myself aloud, trying to anchor, to stabilise. A man stamps my ticket, it says *libertas*. I walk clockwise, find my balance. The walls are sheer and cut like a coronet around the roof of the city. The cloak of terracotta rooftops is green with lichen, jagged and patched with crooked and ornamental chimneys leaning in black angles. Their pattern is pierced with tall, white monuments to time and God — a clock tower, domes and steeples like index fingers. Down among the houses I can see tiny courtyard gardens, a small swimming pool, prolific, sprawling tomatoes. There is a map on the ticket. I feel *libertas* up here on the city walls, in the fresh sea air. Around and along the great fortifications I move, where Germans take photographs and lean over and look at the water. I see scenes of human knees, of toilets, a coffee pot on a stove, the angry face of a man. I can hear his voice booming against the walls and I quicken my step, feeling skittish and tense. I could get lost down there in those narrow walkways, maybe never find my way home. I see through windows and open doors. Perhaps it would not be so bad. I see the heads of tourists tilting, wearing hats. It seems that here a bad day could never come. It is so tranquil and I am sure I am the only one who feels a little nervous.

The wall is lower by the harbour and under the wall the arched portico of the coffee house and the dock juts out into the bay. Brown-backed fishermen, barefoot and salty, fold

orange nets and heft large buckets of fish to each other. I imagine merchant ships and caravanseraï from the East arrived here once for trade and shelter. Centuries of human visitors have come to this harbour — some to steal this fortress. Now tourists wander about with their hands in their pockets. They watch the salty fishermen and pay for gelato and handmade lace and jugs of white wine. They look for lovers.

The sea curves around and the walls rise up again, tracing a ramshackle path that circumnavigates the Old City. Along this coastal face the walls are high and protective. I stop in a place that is like a parapet. There is a balcony with old cannons and clover-shaped openings in the walls through which I can see. I imagine lining up crossbows or muskets against invaders. I peer through at the dense blue of the sea and the mystery of its dark islands. I never dreamed there would be a place this exquisite. I wedge my arms into this chink in the fortifications and feel the mist of the wave-spray, warm and cool and blissful. There must have been reason to defend this place, must have been aggressors. On the seabed, I imagine the leftover bits of this culture sinking into the sediment. I imagine oyster shells, broken porcelain, glass and coins, fish bones, bits of ships, settling on the sea bed, becoming part of the city's foundations.

Further on the wall becomes low and thick and I am nearing the large fortress at the mainland corner. I sit for a moment on the wall. Down below me the foundation stones of Dubrovnik are grafted onto rock, onto the bones of the earth. I see ruined sections where disaster has struck. I lie on my stomach on the thick, sun-warmed wall and look into the water. Today there are no crashing waves; they rise and

break gently on the stone, they leave sea foam, white against the white rock. This city could be made of sea foam, baked in the sun and hardened to stone — it has breath inside, perhaps some tiny creatures and shells, human bones. The damp air sprays at my face like heaven showering me. The rise and fall of the sea hushes like breath, a long *ssshhh-ssshhh* conducted to my body through the rock. I can feel the mark of the water on my skin, smell the salt. The repetition soothes me, is a balm for my fear; it rocks me into quietness.

Sky moves in slices between cobalt curtains. I lie on the bed or sit on a green wooden chair in my hotel room which cuts into the cliff face. I look out and see mine is one of a hive of balconies, clutching the shape of the coast. I don't really know how to be a tourist, here on my own. Sometimes I don't know what to do, I just sit all day, look out at the sea and think of home.

I remember Isabella on her lounge. I had said, 'I'm restless. What do I do here? There's nothing exciting.'

I sipped tea, she sipped tea, in a room darkened from the hard sunlight by heavy red curtains. I sat on a piano stool, she reclined on a heap of pillows. She is dressed in velvet, with snakes of hair winding around in a tall pile.

'It's a different world over there, Rosa.'

She leaned towards me.

'You'll love it. Australia doesn't have all those wonderful churches, those layers of history, paint and bones. Our families left our culture over there, you know, and when you go back, you'll find a missing bit of yourself.'

The house is dusty and fragrant with musk, sandalwood, hand-rolled cigarettes, books, Jesus, birds made of horn on

thick wooden shelves. I sipped tea, she sipped tea. I brushed her hair.

'I know it's frightening to go on your own, but we'll be here when you get back. This is your home. Just go. Go where you dream of going.'

