

THE PLAYERS

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Contents

Prologue	7
ACT ONE Rehearsal [1993–1995]	11
ACT TWO Performance [1995]	127
ACT THREE New Roles [1996–1997]	141
ACT FOUR Foreign Selves [1998–2001]	193
ACT FIVE Real Selves [2002–2003]	339

Prologue

1994

She sat in the shade of a salmon gum, watching the rest of the cast with amusement. There they were, in costume at last, composed like a tableau vivant, a blur of colour among the trees. But now Felix was yelling at them all. And it was hot. And she was parched.

She pulled a plum from her pocket and bit into it – sweet, delicious, warm on her lips, juice running down her chin.

Revolution in action, Felix had called their play, quoting Napoleon, apparently. But how could a play lead to revolution? Had Napoleon been referring to the power of wit, instead? She'd been reading about that.

The sun spiralled down through the leaves, making her woozy. The white glare. The baking dust.

Something was unravelling inside her. Susanna, her character, was slipping away. Felix had been upset, declared that the scene with Sebastian had flopped. He believed in her, he'd said, but he didn't have time to explain.

She had to outwit her oppressor, that much she knew. Wasn't that what revolution was all about? But surely a revolution entailed an uprising. A declaration of war?

Plum juice dribbled down her neck, dropping spots onto her apron. Dark flowers, spreading. Like carnations. Yes. The peaceful revolution. Gloria had spoken about soldiers marching through the streets of Lisbon with carnations in their rifles. Not one gunshot. The end of the colonial wars, but that hadn't been any good for East Timor, it had left them vulnerable to civil war and invasion.

There were so many stories of revolution, but they all seemed remote, stretched far away in time and place, when all around her was scorching, boring Perth.

But then again – she remembered Pinjarra, a town not far from home. Had there been a war there? A revolution? No. A barbaric massacre,

more like it. Captain bloody Stirling. How *dare* he? Those English colonisers! It made her feel ashamed.

Heaving a sigh, she sucked the last fruit from the pip and spat it out. A line of ants scurried towards it.

What if history had taken a different turn? Australia, a French colony instead ... After all, hadn't a Monsieur Baudin and his cronies skirted the rim of West Australia three centuries before, hoarding flora and fauna onto a ship? With astronomers ... and draughtsmen? Hadn't they wanted to *capture New Holland*? ... All that plundering and conquering! No different at all from the Count in the play.

Her mouth was sticky. She needed to wash her hands. She didn't care anymore if she was required, if her scene was next. She'd had enough of it all.

She hauled herself up and pushed through thick bush. The sun, a burning host.

A rocky path led through mottled shrubs and eucalyptus trees, hard sap teeming down their trunks. She dodged straw-like flying insects and termite mounds, inched her way over small stones, down the escarpment towards the creek, and leaned towards the cold water and splashed her mouth clean.

Then she stood on a bare, bronzed rock, loosened her dress and shook it off, and stepped into the water. When it reached her knees, she lowered herself, turned on her back and floated. Closing her eyes, she breathed in beautiful, cold, shuddering breaths and imagined she was drifting away.

Footsteps. A tumble of falling stones. She scrambled out of the water, tugged her dress over her wet body. A voice? No. Not a voice. Figaro. Her heart slowed. She lay down on the large rock facing upwards to the sun.

They didn't greet one another. It had always been that way.

'I'm not shirking,' she said. 'I just need a break.'

'I'm really worried about my lines,' he said quietly. 'There are so many, and I don't know how I'll remember them all. I don't even understand what they all mean.'

That was true. Figaro had a lot of lines. But she was struggling with her own.

'You'll get there,' she said.

It looked like he had come for a quick dip too. The sun fluttered across her arms.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I can’t seem to get my part right, either. Haven’t you noticed? I’m not very good.’

He didn’t respond.

‘What should I do?’ she asked, feeling the sun on her lids. ‘I’ve been reading up on revolutions in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, but it hasn’t helped one bit.’

There was a long pause. She closed her eyes again and heard a pebble skim across the creek, then another.

‘Think of someone you hate,’ he said. ‘Maybe someone you would even kill. And imagine he’s the Count. Take it into every scene. See what happens.’

And then she saw Charlie in her mind’s eye. Charlie. Charlie. Then the sun, bursting into fire. She could see it. Smell it: the humiliation. Charlie. Yes. She would do everything she could to outwit him.

She opened her eyes. Figaro was sitting near, fully clothed. He looked away. Reaching out to him, she just missed his hand. The crunch of his feet echoed as he climbed the side of the escarpment. Where does the heart go? she wondered.

