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Algeria's Way

Alexandra Smith SMTALE005

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Alexandra Smith Date: 10th November 2005



THE FOOL

In this past month Algeria has sold her car, disposed of her bachelor flat, and left her life's possessions with a friend. She has resigned from her job as chief of marketing and design at Max Chalk Bespoke Interiors Fabrics, binned the secrets from her baroque desk's drawers, and split up with her long-distance lover, who, according to the psychic at Tea & Tarot, is her soul mate, and, according to her psychologist, is a psychopath.

Yesterday was Algeria's final day at work.

In the evening she flew to Spain.

Tomorrow she meets a group of South Africans – nine women and a man – to begin a four-hundred-kilometre walk along the ancient pilgrim paths of El Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the way of St. James of the Field of Stars.

Now she is in Madrid.

On the streets of the city, she jostles through crowds of tourists in floppy hats and branded trainers. Armed with digital cameras, they pan and zoom-in, seeing

nothing. They too have come to find Spain. This place, she thinks, is old enough to be melancholy.

With a map, she finds her way through the alleys of the antique part of the town.

The buildings in the Plaza Major, with their wreaths of fruit and flowers, recall a time when buildings were feminine and women were voluptuous. Fat buildings, made of fat bricks, not towering transparent skeletons. The square is paved in rough stones, each chiseled and placed by human hands. Algeria skirts around café tables and their umbrellas, set up in anticipation of tourists and tips. A cleaning woman beats a rug on a balcony and dust drifts down. A dense smell of flesh curls from joints of cured meats that hang in an emerald-framed *Cerveceria*

Algeria takes pleasure in observing the rituals around tables. A woman with heavy features sucks an olive. Beside her, a man stabs a fork into a bowl of fried and spiced potatoes. When his partner's head is down, he winks at a beautiful girl two tables away. In return, the girl holds a prawn lingering near her mouth, not quite hiding a small smile. A female student shares a cigarette with another, whose hand nestles in the back pocket of her trousers. A couple of honeymooners sit head to head, the husband touching the wife's cheek while feeding her chunks of bread topped with chorizo. It is a courtship of consumption.

In spite of her decision not to be bitter, Algeria cannot suppress cynicism about the stylish men with manicured hands, neatly trimmed nose hairs and condoms tucked discreetly between the credit cards in their wallets. She feels, too, an empathy tinged with jealousy for the all-knowing, well-dressed women with long dark hair, socializing for survival. The bonds of eating begin with the first mouthful of mother's

milk, and if that is the beginning of love, then the scene of the comestible universe around Algeria is as close to an orgy as one will find in the town square of a Catholic country. And all goes on without the shedding of a single pair of knickers.

Leaving the cafés, Algeria moves on towards the shops. Already her neck hurts. Somewhere she has read that a backpack should weigh no more than ten percent of a hiker's body weight. Her bulging Karrimor overloaded with bags of unsulphured dried figs, organic almonds, and a small pebble, weighs in at twenty-five percent of her boyish body's mass.

Artful pyramids of produce draw her into the food hall of El Corte Ingles, a climate-controlled department store with marble floors and a glittering maze of cosmetic counter mirrors at its entrance. She is unable to resist buying sweet maroon cherries, figs and non-genetically modified rice cakes

Further along the road, on a buttermilk awning is printed the word *Carniceria* and beneath it, behind her reflection in the shop glass, on a bed of ice decorated with tomato roses, are three leaping rabbits skinned to the pink. She shivers for them and continues on her way, looking forward to scrubbing the grime of travel from her hands.

Richard often called Algeria prissy and pretentious, a princess. As much as she does not want to be those things, she believes that perhaps Richard is right. In her life she remembers two years of euphoric happiness in her early twenties, but she cannot remember the cause. The times before and after those two years were dim and guilty. She knows that she deserves to be put down, punished. She must be vain, she has had life far too easy with her skin, white as calcinated bird bones, and Naples Yellow hair – that is how her mother once described her hair, opening an art book and pointing to a courtier's turban painted in that same silky colour.

In the time before Algeria was born, when her embryo still had gill pouches and a postanal tail, she heard her mother weeping. That maternal grief thickened as it distilled down through membranes and body minerals towards the waterlogged little life.

When she was thirteen, Algeria would lie in bed and cry about the sad state of the world. That was an era on the brink of the computer revolution, a time of atomic bombs, high apartheid and famines in Ethiopia. She wanted to save the human race. Such conceit.

So there it is out in the open. She despises herself. And she misses Richard. The man who kept her feet so well nailed to the ground.

Eventually, hot and desperate to free herself from her backpack, she finds her hostel, on the third floor of a building in a road off the Plaza Major. The man at reception checks for her reservation while watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* in Spanish.

He asks, "Do you mind if the WC is outside of the room?"

Oh God, Algeria thinks. She isn't yet ready to face sharing a bathroom with strangers. She knows that on the Camino she will have to share living, sleeping, bathing and eating with hundreds of other pilgrims, but she needs this one last day and night alone.

"I did book a room with private facilities," she says.

"Yes, it is private but across the hall." He can't tear himself away from the TV Drama.

It will do – she is too tired to argue. She nods and asks if Christine Stewart has checked in.

The receptionist glances at the register and shakes his head.

Relieved, Algeria retreats upstairs. Christine is one of the walking-group members. On her way to her room to binge on fat cherries and ripe figs, she tries to remember what Christine looks like.

Algeria had found the walking group by chance in a discarded newsletter on a table at her local organic food dealer and café. The page was marked with a ring from the bottom of a glass of carrot and beetroot juice. Slap in the centre of that ring was Dominic's advert inviting anyone interested to join the pilgrimage he was leading to Santiago-de-Compostela. The advert contained a heady, irresistible claim: *Santiago has the power to change lives.*

That advert appeared to Algeria on the day after she made two discoveries.

The first was that Richard was seeing some other girl.

The second was that the mill Algeria had been relying on to manufacture an urgently required chenille stripe had delayed her order at the last minute to make room for an order from a rival company. Algeria had been working at Max Chalk Bespoke Interior Fabrics for five years. The glamour had gone from devoré velvet sheers, embroidered silk taffetas and heavy Italian brocades.

She cannot shake Richard (and dirty deals) from her consciousness. If she could muscle in on another man's deal or another girl's man, would she? She has done neither, yet she believes that in the right circumstances all people are capable of all deeds. It is better not to think of such things.

She promises herself she will think only of here, of now, of Spain, and will allow no memories to consume her.

The walls of her tiny room are scorching orange. From her window she has a view of the gutters, walls and washing lines of the buildings next door and behind. There is one of those ingenious pulley washing lines strung between the buildings. On

it hangs baby clothes, vests and lacy full briefs washed grey. She pulls a newspaper from her backpack but does not read it. She is content, alone. With her index finger she gouges a hole through her plastic bag of cherries and purple figs.

After a handful of cherries and three figs, Algeria flicks through the TV channels. The TV weather man forecasts heat for the coming days. A Spanish news anchor translates a US Army general talking about the unrelenting stance the US will take against the Axis of Evil and how it will not rest until all “high value targets” have been captured and neutralised and brought to justice. She eats the last fig, skin and all. The army general on the television, the unsmiling immigration official she encountered in transit at Frankfurt International Airport, remind her of her father’s brindled bull terrier. It used to infuriate Algeria’s mother by urinating on the master bedroom’s silk curtains. It growled at her mother’s whippet if that dog dared enter the bedroom. Yes, dogs growl, sea lions bellow, wolves bare their fangs and howl, and humans sing anthems and jingles and have border police with loudspeakers and noisy weapons.

She changes the channel. There is a dating game. Full of figs, she lies back. Sun comes through the window at an angle past midday. It divides her: half into shadow and half into light and it makes her hands burn with its heat. The room smells of lavender and slowly baking fruit. TV voices, in Spanish, soon put her to sleep.

A knock at the door wakes her. The sunlight has moved down from the muscles of her middle to her thighs. It takes a few seconds to orientate herself. Through the window she sees that the baby clothes and briefs have been replaced by dishtowels. She gets up and opens the door.

“Hey, I just arrived,” says Chrissie, giving her an over-friendly hug. Algeria smiles and endures the affection from the barefoot girl who has half a dozen rags clasp her hair into loops. Finally, Chrissie releases her, looks about and says, “Jeez, these walls are vibrant.”

Chrissie, a benign intruder, gravitates to the window. A pair of vintage-looking diamanté spectacles hang from a chain round her neck. She wears Kenti-cloth print shorts and smells of mango tobacco.

“Not much to see,” says Algeria, pleased with the room’s lack of pretension.

Standing at the window, Chrissie gazes at the dishtowels on the washing line.

“How are you?” asks Algeria. “How was your flight?”

Chrissie tells Algeria how she forgot the hostel’s address in Cape Town along with important telephone numbers and the Camino workbook that the tour leader, Dominic, had given them at a meeting before they left.

“All I knew was that it was near the Plaza Major,” says Chrissie, raising her lilac spectacles and holding them over her nose. “But I was totally chilled. I wandered around for two hours, just absorbing the scene and spirit of the place.” Chrissie breathes in deeply as if still imbued with this mysterious Spanishness.

What was that spirit? All Algeria saw was eating and sweating. She can feel sun across her cheekbones and in her eyes.

“Those are pretty glasses,” Algeria says, still perturbed that she might have missed the soul of Spain. She was in the Plaza Major, too. What alley or chink did Chrissie find that she did not?

“Thanks. They’re vintage 50’s Christian Dior. I picked them up at that second-hand clothing shop in Stellenbosch.”

“I know the one.” Perhaps it’s in the glasses? Algeria has a slight stigmatism in her left eye; her vision might have deteriorated to the point that she missed what she was looking for.

“My optometrist put new lenses in them. I’m short-sighted.” Chrissie peers at Algeria. “Your eyes are emerald-blue, like Murano glass. I have a vase that colour.”

Algeria shrugs: she’s uncomfortable with the attention. She moves her head out of the sun. “How did you say you found the place?”

Chrissie allows the spectacles to hang again. She explains that she stopped for a beer and got chatting to an English-speaking barman at a *taverna*. He’d heard of the hostel, and drew a map for her on the back of a Heineken coaster. She holds up the coaster as proof.

“You’re lucky,” says Algeria. “I found a wonderful place selling fruit: figs and Spanish cherries. I adore cherries.”

Chrissie lifts her spectacles again to look at Algeria. “Have you lost weight since that Camino meeting? You’re looking very thin. Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Algeria can never understand why it is that people who would not ordinarily tell a fat woman she is looking fat do not show a similar sensitivity when it comes to thinness.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Algeria indicates the photocopied Camino workbook on the telephone table. “Have you managed to do any of this?”

Chrissie shakes her head. “No, as I said, I forgot my workbook in Cape Town... Have you always been so thin?”

“Always.” Algeria holds up the workbook. There is a smudgy medieval pilgrim on the cover. “Well, there’s not much to do today. Today’s the Fool.”

In the workbook, days have become trumps, literally, in a game of Tarot. Major Arcana images from the *Visconti-Sforza* and other occult decks circumscribe a circle of allegorical lessons to begin on the first day they arrive in Spain and to continue until the day their Camino ends.

She opens the workbook to the expansive fellow depicted in the image from the *Universal Waite* deck. He stands at the edge of a cliff wearing yellow boots and a robe patterned with pomegranates.

“Jumping off a cliff you know,” says Algeria. “The wanderer starting a journey into the unknown, a quest, shaking off the *status quo*, that kind of thing. We’re supposed to reflect on it and write down our dreams from last night or something... I haven’t done that, I never remember my dreams.”

“Mind if I smoke?” Chrissie asks.

Although Algeria minds a great deal, she does not say so. Instead she shakes her head, empties the fig skins and cherry pips onto the newspaper and puts the still-sticky ashtray on the telephone table next to Chrissie.

Algeria and Chrissie discuss the length of the express trip to Leon and then the Mediterranean coast where Chrissie plans to holiday after the Camino. Chrissie says she has borrowed her backpack from her ex-boyfriend. He lives rent-free, in Chrissie’s flat, even though they have broken up. A temporary arrangement, Chrissie explains, until he starts to make a profit from his trance dance co-operative.

“I don’t think I’ve met an Algeria before,” Chrissie says. As she rolls her cigarette, the Kenyan wire-spiral bracelets on her arms tinkle. “It’s such a pretty name.”

“My mother was in love with Camus when she was in her intellectual art student phase, and apparently decided then that she’d one day name her children accordingly:

so we're Summer, Camilla, Albert and Algeria. That's what she tells everyone, but personally I think her inspiration came from his story in that collection called 'The Minotaur.' I think motherhood was her Oran. It's a city in Algiers, where eventually all people are consumed – *devoured* is the word Camus uses – by the Minotaur."

"The Minotaur, the mythological..."

"Boredom." Algeria smiles. "The Minotaur is boredom. The citizens of Oran have given up wandering. They have accepted being eaten." She loves, and is hurt by, her mother for being a bad citizen. Her mother never gave up wandering. Nor will Algeria – she wants to be an eternal pilgrim.

"I wish I had a philosophy behind my name," Chrissie says.

There is no lighter in the room. Algeria is relieved when Chrissie departs to find one.

The pile of fig skins and cherry pips are wilting on the newspaper. Outside, the city is shouting. She thinks again of Richard. She is ten thousand miles away from him, and yet she can think of no one else.

To banish Richard from her thoughts, she tries to visualise the artworks she saw at the Prado earlier in the day. She thinks of Gabriel Metsu's *A Dead Cock*. Almost touchable, that bird dangled by one foot from a hangman's noose. Remembering its crimson coxcomb, she imagines an alchemy of insects dried and heated over a low fire. Their arthropod corpses would have been brought to Spain by traders, sold to merchants and crushed into pigment. The culmination of that cochineal generation's co-evolution with man was to suffer the colourist's grinding and be mixed with the artist's imagination. United, artist and arthropods, in having their insides immortalised on canvas.

Algeria is an artist, too. A hunger artist. She is bent on dieting disappointment and hurt out of her system. It is a biological fact: when body mass index is sufficiently depleted, reproductive systems close down and a girl's taste for love is dulled to zero. Her relationship with Richard, which began when she was twenty-six, was the first relationship she'd had with a man. At the age of twenty-six that wasn't exactly normal. There'd been other men who had tried to start up relationships but she always managed to escape from them.

When she tried to evade Richard, he said, "I have feelings too, you know." This struck her because until then she never thought men could have feelings, such dangerous and cruel creatures they seemed to her. From Richard she learned that men are human.

The day Algeria discovered that Richard was seeing another woman was the day she was tempted to stop eating altogether. Surely, it would be easiest just to be air? Air has no expectations, no ego, no vanities.

Richard had inherited his dark eyes and perfect bone structure from his mother, but none of her animation; very little moved him. *No girl can do worse than put herself at the mercy of a handsome appearance.* It is a line from a play Algeria once acted in for the Muizenberg Amateur Dramatic Society. *The Glass Menagerie*, that was the name of the play. Algeria played the part of the crippled girl, Laura. She related well to Laura, who had a collection of glass animals.

An obsession with theatre and particularly the opera was one thing Richard and Algeria had in common: she had dreamed of being an opera singer and his mother, in her day, had been a starlet of the Belcanto Society. His CD collection spanned all operas ever recorded from *Euridice* to *La Voix Humaine*. Every day after work, he ran ten kilometres and while running listened to opera on his i-pod.

The great loves and torments of divas and adoring tenors crowded the evening air in his Spartan apartment, which was also filled with expensive sporting equipment: a windsurfer, a mountain bike, a second-hand paraglider, an ice-axe, boots with crampons, running shoes and climbing shoes, bags filled with thick steel clips and heavy coils of ropes.

Cold. Despite his physicality and all those limits he tempted so fearlessly, Richard didn't even sweat. He was cold and his body was cold. When then was Algeria warmed by him?

The cold was one of the reasons she gave Richard as to why she could not move to Vancouver with him. Too cold and she cannot endure coldness. Too thin, he'd said, and told her she should eat more. It suited him then to tell her to eat more. Before that, he would poke her concave belly and call her "fatty."

Richard. She determines to implement a program of negative reinforcement – she will punish herself whenever she catches herself thinking of him.

What is the worst thing she could inflict upon herself, the worst punishment she could mete out? *Meat*, of course, if she thinks of Richard again she will force herself to eat a slice of meat. A slice for each thought of him. *A pound of flesh. Her flesh, her past, sullied and stale.* She thinks of the *Carnicería*, the three rabbits, the dead cock, the smell of chilled sinews, the rows of smoked and salted hams.

She thinks of all the hours spent waiting for Richard in restaurants and hotels. She sees him pleading for forgiveness, begging her to move with him to Canada. She should have ended it that weekend she flew to Johannesburg to see him and he forgot to meet her at the airport. He did not answer his phone. For three hours she waited at the arrivals lounge, before checking into the airport Inter-Continental Hotel.

When he telephoned her that night, with his arsenal of excuses, saying he had to see her, she refused to tell him where she was and she enjoyed her newfound power. For once, she was not the one who begged.

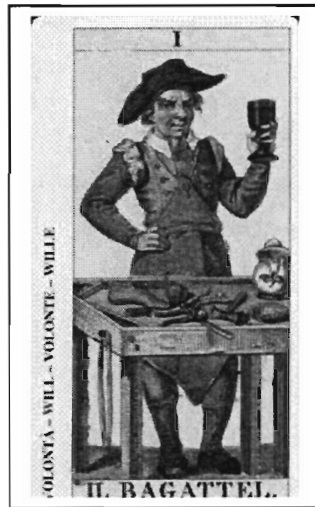
She needed to be fed gentleness with a dropper like those used to resuscitate dehydrated birds. And if not that, then she wanted him to suffer.

She knows now where Richard had been while she was waiting in the airport – perhaps she had known all along. He was at the opera with Caroline.

Deception... Deception, Algeria recalls those first words spoken in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Even though she knew it was a mistake, Algeria finally relented; she told him the name of her hotel. When Richard met her in the hotel lobby, he wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to his chest so that she could hardly breathe.

“I just want to eat you,” he said.



THE MAGICIAN

Algeria pulls a grape from its stalk and looks on as Chrissie and Cathy hug hello on the platform at Madrid's Central Station. Four thousand years and humans are still cultivating and plucking grapes – this reassures her. Some paces away, Chrissie and Cathy are holding hands like nursery-school children about to play Oranges and Lemons.

The depth of this place makes Algeria think of Egyptian tombs. She has been underground in Egypt. Sennefer's tomb smelled of footprints. Algeria remembers it for its ceilings, patterned with bunches of blue grapes and other fruits. Those tombs were cool and empty, parched of bodies and ghosts. Here trains arrive, announcements are made, people embrace. It drains her, all this life.

“Have you seen any of the others?” Algeria asks them.

“Only that woman from Port Elizabeth,” says Cathy. “She's on the train already.”

Inside the carriage, Algeria sits beside a teenage boy with stubble and acne, listening to a CD Walkman. Seated opposite, Cathy and Chrissie gossip about their love lives.

A boyfriend named Anthony is frustrating Cathy. He is obsessed with waves – not the light waves that fascinate Algeria, but salt water waves. His thoughts are always of the sea and he is unmoved by money. Cathy wants stability. She wants to move away from the beach suburb of Noordhoek because, besides anything else, the air is rusting her new car. Her hair is the faint yellow an eighteenth-century chemist would have obtained by heating a mixture of lead oxide, sea salt and soda.

“It hasn’t worked out the way I hoped. I feel so let down,” says Cathy. She adopts the expression that has etched a deep and premature crease between her eyebrows.

“Doesn’t every woman?” says Chrissie, pulling up one of her royal-blue leg-warmers. “I’ve given up on men. I just don’t have the energy anymore.” She looks at Algeria. “Know what I mean?”

“Free energy. Perhaps that’s the heart of the matter,” says Algeria. She is thinking of the books on physics she has been reading. “Life depends on it, so you’re right, maybe love does, too.”

Cathy and Chrissie do not seem convinced. Chrissie is about to say something but is interrupted by the arrival of food. A man wheels a trolley through their section, peddling his bonbons to Cathy and Chrissie and the boy with the Walkman.

When the train finally eases out into the light, Algeria’s first view of the netherworld is the bricks and scrap and gloom of Madrid’s outskirts. Soon they are in the countryside, miles of green grass, cypresses, poppies and bales of hay.

Chrissie opens her Coca-Cola. The dark sugary beverage reminds Algeria of an old man who used to go to her grandmother's annual Boxing Day party. Every year without fail he would corner Algeria and her cousin in a room that smelled of stale cream-crackers. She remembers the room as a clutter of Christmas garlands, brass tacks, blue airmail paper and typewriter ribbons. Their backs against a wall, the man would tell them that if they left a tooth overnight in a glass of Coke, by the next morning the tooth would have dissolved.

After a ticket collector has done his rounds, the catatonic teenager transfers to another seat where he has three chairs and a bag of crisps to himself.

"Want a bite?" Cathy holds out a chocolate to Chrissie.

Chrissie bites. Cathy pulls the wrapper down further. Scalloped at the end by Cathy's teeth, it points at Algeria.

"Want some?" says Cathy.

Algeria holds up her hand in rejection to the two girls happily munching. She wants to say, *Have you read the wrapper? Get that chemical shit away from me.* Instead she smiled placidly and says, "Not for me, thanks."

"Ant would spend his whole life surfing if he could," Cathy says with a scowl. "I want more for him. I'm beginning to wonder why we are together."

Cathy and Chrissie are too similar, Algeria thinks. She wonders if they'll talk about Anthony all the way along their walk to Santiago. Will it be blisters and Anthony, backache and Anthony, meadows and Anthony? And will Anthony be surfing all the while?

Lulled by the movement of the train, Algeria remembers the hypnotherapist Malcolm Ross. Her psychologist had suggested she see Ross. Lean and balding, Ross worked out of a house that smelled of too many aging dogs. They followed her in a

yelping procession: a shapeless, overfed Labrador, an aging Maltese poodle and a Jack Russell with an ulcer on its hind leg.

In his cramped office, Ross sat less than a metre away from her. She found the lack of distance unsettling. She had hoped that hypnotism would be like a general anaesthetic. That it would all happen with a painless lack of consciousness.

“I have these images in my head,” Algeria told him. “Memories, I suppose they must be.”

The images are not clear. There is nothing visually sinister about them but they press her down.

“What sort of images?” asked Malcolm Ross.

“One image is a section at the end of my parents’ home in Constantia,” Algeria said. “It’s the housekeeper’s room. The time I see it is when Maggie was the housekeeper. It is dark and heavy and makes me scared as if something happened there... but I don’t know exactly. I don’t know why I have these thoughts.”

That is all she will say of them.

“How old are you, Algeria?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“And in these images, what age are you?”

“I’m not sure. A child, very young.”

“What makes you think there is significance in these images?” He leaned forward. The rays of sun coming through the window turned the glass on his framed certificates into blinding silver. “Why does your psychologist want you to know more about these flashbacks?”

She answered him without looking him in the eye.

“Business relationships are fine,” she said, “but personal relationships make me anxious. I avoid them. I withdraw, isolate myself. For years when I was a teenager I never spoke to my father or my brother. I have no idea why. But I was always a frightened child. I used to have recurring nightmares.”

In one nightmare there was a car. It was an off-white old model car, maybe a Peugeot, not a car with which she was familiar. She was a child, and she and her mother got out of this car to go shopping. She climbed out on the right and her mother climbed out on the left. When she walked around the back of the car there were malevolent faces in the pavement and she was trapped. The faces were going to hurt her, consume her. She screamed and called for her mother’s help, but her mother could not hear. Her mother, in a long tight skirt and kitten-heeled shoes, walked away, oblivious. The way her mother’s arm was positioned was as if her mother believed she was holding Algeria’s hand. But she was holding air. There was no child walking at her side. No matter how loud Algeria shouted for help her mother continued walking towards the shop, unknowing.

“The nightmares woke me every night and I would go and sleep on the floor next to my mother’s bed,” she said.

Malcolm Ross didn’t need to know that this went on until she was fifteen years old. When she was fifteen her divorced sister, twelve years older, moved back home and Algeria gave up looking for safety on the floor of her parent’s bedroom. Instead, she camped out on the floor of her sister’s yellow bedroom, and the two whispered for hours in the dark.

“I want you to relax now,” Ross said. “Close your eyes and take a long deep breath and then slowly exhale.”

She felt calm, listening to the twittering of birds, taped and real. She focussed on breathing in and out.

“Now keep breathing slowly, slowly and deeply. All the sounds you hear just make you feel more relaxed. More and more relaxed. When I count to three I will snap my fingers and your feeling of relaxation will double. One. Two. Three.”

Snap.

“Now this time, when I count to three and click my fingers, you will be a child and you are in the room at the end of your parent’s house, Maggie’s room. One. Two. Three.”

Snap.

“Tell me, Algeria, what do you see?”

The train slows as it passes through a station and Algeria looks up to discover a woman in her forties standing above her, cheeks red as raw mince and thick ankles bound up in the leather and laces of hiking boots. She has an unusually large backpack and carry bag.

Cathy introduces her as Diana, the woman from Port Elizabeth.

“I was sitting right at the back. I noticed the empty seat so I thought I’d join you,” Diana says, and she sits down next to Algeria.

Algeria notices that Diana’s hands are scarred across the top and over her fingers, as if her skin was once melted, peeled off and then stitched on by a shoddy tailor. How did those hands get so ruined?

Diana sees Algeria is looking but she is not shy of her hands; she does not try to hide them.

Algeria could do without talking right now but Diana is chatty. She didn't make it to the Prado Museum, and tells Algeria that she plans to spend a week in Madrid after they have completed the pilgrimage.