'I dream of Istanbul,' I said. 'I see pictures of it and it stirs me up inside, it looks so colourful and I wonder how it smells and sounds and feels.'

'Well you should go there, then.'

'I will.'

Outside in the sun her eyes were gems, sparkling amber, and she hugged me in the driveway. I feel safe with her, I wish she was here.

I drove away from home, I sold my car and booked the ticket. I didn't think about not knowing language or feeling strange, I just picked an airline that was cheap and a destination near enough for me to make my way to Istanbul.

I wiggle across the bumpy pebbles of the beach and immerse my feet in the sea. It paints me an anklet of wetness and I wade for a while. People on deckchairs read and sleep and are silent and I wonder if they are alive and if they know that the touch of the Adriatic is gentle and that I have only ever felt the Indian Ocean against my skin. I feel as if it makes me grow wiser, to immerse myself in other waters.

I've always been frightened of things that live in the water, things that might hurt me. At home there are blue-ringed octopus and bluebottles, great floating jellyfish, sharks. You can die in the sea, we all grow up knowing that. There are small fishing boats halfway to the horizon and I

look out at them, wonder if there are deadly creatures swimming beneath them.

Time goes past — days walking through unknown streets, once hiding from a man with brown felt teeth who sat beside me, spoke fervently in strange words; time drinking tea, drawing. I learn a phrase from my guidebook and try it out at a kiosk.

*‘Dobar dan.’*

But I can say no more and when she speaks to me in her language I feel frightened and embarrassed because I cannot reply. I walk away, buy orange biscuits and a bottle of still water in a supermarket instead. I begin to learn the streets.

I have not spoken English at ease for days. It feels like a long time. I meet people sometimes — from here, from Germany, Scandinavia — but I have to trim and edit my words so that they understand me. I met a young man from the north of the country, he wanted to drink coffee with me. I was tired of being alone, so I thought I might, just to talk to someone. I sat with him a while but we could not speak more than our tastes for sugar in our coffee and our geographies. I wanted to leave him because the silent spaces could not be filled with words and something frightened me in his full lips, something which might burst out at me. I searched my phrase book and found, ‘Leave me alone.’

*‘Ostavite me na miru.’*

He laughed and swiftly touched me, his face close to mine, his copious lips overflowing at my mouth. Anger rose in me and I yelled, ‘Fuck off!’

I ran from the table, I could hear him laughing. Broken-English conversations remind me that all I think and all I cannot say is stuck there, remains inside me. I leave no imprint. It is as if I were not real, my shadow is blown around corners.

I follow a cat for a while one day, just to be taken somewhere without thinking about it. We move in unison through the streets past artists, postcards, jewellers: my eyes entwine in the filigree: fine coils of silver, fascinating and intricate. The cat leads me away, up narrow stairways, underneath the lines of washing, into uncleaned places and back down to the Stradun. Following the cat, I am free from decision. She leads me like a mother; she is teaching me the map, knitting me into the city with her trail. The pattern of streets carves into my mind like the lines on my palm. I lose the cat, sit along the waterfront and read my guidebook.

*Early in the morning of April 6th, 1667 came a great Earthquake. The ground trembled, dust rose all around the city as buildings crumbled. Many of the people were still in their beds. In the Pharmacy, glass and porcelain containers were filled with sage, wormwood and other herbal mixtures and these stocks were all shattered, releasing a mix of smells into the streets. Then, quick as it began, all became still. Voices cried for help from under piles of stone, wood and fractured terracotta. Houses were gone and the famous Cathedral was all dust and rubble. Then there was fire, which tore through the ruins before many of the survivors could be pulled out. Then nearby residents plundered what they could. Five thousand*

*residents of Dubrovnik died in all this calamity, but from the ruins, determined citizens rebuilt the city they loved.*

I can feel it trembling underfoot, smell the dust dislodged by tiny movements of the earth. There are fault lines shivering all through the Balkan Mountains, according to the book. I hope it does not crack while I am here. A section of the city still lies in ruin, I saw it from the wall.

I read about the Pharmacy Museum where the monks made potions and fought infections like the Plague. The cat passes by me again, so I close my book and follow it back through the gate from the sea to the city.