ACT ONE Rehearsal

[1993–1995]

If love is not to fly away
Then what has Cupid wings for, pray?
– Pierre Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*

1. Sebastian

Perth 1993

When he first saw her, she was wearing a sweeping skirt and boots, with a long woollen cardigan, hiding her hands in her sleeves. Eyes too blue somehow. He thought she looked like a moving sketch, all limbs and bones, nothing to hold onto. He imagined her slipping out of his embrace.

She looked at him. 'Veronika,' she said. 'Friend of Lucas.'

'Lucas?'

She pointed to the band. 'He plays bass guitar.'

She had a doll's mouth, full cheeks that softened her edges. A smattering of freckles under her eyes, like a stain of permanent tears. He felt a flush of warmth, the need to keep her close to him.

'Happy birthday, young Sebastian.'

Sebastian turned towards the voice. 'Uncle Frank.'

'Twenty-one today!' Frank thrust a bottle of whiskey into his hands. 'Another few years and you'll be an old geezer like me.'

'Let me introduce you—'

But Veronika had disappeared.

When would he see her again? See those bright, haunted eyes. He hankered for something alive in her. Something he couldn't quite name.

It was a year until he saw her again. Unexpectedly. Thrillingly. In a philosophy lecture, sitting several rows in front of him. She was scribbling in a notebook, and he noticed her long, slender hands and a yellow flower, a honeysuckle perhaps, tucked behind her ear. He watched her intently, waited for her outside on the lawn, asked if she remembered him. She'd been to his twenty-first, he said. She smiled, then told him she remembered the pink icing stuck to his lips. He asked her to join him for lunch, but she refused.

He didn't believe in omens, in luck or superstition, but seeing her azure eyes, the tousled red hair, her smiling refusal to give in to him, he

couldn't shake the feeling that 1994, his twenty-second year, marked a new beginning. He would simply have to try a little harder. Try something different. Catch her.

2. Veronika

Ah, yes. The birthday party. She'd felt like an imposter, smuggled in by Lucas to see the lives of the idle rich: the delicate glasses, the meticulously crafted morsels on silver trays. Shiny people with neat edges and no stray threads, conversations trailing into nothing. The birthday boy standing too close to too many women, a toothy smile on his face.

But what she remembered most vividly, most painfully, was a cigarette falling onto her skirt, the rush of fire on the hem, a frantic splashing of water, and how it took her back, as she was always taken back, to Starfish Bay. The bonfire at the beach. Flames orange and blazing, people running and screaming. And then that fearful moment in time, alone and afraid on the beach, when she'd called out into the darkness and no-one came.

She'd been so young then. Barely an adolescent. And now she was on the brink of turning twenty. She still found it hard to believe she was studying at university. The only other person in her family to do so had been her great-grandfather, who had studied mathematics in Prague just before the century turned. Her father was the son of Czech immigrants, had bought fifteen acres at the age of twenty-six, made a market farm in Mundaring in the Perth Hills. Her mother, Angela, had grown up on a farm in the Avon Valley and was then courted by Michal Vaček with baskets of apples and pears. Her parents had liked his no-nonsense attitude, his thorough knowledge of business; her mother had liked to say that he was good enough for her family and strong enough to carry her through life. She'd raised two daughters, devoted herself to the orchard and to family life, but told Veronika she'd never expected a daughter to study French, philosophy and literature. It was, she'd said, *a bit of a surprise, a lot of a surprise, really.*

It was French that Veronika loved most of all, the way the words rolled, lilted, leapt. Some were dreamy, suggestive, chiming with her spirit. She was proud of having read an entire volume of Verlaine's poems without needing a French dictionary, but her mother was concerned that studying that language gave her daughter 'notions'. But it was precisely those

notions that sustained her: the promise of Paris, of marvellous things to come. Galleries and the Opéra, chic cafés, the treasures of the Louvre, concerts at the Saint-Chappelle. Smoky bars. Seduction.

When Sebastian found her again and pressed her to talk, she was wary. She wondered if she could be serious about a man with such a pretentious name. But she had to admit he was handsome, in a conventional and reassuring way: square-jawed; broad-shouldered; thick dark blond hair; an even nose; amber-coloured eyes. And unlike other students she'd met, he was clean-cut, beardless. So she agreed to eat lunch with him on the lawn, let him lead her to the giant Moreton Bay fig tree near the lecture hall, let him take her arm to ease her onto the grass. Sun sliced the air and she clung to the shade. Students milled around.

'So, did you enjoy the lecture on Nietzsche?' she asked.

'Yes, I did. Although I must say, it was hard not to be distracted.'

He smiled at her, and she felt her face grow hot.