"Art fascinates me." Diana smiles and seems to be imagining pictures. "All those paintings, like cross-sections of so many hearts and minds. I'm a psychologist, you see. I used to be a translator, but I'm a psychologist now." Absently, she strokes the skin of her left hand with the disfigured fingers of her right.

A psychologist? There are so many questions Algeria would like to ask, but it would be impolite, an infringement on Diana's holiday.

"I'm looking forward to seeing Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*," Diana says.

"Yes, it's extraordinary." What Algeria most remembers about those three detail-crammed panels of the Bosch triptych is that between the peculiar skulls and birds and naked people, there was a lot of fruit-eating going on.

Cathy and Chrissie, still munching, not particularly interested in Bosch, drift back to the unsatisfactory situation of Anthony.

Diana holds a flimsy magazine called *Humane Education*. "I got it from my local SPCA," she explains. "I foster cats for them."

The front-page story captures Algeria's attention. It is about shipping live meat to Asia. A cow, with one foot hooked from a crane, dangles over the sea between ship and shore.

Diana makes a comment about animal husbandry, and discussion moves from the cramped, drugged-up cover-story animals on a six-week voyage to their slaughterhouse death to a story in the magazine written by a twelve-year-old girl about dissecting a frog in biology class.

“I could never do it,” says Diana. “I could never kill anyone.”

Algeria ponders the use of “one” as opposed to “thing.” Yes, it’s true Algeria also refers to animals by personal pronouns – still, in this instance, “*anything*” seems a better choice of word.

“Once I had a biology teacher who tried to make me do it and I fainted in the class. She left me lying under my desk and continued with the lesson,” Diana says, still stroking her left hand.

“What a horrible teacher.” Algeria watches Cathy bite into a second chocolate. “I’m surprised they still do dissections. Aren’t there computer simulations now?”

Diana shakes her head. “I don’t know. I would never expect my children to have to do it. It can traumatise a person. Nobody has the right to torture people or animals. I’m a vegetarian.”

“Me too,” says Algeria.

Diana seems pleased to find an ally. Would she feel the same way if she knew that Algeria could not say why she has been compelled to be a vegetarian these last seven years? A strict vegetarian, at that: no meat, no fish, no chicken, no eggs and no dairy. Yet, no matter how many films Algeria subjects herself to on the snipping off of battery chicken toes and chicken beaks and dairy cows with dragging and infected udders and the host of other farming atrocities, she does not feel *their* pain. She is at a distance, emotionally and physically. She sees their suffering as the doom of her future self. What she feels is a profound sadness: for herself, for her being. She feels it, she sees it and she has no word for it.

“I’ve never dissected a frog, either,” Algeria says. But perhaps she is not so distant from that kind of suffering. Perhaps she knows how a frog feels before dissection.

Diana reads aloud from the article in *Humane Education*.

“Three frogs were brought into the class in glass cylinders. They were jumping up and down trying to escape.”

Algeria imagines a lab like Mrs Beams had at school, the bottles on its shelves filled by formaldehyde-infused sea creatures, spiders and a human foetus. The unborn child was flaking and white, with a much-pointed-to umbilical cord dangling in limbo. She pictures them, three jumping frogs, little and green, and a class of thrilled early learners.

“One frog was put into a metal dish,” Diana reads.

Algeria’s eyes settle on Diana’s wedding ring on a ruined finger. Would the metal dish be brassy like a wedding ring or the lid of a jar? No, it would be steel, clean and cold and anti-septic.

Cathy and Chrissie have their heads together. It is an enviable friendship. Chrissie tickles Cathy’s palm.

“Sometimes Ant and I get on so well,” says Cathy. “But everything is just so easy for him and it irritates me. Like before I left, I was talking to him on the beach and I said that I wished I could stay and surf. I suppose I was having second thoughts about doing the Camino. So Ant says, ‘You could.’ Can you imagine!”

“The teacher gave the boy in the class a scalpel,” Diana continues. Algeria imagines the amphibians panicking in their prison.

“*You could*. What did Anthony mean by that?” says Chrissie.

Cathy shrugs. “Exactly! He’s emotionally immature. I suppose I was overreacting, but it just made me want to scream and shake him. I’m trying to be more chilled. I asked him and he just shrugged.”

““The boy with the scalpel tried to cut the frog’s head off,”” says Diana. Her cheeks are blotted and she takes a deep breath as if about to go underwater.

Algeria can see the children in their uniforms gathered around a worktable on which is a glass jar containing two frogs jumping, with another frog in a metal dish. Some children are giggling, a future zoologist is fascinated, others pull faces and perhaps there is a squeal of disgust from the author of the story. The teacher glowers and commandeers attention to the great event. But she does not have to tell them to look – they will look, they *must* look, they cannot help but look. In the pushing-shoving to get a front-row view, a box of led pencils is scattered on the floor. A stash of sticky M&M’s passes between hot hands. The author of the story wants to hide her eyes but she must do her journalistic duty.

She steels herself for the moment. The frog is held down.

Her breath seems to stop.

The blade gleams, then dips into the frog’s thin skin.

Get it over with quickly, thinks Algeria.

“Suddenly I snapped,” says Chrissie, “and I started saying things like, ‘You can’t just drop things, it’s totally irresponsible and wasteful. You just can’t do that, you have to take some responsibility, commit to something.’ I was about to say, ‘That’s exactly your problem.’ Shit, he was so angry.”

“Shocking,” Algeria says to Diana. “Unbelievable... so violent.”

Frowning, Diana closes her eyes briefly, and continues. ““When the boy tried to cut off the frog’s head it didn’t work because the scalpel was blunt.””

“Do you know how frogs breathe?” Algeria asks Diana, who appears disconcerted by the question. “It’s called positive pressure breathing. A frog pushes the air into his lungs.”

Diana looks at Algeria in a way that makes Algeria feel like a specimen.

“What happened to the frog after that?”

““The boy stabbed the frog about four times,”” reads Diana. “The girl writes: ‘We thought it was dead but when they started cutting open its stomach, it tried to jump. It was breathing very fast. I don’t know whether I should talk about it...’”

Diana pauses, pale, but carries on. ““One of the boys held its body down with the glass jar, stabbed out its eyes and cut its head off with scissors. Then he put the head on tweezers and carried it around the class, scaring people. Most people were laughing.””

Algeria doesn’t know what to say. What does it mean, all that glee? Was it nerves or does it point to something sinister in human nature?

“There’s a correlation, you know,” says Diana. “Research into the childhood of serial killers and vicious criminals shows that they have a history of torturing animals. Men who abuse animals are also more likely to abuse their wives...”

There is strain in the muscles of Diana’s face and her blue eyes have become intense. “My ex-husband once threw my dog against the wall in our kitchen. He might have done the same with me, if it weren’t for my neighbour, Rosa, who rescued me...”

Diana gazes out of the window. Algeria is shocked at this new evidence of the violence of men. She wants to say something but Diana speaks: “Bosch has a marvellous eye for detail, don’t you think? A truly remarkable artist.”

Algeria is trying to reason away abuse and the pink-and-cream melamine floor and Maggie’s boyfriend who used his enamel dish of maize meal to hit Maggie across the face. Algeria tries to unthink the corner where she crouched, watching, with her

long hair covering her eyes. She wants to undo the threatening lighter and the hands that pulled at her childish panties.

Chrissie sucks the last gurgle of lukewarm Coke from her can. The Walkman boy is bobbing his head to music only he can hear.

Cathy sighs. "I still love Ant."

Stroking her left hand with her right, Diana watches through a window as summery Spain rushes by.

University of Cape Town



JUSTICE

Algeria walks until a cobbled road opens out to reveal the Cathedral San Isidoro with its sharp towers grasping at the sky like a handful of bunioned fingers.

Beneath the Cathedral's lapis lazuli-coloured clock face scattered with painted gold stars and moons is Dominic, tour leader and tarot master. He is the image of beneficence, in a loose white shirt, shorts, and leather thong sandals. He takes a drag on a cigarette, squeezes the fire from its end and welcomes Algeria.

"Go into the Cathedral," he says. "Today is the Magician's day, a time to consider choices. Look for a symbol, an image to take with you, something that represents the Camino for you. Write down your reason for making this journey to Santiago. What are you looking for, what are you asking for?"

Three men in white vests with wisps of hair and bellies that have endured decades of spiced paella and heartburn sit on a bench in the sun, in a stony alcove outside San Isidoro's Cathedral. Each one has an old camera on his lap. The man in the middle has his eyes closed and a contented growl emanates from his sinuses.

Algeria walks from the brightness into the stone and glass and spiked shadows of the Gothic cathedral. Two centuries of slicing, chiselling, carving, bending metal, cutting and staining glass for eighteen-hundred square metres of windows are lauded with five lines of description on a paper sign covered in plastic over a donation box.

Still, Algeria stands looking up towards the jewel-light filtering from a scene of crucifixion. At the foot of the cross is a bleeding sheep and a woman whose face is distorted by wailing and the angles of the glass. Life drips from the holes made by spikes in the thorn-crowned man's feet. A sunbeam reflects a nail and amber blood into Algeria's forehead and, as she shifts, the reflection moves down her arm to her hand.

She frees herself from the casement's stigma. The scene, with its host of tearful angels as audience to the torture, promises heaven but permits only half-light to tint the secrets of the cathedral. *When all else fails use bloody great nails*, said some old-school engineer.

The San Isidoro curator has hair and clothes like abbé Pierre. He and his two colleagues talk in Spanish in hushed voices. He plays with a bunch of big keys that open doors Algeria can only guess at. His eyes have settled on a Japanese tourist near the altar. His breath pushes through a nose dense with wiry hairs.

The tourist prepares her camera to photograph the Virgin Mother.

The curator stands, coughs a dank bronchial warning and, when he gets no response, shuffles over to the tourist.

"*Eh, Señora, no el flash eh?*" The curator's words bump off the stone floors and walls. He scowls and says, "*Entiende usted?*"

The tourist takes fright and scuttles off.

The curator breaks into a limpid cough, crosses himself, kisses his fingers and offers the kiss up to *Santa Maria*. Then he returns to his guard-post and resumes the conversation with his friends.

Algeria sits down on one of the pews. She contemplates what to write as her request for Santiago, the great Saint whose city is populated with the whispers and echoes of the countless pilgrims who've been marching on to find salvation for the last thousand years. The road to Santiago is crowded with need; there is not an inch of respite from the hubbub of ten centuries of hopes, dreams and desperation.

Another tourist is lifting a camera to focus on the altar.

“*Oiga!*” calls the curator. His keys rattle like the bones of an angry skeleton.

“It doesn't say no photography,” says the tourist, with an American accent. She turns her back on the curator and returns to the business of selecting aperture and speed.

Muttering to his friends, the curator pushes himself up again and walks over to prod the tourist. “*No, el Flash,*” he commands.

“Fine,” she says. “But I can still take a picture. You should put a sign up if you don't want photography in here.”

“*No, el Flash,*” he repeats. Again he crosses himself, kisses his fingers and offers the kiss to Blessed Mary, Mother of God. He gives the tourist one last glare and walks off. When he sits down, he resumes his conversation with the two other men. They mutter and shake their heads.

Algeria's attention is drawn away from the guardians of the *Santa Maria*'s effigy, when Dominic enters the Cathedral. He is with a blonde woman in a flowing white figure-disguising Indian cotton pant-suit. They join Algeria on the dark wooden pew.

“What do you think?” the woman asks Algeria.

“It’s impressive... powerful, I suppose,” Algeria says.

The woman crinkles her nose. Her lips shine. They are good lips, thinks Algeria, symmetrical, neither thin nor too fat.

“I find it very cold, restrictive... unwelcoming, actually,” says the woman. She holds out her hand. “I’m Annabel, by the way. You’re Algeria, right?”

It seems a very long time that they sit there holding hands in the gloom.

“Yes,” Algeria says, withdrawing her hand. “Yes, you’re right, it is strange. It’s meant to be a symbol of infinite love and yet it’s threatening, alienating and exclusionary. And so sombre...”

“Like a bloody coffin, if you ask me,” says Annabel, opening a sketchbook. “I don’t get any sense of spirituality or love from it. Quite frankly, I get more out of sitting under a tree or being on a mountain than being in a gory place like this.”

She begins a pen drawing of an ornate pillar cap.

Over Algeria glowers a crimson-and-gold scene of the crucifixion. She agrees with Annabel, the Cathedral *is* a coffin, a tomb. It will be her symbol.

As Annabel sketches, Algeria, listening to rubber soles squeaking against the stones, concludes that the hardness of the place must be a cover-up, a defence, a show of bravura. A bellowing of power and superiority, and to hell with you if you don’t follow the Catholic faith. The bell that tolls hourly, the priests that reprimand daily, the pictures of damnation that linger eternally.

And yet, Algeria empathises with the curator, who has the thankless task of preserving the disintegrating life of a photosensitive Saint.

Another trophy-hunter tourist is making his way to the altar. The curator is tying his shoelace and does not see the potential trespasser.

The trophy-hunter takes a shot of a bejewelled cross and in that second the tourist and the cross are touched by a dazzle of white light.

Sitting up, the curator shouts, "*No, el flash no está permitido!*"

Unconcerned or uncomprehending, the tourist takes a second shot, this time of a weeping Mary holding up her punctured son.

"*Oiga!*" Keys fit for heavenly gates rattle as the curator makes a quick shuffle over. The shuffle robs the Virgin Mother of some of her colour. "*Oiga! Señor, el flash no está permitido.*"

The tourist wanders off, pleased with his catch.

The curator glares at the tourist's Tommy Hilfiger-emblazoned back, wipes his brow and looks hopeless. He returns to his friends and points at the departing trophy-hunter. They mutter and whisper. One of the curator's friends gets up and follows the trophy-hunter out of the cathedral. The curator sits back in his chair, grinning. He and his remaining friend laugh and their laughter rumbles down the three aisles, towards the three apses, through chinks in the cathedral bricks, cracks under doors, keyholes, up through the square belfry and all the way out into the streets of Leon.

Annabel, unaware of the curator, pauses from her sketch and looks at Algeria. She reaches out and touches Algeria's hair. Algeria thinks it a peculiar move until she sees a tiny red flower in Annabel's hand.

"It was a beautiful tree," says Annabel. "I saw it too, on my way to the cathedral." She smiles, puts the flower between the pages of her book and sketches again. The sketch is not brilliant but it has a decorative quality and a haphazardness that Algeria appreciates.

Algeria looks around the ancient building. "I suppose all these rituals are meant to establish a dominance hierarchy... this is the architecture of intimidation."

“Exactly,” replies Annabel. “That’s exactly what it is.”

“But I suspect that at its foundation is fear.”

Annabel nods. “We should have dinner now.” She closes her sketchbook. “I don’t know about you guys but I’ve been travelling all day and I’m feeling pretty hungry. Could do with a drink, too.”

Dominic’s breathing halts and his eyes open.

“*Las Torres Tempranillo*,” he says, turning to Annabel. “Excellent idea.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for the others to arrive?” asks Algeria. Three group members have not arrived.

“No.” Dominic stands and rubs his hands. “They’ll find their way to the hostel.”

Very soon they return to day.

Annabel stops to peer at two insignificant drops of blood that fleck a stone tile outside the Cathedral. It is blood from a small bird with a smashed head, black feathers and an orange beak. Annabel photographs the bird and its blood let from several angles.

Algeria notices that the three old men with cameras have gone from their bench in the shade of a medieval alcove. She becomes aware of a fracas in the direction of the Plaza de la Regla. It is the red Tommy Hilfiger top that she recognises first. The trophy-hunter is walking, half-running, and swatting at what seems to be four old men. Algeria puts her hand over her brow to block out the sun so that she can be sure of what she suspects: they are the three old men who were sitting in the alcove and there is the Isidoro curator’s friend. All four men have cameras and they are following the tourist like paparazzi. Photographing from every angle, always using a flash. They are unrelenting and chase the trophy-hunting tourist, who is squinting from the excess of bright lights, all the way down the Sierra Pambley.



THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Due to the configuration of tables in the refugio courtyard, each person who stoops under the archway must come towards Algeria, as clear and full of possibility as the first line of a book. She could make an effort and find out what occurs beyond that line, but she doesn't and nor do they. Sometimes she offers an absent smile; most times she merely looks on to the next face.

Beneath the antique eaves of the Amigos del Camino de Santiago, in the village of Ospital de Orbigo, Hazel, a fellow pilgrim, met along the way the previous day, bites open a packet of mixed fruit and nuts.

"Did you manage to get any dinner last night?" Hazel asks.

Algeria shakes her head: no dinner, but something else has happened since she parted from her walking group beyond Leon city limits yesterday. Near a series of Hobbit-like homes built into the grass and noticeable only by an odd chimney or a squat door, Algeria, eager for solitude, strode ahead of the group.

Still, Algeria, was not quite alone: in spirit she was with Richard. He devoured her thoughts. She took it for granted that the yellow arrows painted along the Camino paths would lead her to Villadangos, the agreed stop for that night.

Richard had once told Algeria that he had no memory of emotions and that he needed feelings to be explained. Richard was a beautiful man become heartless. If Richard had to choose a symbol for himself, for his life, for what he wanted, what would it be? Nothing came to mind.

Algeria has tried to out-love Richard's other girlfriends and over-love his heartless self, but this kind of loving is corrosive.

Richard laughed when Algeria told him she wanted to write a novel. "You're not a writer," he said, "and what could you write about?"

She has decided she will write about her experience on the Camino. As she travels she will compose a novel inspired by Dominic's cartomancy, step by step and word by word, it will last as long as the pilgrimage. When that novel ends she will be done with Richard. Then she will begin another book.

Algeria walked on and on until half past one when her feet, unaccustomed to walking for seven hours solid, began to ache. She realised she hadn't paused to drink anything the whole morning and, worse still, she needed the toilet. Ominous clouds in the distance did nothing to cool that searing present. There were no trees for shade and relief, just bend after bend, meadow after meadow, and the village nowhere in sight.

A distant barn at the top of a hill made her hopeful; it might be the start of the village.

It was not. A farmer watched her go by. The road dragged on over the hill. On and on and on and there was no choice but to continue: she couldn't fail on her first day of the Camino.

Around yet another corner, Algeria happened upon a woman pilgrim with acorn-brown eyes. She was sitting on a log, eating a jam sandwich. Her name was Hazel. She informed Algeria that Villadangos was long gone and the next village five kilometres on was Ospital de Orbigo.

And here they are.

"I didn't feel like dinner last night," Algeria explains. "I was so exhausted after all that walking."

"Well, you would be: thirty-seven kilometres on your first day is a bit much," Hazel says. "You need to eat, though."

Algeria nods. "I did eat a packet of Brazil nuts."

Around them, pilgrims are yawning and sipping coffee from bowls. For one Euro the hostel provides a breakfast consisting of hunks of soft bread, cheese, jam and coffee. It was simple food but not for Algeria. She doesn't eat bread, or jam.

"You should have come for drinks," Hazel says. "It was a big group of pilgrims. That Mexican fellow, Miguel, had us all dancing. It was a riot."

"I can imagine." Algeria had encountered Miguel four times yesterday:

First in Leon with the morning star above them, between a huddle of antiquated back streets, along the ochre-walled Calle Escorial outside the Benedictine Pilgrim's Refuge. In a square with weeds growing through cobbles, Algeria had been photographing a dog barking at a tall stone cross. She'd just purchased a cockleshell with a red cross hand-painted on it by the Benedictine Sisters. At the top of the heart-shaped shell was a hole threaded with a leather loop that she used to attach it to her

backpack. She had on her peaked cap, and she was waiting for her walking group, impatient to leave, to get on with the walk, to prove she could do it, when a man with curly brown hair emerged from the monastery refuge: Miguel.

Her group members were slow in coming. She and Miguel talked about the colours of the buildings and antique colourists, chemists, alchemists and poets. He told her he worked as a lawyer, that he'd come on the Camino by a twist of Yahoo fate: he'd done an internet search on the meaning of life and amongst the millions of answers he picked the result with the same number as his birth date. It was an article on the Camino de Santiago. Algeria liked that and the way his accent played improperly with the English words. His face was smooth, boyish, and yet there were touches of grey in his thick dark hair. He wanted to leave and suggested she walk with him, and that was when she saw his wedding ring, yellow as orpiment and perhaps equally treacherous.

Each time she saw him again, the first thing she noticed was his wedding ring.

"I suppose Miguel is still fast asleep," Hazel says. "I left the *taverna* just after ten. But according to Katie... have you met her?"

"No."

"She's from Perth, lovely girl. She said Miguel and some others stayed on until after midnight."

This Algeria already knows. Where is Miguel's wife? Back in Mexico? Does his wife know he spends all night dancing with strange women at *tavernas* or does she think her husband is on a Catholic pilgrimage to find the meaning of life?

"I didn't know you were going for drinks," Algeria lies.

"Oh? Miguel said he called you."

“I must’ve been asleep.” Algeria peels her banana. She will not allow herself to feel guilty about being anti-social. It will ruin the dawn. She enjoys the first hour of morning more than any other time. It is the driest hour – the time before the day has spoiled her thoughts with its excesses and guilt.

Hazel empties peanuts, pumpkin seeds, raisins and demembrated walnut’s – Jupiter’s acorns – into her mouth.

“Damn good singer, that Miguel,” says Hazel. “One of the taverna’s waiters had a guitar. Miguel played a bit and sang. He’s very entertaining.”

Hazel cannot possibly know that the continuing discussion of Miguel is causing Algeria discomfort: she has developed an unfortunate infatuation for that philandering stranger with his glittering wedding ring. Even his name is allergenic.

In a short time Hazel has amassed a pile of bread crusts, two banana skins, an apple core and a large tub emptied of raspberry yoghurt.

“I need a good breakfast when I’m walking otherwise I start to flag halfway,” says Hazel, evidently conscious of Algeria’s fascination with her eating.

“Seven weeks of walking,” Algeria says. “That’s a long time. What will you do when the whole thing is over?”

The hostelier stirs a soup pot of coffee on the outdoor stove. Above the stove is a rectangle of corrugated plastic roof to protect it from rain.

“I’m a storyteller,” Hazel answers. “When the walk is over, I’ll go back to storytelling.”

A pilgrim holding a bowl walks up to the hostelier.

“Are there such people, storytellers?” Algeria thinks of her father who used to read her stories in bed at night.

“Well, I’m one,” says Hazel.

Story time was Algeria's favourite time of day. After a certain age stories grow up into novels – long and solitary creations that require commitment. Then just when you have given up your mind to them they insult you with the contrivance of the last page and a cover to close. At least fairy tales are honest about their unreality. Novels are slick deceivers, like politicians and psychopaths. And yet it is a novel Algeria longs to write.

The hostelier ladles coffee into the pilgrim's bowl.

“That Miguel really had a good voice.” Hazel bites into a ginger biscuit. “Now he'd be a natural storyteller.”

There is a basket of speckled guavas and an olive can with an arrangement of roses on the ground next to a well in the centre of the courtyard. It is the kind of well into which Snow White would toss wishes. It reminds Algeria of the well of painted cardboard used in the stage set of her music school's production of *Snow White*. She'd sung the part of that princess wearing a yellow hoop skirt and blue bodice. It was a dress to be proud of, despite the cheap satin. Regardless of her family's assurances to the contrary, she knew her performance was mediocre, and that all it had in its favour was her youth. The song was as sweet as Coca-Cola. Those who dared to leave their heart soaking in such sentimentality overnight would be sure the next morning to find the organ dissolved like a tooth in fizzy liquid sugar. *I'm wishing for the one I love to find me today, I'm hoping and I'm dreaming of all the nice things he will say.* During that Snow White-age, she never realised how trivial the word *nice* was or that the one she loved would turn out to be a tin man, devoid of niceties. What a pity Richard is not here and this is not some fairy tale, for if he came on this quest he could ask Santiago for a heart.

History is stapled to the walls behind Hazel on posters with illustrated timelines. Algeria has made herself a cup of herb tea using one of the teabags from the box that is crushed into her backpack and which has made all her clothes smell of mint.

“How on earth can you earn a living from storytelling?”

“Story therapy for children who have been traumatised or have developmental or learning disorders – that’s how I make my money. I belong to a storytelling circle, too,” says Hazel. “Once a month we gather and tell stories.”

“What sort of stories do you tell?”

Before Hazel can answer, Miguel appears from under the archway.

Algeria doesn’t know what to say to him.

“Sleep well?” he says to Algeria in a tone unnecessarily pointed.

She has no answer other than a half-hearted laugh.

He spots Hazel and his smile returns. “*Cómo estás, Hazel!*” He holds open his arms as if about to embrace Hazel, but it’s just a gesture.

Hazel doesn’t know that around midnight Algeria woke from a dream and stood out in the courtyard. Miguel arrived back at the refugio at thirteen minutes past midnight. In her quiet corner in the courtyard darkness, Algeria watched Miguel coming in with a girl. The girl had an Australian accent – perhaps she was the Katie of whom Margaret had spoken. She’d had too much to drink. Miguel said goodnight to the girl, and she disappeared through the archway leading to the dormitories. He sat on the low wall of the well, staring at the stars, until he saw Algeria.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

He came and sat next to her, under these same antique eaves of the Amigos del Camino de Santiago, on this same bench.

She didn't exactly register how it happened that suddenly Miguel was kissing her.

"Let me kiss you," he said. "I want to kiss you. You look so sad. You're too beautiful to be sad."

When he tried to kiss her again, she pushed him away and stood up. "Don't lie. And anyway you're married."

He grasped her hand. "Sleep with me tonight, then you'll know what love is."

"I'd never do that." She snatched her hand away. "You sleazy..." A number of words flashed through her mind but most were harsher than she meant. "Cowboy!" She left the courtyard with its Snow White wishing well.

Now, Miguel pays his two Euro, sticks the long bread roll into his knapsack and holds out his bowl for the hostelier to fill with coffee. When the hostelier is not looking, Miguel opens his plastic packet and from it adds a spoon of extra coffee to his bowl.