The cat takes me to the stairs of the new cathedral. There are drawings of the one that stood on this place before the earthquake. A plaque in English says that it was built as a gift of thanks from Richard the Lionheart for rescuing him from his ship, wrecked in the Adriatic. It was grand and famous and I feel sad that it is gone. This one is prettier though. I leave the cat and go inside. There are Renaissance paintings by famous Italians — sad-faced Madonnas and their chubby Jesuses. At the back of the altar is the Treasury and I pay to see it. It is silent, my steps echo here. The Treasury gates have three keys, the security guard says, and he tells me the details of the locks and gates and some of the things inside. Arm bones of saints are relics here, encased in gold shells. The remains of Saint Blaise's head is locked inside a jewel-encrusted helmet. His hand is here too. He's the patron saint of Dubrovnik; it is his statue above the big entry gate. It's just so awful to think that some person dismembered him, chopped his head off and sealed it up in this gold helmet. What sort of person chops up saints?

There is wood from the cross of Jesus, where his blood leaked and soaked, mounted in filigree gold and silver. There are Holy Innocents under glass — little brown fibulae and finger bones, now bloodless, jumbled together after some slaughter — it doesn't say where or why they were killed. I think of Moses. The bones have browned in their elaborate casket with glass panes and golden ornaments. I am looking deep inside, trying to count them. So many Innocents. Air has bored bubbles into the core of their remains. If I could touch them, I think they would turn to dust.

I have no human bones in my possession, only stones. Some are fashioned into shapes by human hands. Some have been laundered by many tides to a smooth face, some are hardened bubbles in a matrix of sand, green with lichen. I pick up my stones in alleys and gardens and beside the sea — I am starting a collection. I collect tiny pieces, loose parts which sheer off the buildings, and I keep them in a red box lined with tissue paper so I can touch them one day in another place, so this place might seem real.

I wander alone here for days, in the Old City and by the sea. Alone as a little girl, clutching for my handbag. The wind and the sea erode me — they work away at my skin, my eyes, my feet, my fingernails — and I feel closer to the surface of myself. As if the me I didn't want anymore is gone. I'm collecting this experience, building myself into a bigger person, a different, more interesting person. I will never return to Australia as I was before, and I don't want to.

Today I follow the map to the Akvarium. I love the word and how it sounds like an English word and something totally foreign, all together. The Akvarium is built inside the fortress

of Saint John, in a corner of the city where the wall launches out in a bold semicircle. I guess it was some kind of turret for fighting off invaders. There is an alley of shops selling artworks but there are few tourists around now, the end of the season is coming and it is quiet, things are closing up for the winter. I can hear a baby crying from a high window. The paintings in the shops are all smudged shapes and shadows; I guess they are in vogue in Dubrovnik. I don't like them but the shopkeepers are keen to welcome me in to look.

Isabella has much better paintings on the walls of our house. There is one that I love, it is coloured like a burning sun, with a burnt-down church and two grey faces with their eyes closed. I have looked at it a hundred times or more, but still I love the colours and the solemn feeling. I drift back there for a moment, to the exhibitions in the big peach-coloured gallery that used to be a convent. I go with Isabella and Lucia and we drink wine. I love getting swept up in the laughter and talking, though I always seem to be the quiet one, watching. I feel as if I have nothing to say. Outside, cars growl and pace, round and round the block, packed with boys. We walk home to make cups of tea, dreaming to each other about meeting a nice man, someone different who might blow in from somewhere else. We often end up talking about that.

I pay the small entry fee to a pale young man at a desk. He looks sweaty, but it is cool inside and there are a few tourists with children.

It is damp, dimly lit and the walls are dripping with seawater. Under here is a strange otherworld, hushed and echoey. It silences me inside, takes me to my heart.

First I see the octopus, its tank set into the limestone wall.

I stare into the sea-creature's home, its sucker-kisses press on the glass and slip away as it moves. It moves like syrup, boneless and lingering. I can taste the salty air around my lips. 'Are you leaving?' I ask it aloud. Yellow sand clouds rise in the water. 'Do you love someone under the rocks?' I press a wet finger on the glass. It leaves no print.

I have no dialogue in this place. The octopus doesn't look or speak, no flesh touches my flesh. I feel a bit like these creatures, confined in big fish bowls with none of their kind.

There is no romance in the serenade of the water filters. I gather salts from the weeping walls on my fingertips as I walk around the semicircle of the fort to a hole in the marble pavement.