'And I *have* started the essay,' he said, 'although I *am* rather busy these days. It's my final year, but I'm still completing my other degree. I'm getting my teeth into political science and—'

'You're the president of the dramatic society, right?'

'How do you know?'

'Lucas told me.'

'Lucas?'

'My friend. He's my housemate. He was in the band at your party.' She played air guitar.

He edged a little closer. 'I have a proposition for you,' he said. 'I want you to audition for our next play. I mean, it's a couple of months away but we're already looking at our options. We could read through some plays together.' He smiled, as though pleased with himself. Let me tell you something,' he said. 'This play is going to be brilliant.'

Reading through a play together? What kind of play was that?

'But what about Nietzsche?' she said.

'Nietzsche?' He tilted his head. 'Well, there's a lot one could say about Nietzsche.'

She wondered if he'd started his essay, after all.

'I think he was a strange man,' she said. 'Full of his own bombast and gloom. So what if he lost God? Every generation loses something.'

He looked amused. 'What has our generation lost?' he asked.

‘True art,’ Veronika said decisively. ‘It’s all imitation now. Pastiche. Parody.’

She rose to her feet, dusting off the crumbs from her sandwich.

He kept seeking her out after lectures, and she had to admit she was flattered. At first there were jerky exchanges: banal observations about lunch and the weather, half-baked philosophical chit-chat. Then they moved onto more serious matters: the music of French for her, the attraction of reasoned argument for him. Stories about their families: his neurologist father and exuberant, doting mother; her orchardist father and a mother who loved to cook. He was an only child; she had an older sister. Sebastian was intrigued by her immigrant heritage: *Bohemian*, she told him – at least, Bohemia was where her grandfather had been born in a village called Lužany in the Hradec Králové Region, where his family grew apples. Her father had wanted a daughter called Veronika, with a *k*, to honour his great-aunt. Veronika’s grandparents had escaped communism, fled in the dead of night, crawling on their stomachs through a forest to some kind of freedom in Germany. They’d come via ship to Australia in 1949 and her *babička*, Veronika’s Nan, was sent to work in a slipper factory, her *dědeček*, grandpa, laying pipes.

When Sebastian called her family *real* and his own family *stifling*, she was aroused by some unspoken need in him.

And then without really planning it, without talking it through, they began to skip lectures, escape onto the Great Court, disappear into the shade. They would sit for hours under the dripping willows, books between their thighs, pretending to read. It was a place of quietness and beauty, this shady grove. It seemed to become *their* place. She imagined it was an outdoor cathedral, graced by magpies and willie wagtails, built from earth and wet black bark.

One day she watched Sebastian strip off his shirt and wade the length of the moat around Winthrop Hall. He was showing off, she knew, saluting the cheers of students. A week later she watched him launch himself in a hang-glider from the top of one of the towers. Astounding! Was all this for her?

And then, on a sunny, hot afternoon, lying entwined in their grove, he told her how much he liked her name and the little ‘hook’ above the ‘c’ in her surname, which Veronika taught him was called a *háček*, and

pronounced *ha-check*. It rhymed with Vaček. He liked that her father was a farmer of sorts: authentic, a man of the land. And he liked that she wasn't like the other girls he knew, the Jessicas and Victorias who lived in big houses by the river, tall and strapping sportswomen with blonde ponytails. He called her a bright flower blown in from the wind, a bird who'd flown from a strange continent.

'And I love the sound of your voice,' he said.

He leaned in to kiss her, softly, on the mouth.

It felt like being kissed for the very first time. With Joshua. In their secret place, in the tree house, where the rest of the world fell away.

She felt Sebastian lifting her shirt, kissing her belly. Felt his roving hands. He knew what to do, and it pleased her.

One day he asked about her sister.

'She's overseas,' Veronika said. 'Nannyng.'

'You don't like her much, do you?' he said.

Veronika shrugged. 'We don't have a lot in common. She wasn't really a reader, except for, you know, *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan*. And she was ... well, into boys from an early age.'

She pictured holidays at Starfish Bay – Ana lying on the shore, sitting up when Charlie walked past them; then her sister, leaning over, breasts brimming out of her red bikini. Then at night, watching Ana from their bedroom window, leaping onto Charlie's motorbike, clutching his waist, her skirt barely covering her thighs.

'I envied her, too,' she said. 'She was ... kind of free.'

She didn't tell him how she'd pictured herself on that motorbike. Thirteen years old, with no idea where Charlie might be heading. The unspoken thrill of it, edged with fear. She snapped herself out of it. Needing to be *distracted from distraction*. That poem she'd studied last semester. She needed a new interest, a new passion. Something dramatic that might set her free.