"I don't like him to see," he says to Hazel. "Not to upset him, you understand, but this coffee he serves is cow's piss." He scoops up another spoon from his stash of coffee and holds it up to show Hazel. "After last night, I need snake's piss if I'm going to make it to Astorga."

He turns to Algeria. "Now I really sound like a cowboy, don't I?" He proceeds to make a long speech in Spanish, which has Hazel enthralled. At the end of the speech he gives Algeria a flamenco-like look of defiance.

"Bravo!" Hazel claps her hands.

In one gulp, he downs his bowl of coffee.

"It was a poem," Hazel explains. "By Pablo Neruda. 'Ode to Wine.'"

Miguel stands. “Well, I’m headed for Astorga. After all that sleeping, Algeria, you could walk the whole way to Santiago today.”

Algeria half laughs. “Buen Camino, Miguel. When I write my book, I’ll definitely put you in it.”

He frowns, turns to Hazel and rattles off in Spanish, finishing with a frustrated shake of his hand towards heaven.

Again Hazel is delighted. “Brilliant. You really are good at ...”

Miguel interrupts her with another stream of Spanish. He ends by turning to Algeria and saying, “Please, don’t do me any favours by putting me in your book. But if you do, at least spell me correctly: Miguel Sebastian Martínez de Alarcón y Alcocer.” Then as if speaking to all the pilgrims in the courtyard and the hostelier, he opens his arms. “*Adiós!* Farewell, goodbye, *auf wieder sehen, Bueno Camino. Muy buena suerte.*”

Waving him off with glee, Hazel turns to Algeria “What a character. He’s unreal, isn’t he?”

“Yes, quite unbelievable,” Algeria agrees. She breaths in the smell of ripening guavas in the metal tin near the dried-up well and smiles at the next pilgrim who ducks under the archway to enter the courtyard for breakfast, coffee and chunks of bread and jam.



TEMPERANCE

Promise you will write to me. As Algeria roves the village streets of Hospital de Orbigo, those are the words that repeat in her thoughts. She had promised Richard she would write to him about Spain and the Camino but now she does not feel like him. He is too much trouble, too tiring a love: he has drained her of all wishes.

This is a place made of stones that look like they've come from the walls of broken-down wishing wells. It is so quaint she almost forgets that behind the walls are real people, some with gingivitis, scrubbing pots and making beds; that real storks,

some with lice between their feathers, have made their nests on the church belfries, and that the bees, some in their last hours of life, are real, too.

She walks under medieval bunting, embroidered with the insignia of chivalric orders and strung between the buildings. At a shop with a window display of shimmering fancy-dress suits for an upcoming jousting festival, she purchases a sliver of a tart made entirely of dates and almonds with no added anything, just dried fruit and nuts.

The shopkeeper speaks English and wears aubergine lipstick. Algeria banishes an inherited scorn for the lipstick. She had never disliked cosmetics until she met Richard.

“What’s that sticky stuff on your lips?” Richard had once asked her in front of their friends.

It was a curious question because his mother always wore red lipstick. He knew perfectly well what the stuff was. Still Algeria had felt guilty. It seemed to her that he was saying, *Don’t try to pretend that your lips are rose-red, silly girl, you can’t fool me, I know what you are beneath all that.*

The shopkeeper tells Algeria that the bunting is up and the costumes are out because the following night there will be a celebration commemorating the most ravishing display of chivalry since the inauguration of the Order of Knight Templars in 1118.

“Suero de Quiñones was a knight literally chained by love,” says the shopkeeper, making her black eyes wide behind round metal-rimmed spectacles.

How well Algeria relates to the poor knight, even though he lived six hundred years ago. The heartbroken wretch vowed to fast and wear an iron collar as a symbol of his slavery to a lady of astonishing beauty.

That is Richard: a being of astonishing beauty.

Alas, the Knight came to regret his vow to suffer for love, it was unrequited and he, like Algeria, wished for freedom. Suero and ten anonymous steel-clad supporters, who pledged to help him fight for his freedom, issued a challenge to all the knights in Christendom: a jousting tournament at Orbigo Bridge.

The shopkeeper's lips are thin and her cheeks have sagged but she speaks of the knight with youthful awe.

"Three hundred lances would be shattered in combat." She hands Algeria the change from a second sliver of tart. "Then according to the Law of Arms, Suero would be liberated from his prison of love." The shopkeeper fiddles with the knot of the checked scarf tied around her head, hiding her hair. "Thirty nights and thirty days they battled. When one hundred and sixty-six lances were broken the judges called a halt to the violence."

In her excitement, she has untied the knot over her forehead. "After removing the metal collar from brave Suero's neck, they declared him victorious and free." She pulls off her scarf and reveals a head of nearly-vanished madder hair.

"Bravo," Algeria says. She wants to clap but it is difficult to clap while holding a sticky slice of pie.

The shopkeeper nods and ties her scarf around her head again. She drops Algeria's change into the till and it makes a ching-ching sound as the metal drawer closes.

Outside in the sandy river-stone street again, Algeria is not sure how she will fight for her freedom. She does not have ten compatriots with lances to second her in battle. For now she shirks the challenge and determines to find a suitable postcard so that she can stay true to her promise to Richard. As much as he tires her, she cannot

undo the fact that he was the first man she loved; she feels some loyalty to him for that. He has taught her hard lessons; but she has survived, grown stronger, and she feels a debt to him for that punishing education.

There are only the two general dealers on Hospital de Orbigo Main Street. The shop she has just come from sells food, mostly of the pickled and bottled variety, and camera supplies. There are Maid Marion dresses in the window.

There is no traffic here, almost no life. It seems a village of unending siesta. She crosses the road from the shop with the tarts to the shop that sells postcards. She had wanted to find a particularly beautiful postcard but there are just two options. Both have thick blue borders and photographs barely in focus. Algeria selects the card with the front door and steeple of the Iglesia San Juan Bautista.

She must now choose the words to fill the wretched card. She unzips her backpack enough to allow her hand to worm between her hiker's chattels and find a pen. Her fingers brush past a yellow stone. She takes it out but doesn't look at it. As always, she is amazed at how cold the stone is. It is a memento from a riverbed in Africa. The next time she puts her hand in the pack she pulls out a pen.

It worries her deeply that Richard will find the postcard picture boring so on the back of the card she makes a side note to him: *This is a tedious picture but the only postcard I could find in this village.*

Sitting on the bridge over the River Orbigo, it takes an hour and a bag of cherries for her to resolve the problem of what to write. Finally, it is done.

Hola! Spain is bliss. It's warm and endlessly photogenic. I'm so pleased that you convinced me to bring a camera – it's a necessity. On the first day of the walk, I was ahead of the group and took a wrong turn so I ended up doing 37km instead of 20km and spent the night in a different village. Will meet up with the group later. I thought

about you while I was walking – you would love it but I think you should run (or at least cycle) the Camino! You must do it one day. I think I'll stay longer and walk to France. Have met such interesting people. Are there any walks across USA and South America? I've decided I want to be an eternal pilgrim. Lots and lots of love, Ally.

She has kept her promise to write to Richard – she has not let him down. There is a snag: Algeria does not have any stamps so she cannot post the card. She will find stamps along the way. Careful not to buckle its corners, she tucks the card into the valuables pouch she has strapped around her waist.

By the time she returns to the pilgrim's hostel, it is open. She rambles around the backyard, taking pictures of the overgrown orchard with a shed in one corner filled with foam mattresses going mouldy. Towards late afternoon the walking group members arrive and settle in and she photographs them. Drained Chrissie in culottes eating sunflower seeds, hair in dozens of small twists like bobbins on her head, arms decorated in Ethiopian beads and wire bracelets. Agata's top-of-the-range silver Nikes airing on a clay tile amidst long grass. Cathy counting her coins to work out if she has enough change to phone her boyfriend. Diana flushed, with sunburnt shoulders, marked by the straps of her weighty backpack, eyes hidden by black sunglasses. She's lounging and sipping wine with Margaret, who is dressed in tones of dehusked rye. They're side-by-side on a green vinyl sofa on the weedy terrace – mattresses, bent fruit trees and a washing line of socks make the picture's background.

Algeria zooms in on Margaret.

“People seldom remember my face,” Margaret says as Algeria photographs her. “Actually, I prefer it that way. I enjoy a sort of quiet anonymity... invisibleness, I suppose, is what it is. After twenty-seven years of marriage, I've spent so much time

worrying about other people and doing things for other people, my husband, my children, that I don't think *I* exist anymore.”

Cathy rolls her eyes at Chrissie. “You're writing a book aren't you, Ally? What's it about?”

“I always wanted to write a book,” Margaret says. “People used to say I had talent... My husband's a professor. He's just published a paper on a Chinese poet called Li Yu.”

Algeria lowers her camera. “How fascinating.”

“Yes, indeed,” Diana says with unexpected sharpness in her voice. “I have a good friend who loves Li Yu's work.”

“I don't much care for his poems.” Margaret shakes her head. “Frankly, I don't know what my husband sees in them. He used to be an expert on the Romantic poets... that was a long time ago. Many promises ago.”

Algeria remembers her postcard to Richard.

“I suppose we all make sacrifices,” Diana says, topping up Margaret's yellow mug with white wine. Algeria's eyes linger on Diana's scarred hands and again she wonders how they came to be that way.

Cathy is staring at Algeria and waiting for an answer. But near Algeria's belly, against her gut, that postcard with the fat blue border and the picture of the steeple on the Iglesia San Juan Bautista is worrying her.

“I'll tell you all about it in just a moment,” Algeria calls, as she begins picking her way through the long grass towards the shed with the mattresses.

She can hear Diana saying, “You should ask your husband.”

“What?” Margaret sounds taken aback.

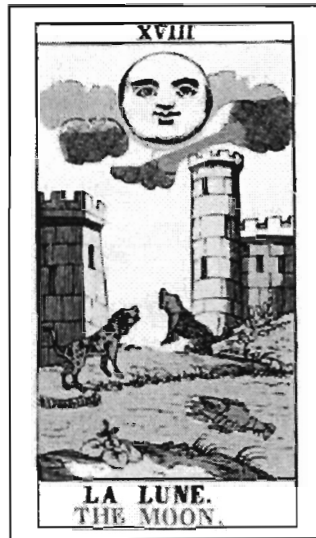
“Ask your husband what he sees in Li Yu’s poetry,” Diana is saying. “You might be surprised.”

“I doubt it. I’m too old to be surprised.”

“You never know.”

Algeria would like to hear more about the Chinese poet but she’s anxious to unburden herself of a promise. The shed has damp walls and foam mattresses with split covers and fungus in their fibres are curled around each other, spooning like lovers. Algeria takes the postcard out of the pouch around her waist. She pushes the card through a tear in some blue satin ticking. It fits snug between the ticking and the foam.

The promise to Richard is not broken: she has written to him but unless he ventures across his Atlantic Ocean and along these pilgrim paths to this shed of forgotten beds, he will not have the chance to read her writing. Still, she’s kept her promise.



THE MOON

Elevated over surrounding pastures and smallholdings stands the town of Astorga, severe as a feudal duchess and encircled in a corset of blackened masonry. Four pilgrims are walking along her ramparts. They go up an avenue lined with rose bushes. The rose blossoms are fat and velvety in thirty-two shades of red; it is too much colour and damask scent even for the hottest summer in this most antique of towns.

Peering through the entrance of the first restaurant they find, one of those pilgrims, Jacqueline, pulls her lips and says, "No, this is not the right one for us."

Jacqueline is a French woman who claims to be psychic, hear voices and, in particular, receive messages from oak trees. She smiles at the other three pilgrims and

exposes a set of crazily configured and badly stained teeth. Her plump cheeks disguise wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. Those cheeks and the bouncing coif of yellow curls give her the look of a crested bird, a stocky forty-something cockatiel. Her fingers fiddle with a turquoise stone that hangs between a crucifix pendant and a necklace of small shells

None of the other pilgrims have any preference for the establishment Jacqueline has rejected and so they continue. The steep road is flanked by centuries of buildings. Some are ruined, with broken façades revealing the remnants of floral wall coverings on their interiors. In one there is a workman stripping faded coral paper, peeling layers of family secrets, old arguments, disappointments and evaporated joys off the inside of that mortar nest.

A tapas bar, a pizza parlour, a sandwich shop and a bistro with a French name are all vetoed by Jacqueline's "voices," who have turned out to be very difficult to please. Even the sound of Jacqueline's boots against the stone road is sullen.

"It is for your own good," says Jacqueline, turning to eye Algeria.

"This is getting ridiculous," mutters Annabel, the pilgrim who always wears flowing white robes and listens to Cesaria Evora on her Walkman. In a peeved whisper she says, "Messages from oak trees! Please, it's nonsense."

"Probably," agrees Algeria, for whom telepathy is a minor obsession. Her father, pragmatic accountant that he is, believes his mother was psychic and that he is psychic, too. This fact, he claims, is supported by his uncanny ability to pick winners at horse races. An ability Algeria's mother scoffs at, having watched as Algeria's paternal grandfather gradually gambled away the family fortune (made on biscuits: lemon, chocolate, ginger, coconut and others) on Saturdays at the Kenilworth Racecourse. However, Algeria is selective about the people with whom she discusses

the matter of sixth sense. It is a field fraught with extremists. Absolute impossibilities and unquestioning devotions are, to her mind, equally unsatisfactory. But Jacqueline is being so difficult: if this is what telepathy does, Algeria might have to review her ambition to read minds.

Jacqueline rejects another café.

“Oh, come on.” Annabel’s eyes have narrowed progressively. “I just want to eat! I don’t care where.”

“Yes.” Jacqueline cocks her head to the side and studies Annabel. “I can see that and it is a problem. You’re always hungry.”

“Well!” Annabel laughs, but it is a laugh of indignation rather than good humour. “That’s very nice: are you’re saying I’m overweight?”

“I’m sure she didn’t mean it like that,” says Diana, the fourth pilgrim, whose hands are damaged and look like pigskin gloves. Even though the other pilgrims have left their backpacks at the hostel, Diana is sweating in the heat from carrying her overloaded pack. She’s seldom separated from it. She ushers Annabel forward and whispers, “You know, Jacqueline’s English is very poor.”

More restaurants are judged unfit and finally Annabel, still insulted, loses all patience. “I’m eating here.” She has stopped at a restaurant in the Town Square.

Jacqueline pouts. “Pity.” She touches Annabel’s sleeve. “I like this outfit: very nice, very white.”

“Thank you,” says Annabel, but she is too irritable to smile.

Taking off her backpack and transferring her burden to the stone-tiled floor, Diana sighs with relief. “Yes, I think I’ll stay here, too. I can’t go on.”

“What you do for friends,” says Jacqueline, staring at Diana.

Diana frowns. She strokes her left hand with her right hand.

“Not me.” Jacqueline shakes her head. “Don’t ask me to stay.”

“I won’t,” Annabel says.

Jacqueline turns to focus on Algeria. “You’ll find nothing right for you here. I’m going on, you really should come with me and spare yourself any unfortunate decisions.”

But Algeria, who left the hostel at the previous village in the violet of pre-dawn and has been on her feet for sixteen kilometres, is too tired for Jacqueline’s eccentricities.

Finally, Jacqueline, gazing at the sky, in the direction of treetops just visible over the buildings, says, “See how the moon hides her brightness in the heat of the day. You can learn from that.” She sniffs twice, turns her back on the women, wiggles her fingers in a wave and calls, “*Au revoir, mesdames.*”

The three remaining pilgrims watch her draw away from the restaurant in the right corner of the town square, where they are enveloped in the twitterings of crumb-seeking blackbirds and scents of roasting coffee beans and sugar melting in espresso.

“She’s as kooky as they come,” says Annabel, leading the way between the tables until there is an empty one where they can sit.

“I bumped into that Mexican fellow, Miguel, in a café on the way out of Orbigo,” says Annabel and she pulls out a chair. “Now, he’s a coffee addict.”

Algeria shrugs and sits and picks up a laminated menu, in which she feigns interest, already wishing she’d gone with Jacqueline. And there’s nothing on the menu she will eat.

“He wanted to know all about you,” Annabel says. “He said you’re the woman of his dreams.”

Algeria pulls a face. “He’s exaggerating and more importantly he’s married.”

A baby screeches at a neighbouring table. The child's elaborate outfit intrigues Algeria: he is smothered like a royal infant by layers of brittle linen wrought in silk-threaded profusion with flowers and organza ribbons.

Algeria wishes to steer the conversation away from the pilgrim lawyer named Miguel. "Have you got children, Annabel?"

"Nope, no children, no husband, no boyfriend, and, thank God, no cats," Annabel says.

"What's wrong with cats?" Diana asks. She is slumped back in her chair and looks so exhausted from the day's walking that she's only half there to hear the answer.

"Nothing really," is Annabel's diplomatic reply. She ponders over the offerings and finally orders a combination of starters: blood pudding, crumbed mushrooms, tortilla, spicy pork chorizo and a gin and tonic.

"Isn't that Jacqueline?" Algeria points to a figure at the far corner of the Town Square. They watch as the figure strides along a distant perimeter, past the Town Hall. Jacqueline turns right and continues along a row of restaurants but she doesn't stop to read any of the menus displayed at the entrance. The square is not a square, it is a rectangle, and Jacqueline turns right again and approaches the side where the three pilgrims are sitting, watching her from their café table.

"Jacqueline," calls Algeria as the French woman marches by, but she receives no reply in return, nor indication that Jacqueline has heard her.

At the next corner, Jacqueline turns right and repeats her journey around the Town Square.

"Definitely mad," says Annabel, transferring her attention to the food that has just arrived. Some cocky blackbirds fly down to make an attack on her bread roll but

she scatters them with a few sharp flicks of her napkin. She tucks in straight away and after the first mouthful says, “You should try this blood pudding, it’s excellent.”

“Just the name makes me feel ill,” Algeria says, still watching Jacqueline’s march around the square.

“Ah, you’ve inherited the monotheist’s phobia.” Annabel licks a clot of butter, crumb and blood off her thumb. “All the religions that came from the Middle East – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – they turned blood food into a taboo. But the Berbers, the Mongols, the Masai, the Nordic people, have a different idea about eating – or, for that matter, drinking – blood. Have you heard of paltbread?”

Algeria shakes her head – she really does feel rather ill now. On the way from Hospital de Orbigo, she drank water from a fountain of dubious nature; it might be having an undesirable effect.

“Paltbread: it’s black rye bread made with blood and beer. Blood and beer, imagine. It’s a Nordic speciality. I’ve had it, it’s very good.”

“Blood is definitely not for me.” Algeria smiles apologetically. “I’m vegetarian.”

“Me too,” Diana says.

“Shit, I didn’t know.” Annabel laughs and plucks a mushroom steeped in yellow fat from her plate. “Change of topic then, I suppose.”

“So who’s this Miguel fellow you two were talking about?” Diana says, breaking the silence.

“Nobody important.” Algeria tries desperately to think of another topic but her thoughts are not co-operating, they are running to the Astorga Cathedral. She’d passed it on her way to the hostel that morning.

Annabel’s eyebrow peaks but fortunately her mouth is too full of bread and blood pudding to speak.

“Annabel, have you never wanted to get married?” Algeria asks, thinking that marriage should be a consuming enough topic, after all it must fill at least half of the books and half of the thoughts on the planet. Algeria closes her eyes, remembering the cool feeling of Miguel’s wedding ring sliding across her hand.

Annabel’s nostrils flare and her lips flatten into a smirk. “Yes, actually, and I’ve been married – years ago, for all of eighteen months. Short, sweet, or not so sweet, and never to be repeated.”

Algeria is comforted to hear again that other loves fail or are imperfect.

From the perfect English Annabel speaks, Algeria deduces that this woman and her artist’s hands now mopping up clogged sauce with a white crust, must have gone to schools and come from a family that in British society would be called the “right sort.”

“What happened?” Algeria asks.

Leaning back in her chair, Annabel holds her gin and tonic against her cheek to cool her heat-blotched face. When she removes the tumbler, her skin glistens with transferred condensation and she surveys the restaurant through glass and liquid.

“That’s a good question, actually,” Annabel says. “I still haven’t managed to answer it for myself.”

“What was your husband like?” Diana asks. She has tired of her salad and begins pushing the olive pits on her side-plate into a neat row.

“Nice at first, ” says Annabel, staring at the wedge of lime in her gin and tonic. “When I first got to know him, he was utterly charming, always trying to please.” She drains the glass and chews the lime. “He was the sort of person who at a party was always sorting things out. If something ran out, for example, like wine or milk, he

would be off to go and get more. Always doing things to make people happy. A really, really nice guy.”

A waitress passes. Annabel catches her attention and orders another drink and a dessert. Algeria asks for a glass of water.

“Water?” Annabel raises her eyebrows and rolls her eyes. “That’s why you’re so skinny.”

As the waitress is about to leave, Diana suddenly says, “I’ll have that chocolate cake, too.”

“He’d never just sit down and chat,” continues Annabel. “Even at a dinner party he’d find things to keep him getting up – pour drinks or carve meat or clear plates or wash up or make his famous cappuccinos.”

“He really doesn’t sound too bad.” Diana’s voice is wistful, almost groggy. Algeria wonders if Diana has a mild case of sunstroke.

“Exactly, that was the problem. My friends said I’d married the perfect man: good-looking, well dressed and charming. I have a theory that he was always off doing things to disguise the fact that he has very little substance to his personality. He has no particular talent or interest. He can recite news headlines but he wouldn’t be able to debate the issues. Everybody liked him, though, and they still do. He and I are still friends.”

“That’s nice,” Diana says. “You’re lucky. What about you, Algeria? You’re not married are you?”

A waitress arrives carrying chocolate tarts with ice cream and also the glass of water.

“Just in time,” says Algeria, taking the glass of water. The waitress neglects to clear the irksome dish that had contained the blood pudding.

Algeria stares as Annabel sinks a fork into the mocha tart and pushes it between her lips. A splodge of whipped cream remains on Annabel's lower lip.

"Mm, this is seriously good," says Annabel. She glances up. "I feel like you're watching me undressing. Do you want some, Algeria?"

Algeria blushes and looks away. "Sorry, it's a habit. No, thanks."

"Come on. It won't hurt you," says Annabel, with a wicked grin, holding a cream-laden fork close to Algeria's mouth. "Close your eyes and think of England."

Algeria pulls back. "No, thanks, really. I don't like sweet things. The last time I ate cake or anything like that must have been about ten years ago."

"Good God." Annabel's eyebrow is raised and her nostrils have flared. "You poor deprived creature. I don't know how you survive. Why?"

"I don't like them, that's all."

Diana has stopped chewing and is studying Algeria. "No wonder you're so thin."

Algeria ignores the remark. "So what happened between you and your husband, Annabel?"

After she finishes the forkful of rejected tart, Annabel sighs and says, "Nothing bad, really. I married a man who I thought was wonderful, always doing interesting things, but as soon as we were married, it all stopped. All he wanted was to sit watching the TV. He never wanted to *do* anything, not even talk. He totally lost interest in me. The only thing he was interested in were his boy toys – you know, he was always buying the latest TV or sound system. That sort of thing."

"That's awful," Algeria says, feeling the futility of her reply. "It's almost like he was doing all those things only to please you before you got married and once he 'had' you he couldn't be bothered anymore. A deception."

"Deception," repeats Diana.

Jacqueline is still walking around the square filled with squabbling birds and frolicking children.

“That,” says Annabel, stabbing the air with her dessert fork, “is exactly what it was like. I remember one night so vividly. I decided I would try and get a bit of the romance back into our marriage, so I made this fabulous dinner. I remember the menu exactly: braised Belgian endives to start, *Toulonnaise* roast pork with olives and anchovy for main and Sabayon with *Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise* for dessert. I even made Provencal *Oreillette* biscuits to have with coffee.”

As Annabel speaks, in Algeria’s mind, fuchsia silk tablecloths are thrown over garden tables and hundreds of small candles are lit.

“I set the table with beautiful flowers and candles,” says Annabel. “But when he came home from work all he wanted to do was take his food and eat it in front of the TV.”

“That’s shocking.” Algeria thinks that Mrs Beeton or whomever it was that first said that *the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach* must have either been severely misguided or a liar of Machiavellian proportions.

“And heartbreaking,” says Annabel. “I remember so clearly – it was full moon and after I tidied everything away I was standing in the kitchen. I could see the moon from the scullery window. I just stood staring at the moon and crying and he was watching *Beavis and Butthead*.”

Diana has her hand over her mouth.

“I’d like to say I can’t believe it,” says Algeria. “But I’ve had similar experiences.”

“*A perfect night for going.*” Diana just stares at the empty white cake plate in front of her.

They sit without talking, listening to laughter, clanking dishes and chairs scraping around them. Algeria wishes the waitress would take away that blood pudding dish. A family flock of blackbirds descend on a recently vacated table nearby. They make a flurry of pecking at scraps before a waiter shoos them away.

“Nothing surprises me anymore,” says Annabel, lighting a cigarette. “Men are all the same. All shits, I’m afraid. Divorce was the best decision I’ve ever made.”

Diana perks up. “You should tell that to Margaret.”

“Why?” Algeria asks.

“I don’t know,” Diana says. “She doesn’t seem happily married, that’s all.”

“Well, I’ve never looked back,” says Annabel. “I have a wonderful business now and I am doing very nicely without him, thank you very much. I’m negotiating to sell my hotel for a whacking profit to some Italian heiress, and then I’ll find a new direction. Marriage is outdated and meaningless, religious poppycock, as far as I’m concerned.”

“It must mean something,” Algeria says, more to herself than to Annabel. Earlier when she’d stopped to look into the cathedral, Algeria found herself overwhelmed by its piety, centuries of faith and tears trapped between molecules of granite, compulsive ornamentation and obscene walls of solid gold.