The hole is perhaps two metres wide and forms a pond for a solitary leatherback turtle that is nearly half as long as its home. Tourists walk in a slow parade around the edge of the pond, sliding their hands along the cold metal rail and looking down at the turtle in mournful fixation. The leatherback lies on the bottom, still as a dome, surrounded by a confetti of silver and bronze coins. I think it is protecting itself, it is probably frightened. I lean over the railing. Poor, lonely thing. It doesn't move. I feel in my purse for a coin, a silver platypus coin to make a wish like all the other tourists.

'I wish for you a field of coloured seaweed and a nest on a quiet beach.'

I throw the coin.

'Find me love, turtle!'

The coin settles flat on the turtle's domed shell. Oh, I didn't mean to disturb the thing. It rows itself, slowly, circling the confined pond. Its brown face pierces the



surface of the water and through the salty, humid air comes the turtle's thick bellow — a long, low call.

I quiver, didn't mean for such acknowledgement.

I leave quickly — get away from the speech of the turtle, back into the streets, back into the Babel of human things.

In the sun, particles of dust and rock sparkle and move, wild and random in the wind. I watch them from beside the Rector's Palace, in the sun near the arches. My breath is rushing and heaving. I feel panic inside, but I don't know what it is about the turtle that made me feel this way. What it said to me must have meant something. I can hear my own saliva crackling in my swallows. I just stand here, looking around me, down at my body. I am standing in low black boots on the marble, my legs are wrapped in black tights and a short velvet skirt. My hair is heavy in a ponytail. My fingernails are painted pink. I wear a silver filigree ring I bought here, in Dubrovnik.

I can see myself. I look like me, but I am far away from my world. I am apart from everyone around me, as a statue is apart.

People can see me. They walk around me, going places together, down all the avenues that go from here. A young man walks across the crowd towards me.

He touches me, on the arm.

He smiles at me, saying something about lunch. I just stand there, don't say anything, as if the world is silenced by my feelings. He starts to pick strands of hair from my pink cardigan. He shakes his head at me, says something I don't catch and collects the hair in the cup of his left hand. He moves around me, pulling strands from my shoulders

and my back. He is circling around me. I don't protest, I say nothing. His speech is rasping, whispery, makeshift English with a hard accent that is difficult to understand. He speaks to me in declarations or questions, I don't know which.

'You are tourist.'

I should speak, he is so close. He is too close to me.

'You come from Australia.'

'Yes.' I manage to speak while he is behind me. My heart is pounding and he stops moving around me, smiles a stretched-out grimace of a smile.

'I have see you here before. You want lunch?'

He seems familiar but I have not seen him before. He is not as handsome as most of the young men around here, he is hollow in the face, marked with lots of scars — from burns maybe. When I listen closely I can understand him.

'Is very nice restaurant. Come, I take you for lunch. You want food?'

'Yes, I have not eaten today.'

He circles around to my left hand and pulls me into his step.

'Is good to make hair beautiful but you must take off jacket. Then, when hair is all finish, you can put it back.'

I smile at this. I never take care of such details.

He draws me by the hand, alongside the Cathedral then up into Escher-stairs, around corners and through unknown alleys. We seem to cover a lot of ground; he walks fast, pulls my hand. I have never been this way before, and I try to look around to get my bearings but he is too quick.

'Wait!'

I let go of his hand and stop on the stairs. There is washing overhead, a knot in my stomach and my legs are aching from racing along after him. He turns and looks down at me.

‘Is not far now.’ He looks puzzled at my stopping.

‘I’ve never been this way. It looks like people’s homes and I don’t think I’m supposed to be in here.’

‘You don’t trust me, huh?’

‘No.’

He sighs, shakes his head. I see nothing but the walls and the washing, some doors and a bit of sky. I’m completely lost. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and places the strands of my hair inside and folds it carefully. Tucks it into the pocket of his jeans. He has carried it all this way in his hand.

‘Why are you keeping my hair?’

‘You want?’ He hands me the handkerchief.

‘I think you have so much.’ He smiles and my question seems silly.

‘I keep because I cannot throw it down here, is part of you.’

I don’t understand, maybe it’s a cultural thing. People do voodoo things with hair.

‘Will you use it for magic?’

He laughs with his strange, grimacing smile and says a quick string of words in another language. I don’t think it is Yugoslav, at least not the way I’ve heard it spoken here.

‘Don’t worry so much.’ He reaches down and takes my hand again.

‘Restaurant is just there, maybe ten metres. Come, sit and I get you something.’

Now that we are so close, I let him lead me. We round

a corner where there is a gap between the buildings filled with tables, checked cloths, orange awnings.