Kneeling at one of the pews was Miguel. He was praying. Algeria’s first response was critical: *praying for forgiveness from his wife for his philandering*. But seeing the gregarious man on his knees made him somehow so exquisitely fragile that she wanted to stand close to him and perhaps rest her head upon his shoulder. She watched him for some moments without realising she was doing it. When she did realise she turned away, and, angry with herself, scowled at the cathedral walls.

She recognised that many found beauty in the cathedral, but to her it was too swollen and inflamed with precious metal and gem-studded crosses, blood in rubies, grief in pearls – glorified death and torture, gilded and morbid, from corner to corner. Sermons and guilt had sucked out the oxygen and left the place rasping like the pious one who died of gonorrhoea after the Banquet of Chestnuts. Claustrophobia and the possibility of Miguel seeing her drove Algeria out.

After she left the cathedral, she'd gathered herself together, and was standing in a courtyard. The reflections of yellow light from the stones blinded her. All she could see was a silhouette, and she could hear a voice: Miguel. The sunblindness was disorientating, maddening. Yet he was there, touching her cheek. He took her hands and kissed them.

She'd pulled away and left him there, alone with his Catholic ancestors; let them decide the appropriate punishment of that man with his wedding ring chasing girls on a Catholic pilgrimage.

The waitress loads the remains of the meal onto a circular tray. Cigarette in hand, Annabel empties two sachets of white sugar into her coffee and stirs. Algeria stares at the ring left by a dish where a fly is drinking from a drop of over-cooked blood. The glare of the sun on the stone tiles is hurting her over-sensitive eyes.

Matchbox and fresh cigarette in hand, Annabel's lighting is halted by a view over Algeria's shoulder. "Ooh, I say, speak of the devil, there's that gorgeous cowboy of yours."

Algeria turns to see Miguel striding across the Plaza Major. He's holding a bunch of roses. He waves back at Annabel and is heading for their table, but halfway across the square a small woman with curls intercepts him.

"Look." Diana points. "That's Jacqueline."

“Is Jacqueline still there?” says Annabel, turning to see. “She hasn’t been walking around the square all this time, has she?”

“Yes.” Algeria smiles. “I think she’s asking him for directions.”

Indeed, Jacqueline brings out a large map and embroils Miguel in some pathfinding conundrum.

While Miguel is still involved with Jacqueline, Algeria puts the money for her water on the table. “Please excuse me, ladies” Algeria says, “I’m exhausted. I’m going to go back to the hostel and sleep. I’ll see you later.”

Before Miguel notices, she leaves the café.

University of Cape Town



THE HIEROPHANT

Nausea rises in Algeria's gut and the fluid in her inner ear's semicircular canals seems to be flowing in all kinds of wrong directions. Sitting up in bed, she finds that the mixed-sex dormitory is sliding off its foundation like the clocks in Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*. She puts her hand on her forehead and cheeks and they are unusually warm.

The stench of her breakfast ration of bananas fermenting in the packet hanging on the bunk-post makes her gag. Shivering from fever, she clammers down and gathers her things to prepare for the day.

As she walks between the sleeping people, she thinks the metallic water from a squeaking copper water fountain in the village of San Justo might be the cause of her malaise. The sign above the tap had said AQUA POTIBLE, so, remembering some advice about the importance of keeping hydrated along the Camino, she had forced herself to drink, despite the taste.

After showering and packing, she abandons her walking group (she can't face talking to anyone this morning) and departs from the dusty boots and night-breath of the Astorga hostel just before six A.M.

In time, the clear air eases the giddiness, but she walks more slowly than normal. Everybody else appears brighter than usual. A husband and wife pilgrim couple dressed in navy-and-red stripes march past, looking as if they could swim the English Channel, ride the Tour de France and whip up a stack of crêpes with chestnut sauce before the sun has fully risen.

"Buena Camino," they call with a cheery wave.

She lifts a limp hand in response and feels the rough edges of last night's chick-peas rolling inside her stomach.

And then, although she'd hoped to be ahead of her walking group, Jacqueline, who was asleep when Algeria left the hostel, catches up with her and puts her arm around Algeria's shoulders. In one hand she has a boiled egg and in the other a large half-bitten bread roll. Ordinarily, such proximity would make Algeria feel awkward, but today it is lost amidst a general sense of disease.

"Algeria, *mon amie*, you are okay?" says Jacqueline. She wears a sleeveless bush jacket with several pockets and a field scout's hat, which gives her the look of a United Nations environmentalist on a mission in the French Congo.

"I have heard you are not well? Would you like some bread to settle your stomach?"

"No, thanks. I'm feeling much better now," says Algeria, who appreciates the sympathy but has to swallow back her body's queasy response to the steam of coffee, boiled egg, onion, and unbrushed teeth expelled from Jacqueline's mouth. "I never eat bread."

Jacqueline shrugs and takes a bite of egg, followed by a bite of bread, and says, with a full mouth, “Why not?”

“Wheat allergy,” Algeria lies, too sick to bother with explanations of her tenuous philosophy on bread. She notices Jacqueline’s canister of water attached to a strap hanging round Jacqueline’s neck. She can hear the water in the canister swishing from side to side. Although the sun has hardly had time to shine, Algeria feels waves of heat rising from the tar, drying her lips and tongue. “I just realised I forgot to fill up my water thing.”

“Very bad, you must have the water,” Jacqueline says. “You must drink, Water is essential.”

Algeria says, “I’m sure there’ll be a water fountain in the next village.”

“Maybe, *j’espère que oui.*” Jacqueline unwraps her arm from Algeria’s shoulders. “Yes, you’ll find water along the way. I’m sure.”

“I wonder if anyone has ever tried to fry an egg on a hot road?” Algeria mumbles. “I suppose they must have in a place like Australia. I’m sure they do it there all the time on those hot red rocks in the desert.”

Jacqueline’s lips pull down at the corners. “I know absolutely nothing about Australian cuisine.” She shrugs and quickens her pace. “*Eh bien! Bon Camino, à plus tard.* See you later. Be sure to drink.”

It is a great relief to Algeria’s stomach when Jacqueline departs. As she disappears Algeria can hear her singing a French love song.

They probably invented fried egg in Australia. An egg probably rolled out of a nest and cracked onto a rock and next thing it was sizzling. She cannot imagine what such an ode to the split-headed egg would entail, except that it would be a good ode for an Ogden Nash or an Edward Lear. *There once was a man from the Dalmatian*

coast / he fried an egg, he put it on toast / he added the sandwich to a boiling pot roast / that sweaty egg-lover from the Dalmatian coast. She decides it is better to walk and not pay any attention to thoughts.

Thirst has begun to scratch her throat lining.

The path leads away from the road and the land around Algeria seems greener than before. The meadows have erupted in a swamp of flowers. She wishes the bees would lie down for a while and rest; they push themselves too hard, those small creatures.

Thinking about being thirsty makes her more thirsty. What if there is no water at that next village? No, there's sure to be water.

Her feet and her mood drag through the gravel like a fat-tailed sheep's four-foot-long tail. She needs one of those carpenter-shepherds, like Herodotus described, to make a cart for her fat tail. A roebuck, full of life and energy, jumps across the path several metres ahead and disappears off into the scrub. She is parched, her eyes are unwilling to focus properly and she's seized with invalid misery. There's no water anywhere and she misses her ex-boyfriend and she hates the fact that she is a decrepit and weak fool and wishes that he had a heart. In her attempt to get over him, how could she be so stupid as to have developed a crush on a married man? This road is littered with old cans and empty packets and they make her despair: she, the world, even this thousand-year-old pilgrim route, they are all in a mess.

She laments the tears that flow from her eyes, robbing her body of the liquid it craves. *Crying will do nothing but dehydrate me*, she thinks.

Three hours of walking go by with thirsty thoughts and hot air rasping her dry throat. Then, in a tumbledown village, Algeria sees a drinking fountain under a church spire. It is a lovely sight.

With new strength, she strides across to the fountain, sinks to her knees, positions her mouth under its opening and twists the tap hard left, waiting for the gush of cool. Nothing comes out. She twists the tap right – still nothing. She hits the mouth of the tap hoping to wake it into giving her water. There is no response. How can it too deny her? She covers her eyes with her hands. It can't be. She tries the tap again. There is no water in this fountain. Sitting in the dust, she stares at it.

A white bird with a long yellow beak squawks and glides through the cool air overhead. It lands in a nest at the top of the spire. The spire and the bird and sky are swimming. Algeria must carry on, thirsty or not. She uses the tap to lean on as she stands up.

The journey seems hopeless, pointless and impossible.

She walks on.

Further along the road, two middle-aged women of solid legs and sturdy manners, rest on a piled-stone wall. Between mouthfuls of white bread and cherry jam, they greet Algeria and wish her Buena Camino in jolly voices laced with sips of strong tea from a flask and New Zealand.

That tea looks so good; so wet. She fantasises about sipping from their flask. But Algeria cannot ask them for their tea – she doesn't know them. She cannot linger and talk to the women with their woollen socks – if she stops too long she may not start up again. The headache has curled around her ears and into the fluid between her cerebellum and skull. There is fluid in her skull – lucky skull. She says goodbye to the women and the possibility of tea.

The warmer it gets the more nauseous she feels, but she persists through the village, passing decapitated houses with a delirium of grasses and wheat and flowers growing up through the floors. The bookish appeal of ruination, of crumbling homes

with jade-coloured doors, is such that she cannot resist taking a few desultory photographs. Wild roses have clawed up the rough stone walls of the village and mingle with cultivated roses. Ivory. Red. Magenta. Orange. All have survived the dry summer with little water. The rough bricks of the walls look like her lips and throat feel. Towards the end of the village is a house with an indigo door. A cigarillo-chewing old man and his goat companion sit out front beside a table of tired memorabilia of pilgrim walking sticks, hats, gourds and scallop shells for purchase. The man is sipping a glass of fresh-looking orange juice with glistening blocks of ice.

She envies him but continues into the sub-sensory hum of insects and the burning day.

She takes off her cap to air her sweat-soaked head. Minutes later she is shivering because it has become intolerably cold. She hugs her arms to her aching chest. She considers wrapping her sleeping bag around her or stopping to sleep on the side of the road. Sleep, how pleasant that would be. Even in the chill of infected heat, she realises that the later it gets, the warmer it will become and the worse she will feel. From the last distance beacon she estimates that the village of Rabanal should appear in a couple of hours, eleven hot kilometres away.

Algeria can smell the grass at the side of the path and it looks so soft. Cold becomes sinking heat and a tree offering shade and the possibility of a nap is appealing. She walks with her eyes almost shut, no longer sure if she is walking.

When she opens her eyes, the grass is gone. The path is severe and goes on and on and two hours of it seem an infinity ahead of her. Her body is a dead weight. There is nothing, only the sand and stones – no people, no villages, no water, no orange juice, no tea.

This was a mistake.

She should not be here.

But she is and she must force one more step, just one more, away from here. Just one more step towards liquid and a bed that smells of clean cotton.

She tries, but her stomach has tightened into a cramp that causes her to bend forward. Where are the other pilgrims? If she falls now, will someone save her? Will someone find her sleeping on the side of the road and take her to safety and give her something to drink?

And then the inexplicable occurs.

From around her and within her, the Spirit of Love wells up in the form of a man. He is a man in billowing white robes. He lifts her into his arms, into the cool folds of those long white robes.

She is no more a dead weight – her feet are light. He and she are air. He talks in a gentle voice, telling her he will carry her to Rabanal. He gives her pure water to drink. It is a delicious water of exactly the right coolness. With a damp cloth he wipes her brow, wiping away the headache with each soft stroke. Concern dissipates. She is safer than she has ever been.

His voice is constant and soothing, telling her about Love and Strength.

“Rest and listen to the birds,” he says, and all the while he keeps her cool in the white folds of his robe. He gives her water when she is thirsty and cools her cheeks when she is hot.

As he strokes her forehead he says, “Whenever you need help, at any time, I will be there for you.”

Here is bliss. There is plenty to drink and nothing to fear.

“People put too much emphasis on death. The body is just a vessel,” he says. “The soul will move from one vessel to the next or perhaps to a flower, an animal, a bird, even a fly.”

They are passing a forest and there are many flies buzzing around and she wonders if those hot and dirty black flies could be vessels, too.

“Yes, even the flies.” He smiles. “Do not worry. Individual vessels are not so important. Distinct like hairs on a horse, yes, but really just part of the horse, part of the whole.”

While he holds her, she does not feel nauseous. She feels peace and calm and the sense that everything will work out.

As they approach Rabanal, the Spirit of Love says he will leave her before they get to the town but that she will be fine. He tells her that when she gets to the hostel, no matter what happens, she must go straight to bed, drink lots of water and sleep until six P.M. Then she must have dinner.

“At dinner you will eat something that you do not usually eat, but you must not worry because you need it. And, child, know this, in the future you will face a test, and you must have faith.”

The path bends and he sets her down on her feet. “Remember the test.” He leaves.

Can she make it walking alone? She does not know how much further it is and she is hot and nauseous again. Ahead is a sign. She hopes it is the name of the village but it turns out to be a rusted advertisement for a property development. She fears she has been deserted at the most difficult moment.

Around a second corner is the desolate main street of Rabanal. It is a place made of gravel roads, and the shutters on the homes are bolted. Walking through the dusty

alleys tinged with haematitic pink, she passes a church. There is a cottage where a sour-faced woman sits, stitching patches together for a quilt. After the woman has directed her to the hostel, Algeria reprimands herself for failing the test, for impatience and for losing faith so quickly.

She arrives at the Albergue De Peregrinos in record time – eleven kilometres in just over an hour.

Wandering through the arched stable-door portals of the Albergue, she finds herself amidst a curiosity of sacred and inane artefacts. As the hostel-keeper stamps her pilgrim's passport she looks into the frozen eyes of a stuffed goat whose head is trophied above dried flowers. The animal is surrounded by a wooden cross, a plaque with a cartoon, a shovel, a pilgrim's stick, a wooden rake and a shrine to Santiago with two candles burning in red glass containers.

Beyond the entrance area is a courtyard with a wagon-load of potted geraniums, balconies fit for Juliet, bunches of drying onions, bicycles, cycling shorts dripping from rows of washing lines and an island-resort-style bar. A group of male cyclists are drinking and eating giant bocadillos, sandwiches stuffed with cheese and sausage.

Despite the jollity of the place, Algeria does as she has been told and drinks a litre of water, then selects a top bunk near an open window, and drops onto the bed. She cannot sleep. Every twenty minutes or so she has to jump down from the top bunk and rush to the toilet. Since arriving in Rabanal she has developed diarrhoea.

On one of her trips back from the toilets, a grey-headed Englishman, who introduces himself as Peter, offers a tablet that he suggests will remedy the problem.

“If you need more, just ask,” he says. “I have plenty.”

Two hours of running to and from the toilets, another tablet from Peter, and finally she falls asleep. She has no dreams. At five-thirty she wakes and is seized by a momentous hunger. But she waits, as instructed by the Spirit of Love, until six and then with no trace of headache or nausea, she throws off her sleeping bag to search for food.

In the courtyard, a pilgrim is feeding chunks of bread to a dog chained to the wagon of geraniums. The pilgrim has blisters on her shoulders where her overloaded backpack has rubbed her skin raw.

Seeing how much the dog enjoys the bread, Algeria recalls that the Spirit of Love told her she would eat something out of the ordinary in Rabanal. At the cantina counter she orders an olive-paste bocadillo with no butter.

As she takes her first bite, Algeria cannot recall when last she ate bread; it was years ago. Its texture has a lovely dryness about it, quite unlike fruit, quite unlike potato, and yet more moist than rice cakes, and it is so filling. Her hunger turns the modest roll into an unforgettable feast.



THE HANGED MAN

Ruth does not have her face on. No cresol lipstain or tinted sun cream has been applied to brighten that skin stripped of youth by existence and car fumes. Before Rabanal is relegated to memory, Algeria photographs Ruth: damp hair, chilled hands and a mouthful of banana wedged in the side of her cheek. Her smile is bleak. In the background: Brazilian cyclists, men and their wheels waiting to be set in motion by chains and testosterone, their noses warmed by the steam of coffee at the refugio's cantina.

Today, Dominic, smelling of Garnacha plonk, has decreed that the group will walk together. Like Moses, he leads the women with a pilgrim's staff, relishing his role as tour guide and spiritual leader despite his psoriasis rash, which has worsened up his hands and arms.

The path to El Acebo will go via the *Cruz de Ferro*, where Dominic has planned an unburdening ceremony. Algeria dislikes these homebrewed rites; she thinks of them as *popcorn rituals*.

“It’s an amazing place,” Dominic says. “Did you all manage to bring a pebble from home to symbolise what you want to leave behind at the *Cruz de Ferro*?”

“You said it didn’t have to be a stone?” Ruth speaks for what seems like the first time in days; she is always off somewhere praying. All the light tones have been scraped from her timbre, leaving her voice devoid of life. It could be a shadow speaking.

“Usually it’s a pebble,” Dominic says, “because the cross is on the Mount of Mercury. People do leave other things. Nothing too big, though.”

“What I have is not very big,” Ruth says, shading her eyes from the sun.

Progress to liberation is halted by hot chocolate in the destroyed village of Foncebadon.

“I had the best hot chocolate of my life here the first time I did the Camino,” says Dominic.

A tin sign advertises a bar. On the sign is sketched a pilgrim: rust eats holes in his nose and he points the direction to the bar. The bar is the sole survivor of a collapsed world. Not even a church, on this church-filled route remains. It occurs to Algeria that, in general, bars might outlast churches, but perhaps not altars, which are altogether older than Christianity. Until now, she had found the quantity of churches a drag, but suddenly she is curious to know why on a pilgrimage there are not more churches.

In the fields around the bar other packed-stone structures, including perhaps a church, have toppled – as all things eventually do – to low walls or foundations where a herd of goats with clanging bells is grazing.

“Who’s for hot chocolate?” Annabel says, when they have entered the bar and are standing at the counter. “Come on, Ally, I know you want it. Secretly.”

Algeria asks the waiter for a cup of mint tea. When it comes, the cup is chipped and through the pale liquid its insides are exposed: covered in scratches from years of stirring and scouring.

In this great bar, last bastion of Foncebadon culture, there is only banality: dingy carpets and brown chairs. How melancholy to cheer with misted beer glasses that have lost their La Casera logos to the rubbing hands and wedding rings of so many other drinkers. She makes a note of this in her journal.

A brown canary with a bald wing sits on a perch behind the bar. Every now and then the bird swivels its head and tugs at its remaining feathers.

“Belonged to a man who recently died,” says the barman. “The bird’s in mourning.”

While Algeria sips her tea, Ruth stares sadly at the grieving bird and Diana tells them about the history of canaries. In the 1400’s the masters of the Spanish Empire conquered the Canary Islands, and amongst the treasures they took back to their homeland were those tiny singing delights. Spain controlled the breeding of canaries, allowing only male birds to be sold. For a century, no female canary was permitted to leave Spanish soil.

“How tragic,” Algeria says. “If Florentino Arizo had been a canary he could have sung his heart dry for a hundred years and he would never have got his Fermina.”

Ah, but the love lives of canaries changed in a storm: one small incident upset the balance of power and everything was altered. A ship carrying a large cargo of canaries from the Canary Islands was wrecked. They flew from their broken cages to the Island of Elba, where they began procreating with wild abandon. Soon canaries were being sold and bred all over Europe.

After the liberation of the birds and a cup of tea, Algeria excuses herself.

She notices Ruth leaving the bar and wandering off into the meadow. Algeria takes a photograph of backpacks lined up against a crumbling wall and resumes the road to the *Cruz de Ferro*.

The cross itself is unremarkable. It is nothing more than two iron strips of unexceptional dimensions mounted on a pole. The pole rises up out of a mass of grey rubble. From a distance, the base of the pole appears defaced with garbage.

On the grass around the dried-out monument, pilgrims sit eating ham sandwiches or crisps or sausages dipped in mustard. Some take photographs, others contemplate, and most chatter but all will eventually climb the pile of leavings.

Careful of the twisting stones beneath her feet, Algeria makes her way up the heap. What first appeared to be rubbish halfway up the base of the pole metamorphoses into lives with memories. Flowers, letters, poems, crucifixes, pictures of saints, all pinned-on or tucked-under circles of string that criss-cross the dead trunk. Taking care to notice the most particular details of each artefact, Algeria writes a description of the cross in her journal.

There on the grass below, Ruth arrives. She waves at Algeria and smiles but lingers on the grass as if reluctant to put down her pebble or whatever it is she has brought to leave here. Algeria waves and turns back to examine the dreams pinned up

the base of the cross. A small red satchel. A plait of brown hair. A teddy bear. A sachet of foam bath from a hotel in Brazil. A pair of hiking boots. A jewellery pouch. Shells, T-shirts, photographs, stickers from all over the world, and a valentine's card. Love and memory stored or left behind to burn in the elemental sun; it is a funeral pile.

Algeria clutches her deep ochre pebble that has come fifteen thousand miles from its mountain stream in Cape Town. The truth, if such a thing exists, is that this is no fairytale. Spain is not Oz, and memories cannot be turned to stone. Apologies to the good witch, but Algeria has researched the matter and, according to the experts, the permanence of memory is an illusion.

Algeria looks at the stone in her hand and is certain now that memories are relationships that do not survive in isolation but intersect ad infinitum. The past and the present are lovers, constantly fusing and reproducing, their whole is greater than the sum of their parts.

All Algeria is certain of is that she wants to be rid of her pebble. That pebble is from a river that runs down the Helderberg Mountain outside of Cape Town. She and Richard had spent a dismal, cold and overcast night camping on top of the mountain. They had planned to walk to the peak called Sneekop where his father's ashes were scattered. They could not make it to the top because the weather became foul. Before the rain started they pitched a tent on a slope. All night they were buffeted by the wind. Nothing but shivering went on in their one-man tent. The ten centimetres between their sleeping bags may as well have been two oceans and a continent. As soon as there was dawn enough to walk, they did, and on the way a small buck pranced across their path and off into the bushes. Towards the end of the walk, the sun came out and Richard wandered away, without speaking to her. Eventually, she

found him: he'd stopped to swim. After that, Algeria amused herself by collecting pebbles in seven colours of sand. She never imagined that one of those pebbles would end up in Spain.

Ruth begins to clamber up to the *Cruz de Ferro*. Her copper hair has become fluffy from hostel-hopping – there are no blow dryers and not enough space in her backpack for styling aids and follicle tonic. When she gets to the top she looks bewildered. Tears are running down her cheeks.

“There is nothing,” Ruth mutters. Her face is red and her eyelashes are damp. “I want so much to feel. But I find nothing, I can't feel anything.”

Passing pilgrims below take incidental photographs and so Algeria and Ruth and Ruth's tears will be always be trapped on that heap of broken stones against a blue sky.

“Just ignore me,” Ruth says, in that shadow-voice.

Algeria sets down her own stone, but she is disappointed to see it dwarfed amidst the hundreds of others. She waits to feel the difference. But there is no change.

She has failed to let go of all those memories.

She says nothing of her failure and examines the drooping flowers and fading letters on the post.

Ruth takes a bib out of a plastic packet and slips a pink ribbon under the criss-cross of strings on the pole. The bib is flecked with dark stains. After tying a bow, she takes a photograph out of the packet.

“My baby's name was Gabrielle,” Ruth says and begins sobbing. The tears seem to drain the energy from her legs because her legs crumple until she is sitting on the stones with her head against the bleached base of the cross.

Intimidated by this misery that is weighty enough to force a woman to her knees, Algeria crouches down next to Ruth, who is more a stranger than a friend. Ruth hands her the photograph of Gabrielle. It is soft from the thirty-degree heat. In the picture, the newborn baby appears perfect, angelic.

“She is really beautiful.”

“*Was* beautiful.” Ruth seems about to say more, but whatever it is so awful she has to cover her mouth. Her face caves under the strain of what tragedy Algeria can only guess.

Some time passes and Algeria notices that other pilgrims are avoiding the cross. They continue to sit like that for a long time. All the while Ruth keeps gasping like someone trying, but unable, to stop crying. Gradually, Ruth’s breathing becomes more steady.

“There are some things in the world that are too terrible to speak of, to think of... people do such unthinkable things to each other.” Ruth closes her eyes and rests her head against the dried-out pole.

It was not comfortable sitting there, with the stones of thousands of memories digging into their skin. For a long time, Ruth sits, eyes closed to the sun, and then she says, in that shadow-voice, in a way that suggests she has pressed down all emotions to enable a matter-of-fact tone: “A man broke into our house in Diep River. Gabrielle was there with my sister. He tied up my sister and put her in the cupboard. He raped Gabrielle and strangled her. She was two years old.”

The hairs on Algeria’s arms and legs stand on end. What could Algeria say? She is at a loss and then Ruth reaches out and clutches Algeria’s hand and begs, “Why? Why? Tell me why?”

“There’s no excuse or reason.”

“But I want to understand.”

What strange plan Fate has made to put Algeria here with this Ruth: as if Fate is determined that Algeria should put down her stone again. As much as she never wanted to have to tell this to anyone, she says, “Ruth, when I was a child I was raped, too.” She feels tension tightening in her neck and she squeezes the muscle above her shoulder, then she also leans against the *Cruz de Ferro*, closing her eyes against the sun.

The sound of stones crunching beneath boots makes both Ruth and Algeria open their eyes: a pilgrim is venturing up the hill of broken rocks.

“Do you mind, if I...?” The pilgrim in denim shorts and yellow shirt is tentative about disturbing them but determined to set down his stone.

“Not at all,” Algeria says, getting up.

Ruth also stands to allow the pilgrim access to the base of the *Cruz de Ferro*. She smooths back her hair and looks at her baby’s bib.

“I’m glad to leave these here,” Ruth says. She pins the photograph of Gabrielle onto the post near the bib.

For a moment the two ladies stand, absorbing the warmth of summer, the pilgrims talking and eating on the grass below, and the sound of birds chirping in the surrounding air.

The two of them walk down the Mount of Mercury,



THE LOVERS

“Love!” Margaret emits a shiver of laughter. “That dies very quickly.”

Noxious diesel fumes billow through the meadow air compliments of a low glinting car. A sophisticated Spanish couple, dressed in leather and pure silk shirts, emerge from the car and sit, his hand on her knee, at one of the Taverna tables.

Margaret’s wilted smile and inelastic skin whisper with senescence. She is beige in comparison to the ladies seated around her: Annabel, who has a tan, straw hair and eyes bright as the malachite ring on her finger; Gudren, who has spiky black hair, and wears a mauve pashmina and aubergine lipstick; Diana, who is a shade of sunburnt agony with glasses dark enough to hide secrets, and Cathy and Chrissie, the youngsters of the group, in their tight T-shirts, looking like they’ve just stepped off a beach in the tropics.

In José’s Bar beer is flowing and TV football lights the permanent dusk with a small screenful of singing fans. But the women have ditched the Champion’s League

chapel in favour of a table on José's terrace with its two pots of flowers and tables in the cobblestone road. It overlooks far pastures and smells of soggy coke-and-cane-saturated twists of lemon.

Annabel has convinced Margaret, Gudren and Diana to order Absolut Vodka cocktails.

From her end of the table, Algeria has been listening with some interest to the cynical discussion on marriage. In fact, it is only half cynical: those of the ladies who've been married are cynical; the younger ones, not yet married, seem to long for marriage, even though they suspect, or are almost certain, it is a feckless illusion.

"Diana, as a psychologist, what do you think about everlasting marriages?" asks Algeria. "Are they a myth?"

"The divorce rate is very high." Diana bites her lip, reluctant to continue.

Margaret takes a sip of her glassy spirit. "People give up too easily. There are always difficulties and if you want a relationship to work you have to make sacrifices." Her voice is dull and dried-out. "Lord knows, I have... I could have been so many things..."

She tucks a wisp of barley-coloured hair behind her ear and looks down and sideways behind her shoulder as if at all those opportunities long gone. Then she takes a breath and confronts the table with a dim smile.

"I suppose twenty-seven years of being married to the same person is not everybody's cup of tea. But after all the trials and tribulations, the intense familiarity becomes a great comfort."

"That's what I want," Cathy says. "I want to be in love and to get married and have children and to be married for twenty-seven and more years."

Diana slumps back in her chair.

“It’s not that I don’t love Anthony,” says Cathy. She turns to Chrissie to explain. “Ant’s got to get his shit together. He can’t spend his life surfing. He has no focus, no motivation. He’s depressed because he doesn’t have a career and then it’s like, here I am and I am doing well, and then I’m constantly on his case about him doing something.”

As Cathy and Chrissie plunge into yet another, detailed analysis of Anthony’s failings, Margaret leans towards Algeria.

“I have a friend, also married, but...,” Margaret begins. “For the past ten years she’s been having an affair with a man who she sees for just two weeks of every year. It’s an annual date in some exotic location. This year was at a palace on the Ngorogora Crater. Just two weeks, though.”

“What a perfect solution,” Algeria says. She is drawn to the possibility of implementing such a strategy to her own relationship with Richard, and is surprised it’s Margaret, who’d seemed beaten to banality by wifedom, who is the source of this alternative romanticism.

José’s restaurant is run by José’s daughters, all of whom have long, dark, straight hair, plenty of attitude, pained smiles, and, beneath their aprons, are dressed for a night out. All that stands between José’s daughters and the party is a roomful of hungry tourists.

The group of women is at a row of two-seater tables covered in red checked cloth. José’s daughters slam down the pilgrim’s menus, cutlery, glasses and plates of bread.

It is a carnivorous pilgrim’s menu and its meatiness creates a problem for the vegetarians: Algeria and, a few chairs down from her, Diana.

“I’ve always wanted to renovate one of the ruined villas around here – did you see that one at the edge of the village?” says Annabel to Chrissie, between mouthfuls of *vino del país* and bread dunked in olive oil.

One of Jose’s daughters, a burgeoning beauty wearing an electric-red cat-suit under her brown apron, pushes between Chrissie and Annabel’s conversation.

“*Estàs listo?*”

Annabel shakes her head and picks up the menu.

The daughter heaves a sigh and looks at Gudren who points to something on page two.

“*Lenguado a la parrilla?*” the daughter asks, and she taps her pen against her order pad. Gudren nods and the daughter makes a note of the order.

From the other end of the table, in a language that is half Spanish and half gesture, Algeria beckons. The daughter sidles closer.

“Is it possible to have the ‘tripe with chickpeas’ without the tripe? Just the Chickpeas. I’m vegetarian, *vegetariana*.”

“Bloody vegetarians,” Cathy mutters to Chrissie.

Jose’s daughter blinks her black lashes. “*Yo también*. I put vegetables with for you.”

Diana and Margaret sign up for the tripeless chickpeas and vegetables, too. Margaret finishes her vodka and moves on to drinking Spanish red and the food arrives in approximately the length of time it would take to open a tin, decant the contents onto a plate and give the plate a one-minute nuking in a microwave.

The vegetables consist of soft cabbage devoid of colour. On Algeria’s right, Gudren covers part of her line fish with a paper napkin.

“Why did you do that?” Algeria asks.

Gudren winces her perfectly cut nose. “It’s the eye.” She lifts the napkin with a giggle, to reveal the head of the fish with its overcooked eye. “I can’t stand to have that eye staring at me while I eat.”

She replaces the napkin and stabs her fork into the dried-out fish belly.

After a few mouthfuls, Margaret abandons her plate of spongy legumes named for Cicero’s wart, and fills up on bread and olive oil and many glasses of lusty *Tempranillo*. Meanwhile, Algeria makes neat work of her soulless meal. When she is slicing the final wilts of cabbage, Margaret leans close to her ear and says, “Actually, I also have a relationship with a man who is not my husband.”

Algeria considers how best to respond: of course she wants to hear more, but she doesn’t know Margaret well enough to ask for details.

Diana is too many chairs away and there is too much eating and too much talking going on for her to have heard Margaret’s admission.

“It’s totally Platonic, nothing more than a discrete flirtation,” whispers Margaret. “He’s a wonderful man, a real gentleman and so romantic.”

If the man is romantic and by the way that Margaret’s eyes are glittering, it would seem that he is, and there is flirtation, where does Platonic fit in?

“How did you meet him?” Algeria asks, maintaining a politeness of tone, which covers her delight at being priest at this unexpected confessional.

Margaret grasps the back of Algeria’s chair, sits forward and giggles. She’s an entirely different woman, no longer the colour of rye but rosy from *Las Torres*, and almost wanton. “We met on a Tuesday at a bookshop in Constantia.”

Algeria knows Constantia, the valley traditionally inhabited by Cape Town’s waspish affluenza and more recently colonised by Europe’s jaded fraudsters and fleeing gentry and, of course, the left-over locals (like her parents) whose house staff

still refer to them as “Madams” and “Masters.” There is only one bookshop in Constantia, a blue-carpeted creation of a thousand-and-one opening paragraphs with a coffee shop on its right shoulder.

“I met him on the day of my silver wedding anniversary. I was dressed up but in a very bad mood and I’d decided to go to the bookshop to cheer myself up. I love browsing through the new arrivals. I never buy them, of course, they’re too expensive, but browsing is just my best thing to do.”

There are always Margarets standing at those new-arrivals shelves, running fingers down smooth covers and reading the first pages. Algeria is a Margaret. She likes the smell of the new books. Not the white-paged books with chemical scent but the common paperbacks. As heartless Richard, who is an olfactory savant, had once pointed out to her, those paperbacks smell of sweet pine, wood pulp and glue-fragranced pages.

Margaret, she imagines, is a trouser-and-blouse woman.

“I was reading the first page of Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full* when I heard a voice, a man’s voice. He was so beautifully dressed, so debonair, and he was asking me if I had read *Bonfire of the Vanities*. I remember thinking that he looked like Christopher Plumber.”

Although it has not been proved that humans, like moths or ants, can communicate with pheromones, Algeria has such a strong sense of Margaret’s excitement that she wonders if her subconscious can smell it. Perhaps Diana, three chairs down, can smell it, too; she hasn’t taken her eyes off Margaret.

After the Tom Wolfe prelude, the bookish charmer wanted to share with Margaret some pages of his favourite novel, *Perfume*, over a cup of coffee.

“I didn’t think there was any harm in having a quick cup,” Margaret says, and she covers her smile with her hands and looks as pleased as a schoolgirl talking about her first kiss. “He was so polite, a real gentleman, and very interesting. It is a very civilised aff...” Margaret blushes. “Arrangement. He phones me and occasionally we meet up for coffee or lunch or dinner. One evening he took me for a walk in Kirstenbosch gardens. He’d bought two glasses and a small bottle of Veuve Cliquot and salmon-and-avocado sushi and a bunch of sweet peas he’d picked from his garden.”

Margaret gazes at the great tins of tomatoes lining the inside wall of José’s Taverna as if seeing the bench under the camphor trees where she and her saviour from matrimonial tedium sat sipping champagne one summer’s eve.

“I don’t have his number, though. I don’t want it. I would never phone him – I’m not that kind of woman. It would just be too complicated. He’s a wealthy man, married too, and he has children. No, he certainly doesn’t want to have any complications, and nor do I. My husband doesn’t know about him and of course I haven’t told my children.”

Before José’s daughter clears away the plates, Margaret takes a mouthful of her dish of watery cabbage and soggy chickpeas. “I don’t think my husband suspects anything... I’d never do anything to jeopardise our marriage.”

Diana looks up at Margaret as if she has heard something.

Algeria dabs lukewarm chickpea brine from her mouth and says, “Margaret, you’re an inspiration.”



THE DEVIL (REVERSED)

1

Diana strokes her scarred hands and the feel of the dead skin patched together takes her back to a particular morning some fifteen years ago. The night before, Grave, her husband, had returned from Café Verdi in enough of a rage to rattle plates in the yellow-wood dresser in their kitchen, shatter Diana's tea pot, knock a bowl of lemon curd off the table, and scatter hundreds-and-thousands all over the floor. When Diana bent to gather the candy baubles meant for a cake to celebrate her birthday, Grave kicked her in the face and ribs. She'd stayed down with her eyes closed. She could smell the Handy Andy she'd used earlier in the day to clean the floor. The scent of synthetic iris was worse than the blood she could feel running from her nose.

Now morning was glaring through a net curtain at Diana's swollen eye and she was still on the floor. She'd fallen at an awkward angle: moving would be hurtful, so she lay hoping she would never have to stand again to live through being knocked down. Her face was plastered with hundreds-and-thousands.

She closed her eyes and listened to the cars driving by on Wolfe Street, a peaceful thoroughfare through the Victorian village of Chelsea Wynberg. *The neighbours must have heard Grave last night*, was her last thought before sleep.

When she woke, he was cradling her face in his hands.

"Baby, I'm so sorry," he said and stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry."

He took a dishcloth that smelled of dried icing sugar and Sunlight liquid soap and wiped away the candy balls that were glued to her cheek with tears. He helped her up and sat her in a rickety metal chair at the café table in their lounge. She didn't wince but stiffness and swelling made her ache so that she felt she might vomit or faint or both.

"I've bought your favourite breakfast," he said. "From the Olympia Café. And I have a surprise for you."

Although it hurt her, she smiled.

"You're going to love this." He disappeared into the kitchen. She could hear him preparing tea and taking something out of the oven and he was singing a song

made famous by Louis Armstrong. Grave didn't know all the words, but he sang the refrain over and over: "*I think to myself what a wonderful world.*" Every time he sang it, Diana felt more sick. Eventually, he returned with a tray brightened by a vase of gold, red and lilac freesias.

He set them in front of her. "Pretty, aren't they, my love?"

"Yes," she said, but they were vile. Her usual delicately patterned pistachio-and-rose porcelain teapot was absent; in its place was a pair of cheap Hypermarket mugs made of thick ceramic.

Pointing to a small gift-wrapped rectangle on the tray, he said, "That's your surprise." He looked at her with meaningful sincerity. "I really am sorry, babe. I'm not going to drink so much anymore... I promise. You know I love you more than any other woman in the world."

She nodded and took the present in its silver paper. Grave was eager to see her opening the gift. Before she'd even slid it from the paper, he said, "I chose it for you specially. I know how you love poetry."

She was shocked when she saw the book. He mistook her horror for delight. While she choked with sadness, he embraced her. Then he sat back and tucked into his croissant.

She ran her finger down the book's waxy cover. It was red and there was a picture of a woman lifting her Victorian petticoats. The picture was blurry, as if the camera had been crying. *Erotic Poems* was the title of this member of the Everyman's Library of Pocket Poets.

"So you forgive me?" Grave asked.

Diana smiled and he took that for a yes. She'd been happy to once read in an antique book on child psychology that smiles evolve from grimaces issued during a baby's cries of pain. She often smiled at Grave.

They spent the rest of Sunday, curled up on the couch, under a blanket, reading those intolerable poems. Diana's face throbbed. One poem by Robert Herrick excited Grave and he wanted sex there on that sky-blue couch.

4

When Grave had gone to work on Monday, Diana was free again. She dabbed base over her bruised face and took herself and the book of poems and her notebook to the Maynardville Park.

She sat on a bench, near a drunkard who reeked of foot rot and methylated spirits.

Something would have to be done about her situation with Grave. An outsider would say the solution was obvious: leave him. Two years ago, she'd tried that – she had a steel pin in her shoulder to show for her attempt to escape.

The need to get away had been welling again. She'd surfed the Internet and found out about studying psychology through UNISA. She lit a cigarette.

"Do you want one?" She offered the box to the vagrant.

"Ja, my Marlboro Lights angel," he said.

She gave him a light. Her face hurt. The two of them puffed on their fags and pondered their personal tragedies. She opened the book from Grave. In the empty middle of her notebook's cover she drew a rectangle. Inside the rectangle she wrote

Erotic Poems, and it pleased her to scratch that title out several times, pressing so hard that her pen almost tore through the paper.

With a second cigarette in her mouth, she flicked through the book of poems and found the first one Grave had read to her the day before. It was a translation of a verse entitled 'Lover' by Paul Éluard. In her notebook, she wrote a new translation that made the words bearable:

Hater

Hater, bragging with fists

The silence of hate

dissolves your legs and your feet

and your buttocks and your eyes

Dissolves those punches

So even the cruelty on your eyelids

vanishes, leaving nothing, no trace of you.

She glanced up and was surprised to find herself looking into the eyes of a pale boy who'd sat on the opposite bench. "Boy" was not the right word – he must have been over twenty. He smiled at her. She didn't smile back, but she studied him long enough to take in the details of his outer self. He wasn't a vagrant, but he didn't look rich. His clothes hung baggy, over a thin body. His hair and eyes were dark. Some artist should paint him – he had a suitably intense, beautiful, angular air about him, like a failed musician. He hadn't hurt her, not yet anyway.

"What are you writing?" he asked.

She smiled at him and lit a cigarette and gathered her books and left.

5

The next day she returned to her bench, but her vagrant friend was missing.

She smoked one cigarette and got down to the business of putting those poems right. The second poem Grave had read was by a seventeenth-century poet. She renamed it "All Sexual Hate."

*I want to hear about bodies repelling bodies,
and souls chained by souls
that minds minds avoid, as planets do planets,
And separate the other's crudest dreams;
That no human superficiality may kill,
And never, like devils, part and misunderstand
their thousand shames.*

*I was that genius that not once tried
to claim obese hate;
I fell from love to sex, from sex to instinct;
But instinctively was stuck
Pinned unmoving between instinct and sex; and never
from sex did I darken again upon love.*

Before she got to the third verse, she heard that voice again: "What are you writing?"

It was the thin boy, the failed musician. He'd sat down on the opposite bench again; she knew this without looking, by the direction of his voice. She pretended she hadn't heard and busied herself with looking for another poem to translate.

"I'm Ben."

Couldn't he see she was busy?

"Can I have a smoke?" he said.

"Sure." She held up the box.

He walked over to her, took a fag, lit it and sauntered back to his bench. Although they didn't talk again, she wasn't averse to his company as long as he stayed on that opposite bench.

6

"What's with the perfume, bitch?" Grave was drunk as usual on Wednesday. It was poker night with his buddies at Café Verdi. He'd lost and, as was the custom, had to treat the boys to drinks and a stripper at a dive in the City Bowl.

He was holding her by the chin against their bedroom wall.

"What perfume?" Groggy, she focussed her eyes on the spittle at the corner of his lip. She'd been asleep until he pulled her by the hair out of bed and shoved her into the dressing table.

"I saw this slut's Poison in the bathroom." He held up a bottle of Christian Dior eau de parfum. "Are you screwing around on me, bitch?"

"No, Grave, I promise I'm not." She was chilled with fear. His hand was so big and her bones were so fragile. She could picture her jaw crumbling. "I just wanted to make myself smell good for you." She smiled. "Just for you, Grave. Only you."

92

That was a lie. She'd bought the Poison at the Edgars sale and was considering wearing it when she visited the park the following day.

He sniffed her and sneered. "So why didn't you put it on?" His hand tightened.

The only answer she could think of was to close her eyes and let tears burn down her cheeks.

He pulled her in front of the dressing table and made her sit. "I want to smell it on you. Then I'll know if you're lying."

He stood above her in the mirror. He stunk of beer and sweat and some woman's cheap floral musk.

Obedient as always, she opened the purple bottle and dabbed her neck with the scent.

Grave pushed her head to the side and sniffed. Like a vampire, he pressed his face against her neck.

"I don't like it." He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I don't want you to wear it. Ever." He turned and might have walked away, if a thought hadn't struck him.

"Drink it." He turned back and stared. "I said, drink it."

Because she didn't understand, she dared not move.

He snatched the bottle from her and pushed the glass opening into her mouth. "Drink it."

Wouldn't she die if she drank all that? Diana closed her eyes and allowed him to pour the perfume down her throat. After that, Grave wanted sex.

Diana didn't go to the park the next day. She didn't want to see or smell another man, not even a vagrant. The perfume had given her a migraine and an upset stomach. She could barely swallow.

That night Grave wanted her to read him more of the erotic poems. The two she found for him were "Serenata" by Lorca and "Exotic Scent" by Baudelaire.

8

With one day to the weekend, Diana had to get out of the apartment, had to enjoy freedom before Saturday and Sunday, which were endless, hellish days of Grave.

She took her books and her Marlboro Lights to the park.

The vagrant was there. Ben, the thin, failed musician boy was there. She gave them both cigarettes. "I have work to do," she said.

Ben said, "Just tell me your name and I'll shut up."

"I like Marlboro Angel."

She wrote her version of "Serenata," renamed "Cacophony."

*The day wipes itself down
along the gutters of the road
and in Grave's heart
the weeds flourish in hate*

The weeds flourish in hate

*Bondaged day silenced
below the sewers of October.*

*Grave soils his mind
with beer, acid and thorns.*

The weeds flourish in hate

*The day of Poison and tar
dims even dark foundations
tar stickies gutters and clogs up
with poisons of your dehydrating kiss*

The weeds flourish in hate

She looked up and Ben was watching her.

“I’ve figured out what you are,” he said.

“I doubt it.”

“You’re a poet.”

That made her smile. “Please. I’m all kinds of things, but not a good enough liar to call myself a poet.”

“Ja, you’re all kinds of things – like really beautiful.” He was blushing.

“Would you consider having coffee with me?”

“Maybe in another life.”

Ben's compliment helped Diana survive the weekend. On Monday morning she woke up in her underwear, on the doorstep of Grave's Victorian Cottage. He'd locked her out the night before because she'd spilled coffee on him. It was a cold morning and she woke up stiff, but none of her bones were broken.

A couple of ibises swooped down on the lawn and were honking in the garden when Grave gathered Diana off the step and carried her to their bed. He stroked her forehead and tucked her into bed.

"I love you, babe, don't forget that. You should sleep. I'll bring us a pizza for dinner tonight. Ham and pineapple, extra crispy, just the way you like it."

She smiled and nodded.

As soon as Grave had left, she got up and showered. She knew she had a black eye from where he had punched her – she could feel it. She didn't bother look, nor did she bother cover it up.

With her books and her cigarettes, she walked to the park. On the way, a pair of truant schoolgirls turned to stare at her.

She began to reverse Baudelaire's poem.

"I knew you were a poet!" Ben was behind her, looking over her shoulder at the ugly words.

She turned up to him, so he could see her eye.

"Do you still think I'm beautiful?"

There was shock in his face. For a moment, she thought he might run away, but instead he came and sat next to her on her bench.

"Read me one of the poems you write, and then I'll be able to answer."

“I don’t write poems. I’m a translator.”

“Oh, what language?”

“Lies.”

He frowned. “Show me.”

Pointing to the book of erotic poems, to the one by Baudelaire called “Exotic Scent,” she said, “This is my ‘Homely Poison.’”

On a cold winter morning if

I open my eyes

And gasp the stench of ice

from your misanthropic self

I see a running misery

That frost has frozen to a blaze.

A hell state of frenzy where

nature perishes

with strangling weeds and

poisons of lurid taste.

Where women are swollen and weak

and men turn away in shame.

Chained to your stink

in this frigid place

I see a grave of bones and bruises

And then the stench of burned flesh

stabs my thoughts and shrinks my senses

fragmented in the palaces of fear.

“You’re much more than beautiful,” Ben said.

She shrugged and said, “Diana. That’s my name.” Curiosity overcame her.

“Are you a failed musician?”

He laughed. “Failed, yes, but not a musician, an actor. A failed Hamlet, currently living off the proceeds of a starring role in a TV commercial for a German brand of foot powder. Can I buy you coffee, Diana?”

She smiled, even though Ben hadn’t hurt her.

Standing up, he held out his hand for her to take. “You have beautiful hands,” Ben said.

They walked hand-in-hand across the road to Café Verdi.

10

After that, every day for six months, Diana and Ben met on the bench in Maynardville, and went for coffee at Café Verdi, and sometimes they went back to his flat overlooking the Goodall & Williams funeral parlour.

There they sat on his balcony, smoking and reading *Erotic Poetry*. Diana had stopped translating the poems. Although they sat very close and he always held her hand, it wasn’t erotic. How could it be with hearses driving by at regular intervals?

They discovered that they both liked apricot jam and yellow cheese sandwiches. So they smoked and read erotic poetry and ate apricot jam and yellow cheese sandwiches.

98

“Don’t you think it strange,” Ben said one afternoon, “that we read these poems but we don’t have sex? It’s not very erotic, is it?”

“I have sex with my husband and I hate it.” She kissed Ben. “This is better than erotic, it’s comforting. Don’t you think?”

It was a warm day. The waste in the blue municipal bins on the poles down the Main Road had started to ferment. Diana rested her head against Ben’s chest and they fell asleep like that.

They woke to the sound of a puppy yapping.

Diana opened her eyes, and when she realised the sun had set she jumped up. “Ben! Wake up. I’ve got to go. Grave will kill me if I’m late.”

Groggy from sleep and disheartened by the mention of Grave, Ben put his head in his hands. “Please don’t go back to him. We can go and live with my family in Port Elizabeth.”

She was used to Ben saying this.

“You know I can’t leave him... hey... *hello.*” Diana bent to greet the creature biting her shoes. “Hello there ... Where did you come from, little one? Look, Ben, it’s a puppy.”

She picked the pot-bellied pavement special off the ground and it wriggled and licked her face. She held the dog out to Ben.

“He’s not yours, is he?” she said.

Ben shook his head. “Must have wandered off the street. I’m surprised he didn’t get run over.” He stroked the puppy and kissed Diana on the forehead. “Why don’t you take him home with you.”

The puppy gave Diana an excuse for not being home when Grave arrived from work.

“I took him for a walk in the park, babe,” she said.

She was expecting Grave to hit her, but he didn't. Fresh from showering, he was glistening, whistling, in a good mood. He gave Diana a bunch of crimson tulips. He tickled the puppy on the head.

“He's cute. Put him in the yard, baby, and get yourself tartered up. Two of my mates are sick, so we're not playing poker tonight. I thought you and I could go for a nice dinner at Café Verdi, how's that? You've never been there have you, my love?”

Before she could stop herself, Diana could feel her head shaking. “No. Wow, Grave, dinner at Café Verdi, what a treat. It's not my birthday or anything... why are you spoiling me like this?”

“Because you're beautiful and you're my wife. Can't a man spoil his wife?” He kissed her very gently on the forehead. “Beautiful.” He stroked and kissed her hands. “Beautiful hands. Now go and get dressed. The table's booked for eight-thirty.”

12

Contrary to Diana's expectations, nothing happened at the dinner at Café Verdi. None of the staff seemed to recognise her or say anything that might alert Grave to the fact that she'd been meeting another man there every day for the last six months. Grave ate potato gnocchi and she had the rosemary chicken. He insisted on buying a bottle of French champagne.

The next morning she told Ben that they'd have to stop going to Café Verdi. Ben didn't mind – it meant more time cuddling on his terrace with the view of the funeral parlour.

An inexplicable change had come over Grave: he'd become very calm, almost likeable. He even stopped asking Diana to read those erotic poems. Were it not for the puppy, their Victorian cottage would have been almost lifeless. She had decided to call the puppy Artemis.

Two weeks after the dinner, and for the first time since she was married, Diana was not dreading the weekend.

Saturday went by in a pleasant enough fashion: Grave bought croissants from the Olympia Bakery for breakfast, they took the puppy to play in the park and spent the afternoon reading the newspaper on the sky-blue couch. Saturday night, Grave went out drinking as usual. Sunday Grave slept late. Diana woke early. She had a jasmine-and-orange-scented bath and moisturised her skin with jasmine-and-orange oil. She ate a slice of toast. She did the ironing while Grave slept.