‘Sit.’

He leaves me in the sun.

The place is by the city walls, salty and familiar. This is a grimy corner where I have never been. The smell of urine drifts in sharp patches. Saliva is thick in my throat and my stomach is tight. He brings me lemonade, stands and watches as I sip. An old woman looks darkly between the iron bars of a room that is half below the marble paving. I suppose it is a basement, and the barred window is close to the ceiling of her underground space. Nameless black muck lines the walls and the pavement. I think it would be very damp down in that room; maybe the black is mould. She says something I don’t understand and waves at the young man. He speaks to her and she moves away from the window. He vanishes into the smell of frying and comes out carrying a tray. He speaks to the air at my left and the old woman sways around to take a plate from him with dark masses of meat and blistered eggs. She returns to her place behind the dirty wall. He brings me a bowl of salad and sits opposite me at the table, watching me. He shakes his head.

‘She is very poor. We must feed her when my boss is out. Two weeks and we are closed for winter, then I don’t know what happen to her. Probably she will be hungry.’

‘You speak English very well. Do they teach you in school in Yugoslavia?’

There is nobody else here for lunch. He squints towards me in the sun.

‘Sometimes, but everyone must learn Russian. I hate

Russian. I have forget it now, English is better for work with tourists. I learn English here in Dubrovnik these two years I have work. I learn from tourists and other people.'

The edges of my panic soften, even though this is his corner and I don't know how to leave. It feels more peaceful here than wandering in the crowd. I look at beads of oil and water on the lettuce.

'What you like to eat?'

'The salad is fine.'

'No, is nothing. You must have something more.'

'Maybe some bread?'

'We make good beef steak here, or some fish if you like.'

'No thanks, just some bread and a cup of tea would be nice.'

'Okay.'

He steps in the door and speaks loudly across the counter. I fold the lettuce carefully into a square and skewer it with my fork. He watches from the doorway, arms folded. I can't put it in my mouth while he watches and he turns to go inside because he realises this, I think.

'Why you come here now? Is end of summer and holiday time is finish.' He brings bread and a cup of tea on a saucer with sachets of sugar.

'It was time for me to go away. I didn't really think about the holiday season. The ticket was cheaper so I thought that was good.'

'This place close in two week and I must go home to my family. I don't know but maybe next year I cannot come back for work here. Much changes happening in Yugoslavia.'

His dramatic sigh sours the air all around us and he stares into the black muck of the walls. His focus is intense and far

away and I feel as if I disappear for a moment. He seems to forget he has brought me here. In his silence, I dip the bread in the salad oil and eat it in small, polite pieces.

'Do you have interest in politics?'

'No, not really. Politics in Australia is so boring.'

'Boring is good. Boring is not trouble, is not people having dictator like we have here. I have interest in politics all my life because politics in Yugoslavia make much problem for my family.'

'I read in my guidebook about it being communist but I don't really understand anything much about the politics here.'

'Don't you have in news in Australia?'

'No. We only see stuff about our own politics or someone's cat who does something stupid or earthquakes and wars. I don't really watch it. I'd rather read a book.'

'You must have good life. When I go in my home, in my village, now I am afraid. I must always look behind. One day I am in street just talking something with my friend and I see Serbian officer from military. Bam-bam! He shoot me here.'

He drops his right arm on the plastic table which shudders, tinkling cutlery. His inner forearm is in the sun, exposing the long white scar, narrowing at one end.

'Bullet go between my arm and my body. But I have much luck, I don't die. This happen just before I come here to work for summer. I finish in military service in March and he remember me because I am one who make trouble.'

'Did it hurt?'

I put down the last part of the bread and put my fingertip to the scar.

‘He hurt my heart much because now I cannot go home to Kosovë and live normal life. I must go from Yugoslavia.’

He is harsh-faced and young all at once, such a strange sort of person to meet. I don’t know where Kosovë is, and I’m afraid to ask because I’ll sound so dumb. He stares off at the dirty wall again and I eat slices of cucumber and black olives. He disappears inside the cafe.

All these places are like dots on a new map to me, removed from my own map by enormously vast spaces of land and ocean. His place is like a new and unheard-of territory and I can’t find any images in my mind to add. I feel a bit frustrated by my lack of knowledge about this country or its politics or history. I am curious — I have never met anyone who has been shot and he is nicer than the other people I’ve met.

He emerges with a lit cigarette in his right hand.

‘Come, I show you some beautiful place.’