She was ironing a white duvet cover embroidered with white ivy when Grave walked in, wearing pyjama bottoms and holding the puppy.

Artemis was wriggling in Grave's big hands. Without looking up at Diana, Grave said to the puppy, "Do you love me, like your mommy loves me? Hey? Do you?" He asked over and over.

"I'm sure he does, Grave." Diana put down the iron and it let out a wet gasp.

"Do you love me?" Grave said, looking up at Diana. One second later she saw Artemis flying through the air, legs flailing, and then he hit the wall. Before Diana could see him drop or hear him squeal, Grave had her trapped and had pinned her hands to the ironing board with the hot iron. She could smell her skin melting like a

jasmine-scented candle and she was close to fainting from the pain when the kitchen door opened and a face she recognised started shouting. It was the Chinese woman from next door, Rosa Ingcheng. Grave lifted the iron from Diana's hands, tearing off her skin, and was about to brand her cheek with the appliance when Rosa screamed, "I've called the police"

Rosa took Diana to the emergency ward at the Kingsbury hospital. Ben came to fetch her because Rosa had to go and give a statement to the detective at the Wynberg Police Station. Diana didn't want to go back to the Victorian cottage in Wolfe Street. They went to the park. Ben had brought along *Erotic Poetry*.

"Find me one to translate," she said, indicating the poetry book with her bandaged hands.

Ben chose a verse called "Before Lowering the Perfumed Curtain." He held it open for Diana and wrote for her in her notebook, as she spoke the translation.

*After lifting the soiled curtain to hide her hate,
She smiles, happy that the day is so long.
She denies her batterer any further pleasure
At last, she is alone between the chilly white sheets.*

*A minute before she picked up her iron
And before that smoothed on her jasmine citrus body oil,
to repel insects with a taste for flesh.
Never hold a light behind the curtain
and maybe you will not notice her ugly face.*

When Ben finished writing he said, “Will you come and live with me in PE now?”

She nodded. “And I’m going to study psychology through UNISA. I always wanted to do that.”

University of Cape Town



THE CHARIOT

Algeria's mouth waters as she passes through a medieval town surrounded by cherry orchards and her fingers itch to stretch across the low hedge fences and plunder from those trees. Kilometres of temptation go by, but she is stoical. No, not stoic, she's a coward. She fears that some angry man brandishing a picker's tool will see her stealing fruit and run out from between the trees shouting at her. She hates to be shouted at; it is frightening. After passing through several villages marked with a scent of cherry nectar, the path widens and flattens and eventually turns to tar flanked by factory yards and rusted cars in the outskirts of the modern town of Ponferrada.

Yellow arrows guide her through rotten alleys lined with deserted homes and For-Sale signs nailed to rupturing walls stained by neo-Nazi graffiti. The arrows she's been following disappear. Over the river Sil, she takes a cobbled road past the

towering bricks and spiked turrets of the Templar Castle, a relic of the Knights Templar who had made the city one of their bases in the twelfth century. She looks back and considers this vestige of history. As she inhales, she imagines that some atomic aspect of the fingers that touched the masonry beneath her heels is just now oxygenating her thoughts. In what proportion does the architecture of a place represent its soul? If Algeria's body is wasting, then perhaps her soul is too, or perhaps there is no such correlation.

Now she is completely lost in a snake pit of roads, traffic lights, concrete apartment blocks, crowds, litter, fast food outlets and the obligatory cathedral. At a kiosk in Ponferrada's Plaza del Ayuntamiento, filled with lounging students, she purchases a magazine in the hope that it will help her pick up some Spanish.

On a bench in the square she spends several painful minutes translating an Estee Lauder double-page spread, welcoming her to *Nuevo Perfectionist* and *the ageless future*. Didn't ageing used to be associated with wisdom? On the next page is a phrase-book-blasting editorial on ten steps to a bikini-perfect body, and by the end of that Algeria's overcome by a sense of absurdity. She has a bikini-perfect body, and knows it is no solution to unhappiness, nor is youth. Having gained two new words, *el futuro*, the future, and *edad*, age, with the help of the airbrushed supermodel and a violet-tinted vial of chemicals, both shiny incongruities on a pilgrimage, Algeria gives up and continues on her search for the hostel.

She's beginning to resent the *Glamour* in her backpack. The thought of all those people posing and pouting between those perfume-scented pages, with all evidence of life and experience and living painted and smoothed and sucked away, becomes increasingly disturbing. She tries to imagine this ancient part of town with all traces of

its history deleted and the patina on its old bricks smoothed away by alphas hydroxy acid.

A miso, tahini and ginger-smelling health shop along the way seems the perfect place to restore her sense of communion with things natural. She stocks up on jars of organic tapenade, bags of Iranian dates, organic rice cakes, and an avocado. As she leaves she spots a yellow arrow on a paving stone and follows its direction down a hill and across a double carriageway.

Through a small door in a long white wall, she finds a refuge from the invasiveness of the city. The Albergue San Nicolas de Flue has dew-smelling grass, a weathered chapel, new hostel buildings fashioned with a hope of Zen minimalism, and a rectangular pond where pilgrims are cooling swollen feet in symmetrically bouncing fountain water.

A woman beckons to Algeria.

This lady volunteer wears a choker of stars from which a jade crucifix hangs. She stamps Algeria's pilgrim's passport and offers refreshment: a jug of iced tea and a bowl of mints. "Would you like a sweet?" she asks.

On the grass one pilgrim is shuffling a pack of Tarot cards. The box the cards come from is printed with the words *Baraja Española*, the Spanish Deck

In the shade of the courtyard overhang, a man with a dark beard and a much younger woman wield chisels and hammers, carving a tree trunk. From where she stands, Algeria cannot make out the images; she'll have to get closer.

When she has offloaded her backpack in the pristine dormitory she returns to the courtyard to investigate the carving. Owing to his height, Dominic has to crouch when he enters through the undersized door in the wall; he too is captivated by the carving.

“This is synchronicity,” Dominic says to Algeria, as he wipes the sweat from his forehead. He scratches his hairline at the back of his neck and stares at the pole as if it were as amazing as the Blue Nun returned. “It’s a sign.”

The lady volunteer pours him a glass of cold tea and her jade cross glitters.

What effect is the submergence in Dominic’s Camino world of signs and symbols having on Algeria? There is a sense of somnolence about this warm place that makes her wish for a quiet corner and a book to read; or perhaps spread herself out on the grass to sleep.

Dominic’s eyes, red from sun and wine, are fixed on the carving as he tells Algeria that he studied art and architecture.

“Years and years ago,” he says, “but I’ve done nothing creative for ages and I was just thinking how nice it would be to do some sculpting, then I walk in here and there are people carving a totem pole. It’s definitely a sign. I’m going to ask them if I can do some carving on the pole.”

The bearded man – a South American missionary – and his teenage wife, welcome Dominic to the task and hand him a chisel. Algeria can see now that this tree has been patterned with symbols of the Camino. Dominic is about to chip between the toes of a barefoot pilgrim. Although Algeria is concerned that Dominic might chip one of those pilgrim’s toes right off, her eyes are pulled away from the endangered digits by redness in her peripheral vision. A middle-aged man in a red peak cap, with khaki trousers and a slight limp, comes through the looking glass door in the wall. The volunteer with the iced tea is summoning him. The volunteer stamps the man’s pilgrim’s passport but before she can offer her bowl of bright sweets, the man takes out a leather journal. It is a special book, hand-bound with thick cream paper, fit for spells or poems or ruminations on the golden mean. In an American accent, the man

asks the volunteer to stamp inside the journal. From her vantage point, Algeria can see flowing writing and delicate pen-and-ink drawings.

Enter New Zealand. *The Land of the Long White Cloud* comes in the form of two women, one of whom introduced herself to Algeria a few days ago as Jay. She is a large, strong-looking woman with cropped grey hair, a farmer's laugh, and a scout leader's manner. The other woman, whom Jay introduced as Mimi, is quiet and wears glasses. Perhaps there is something more than friendship between the women. They have yin-yang talking habits. In group situations, Jay talks and Mimi smiles, and, when it is just the two of them, Mimi talks and Jay listens. From their body language during their registration with the volunteer, Algeria decides that Jay and Mimi are definitely gay but that does not make them men-haters, not like Winifred.

Algeria unwraps a tower of rice cakes and thinks about how Winifred was her mother. She sinks the blade of a knife into the buttery green flesh of an avocado. The knife is blunter than the steak knife she kept beside her bed as a teenager. She opens her Camino diary and makes a note of the date, the place and the number of hours it took to walk from the village of El Acebo. She accounts in detail for the eight-hundred calories she has consumed so far today. She writes: *If a woman looks after you and feeds you for fourteen years, isn't she your mother?*

Winifred fed her on a good old-fashioned Cape Coloured diet, full of sugar to promote diabetes, salty fat to encourage coronary disease and sweat, sadness and anger to kindle guilt. apple pie with cream, roly-poly, malva pudding, chocolate cake, trifle, steak-egg-and-chips, babotie, tomato breedie, brown stew, curry, pickled tongue, crumbed chicken, fried fish cakes, vetkoek, fatty lamb chops, roast pork and roast potatoes. As a child, Algeria was always with Winifred, either in the kitchen or

in that cold place with the pink jewellery box and the bag of plastic curlers – that small room with a view of the dirt bins, Winifred’s bedroom.

Algeria cannot remember whether beyond needing Winifred and being frightened of Winifred, she cared for Winifred. The thought of disliking the hands that rolled and spiced and chopped and battered and buttered for her makes Algeria feels suddenly guilty.

Doesn’t a child have its mother to thank for everything, even anger? While they were rolling polies and crumbing breasts did Winifred’s rage, all that bitterness, resentment and unpredictable fury aimed at men, rub off on Algeria? There were times when Winifred was laughing and happy – she had a good sense of humour and liked to sing and read – but without due cause anger came down like God on Baal and Winifred’s face grew ugly. She became flustered, her lips slackened and spittle flew from her mouth, her eyes became fevered, glassy, the whites yellower than usual. It wasn’t an anger that stayed on her face: it poisoned the air like the cigarettes she smoked.

Winifred would curse men, “*Varke, onnooslike varke, fokin robbis.*” Pigs, dirty pigs, fucking rubbish. She would move around muttering, double the dose of butter, add too much salt, crash plates and pots, chip Algeria’s mother’s cups so that the burgundy lines around the Villeroy & Bosch “Petit Fleur” saucers were always marked with raw porcelain gashes. Tea sets bought by the dozen – Ginori, Rosenthal, Gien – expired quickly, and a stack of saucers without cups mounted up in the graveyard at the back of the kitchen cupboard.

Even in this green refuge, across years and a continent, Algeria can still feel her cooking mother’s pernicious rage.

In contrast to Algeria's actual mother, Winifred, was very religious, a nightly Bible reader, a preacher of doom. Winifred beat meat and, with demonic eyes, used to say the *End* was coming soon and sinners like Algeria would be screaming as they burned in hell on Judgement day.

"Men like to make dirty, evil things with women," Winifred said on a regular basis. She was one of those people with a stock of sentiments to be inserted into any conversation. Those sentences were like stale fruit scones that no one wants to eat, but they come out at every tea.

One of Winifred's other jokes returns to Algeria: Winifred would make her finger like a worm and the worm would outsmart Algeria's attempts to run away and tickle Algeria's crotch through her clothes.

Algeria's mother cannot cook. It doesn't matter now because Algeria no longer believes in cooking: food should be raw and whole. Once Algeria's mother almost burnt the house down boiling an egg. Maids cooked dinner every night and Algeria's mother tinkled a glass bell to call them to clear the plates at the end of each meal. There was an electric bell on the wall next to her mother's bed and, when pressed, it rang through to the kitchen if morning tea was required. Those women who came to the bell and wore Pick 'n Pay gingham overalls and *doeks* were surrogate mothers.

Maggie was the maid and mother of Algeria's pre-school life. Algeria does not remember much about Maggie except eating samp with her and then there is that recovered memory Algeria still cannot come to terms with: the incident in the bedroom with Maggie's boyfriend. Maggie left suddenly one day with her possessions in a black bag and never returned. The adults muttered about passes, but Algeria was too young to understand what a pass was.

After Maggie, Winifred Hendricks was employed. Winifred was Afrikaans-speaking, from a farm labourer's township in Paarl, and did not need a pass.

Winifred complained to six-year-old Algeria of the African smell – “stink,” she called it – that Maggie had left in the maids' room. Winifred warned Algeria never to walk near an African because the African would steal her teeth. Algeria had wondered if that was why Winifred kept her teeth in a glass of water on the windowsill.

Winifred started working for the Laurence family just before Algeria started school. In the family album there is a photograph of her plaiting Algeria's hair on the morning of the first day of pre-prep. It was clear to Algeria that Winifred had a bad deal: she had the smallest room, the fewest clothes, was treated as if she was stupid, never stood up for herself, had to clean toilets and dog's vomit and generally do what Mrs Laurence commanded. The worst thing was that Winifred was only allowed to eat dinner after the rest of the family had eaten. She had to eat the leftovers, and her dinner was always cold and sometimes there was not much left, sometimes almost nothing. Algeria often asked her mother if Winifred could have dinner with the family; Mrs Laurence would purse her lips and instruct Algeria to stop being foolish. It was better when her mother and father were out, because then Algeria sat in the kitchen and ate dinner with Winifred: their favourite meal was squash and mashed potato, which they named *magoosley*, accompanied by pork sausages and gravy. That was nice.

Early on, Algeria decided that being a housewife and cooking for the family would be a dreadful thing to do, indicative of stupidity. She wanted to be a world-wanderer: a career woman who travelled and wore clothes like her mother.

Being there was twenty-eight year old Winifred's complaint to Algeria. Being there seven-days a week with another woman's child and never with her own

children. Brother Jerome and sister Lydia, from fathers different and unidentified, only saw their mother once a month when Winifred had a weekend off. They lived with one of Winifred's fourteen siblings, a sister who worked at a butcher shop in Paarl. Jerome, who Winifred called a "gift," her baby who was born so tiny he could fit into a shoebox, broke his mother's heart when he turned Muslim at the age of twenty-one.

Winifred was not there for her shoebox son, but she was there for Algeria. Except when Algeria wanted to stop eating, when she begun cutting her own bread for sandwiches – on an electric meat cutter meant for shaving ham. Algeria's sandwiches were sandwiches for vanishing people, sandwiches thin enough to see through.

"I've been keeping a journal, too," says a voice above her that makes her hand jump, leaving a start of ink halfway through her last word.

She recognises the man.

"You have a lovely journal," she says. "I saw you getting it stamped just now."

"*Lovely*, that's a quaint word." His hand is resting on the chair opposite Algeria's as if he wants to pull it out, and sit at the table but is waiting for the go-ahead. "This journal means a whole lot to me. I'd have given up walking after the first few days if it weren't for the journal."

"Really? How long have you been walking?"

"It'll be five weeks tomorrow. It's a real nice story, actually. Do you mind if I sit?"

"Please do." But she'd rather be left alone.

“I started walking in France,” he says, pulling out the chair and sitting. “In the beginning there was nobody, not a single person, who could speak English. You gotta understand, I’m the kinda guy who really likes to talk to people.”

He takes off his cap and his strawberry blonde hair is damp with sweat. Without the cap on, his age is more visible.

“See, I’m from Georgia. My father was a military general, so I guess you could call me an army brat. When I was growing up we moved around all the time, so I learned to be real sociable. I gotta talk, if I don’t talk I get grumpy and miserable. This walking with no one to talk to, boy, it was really getting me down. I just thought, ‘Why the heck am I here? I don’t need to be tramping around Spain all alone, I’d rather be back home with my wife and kids.’ I was gonna quit, but then I met these two American women in Pamplona.

“It was the first time I could have a conversation in four days. They were from South Carolina and I believe they could sense that I was thinking of ducking out. So the one woman, she asks me, ‘Is your wife encouraging you to do this walk? Is that why you’re doing it?’ I replied ‘Yes,’ because it’s true my wife thought it would be good for me to do it. So the woman says, ‘Your wife wants you to bring a special gift home for her, the gift of the story of your experience on the Camino.’ That really inspired me. So I’m making this journal as a gift for my wife. I put all sorts of things into it – flowers, pictures, my thoughts, drawings – and at each town I get them to stamp in it, too.”

“What a wonderful idea,” Algeria says, admiring this man who is singularly unglamorous. His features are far from perfect: his brow is too high, his hairline is beginning to recede, and his ears stick out a little too much. But his cheeks are rosy and his face is smooth and freckled and enhanced by a series of furrows that deepen

on his forehead when he raises his brows. Lines near his eyes and `mouth are plentiful. Perhaps twenty years ago, he would have been the kind of man sensible girls would avoid, on account of his looks. Now, there are ten thousand younger, better looking men, and he is made tender by the inelasticity of his skin.

“Your wife is a lucky woman,” Algeria says.

“I guess so.” His smile is skewed, uncertain. He looks away towards a pilgrim sitting cross-legged on the grass. She is in the midst of reading another pilgrim’s future as it is laid out in a Celtic Cross Tarot spread.

“This card,” says the soothsayer to her pilgrim friend, “ the Chariot, is about your ability to move away from difficulties, by the strength of your will. The next one shows that if you can manage the move, which may have its difficulties, there are good prospects for business, great fortune and happiness – perhaps even love – ahead.”

“I could do with a bit of all that,” the American man says.

A few paces from the pilgrim’s Chariot future, is a stone memorial to a man who died of a heart attack along the Camino. Beyond that, other pilgrims are hanging up washing. In the stagnant thirty-five degree heat, clothes stay put and dry quickly.

This is the kind of oestrus heat that can confuse bodies into thinking they are in love, Algeria thinks.

Dominic, with fresh blisters on his fingers to match those between his toes, walks by and waves. “We’re meeting in the chapel now.”

“A chapel? I’d like to see that chapel,” the American man says.

Algeria closes away Winifred in her diary, and puts the half-eaten avocado and rice cake lunch back into its plastic packet. She and the American man walk to the

chapel together, stopping to read the memorial poem to the pilgrim whose heart stopped along the way of the stars.

Expecting a wrath of gilded angels and encrusted idols, Algeria regrets having to leave the open grass and the warmth in favour of chapel-darkness. She and the American man stand at the old doors and look in.

First, she can see nothing but when her eyes are ready, the place reveals itself: it is stark and beautiful. Stripped of pretension it is white, like a bandage, with wooden seats and a triptych of the Lady so often hailed to help the wounded.

Algeria and the American man sit next to each other, opposite that luminous eggshell face of oil paint on wood, the nurse with faint scarlet cheeks like poppies. She has aged: the air of a few centuries has touched her and is proof she has been there, helping, all that time.

It's lucky that the Virgin has no scent, and there is only one of her – many of these Ladies together might be as deadly as an opium field and breathing them in could quite easily put one into an endless slumber. If that were the case, Algeria glances at the American man, then she and this married man would be sleeping together.



THE HERMIT

Behind Algeria is maze of village streets. One is an alley of love. A church looms over gardens dripping rose petals and a stranger is drawing near.

She discovered the alley of love the previous evening on a walk through Villafranca. The smell of those plaques along its walls, the clay lovers entwined and kissing between Spanish poetry, they were captivating. *La caricia del aroma de una rosa, de un solo de ruiseñor la melodía, de un momento musical la fantasía, un beso de amor que aquí la luna posa fue Villafranca arte y poesía.* The language was similar enough to her own for her to make a guess at its meaning. The lovers filled in the blanks. Algeria remembered an article she had read in a magazine. Each person, the article said, has at least 3700 soul mates.

Those words linger in her thoughts as she considers the best strategy of avoidance. A man's voice with an American accent calls out: "Are you doing the mountain or the road route?"

The pilgrim emerges through the dawn and she recognises the bandage and the strawberry blonde hair.

"Definitely the mountain route." She smiles but does not stop. "Buen Camino," she says and increases her pace, anxious, as usual, when alone and confronted by a man.

Yesterday, after twenty-two kilometres of uphill walking and burdened with stocks of Iranian dates and jars of olive tapenade, Algeria arrived at the top of an exaggerated hill, thought she couldn't go another step and when she peers over the down side there was Villafranca. She found the private hostel at the centre of a diamond whose points were a rose garden, a cathedral, a graveyard and a bar. It was a tumbledown nook and part of it was under plastic for renovations. Everywhere was coated in a layer of powdered stone.

She went up a flight of plank stairs. On the left was a door to a dormitory reserved for snorers. At the top of the stairs was a gloomy dormitory with wooden floors, forty musty bunks crammed in rows with minimal walkways. At the far end were two sleeping bodies. Algeria's steps were quiet so as not to disturb dreams and the stagnant air. There were no windows in the dormitory and the air was dusted with night-time body odours. Windowless was probably better since the view would be of the graveyard.

She selected a top bunk where a dimmed sunbeam fell from a star-shaped skylight cut out of the rafters. She untied and took off her boots and damp socks and climbed up onto the bunk.

First, a rosy-cheeked woman entered the dormitory. The woman had thick grey hair held back with a red velvet ribbon. She selected a bunk diagonally below Algeria, took off her straw hat, and looked around, dissatisfied. Fastened to the hatband was a bunch of field flowers and fresh cherries, picked along the way.

As the woman unpacked, her boots flumped against the floor. She took out a paisley shawl embroidered in brilliant shades of aqua and iris with swirls of transparent glass beads that glitter, even in the dulled light.

More boots against buckling timber could be heard from the direction of the stairs. Then there he was: a jovial man with strawberry blonde hair and a bandage around his leg. He came into the dormitory proffering a plastic bag filled with ripe cherries.

“Anyone like some?” he said with his American accent. “I picked them along the way. Hello again.” He smiled at Algeria.

“Aha,” said the woman with the hat, “so you’re one of the cherry thieves who give us all a bad name.” She took a handful. “They look delicious. Thank you.”

“I’ll definitely have some, thank you.” Algeria said. “I’m mad about cherries.”

He held up the bag for her. She took far fewer of the purpled black cherries than she would have liked.

“Please, have more,” said the strawberry blonde man with freckled hands. “I’ve eaten so many I can’t possibly eat anymore. I have to get rid of them.” He held out his packet in a last-chance fashion. Algeria scooped up a few more, not enough. Then with no further takers, the American man bid them farewell and disappeared down the stairs.

The path turns from cobbles to gravel and the ascent up the Cerro del Real begins. His boots grind closer.

“You’re a pretty fast walker,” he says.

“Not really, but I have to keep warm.”

“Do you do a lot of hiking?” He’s only two steps behind her.

“I walk up the mountain most weekends at home. But this is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this.”

She thinks of a time when every day after work she used to walk up through Kirstenbosch onto the contour path with its fynbos, bumblebees and hummingbirds, to shake her head free of the world of interiors. A man with a knife raped a woman near the path Algeria took. Now she cannot walk there anymore, it reminds her too much of the things in her childhood she wants to forget. She tried the path once after that incident, but, halfway up, fear sunk on her with each step until her heartbeat was so loud that she could no longer hear the birds singing. She ran down, and never went back alone.

The intruder grins as he comes in line with Algeria. “Yeah, me too. I love hiking but I’ve never done anything like the Camino.” With his backpack on he is like an aged boy scout. His freckled hands are not rough or coarse but solid enough to be capable of building or creating something.

“Where about in America do you live?”

“Well, it’s Canada mostly.”

“Really?” Her thoughts lead to Richard. Canada is Richard. Richard is closer if a Canadian is near. “How lovely.”

“*Lovely.*” He smiles at the word. “Yeah, my wife’s Canadian. Quebecois, to be precise. For the last year I’ve been living, or rather commuting, back and forth to Montreal, to where she and our kids live.”

Yet he doesn’t wear a ring. Still, the fact that he has a wife is a relief. Algeria relaxes. “My boyfriend lives in Vancouver.” She regrets that she still feels the need to call Richard her “boyfriend.” “Isn’t Montreal where they have the jazz festival every year?”

“Yeah, and lots more. Montreal is the greatest city, always something exciting happening. And it has excellent restaurants. They call it the Paris of North America.”

“It must be cold, though.”

“Oh, yeah,” says the strawberry blonde man, “it’s cold but you’d hardly notice it. In fact, it can be an advantage. In winter there’s this wonderful atmosphere, the cafés are filled with people having coffee and tea and eating and listening to live music.”

Despite herself, Algeria warms to his enthusiasm. “Sounds great. It must be beautiful, too, with lots of nice walks?”

“Sure, all around Canada there are some awesome hikes.”

“Wasn’t that film *The Bear* made there?”

“*The Bear?*” He shakes his head. “I can’t say I’ve heard of it, but I was almost eaten by a bear once, when I was on camp with military school. I told you the other day my dad was an obsessive army general.”

From brown bears the conversation trips over to survival tactics in the wild. The strawberry blonde man tells her that her backpack is not well packed and that the straps are not fastened properly. They stop and he adjusts her straps, hands close enough for her to smell clean skin and sunscreen.

Up and up they walk, talking the whole time.

“I don’t even know your name?”

“Algeria.”

“I’m Simon. So what is it you do when you aren’t hiking around Spain?”

“Well, I was a marketing and creative director at a textile company but I’ve given it all up to follow my dream to be a writer. And you?”

“I’m a chef, but I studied to be a history teacher.”

Goodbye, Mr Chips is what comes to Algeria’s mind. And how in Japan teachers are esteemed, and how she loves teachers. She once had a crush on a Professor Lozano, an astronomer who delivered a lecture at her school when she was fifteen. He had grey hair and knew all there was to know about the stars. He knew everything. But this strawberry blonde man named Simon is not only a teacher he’s a chef, too. Although Algeria avoids most foods, the art, the alchemy of preparing and combining the thousands of possible ingredients all with their own history and geography and chemistry and mythology and poetry and politics fascinates her. At home, eating rice cakes, she pages through her eight-hundred-and-sixty-five-page tome *The Oxford Companion to Food* imagining all the foods she will never taste

“What sort of chef are you?”

“My style is French, I suppose.”

Pity, French is so unhealthy: too much cream and butter.

She says, “Do you have any recipes for sauces without butter or cream... as frightful as it may sound to you, I’m a vegan.”

She expects him to shrivel, like most men do as if “vegan” is a sexually transmitted disease. Simon smiles and tells her about a notorious French chef who became famous for using water in his sauces instead of butter or cream.

“Poor guy, he died recently. Rumour has it that he killed himself when he lost one of his Michelin Stars. He wrote some awesome books, though. Some day I’d like to write a recipe book. Maybe one for backpackers on the Camino using the local ingredients.”

“That’s brilliant. I hope you’ll include some vegetarian recipes.”

He assures her that he will look after the vegetarians. Time and the hill vanish with tales of Canadian and American history. At the top, Simon bends to rub his bandaged leg. His face looks pained.

“Maybe you should rest for a while,” she says.

“Yeah, you’re right, a rest is what I need.”

“Well...” Algeria starts to walk away backwards. “Take care.”

“Oh?... yeah, right, great to have met up with you, Algeria... are you walking to O Cebreiro today?”

“No, Vega. In case I don’t see you again, you should definitely do the backpacker’s recipe book. It’s really a cool idea. Don’t forget...”

“Vegetarian recipes.” Simon laughs. “I know, there’ll be some, just for you.”

Walking through a forest of chestnut trees bent and twisted like Rackham’s illustrations of the trolls in *Peer Gynt*, it occurs to Algeria that perhaps she should have stayed with Simon. After that, the path to Vega is flanked with banks of blue cornflowers.

The Vega hostel is dour with hairs clogging the showers and sludge on the floors in the WC. The only charm in the place is the upstairs balcony with its open-air kitchenette. It has chairs painted with hearts and flowers and a view of the river, which is flanked by trees and farm gardens bulging with cabbages, turnips and

tomatoes. From the hostel owner's tape player, a scratchy tango oozes through the heat.

Algeria showers, changes, and, faint from hunger, goes out to find a shop. She turns left then right into a road that traverses a stone bridge. There, like an Arabian shepherd, top tied around his head for protection from the sun, sits Simon on the bridge, smiling.

"Hey, Algeria, glad to see you made it. I'm just about to have some lunch, care to join me?"

Leaning against the bridge wall, she watches how he slices tomatoes, cheese and lettuce, layers them onto a baguette and sprinkles the sandwich with coarse salt from a cloth spice bag.

"Can I tempt you?"

"No, thanks," she says. "I've had something to eat already. The tomatoes look delicious."

He slices a ripe tomato in half and hands it to her.

Hours pass in an effortless exchange, which includes their mutual aspiration to plant a fruit and vegetable garden, his wife, her boyfriend, and the books she hopes to one day write.

"You should get a redheaded boyfriend, they're supposed to be the best lovers," he says, chewing on his artful sandwich.

"Gosh, it's hot," she says. "It would be nice to swim, but there doesn't seem to be a way down to the river."

"A shame I'm not staying in Vega tonight, don't you think, I could make you something interesting – vegetarian, of course."

"Mmm." She changes the subject.

Finally, he finishes his sandwich.

“You better get going,” he says, “it’s quite far still. I think I’ll do some exploring... hope the rest of the walk goes well. And the book and everything.”

“Bye.” She waves, not wanting to leave. She crosses the bridge in the opposite direction, with every step wishing she did not have to leave him.

Along the riverbank, she finds a path down to a fishing pond, between a cabbage patch and a willow tree. She lingers a long while on the thin bridge where she supposes fishermen would stand to cast their lines into the pond. When she is sure that Simon will have passed, she climbs the bank and turns right into the main road.

Right into Simon.

“Algeria! Did you see the cows?”

“No, what cows?”

It is a shock to find him again, but a good shock.

“A whole herd of cows came over the bridge. I tried to find you but you’d disappeared. They were beautiful.”

“What a pity... I discovered a place to swim, though,” she says. “I’m on my way to get a costume.” Her thoughts are about getting away from him.

“A swim is exactly what I need.”

She explains how to find the swimming spot. “Enjoy it. Bye, again.”

At a grocer’s shop she takes a long time choosing cherries, grapes, fresh dates, and soft apricots. Algeria does her washing, rinsing until her hands are violet from cold and wrinkled. Enough time has passed, so she puts on her costume, gathers up her picnic, and walks back to the pond.

“I was just about to give up on you.”

The voice startles her and she looks up to see Simon again, grinning.

“Oh... hi... was it nice, the water?” It’s becoming confusing this meeting and re-meeting; she likes him but still her mind says, *get away*.

“Icy but irresistible,” he says.

“They have the most divine fruit here,” she says, unpacking the fruit. “Do you want some grapes?” she asks.

“Are you going to feed them to me?”

With a light laugh she opens the plastic container of dates. “Do you like dates?”

“Yeah, very much. Thanks.”

“I’m going to swim,” she says.

At the water’s edge, she unties her hair from a turban-like knot. Blonde hair drapes down her back, past her waist and almost to her knees. She tests the water: it is too cold but she needs to distance herself from him and dives in.

“I’m impressed,” he says as she surfaces. “When you felt the water, I thought, ‘There is no way she’s going to get in, most women wouldn’t.’”

She swims under the fishermen’s bridge but it’s impossible for her to last in the cold.

“I can’t stay in for long.” She wades out, sparkling but shivering. To escape thoughts of feeding him grapes she climbs up onto the bridge across the pond.

Simon joins her. Less than a body’s width away, she turns to look at him. She finds it difficult to concentrate on the conversation about a hiking route in Canada.

“It’s supposed to be awesome. It takes a year.”

Simon is close enough to kiss.

Sun highlights the tips of his eyelashes.

When her heartbeat is so loud that she cannot hear the birds singing, she turns away to face the river.

“It’s late,” she says. “You’ve still got a long way to walk.”

“You’re so right.”

He returns to the cement step and picks up his backpack.

“Well, goodbye again,” she says.

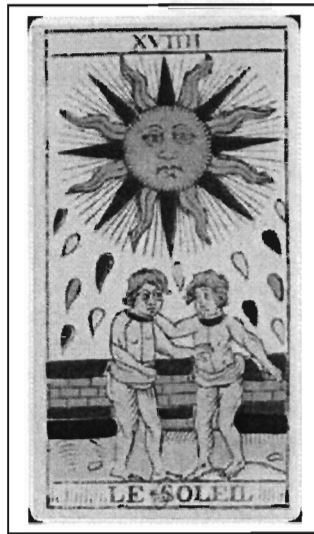
“Bye, Algeria.”

She looks down.

He starts away. “You know what,” he turns back, “let me give you my email address. If you decide to do the Cross-Canada Trail, let me know. I’ve always wanted to do it.”

He gives her his email address and they say goodbye for the fifth and final time. This time she watches him go, thinking, *there goes one of my 3700 possible soul mates.*

Later, on the hostel balcony, eating cherries alone, with the tango playing below, the moment on the bridge repeats. 3 700 possible soul mates, what’s one more missed? But doing the calculations she realises that with over 3.7 billion people in the world, the odds on meeting a soul mate are at least a million to one. Simon is lost and Algeria is still wandering.



THE SUN

As soon as the wine arrives, Dominic downs a glass and wipes his mouth. “Heaven,” he says. While he pours himself a second glass of heaven, Annabel, who is sitting to his right, asks, “What’s all the fuss about the legend of O Cebreiro?”

O Cebreiro is a village of straw roofs at the top of a mountain in what was the Kingdom of Galicia, and is now the province of Lugo, which has saints and whiskey-swimming witches in its history.

“I was desperate,” says Cathy to Algeria, who is sitting on Dominic’s left. Cathy clutches her cup of coffee with both hands. Chrissie, across the stone table, is slicing open a tin of smoked oysters with a Swiss Army knife and listening to Cathy. Despite the impending miracle, Cathy continues on the topic of her hapless infatuation. “I was determined to make Dave fall in love with me. He had a real reputation as a womaniser. He’s so good-looking. I was madly in love with him.”

“The good-looking ones are the worst,” says Algeria, who has half an ear on Cathy’s machinations. “Richard, my ex, is absolutely gorgeous, too.”

There is a clip-clopping and a donkey with his pilgrim stops outside the restaurant. Algeria observes as the donkey permits himself to be tied to a post and watches his pilgrim disappear through a door that creaks when it is opened.

“It was the 14th Century,” says Dominic on Algeria’s right. Red Rioga gleams on his lips.

Algeria sees Dominic’s words in pictures. She sees a morning in snow in a village known as Barxamaior. At the edge of the village, near a forest, was the dwelling of an old man. Inside the fire had shrunk to ash and the cold had frosted the sleep between the man’s eyelids. While Dominic chews on bread, washed down with wine, Algeria sees that before he levered himself out of bed, this old man spoke a prayer.

“Lord, grant me the strength to give all I can give and to be all I can be. Lord may your love warm my joints. It is Sunday and it will be my joy to join with you in communion at the Church of Santa Maria la Real. Thank you for your love made manifest in creation of which I am a humble part. Amen.”

Soup arrives to interrupt the tale. The half-bottle of wine is drained.

The donkey’s pilgrim reappears from the narrow door, holding a bunch of carrots and a packet of biscuits. The donkey accepts a carrot from his pilgrim and chews on it while his pilgrim crunches biscuits.

“I acted like such a nerd,” Cathy is saying. “Tried to do everything I thought Dave would like. Used up my savings to follow him to France one summer. I had these fantasies about marrying Dave and being a good wife. He gave me this.”

She shows Algeria a silver necklace with a marquise clock as a pendant. “It doesn’t work,” she says, looking down at the clock face, so that her young chin is doubled. “It’s antique.”

Like Cathy, Algeria has also flown around the world for love. She thought her efforts would be met with flowers. And why not? Richard had sworn that she, amongst all the others, was the one girl he couldn’t live without and had insisted that she at least give Vancouver a try. It was summertime when she arrived and he was training for a marathon, obsessed with improving his time. Evening after evening of perfect sunsets passed by with no romance. She may as well have not made the thirty-hour flight; he paid her no attention, it was victory enough for him that she’d come.

“*Otra de tinto, Rioga,*” Dominic instructs the waitress. “*Y más pan, por favor.*”

The waitress nods and hurries to another table where two couples and their children are waiting to order.

Then Dominic’s old man took his lantern and a stick and pushed his way into the snow. The wind sucked the flame from his lantern, but the old man continued on the journey. Ice crystals whipped and slashed his skin. Trees groaned and snapped and the gale flung a branch across his path. The force made him stumble and fall into spokes of twigs. One twig gashed him on the forehead and blood ran into his eyes.

Dominic pushes aside his bowl to indicate he is ready for the next course. He grasps his bottle of wine and fills his glass. After a glug, he pronounces the wine “Paradise.”

“In the end, Dave went to England for six months,” says Cathy. “I was counting down the days to his return in my diary. He didn’t phone me when he arrived. I knew he was back though, that really tore me up. So I phoned him.”

A couple of New Zealanders that Algeria recognises come out of the narrow door carrying a bread loaf, a wax-coated cheese shaped like a girl's breast, and ham.

"We ended up spending the night together. The next morning Dave told me that he had met some French girl and that they were engaged to be married." With one finger Cathy touches her pendant, which claims an eternal twelve o'clock. "It took me a long time to get over Dave."

It is a grisly stew with leeks that Dominic chews while the old man of Barxamaior got up, wiped the blood from his eye and continued walking. Pneumonic wetness had penetrated the old man's cloak and clothes and boots. Against wind and snow, the man continued his walk out of the forest and up the Malafava hill to O Cebreiro where the pilgrims now sit eating.

"I'm over Richard," says Algeria.

"Over him?" asks Chrissie, disbelieving. "Are you sure?"

Algeria nods but she is not at all sure; she is Richard's donkey.

"Richard has issues, like everyone... there's always a reason for the way a person is. But you know that famous saying about not judging a person until you've walked three moons in their boots."

It was madness for an old man to be out in such a storm. But the sight of the candles and hearths of O Cebreiro gave him strength.

"Thank you Lord, for walking with me through the storm." Words Algeria imagines he might have said.

When the man entered the Church of Santa Maria La Real, the congregation turned to stare at his blue lips and the icicles clustering on his beard and the water running from his clothes. The service had already begun. A monk blessing the sacramental wine was annoyed by the disturbance.

“What a fool,” the monk thought. “These peasants have no brains. Surely that man does not believe God will notice if he is here or not? He would have done better to stay at home, than risk this snowstorm.”

Dominic grunts and sucks a bone clean of stew sauce. “The poor man of Braxamaior came to the front so that he could be the first to receive the communion.”

There is an image in Algeria’s mind of the monk and perhaps a choir. In Latin, the monk would have said, “Blood of Christ,” and allowed the man to sip from the chalice. “Body of Christ,” the monk would have said about to put the holy bread into the mouth of the man.

“But he stopped,” Dominic says.

The monk was still holding the wafer on the old man’s tongue.

“What is this?” said the monk.

The bread had turned to flesh.

The monk was fearful, he looked into the chalice.

The wine had turned to blood.

“Old man,” said the monk. “God has noticed you have suffered to share communion with him. Here is a miracle: the wine has turned to blood and the bread has turned to the flesh of Jesus. It is a miracle.”

A tour bus grumbles around a bend and pulls into O Cebreiro. Out tumbles a group of tourists, in need of miracles, and well equipped to capture the evidence of them in digital pixels.

“The Chalice of the Miracle is kept in a glass box in the Church of Santa Maria la Real,” Dominic says, scratching the unshaven skin under his chin.

Love or illusion? Algeria looks at Cathy’s clock pendent with its face frozen on a midday long past.



THE EMPRESS

After missing a yellow arrow in the dark of pre-dawn and walking for an hour in the wrong direction, Algeria has ended up on the path to Triacastella with Margaret, who has a backache, and Ruth, who has shin splints. She left early to avoid the attentions of a lecherous pilgrim named Miguel.

Last night, also in a bid to escape that dark-eyed womaniser, Algeria had sat with Diana on the hill with a wooden cross behind the O Cebreiro hostel. They'd talked as the stars came up. Diana's shoulders looked so raw with weeping blisters caused by her backpack that Algeria volunteered to carry some of her load the next day.

"That's very kind of you," Diana said. "It is an unfortunate burden." She did not tell Algeria the nature of the cargo that made her pack so much heavier than that of most other pilgrims on the road to Santiago. Instead, she continued with the

conversation they'd been having on poetry. Diana said she'd written something almost like poetry at one stage in her life.

When they returned to the hostel, Algeria offered a second time to help Diana with the heavy pack.

"It's late." Diana said, putting one of her hands in front of her mouth to cover a yawn. Days of walking in the sun had turned the stitch marks on Diana's reconstructed skin the dark brownish purple of calamata olives. "It's best we go to sleep now."

Algeria was left guessing. Before they entered the dormitory, Diana's last words were, "Please don't tell anyone what I told you about Margaret."

Yes, some questions had been answered on that hill with its cross studded with old and new coins jabbed into its cracks by decades of desperate pilgrims. Algeria had mentioned how interested she was in hearing about Margaret's husband's thesis on the poet Li Yu.

To that Diana had smiled sadly. "Cape Town's such a small place, isn't it? Everybody always knows everybody else."

"But I thought you were from Port Elizabeth?"

"I moved there about fifteen years ago, after my first husband died. I was born in Cape Town, though. Grave, my first husband, and I lived in a flat in Little Chelsea, Wynberg. We had a view of the Maynardville Gardens." It was then that Diana had told Algeria a story about Margaret's family.

The air is clogged with a stench of dung. Trodden smells seep from sheds and along the drains. Cows lumber along the road going where their man goes. He is grizzle-faced with rotten teeth and a waistcoat. The cows swish and plod and, without

stopping, release their bowels, the contents of which slide down matted fur and land to be hooped into the stones. Their man is in front and they push him on.

A fly lands to lick the remnants of peach and saliva from Algeria's lips.

"I can't bear these flies," Algeria says. "I don't know how these people live here."

"There are worse things to live with than flies and dung," Ruth says.

Algeria nods – Ruth, she knows, has survived much worse.

All the way along this *corredoira*, this cart track, Margaret has talked about her daughter. Ruth has been silent. Now and then, Algeria has heard Ruth's breath become louder, more strained with the effort of keeping down sorrow.

Four cows, mothers with udders filled with milk, choosing to stay within their pen, brush and snort away flies and tolerate the stares of the walkers.

At the perimeter of one of these nightmares of domestication, a berry-grower has set up a table and sells her wares from a yard. When clear of the reek, and poorer by a single Euro each, Algeria, Margaret and Ruth sit on the trunk of a tree to eat berries.

Ruth speaks about her husband and difficult thirteen-year-old son Vaughn, and Margaret's eyes widen.

"Perhaps it's my fault," Ruth says. "I've been pre-occupied."

"We've been so fortunate with our children." Margaret places a red currant in her mouth. "Never had a day's trouble. Our family is so close."

This is contrary to what Diana has told Algeria.

"My youngest son, Noel, is studying to be a designer," Margaret says.

Algeria offers Ruth the punnet of raspberries. Neither Algeria nor Ruth speaks, but Margaret does not notice. She talks on about how wonderful and talented Noel is.

“Even at nineteen, I pack him a lunch box to take to college. I always give him a piece of fruit, yoghurt and some whole-wheat bread sandwiches with the crusts cut off. He hates crusts.”

What Algeria remembers of school lunch boxes are sandwiches with bread too thick, clots of butter, a smother of jam and mutterings from Winifred about how Algeria’s other mother had forgotten to buy fresh bread.

“Vaughan prefers to get his lunch from the school tuck shop,” Ruth says, distant. Margaret’s face crinkles.

“Either my husband or I will cook a meal for Vaughn in the evening,” Ruth adds. “Steak and chips or something. That’s Vaughan’s favourite, and mine. That and St. Elmo’s pizza. We have that on treat nights.”

Pizza makes Ruth smile; she hasn’t smiled much along the Camino.

Margaret grimaces at the thought of fast food. “During the week, we have simple healthy food. I cook dinner every night. I almost never cook meat, though. Lentil stew, chickpea curry. No desserts or sweets or cakes.”

No one is perfect, not even Margaret, or so Diana had said.

“But on the weekend,” Margaret says, “I think it’s important for them to be able to relax and have fun. We always have a big family lunch on a Sunday – then I’ll do a roast, or something I know they’ll enjoy. And dessert, of course.”

Whatever Diana says, one thing is certain: Margaret’s family is well-nourished, and that’s worth something.

“When Noel goes out,” Margaret continues. “I can’t sleep until he’s home. Then when I hear him arriving, I get up and go through to the entrance hall and fix him with a good stare as he comes in.”

Margaret shows them the look she gives her son.

The forest floor is damp and smells of rotting leaf layers and hooves. It is good ground, rich black earth, trammelled by daily herds and pilgrims. Ruth has focussed on their six feet in muck-caked boots.

“I always ask him if he has had a good evening and if he’s fine,” Margaret says. “He always replies, ‘Yes, don’t worry, mom, I’m fine.’ Then I give him a hug and say goodnight.” She smiles, content with her maternal effort. “I just want him to know that I’m there for him, if he ever needs to talk or anything. If he has a problem, I want him to know there’s someone who he can talk to about it.”

According to Margaret’s son-in-law, as reported by Diana, Margaret is too much *there*.

“I think Noel understands that my intentions are good. I hope he understands that.” Margaret takes another currant.

Diana had said, with a mixture of empathy and anger, that Margaret’s son Noel has a drug problem and that Margaret is not on speaking terms with her son-in-law.

“I never had the chance to have a good relationship with my mother,” says Margaret.

Ruth crushes a raspberry between her thumb and index finger, so that her fingers become stained with the small fruit’s blood.

“We just didn’t see eye to eye.” Margaret shakes her head. “And then she died when I was twenty-four. We never had the time to make peace with each other.”

“Twenty-four years is a long time to live without peace.” Ruth looks at the broken berry in her hand. “That must have been hard for your mother.”

“Oh, I doubt it. She was such a difficult woman. Very critical – do you know, she told me on my wedding day that getting married would be the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Really?” Ruth shakes her head and stands abruptly. “I’m sure she was just hoping to help you.”

The punnets are emptied and Ruth seems anxious to move on. The walking begins again.

“I have such a wonderful relationship with my daughter, though,” Margaret says, and now there can be no more doubt that Margaret doesn’t know Ruth’s baby daughter died.

“You’re so lucky.” Ruth is pale but putting on a brave smile. “So very lucky.”

“Yes, I wanted to make sure that my daughter never feels like I felt about my mother.”

This son-in-law of Margaret’s had told Diana that Margaret was the one thing about his wife that he would like to change. He claimed that Margaret was domineering, overbearing and treated her own husband, a poetry professor, with distaste. He is not the only one to claim this. Diana’s ex-neighbour in the block with the view of the Maynardville Gardens says the same. Diana’s neighbour, Rosa Ingcheng, told Diana that Margaret and her husband had slept in separate beds for the last eighteen years, apparently because her husband snored. Rosa said it had nothing to do with snoring – he doesn’t snore – but everything to do with Margaret’s inability to show her husband affection.

The town of Triacastella slopes off a mountain and into a river. Yellow arrows take them towards a private hostel. They pass a supermarket where red roses are for sale.

“Did you notice them climbing along the stone walls in one of those villages yesterday?”

Ruth nods. “I took lots of photographs.”

“I loathe roses.” Margaret peers into the supermarket window. “So clichéd, so tacky.”

“The commercial kind, with no scent, like those valentine roses, those *are* a bit tacky,” says Algeria. “But in that village there were wild roses and old roses, not the commercial variety. They were such a magnificent colour against the sky.”

Margaret shakes her head. “I hate them.”

“There was a man who spent a quarter of his life drawing roses,” Algeria says, picturing the book with the crimson rose against an aquamarine background on its cover. “He made a hand-coloured engraving of every rose variety in the Empress Josephine’s garden. If you could see his pictures, I’m sure you wouldn’t hate roses anymore.”

Margaret pulls a face.

“I love all roses,” Ruth says. “They’re my favourite flowers, even the commercial ones.”

“I think I was put off them.”

Margaret closes her eyes to the roses and the rows of tinned tomatoes and jars of salted white beans on the supermarket shelves.

Margaret says, “My husband forgot our wedding anniversary once. He asked his secretary to organise flowers for me and...” She stops speaking and opens her eyes to look at those roses. “Next thing I know, the doorbell rings and there was this man delivering an awful bunch of cheap-looking red roses. So thoughtless, a cliché. I just

burst into tears. It would have been better if he'd sent nothing. I've never liked roses since, especially red roses."

Diana had said that about twelve years ago Margaret's husband had been invited to present a series of lectures on the Romantic Poets in China. He'd wanted Margaret to come with him on the three-month trip. She refused. Before he left he decided to learn some basic Chinese. He wanted Margaret to come for lessons with a private teacher, Rosa Ingcheng, who had once taught Chinese poetry at Peking University. Her speciality was Li Yu. Margaret refused – apparently because she hates learning languages. Her husband began Chinese lessons once a week at Rosa Ingcheng's flat in Chelsea Wynberg with a view of the Maynardville Gardens. Rosa Ingcheng, Diana's ex-neighbour, was married, but her husband spent most of his time in Beijing. Rosa used pin yin phonetic versions of the poems of Li Yu to teach Margaret's husband Mandarin. According to Diana, everybody in Margaret's family, except for Margaret, knows that Margaret's husband and the Chinese teacher have been lovers for over a decade. The family has dinner once a month at Rosa Ingcheng's flat with its view of the Maynardville Gardens.

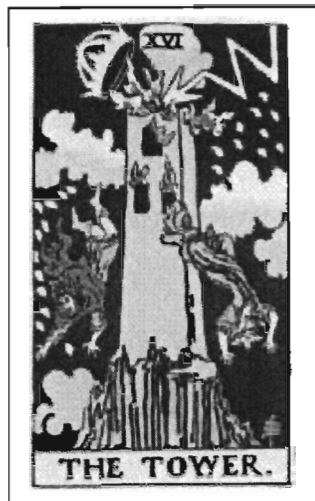
"My hubby always gives me a single red rose on valentine's day," Ruth says. "I wouldn't change it for the world."

Algeria thinks of Richard who could have but never did give her flowers. Richard would tell her he wanted to do nice things for her, special things like she did for him, but he said he seemed to be unable to think of what to do. Not like Pierre Joseph Redouté: could that man have been in love with the Empress Josephine for whom he filled thirty books with two-hundred and fifty rose varieties?

"Well, you're both lucky," says Algeria. "In twenty-nine years of life, I have yet to find a man who gives me flowers."

Across the road from the supermarket, walking down the hill is Miguel, the skirt-chaser with hair the colour of *lapis demonis*. He winks at Algeria as he passes.

University of Cape Town



THE TOWER

Santiago, the end of the pilgrimage, is two nights, forty-five kilometres and, in terms of Algeria's gait, some ninety thousand steps away. In a solitary confinement of thoughts, she strides ahead, a dozen kilograms heavier, to Arca de Pino, that night's stop.

She has taken on some of Diana's load: three bricks taped up and covered in blue plastic. They are books – that much Diana has told her.

After five hours of walking in the heat, and longing for Richard, and hating Richard, the beacons counting down the distance to Santiago indicate that there are only seventeen kilometres to go. She has missed the turn-off to Arca, she realises, passing a compost heap where the air smells of decomposing brown-skinned onion bulbs and hot nettles. The wise thing to do would be to turn back but she wants to get away from her group.