He reaches for my hand and lifts me from my chair. I walk with him towards the city wall and we follow it to a low opening, a short tunnel to the sea, smelling of urine. I try not to breathe. Concrete steps are built on the white rocks, winding down to some wide, flat stones. I often walk over the black rocks at the beach in Bunbury. Once they were lava that cooled and went solid at the water’s edge. They are like opposites, the two places and the rocks and maybe other things I am yet to discover. He is silent and smokes, staring down as he hops across the pale boulders. He stops at a flat piece of rock facing a large island out to sea and sits down. In the sun the contours of his face are sharp, chipped stone, rough and uneven. I sit beside him. He squints at the sea, flicks his cigarette butt towards it.

‘Is very beautiful place, Dubrovnik. Sometimes I think to live here always, but then I think on my mother and my sisters in Kosovë and I miss them too much.’

He looks at me. ‘Do you miss your home? And your family?’

It is a difficult question to answer. Sometimes I have an ache inside that makes me just cry and cry because I miss home and I want to feel that safety and comfort of eating dinner with my parents, sleeping in my own bed. I look at the sea and don’t answer him, I don’t want to.

‘Why you come here alone? Is very far from your place. I do not understand.’

‘I’m on my way to Istanbul, that’s where I want to go.’

‘Why you want to go there? Alone? Is lot of bad people there.’

I think I have come here to learn about the world and myself and people and home. I had to come alone, or it would be too easy. I know if Isabella was here, she would talk to me and I wouldn’t be doing this now. There are so many things for me to learn and I felt like I was doing it too slowly at home.

‘I’m here alone because I want to learn things I could not learn at home.’

‘Maybe you come here to find boyfriend, huh?’

From the corner of my eye I see his hand flicker and he clasps my neck, fingers sinking into my throat. He pulls me towards him. I am surprised, I start to speak but he plugs my mouth with a nicotine tongue. I pull my head back, grab the handle of my bag, my legs unfold to lift me up and out and far away, but he is quick and grabs my hand, firmly. I don’t know why I didn’t see this coming.

'Let me go!'

He does, and sinks his face into his palms.

'Don't you like me? I think I love you at first sight, Rosa.'

Love at first sight. 'Do you think that makes it all right to just grab me like that?'

He just stares at me with a look I can't read.

'And how do you know my name? I haven't told you my name.'

I feel my heart racing and I am rattling with the surprise and a little anger. He pulls my passport from his shirt pocket and hands it to me.

'I steal it. You are like one asleep, Rosa.' He shakes his head at me and stands up beside me.

'You must learn something about watching for danger. I see you come from good place. Please learn it, I like you and is not good to be like that, not in Yugoslavia.'

'No, it isn't, I know that. But how dare you take my passport!'

I hold it tightly, angry now at him and myself for not noticing him take it.

'Guys around here like to sell these passports. I can get ten thousand US dollar for it. Is lot of money, maybe they kill you for it.'

Maybe he would kill me for it. I don't even know what to do if I lose it, how to get another one.

'Not you, though? You gave it back.'

'Maybe I can get it again if you not be careful. But not me, I am good person.'

'Oh, really? Did you take money from my bag too?'

'Of course not.'

Night is beginning to settle and I know I can't find my

way easily out of this corner of the city. It unnerves me to walk the long road to my hotel room, there are too many parks and long, dark stairways.

'I have to go.'

'Really, I am sorry to do that, take your passport.'

He looks in my eyes. Already he is not like someone strange to me, yet I know he is.

'Really, I want to show you how easy I can take your most important thing. You don't look out for yourself. You must. People in this world are not all true and good like you Rosa.'

'How do you know I am true and good?'

'I have much practice in looking for these things. I can see you are good person.'

'I really must go. Please show me the way back to town.'

'I can walk you back to your hotel after I serve dinner for restaurant, probably nine o'clock. Have some time with me Rosa, please.'

I have not been out of my hotel room after dark before. Sometimes I have felt trapped there by my fear of the terrible things that might happen. Maybe he is a good person.

'I promise I will not try to kiss you again. I am sorry Rosa, is just something inside tell me to do it when I look at you.'

He leads me back up the rocks, through the tunnel and along the walls to the Café Lucullu. I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but I am pushing past my doubts because I don't want to be a prisoner of my own fears. Lights are appearing all around me, night is deepening the shadows, changing the scenery. I am still working out where fear and good sense overlap.