The previous night's dinner at a café above Rimbandiso's meadows had been a trial. The orders were mixed up: Dominic went hungry but had plenty of wine, Jacqueline walked out, when she got lamb gizzards instead of pork ribs, muttering "you all talk too much," and Cathy blamed the vegans for confusing the non-English-speaking waitress. Margaret and Diana have both become vegan, too, and when they asked for the egg to be removed from their egg salad, Cathy lost her temper. Annabel filled up on two-dozen queen olives and four mugs of hot chocolate. Ruth had a telephonic argument with her son over whether or not he should have his ears pierced. During it all, Chrissie couldn't stop talking about how wonderful Miguel was. "He's such a good kisser," she said, more than once.

Banishing envy, kisses, piles of stripped olives, and streams of *Las Torras* from her thoughts, Algeria calculates that she should arrive at what is supposed to be tomorrow night's stop, the Monte de Gozo hostel, at one-thirty.

The forest opens into an area of smallholdings and she walks down a road with rows of snowball cauliflowers, Bulls Blood beets and Jerusalem artichokes on either side. The sunlight is thick and running down everywhere like molten gold, it covers her bones, making up for the fat she does not have.

She hardly notices the nun who greets her on the left or the man who smiles at her on the right. They do not seem to be there in the ordinary sense. Not like the cow she is passing or the farmer leading the cow.

The nun pats Algeria's hand, which delicate enough to belong to a sick child. This disembodied touch is comforting but not normal. Now that Algeria realises who the people walking beside her are, she questions her sanity.

She could be schizophrenic, seeing what isn't there. These presences do not have the same substance as reality. She feels them with an inner sight, and an inner

hearing: an uneasy reconciliation for a person who once liked to pride herself on her rationality.

Madness is a definite possibility.

“Have faith,” the Spirit of Love says. He looks like Jesus: in white, like the ordinary man with almost real flesh and a head of dark curls in Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. Just like that painted Jesus, he is there in shadow, not entirely clear. “Allow yourself to accept that we are with you,” he says.

What are Algeria’s options? The first would be to fight off the insight. The second is to take the risk of allowing insight to speak and suspend her disbelief.

They do not say much, the man and the Mother. Algeria finds the nun to be an open and friendly soul, and it seems she has been where they are, done the Camino before. The road dips and passes vegetable gardens fat with kale and other brassicas. Just as she is admiring these farmers’ use of Sparky marigolds, *Tagetes patula*, for nematode control, it occurs to Algeria that this is the time to ask the question she set the universe: “Is it possible to make a person who does not love herself, learn to love herself?”

“You have healing hands,” the Spirit of Love says. “The way to make a person love him or herself is to touch his or her heart. It’s that simple.”

Algeria is not convinced. “How?”

“At twelve o’clock, you should stop for lunch,” he says. “Sit down, hold your hand to your heart, and the veil of illusion, of self-doubt, of fear will be lifted from your eyes.”

“Do not doubt yourself. We will put our hands on your hand and we will give you the strength to heal your heart.”

The nun becomes a different Mother, and she says, “We are one and the same.” Her robes are lapis-blue and her skin is iridescent as the illuminations in Boucicaut Master’s *Book of Hours*.

The Spirit smiles at Algeria. “You, she and I and all of creation, we are one and the same. The separation is an illusion; we are the all.”

They pass a cow with its horns tied to its front foot so that it cannot lift up its head. Algeria assumes the purpose of this is to prevent the cow from wandering too far.

“You must know that pain or wrong done to any one part of creation affects the whole of creation,” the Spirit of Love says. “That pain reverberates throughout creation. A wrong to one is a wrong to all.”

Algeria pauses to look at the cow bound to itself with a dirty rope. “Isn’t that a bit like Karma?”

But they have gone and Algeria is left to contemplate the sun. Her neck and the small of her back have begun to ache from the books weighing down her pack.

She kicks a pebble out of the path and its easy movement down the incline is evidence of Newton’s third law of motion. *To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*. In the truest sense, that is *the way of the stars*. Forces are by nature paired; contradiction must be the secret of everything.

The rising temperature confirms that midday is imminent. Algeria walks on for another hour in the smell of sun-baking capsicums and melons, thinking about this revelation and the *first law of thermodynamics* – energy can be converted but it cannot be created or destroyed. Somehow this must explain why she has ended up carrying Diana’s books.

She crosses a road and enters a forest. It is twelve o'clock. She rounds a corner and after the bend there is a log.

Sitting on the log, she drinks water and takes out her provisions, an apple and a banana. After checking to see that there is nobody around, she puts her hand on her heart as she was instructed to do. She tries to feel for her heartbeat. When she finds the beat, she closes her eyes and imagines that the nun and the Spirit of Love put their hands on her heart.

A twig breaks behind her. She opens her eyes. The first thing she sees is a pair of white shoes. A man is approaching. She takes her hand off her heart quickly, self-conscious, and busies herself with fruit. The man has a paunch, slicked hair and a moustache. His shoes squeak. He is not a pilgrim.

Algeria concentrates on peeling the banana.

"*Fruta?*" he says.

She nods and bites into the banana.

"*Mucho caldo, eh?*"

"Yes." One of the few Spanish phrases Algeria has picked up is *mucho caldo*, very hot.

A long sentence in Spanish rolls from the mouth under the moustache, and the man pats the ground.

"*Non hablo Espanol,*" Algeria says. She smiles, shrugs to indicate she does not know what he just said and continues eating.

The man with the black moustache utters another long sentence in Spanish ending in "*mucho caldo.*" After several such sentences, he begins to annoy Algeria. She is relieved when he turns and walks away up the hill in the direction of Santiago.

With the forest to herself again, Algeria remembers her failed attempt to heal her heart. Disappointed, she bites into an apple thinking that perhaps she will try again later. For now, food and rest and shade are welcome.

The peace does not last.

She hears the squeaking white shoes return. The man with the black moustache stops in front of Algeria and talks in Spanish. She shakes her head and shrugs.

“Santiago?”

“Yes,” she says.

This leads to another Spanish soliloquy ending in “*mucho caldo.*”

Algeria nods. When the man walks down the hill and disappears around the corner, she finishes her apple and takes a last sip of water. She positions her backpack on the log so that she can slip her arms into the straps while still sitting, thereby staving off the moment when the full weight must once again rest on her shoulders. As she stands, the man returns. The squeaking shoes move fast up the hill towards her. She clicks the clasp of her pack into place, smiles, waves goodbye and starts walking up the hill towards Santiago.

Monte de Gozo, where she plans to stay that night should be seven kilometres away.

Her calculations on how much longer it will take to reach her destination, considering her present state of tiredness, are interrupted by the chatter of the man with the black moustache. He follows her up the hill. Has she not told him she doesn't speak Spanish, why does he persist? She shakes her head and attempts to quicken her pace, hoping he will tire of keeping up with her. In the heat and after six hours of

walking, she finds it a great effort to will her legs to move faster. The increased pace has no effect on the man with the moustache.

She wishes he would go away.

Jabber, jabber, "... *Peso...*" She thinks that word means "weight." As the man with the moustache says it, he makes the curves of a woman's waist and hips in the air with his hands. He winks.

His tone and the curves in his conversation make Algeria uncomfortable. She pushes herself to walk faster. His white shoes shuffle through the pine needles on the forest floor. He is closer to her and his talking has become urgent. Amongst a string of sentences she picks up one word, "... *amor ...*"

There is no doubt in Algeria's mind that the man's thoughts have gone the wrong way. It enrages her that he is so close and still chattering even though she made it clear that she does not understand Spanish. Still walking, she turns to him.

"I do not understand. *Je ne comprend pas. Non capisco. Non hablo Espagnol.*"

Surely he must realise now that she does not want to continue this pointless conversation.

"*Je ne comprends pas, eh?*" he says and now he is right next to her, his shoulder jostling hers. Infuriated, she glares at him. He puts his hand in his pocket and takes out a silver foil square. It takes a moment for her to register that the foil square is a condom.

"NO!" She says and holds up her hand. Her heart lurches, she turns away and walks as fast as she can. As fast as the heat, the weight on her back and six hours of solid walking allow.

The white shoes keep shuffling. They are squeaking like bedsprings and vampire bats. His jabbering has become insistent. The faster she walks, the faster he walks and faster he talks.

For the first time, Algeria is aware that she and this man are alone in the forest. She wants to run, but she does not have the strength to run. There is no end to the forest in sight. This muttering man is more than white shoes and a condom. She wills her legs to go faster and prises a gap between herself and the man with the black moustache.

What can she do? Could she touch his heart? If she turned and put her hand on his heart would he realise that he is doing wrong and leave her alone? She dares not try it. The path has turned steep and still there is no road, no village and no other person in sight.

For a reason she cannot pinpoint, she starts singing "*Ave Maria*" as loud as possible. She does not know the words only the tune, so she makes up some Latin-sounding words. Gasping, she walks, singing as loud as she can.

"*Ave Maria*," the man jeers behind her.

She gulps for air between the fake words, but feels stronger. There is still no end to isolation. What other religious songs does she know? In a muddle of made-up *Maria, Gracia*... she recalls there was a *aria antique* she sang as a solo at her sister's wedding. "*Panis Angelicus*," that was the one, and she knows all the words.

"*Panis Angelicus, dat Panis.*" Gasp. "*Celicum. Man ducas dominus.*" Gasp. "*Figuris terminum.*" Gasp.

Her lungs and shins ache but she sings as loud and walks as fast as possible.

"*O Respirabiles, man ducas dominum,*"

She focuses on the song and closes her mind to the man with the black moustache behind her.

“Pauper, pauper, servus et humilis.”

Time evaporates. The words make a shield around her. The path flattens, the forest opens out and, although there are no people, she can see buildings in the distance. Without looking behind her she continues singing and walking.

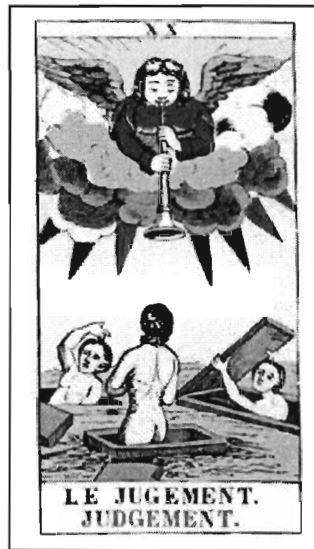
“Panis Angelicus, dat Panis Celicum, Man ducas dominus.”

A pilgrim cycles past her.

The pilgrim smiles and calls out, *“Buen Camino.”*

She realises she cannot hear the squeaking anymore, only a whirr of bicycle wheels as another cyclist passes. Tears run down her cheeks, and a highway rises between the pastures ahead.

Overwrought, she stops at a stone sign carved with a pilgrim’s crook, a cockleshell and a ribbon etched with the word, Santiago.



JUDGEMENT

The dress Algeria wears is white cotton with shoestring straps and almost pretty enough to be a wedding gown. Yesterday, sick of her over-washed shorts and T-shirts worn on the Camino, she bought the dress in the Santiago Market from a stall next to a vegetable-and-fruit vendor, who sat between baskets of granadillas and wore a drooping cabbage leaf on her head for protection from the sun.

Algeria had taken the market as a sign of truce from her universe: she would never finish the novel she planned to write, but at least she'd completed the Camino. The white dress was her reward. She'd also bought a bag full of those wrinkly purple fruits but dared not eat them in the vicinity of the dress, in case their sweet ochre insides should stain the whiteness.

The husband of the fruit vendor had been delighted at Algeria's close interest in the plants he was selling to would-be fruit-growers. She'd examined the plantings and touched their leaves, and thought if she weren't leaving Spain the next day, she would like to have bought one of the *Passifloras*. Proud as a father, the fruit vendor's husband had pointed out a specimen with two open flowers: one flower had a lilac outer fringe and the other flower's crown was pink as candy. She couldn't resist buying the one with its piebald flowers, even though she had no idea what she was going to do with it.

Seeing what an eager shopper she was, the chicken farmer opposite had tried to tempt her with a great grin and tubs of chicken liver pate and fresh farm eggs. He looked crestfallen when she told him, with the help of her Spanish phrasebook, that she was vegetarian. She apologised, and left quickly with her plant and her dress and her bag of passion fruits.

Last night, Algeria checked into the Airas Nunes hotel, housed in an historic building in the Rua do Vilar. Her room has a private bathroom, no queues of pilgrims here (no chance of wandering in for a late-night drink of water and discovering a naked man taking his midnight piss in the basin). How she relished wallowing in her private bath's cool lavender-scented water to recover from the mild sunstroke she experienced after her final day's forty-kilometre marathon.

From her bath she can see the bedroom curtains. They are made from a fabric she recognises is the work of a Spanish company called Gancedo. Beyond that red-and-green floral frame are tiled roofs and the tip of the cathedral's *Torre del Reloj*.

Bells call for this morning's Vespers. She isn't religious but how can she have walked all the way to Santiago and not attend at least one service in the famous cathedral?

As she plaits her long hair, she is transfixed by four parcels wrapped in blue plastic on the dressing table and is considering whether or not to open one of them when there comes a light tap on her bedroom door. Housekeeping, she presumes, come to clean the room. When she opens the door there is nobody there, but something has been left on the floor: a page torn from a book. She picks it up but doesn't know what to make of the picture of an antique print of *Rosa Gallica caerulea*. The muted pink-red rose with golden yellow centre is the work of P.J. Redouté.

Algeria walks out into the passage.

"Hello," she calls down the stairs. "Hello." There is no reply. "How odd," she says into empty hall and then returns to her room where the clanging of large bells rolls in through her window.

Standing at that window, still feeling slightly weak, not stiff as she thought she'd be, but recovering from the after-effects of sunstroke, she enjoys the breeze, the bells and the sound of pigeons that have made their nests in the roof gutters.

About to go out of the hotel, she hears the receptionist calling her, "Senorita Laurence. This letter was left for you."

Perhaps it is from her group of fellow walkers who are due to arrive in Santiago in the late afternoon. She has an arrangement to meet them outside the pilgrim's office at four o'clock.

She opens the letter and pulls out another Redouté rose prints. This time it is a white one with lightly pink insides and is called *Rosa Alba Regalis*, 'Great Maiden's Blush.'

"Who left this?"

"I'm sorry, senorita, I don't know. I just found it here on the desk."

Bemused, Algeria thinks it must be one of Annabel's jokes. She'd mentioned a conversation to Annabel that she and Margaret had had about roses. Related to that she'd also told Annabel about the glorious rose prints of the eighteenth century iconographer, Redouté. So perhaps Annabel, like Algeria, has made it to Santiago ahead of the rest of their walking group, and now, for some unfathomable reason, is toying with Algeria.

Algeria walks out into the cobbled street of Rua do Vilar and turns right towards the cathedral. There, on a sandstone column, outside a jewellery store filled with glinting, jet and silver crosses, lies another page from the torn-up book of botanical prints.

"Really." Algeria crosses the road and pulls the page of a thousand-thorned *Rosa Pimpinelifolia*, off the column. "This is ridiculous." She looks around for Annabel. She checks behind the columns. "Annabel?" she calls. "Annabel, where on earth are you?"

When there is no reply, she continues on her way to Vespers.

In the road outside the pilgrims' office, new arrivals to Santiago are milling and the atmosphere is one of elation. Algeria should continue on straight towards the church but on the inside wall of a narrow road, aptly called *Entre Ruas*, a page is flapping. She walks quickly and pulls it off the wall and barely looks at the Sulphur Rose.

"Annabel," she shouts, breaking into a run when she thinks she can hear footsteps at the end of the alley. Of course, when she gets to the end, there is no Annabel, only a page stuck on a bench, beckoning her to turn left into Rua Nueva. She snatches it off the bench, adding the variegated coral and red marbled rose to her collection.

“Stop it now! Annabel?” she calls out in frustration. A pilgrim couple turn to look at her. The man opens his mouth as if to offer help but beneath the street sign for Transito Salomé, a page of a grand maroon double bloom, *The Bishop* is flapping in the breeze and Algeria goes to it before the man can speak.

She wanders down the transito until she comes to a door, which is ajar and has one of Redouté’s Damask Roses tacked to the wood. The door sighs as she pushes it open and goes into the corridor of what appears to be a pension.

“I am glad to see you’ve made it.”

Algeria turns to the voice behind her. “You!”

It is Miguel, the Mexican lawyer who told Algeria just before he kissed her in the courtyard of the Ospital de Orbigo pilgrim’s refuge that he’d given up his job defending sophist politicians to come on the Camino to find the meaning of life. Miguel, who along the way of the stars also ended up kissing Chrissie and who knows who else. Miguel, whose wedding ring shines yellow like the sap of cyanide.

“Where’s Annabel?” For a brief moment Algeria’s disenchantment is replaced by fear but Miguel’s face has no trace of malice; it is a good face with kind eyes.

He shrugs. “Do you like the flowers I picked for you?”

“I don’t know.” Somewhat disgruntled at being tricked, she flicks through the Redouté roses. “Yes. I suppose, I have to say it, yes, I do like them...” She pauses on the three fat blossoms of the Sulphur Rose. It is expertly observed and even though the page is flat, she can almost feel the curled tips of the petals. “Actually, they’re exquisite.”

“I thought so, too.” He kisses Algeria on the forehead and then closes the courtyard door. For a long while he stands looking at her as if he is Redouté making a study for one of his rose drawings.

Unexpectedly, Miguel goes down onto his knees and pulls the band tied around the end of Algeria's knee-length plait, and when it comes off, the plait is anxious to unwind.

Algeria is not sure if she should laugh or leave, but she does neither, just watches Miguel's fingers working their way through her plait, loosening the twists of hair. She concludes that this must be a Latin thing, this absolute lack of ... what is it a lack of? Not decorum, not shame, maybe it is a lack of self-consciousness – a willingness to be a fool. When Miguel can reach no further along her plait from that position, he takes her hands and smiles up at her. "I hear you like tea."

Tea is familiar ground.

She says, "Yes. I love tea. Can't go a day without it. I always drink at least..."

He kisses her hands. Miguel stands up and kisses her temple. He smooths back her hair. "Come," he says, taking her hands again. "I want you to see this."

"Really... what does your wife think of your behaviour?"

"She doesn't."

"I suppose she doesn't know, poor woman."

"There's nothing poor about her, I assure you." He kisses her temple again. "Come, have tea with me, that's all. You won't be disappointed. I have made a small fantasy for you." Miguel leads Algeria into a yard where a Chinese man sits smoking a pipe while his tea steeps. The yard is filled with succulents.

"Miguel, your lady is just in time," the man says, opening a chest filled with linen parcels and cups with covers.

"Hui has the biggest collection of tea leaves in Santiago," Miguel says. "He's an old friend – he gives me tea in exchange for poems."

Algeria isn't sure what Miguel means by a small fantasy: is this Hui really the owner of a collection of precious teas?

She says, "It sounds like you've know him for years"

Miguel winks. "Come and sit next to me." He pulls her down to sit on the cement step and puts his arm around her. "This is magic, isn't it?" He recites a short poem in Spanish.

"Very good, very, very good." Hui nods his approval. "Which flavour you fancy, missy?"

Algeria is reluctant. What is going on here? This is more madness than she is used to; her sunstroke headache is returning.

"It's only a small cup," Hui says.

Algeria ignores Hui and says to Miguel, "You told me you'd decided to do this walk because of the Internet search – how come you know Hui so well?"

"It's true that is what happened ... the Internet search for 'the meaning of life' ... but it wasn't this year. That was seven years ago."

"So you lied?"

"Only partly. I did give up law but I had go back. I'm still a lawyer but now I come here every year... I *have* to come. But I've paid for your tea, you must choose, please."

She points to a linen packet in the chest. "Why do you have to come?"

"Ha! Matcha Uji," says Hui. "It means *froth of liquid jade*." He empties some of the tea from the bag into her cup. He pours steaming water over the leaves and they expand. "And a piece of Santiago tart for you?"

"No, thanks."

"But it's the speciality of the region," Hui says, disappointed.

“I never eat sweet things.”

“Oh dear.” Miguel rubs his forehead. “You’re an even worse case than I thought. Ah, well, we can fix that.”

“Fix what?”

“You’ll see. This poem I told Hui was by Octavio Paz. Every woman has a poem that matches her spirit exactly, and yours is ‘Brotherhood.’” As he speaks the transparent water turns from insipid beige to mountain-green. Miguel squeezes Algeria close, in the manner of a gregarious host, with generous intentions and love to spare. At first she’s stiff; she’s not used to this level of affection and she’s still confused about exactly what is going on.

Miguel doesn’t lie to her. He tells her that women on five continents write long letters to him about everything from their regrets over good meals spoiled by vain arguments with their spouses, to their earliest memories of salt and kissing. He tells Algeria of one woman who wishes she were a bird, another who has dreams of being a pilot and a third who will only allow him to e-mail her when the moon is full. One of these women lives as far away as Japan, he said.

He tells Algeria that when he is in his lawyer’s suit, he is conscienceless for the sake of the law, and can be cruel to win his cases; so much so that younger attorneys fear coming up against him. They joke and call him “Don Dolor” behind his back. He laughed, he says, when he heard that, but it does not make him proud. It tires him. His wife likes it, though. She is happy to think she has one of the toughest lawyers in the city in her bed. That bed, it is not a happy one. That is not to say he does not adore his wife, he said – he does, there was no question of that. Unless you are a man and know the significance of the debt owed to a woman who gives up her body, her youth, her figure and freedom to carry, bear and raise your children, you cannot understand the

love a father has for the mother of his children. No matter what flaws she has, no matter if she is greedy and spiteful, she is yours and you are hers. It is as simple as that. His wife is the love of his life. Sometimes when he is on the verge of forgetting how perfect she is, he goes to the passage in Ephesians and reads: *men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body. Instead, he feeds it and takes care of it, just as Christ does the church; for we are members of his body.*

Love her, yes, but Miguel tells Algeria he would rather not share a meal with his wife because she talks on and on about parties and what people were saying and who had the biggest jewels. To irritate her, whenever his wife talks about the richest or the greatest or the most famous, Miguel says, “Do you think they’re happy, Brisa?” Her name means breeze, and that is what she is – light, not brightness, but emptiness. “So,” Miguel says, “my wife and I do not eat together, unless it is in the company of friends or our sizeable combined families.” Miguel says he works until midnight when he is sure Brisa will have fallen asleep. Then he goes home and drinks black coffee even though he knows the caffeine will destroy any possibility of sleep. So he drinks the coffee to spite himself, or Brisa, and while he drinks he reads poetry and writes long letters to these women. He knows these women depend on him, they tell him so, over and over. What they do not know is that he is the truly needy one, it is he who would not care to survive without the voices he hears through their letters. He can’t tell them that – nobody wants to know their support has feet of clay. Except Algeria – Miguel’s vulnerability is what is beginning to endear her most to this almost ordinary man in the middle of his life.

“Relax,” he says, drawing Algeria’s head to his chest. “Just relax. Let go of expectations. If you must, then imagine I am someone else: a man you love or once loved.”

She closes her eyes and thinks of Richard and relaxes a bit.

“That’s better.” He strokes her hair. “That’s better. Think about love and everything will go well.” His voice is almost hypnotic. “Somebody hurt you very badly once. I hope it is not this man you are thinking of. Huh?”

He looks at her for an answer but she doesn’t reply. Still stroking her hair, he nods. “I see. Maybe you think you can patch things up with him?”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, there’s only one way to tell if he is worth it: his heart is as tender as his kiss. If his kiss is cruel, then leave him. How’s his kissing?”

Algeria looks away.

“Oh, come on, tell me. You can tell me.”

“No.”

“Come on.

“I said, no.”

“Don’t be shy. How’s his kiss – believe me I’ve heard of all types. You can tell me.”

“I can’t”

“Just try.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Richard never kissed me.”

“What? But you...”

“We did everything else.” Algeria pulls away from Miguel and sits up. “He didn’t believe in kissing. He said there was no point; he said it was a waste of time.”

“Believe? Time?” Miguel is incredulous and tapping his hand against his heart. “Kissing is not something you believe in, it’s something you can’t resist, it comes from your heart.”

She smiles. “Yes, well, he doesn’t have a heart.”

“Impossible. Not one kiss?”

“No.” Algeria is angry now. “But plenty of oral sex.”

Miguel holds up his hands. “I don’t want to know about that.”

“God, what am I doing telling you this. I should go.” She stands, angry now. “I was on my way to the cathedral.”

“Wait.” He catches her hand. “You must have your tea first. Please. Don’t be cross with me.”

Hui is holding up her cup.

“This is so crazy. Alright, I’ll have the wretched tea.” She sits down again, not as close to Miguel this time. “You’re a character of note, Miguel.”

“In my experience, when somebody calls a man a ‘character of note’ it can be loosely translated as ‘wanker.’ Cheers.” He clinks his cup of *liquid jade* against hers. “Drink up.”

He eyes her. She does not much enjoy the acrid taste; the tea is like licking a mouthful of a wet forest floor and mushrooms. The smell of it tickles her nostrils so much that she has to put down the cup and sneeze.

“Bless you,” Miguel says and he hands her a silk hanky, printed with such a beautiful design of violet and pink and orange and jade continuous-stems that she doesn’t want to blow her nose on it. She dabs her nose, then swallows down the Maja

Uji, even though it burns her lips, her tongue, all the way along the inside of her throat. When the cup is empty, she thanks Hui, and, ignoring Miguel's advice that she should rest there a while, she wishes him a good life and bids them farewell.

He seems worried at her hasty departure. "Take care what you do now," he says. As she walks away up the Transito Salomé, he calls out: "Just think about love and everything..."

She turns the corner, out of earshot of his last words, and pushing the incident out of her head, she hurries to the Santiago Cathedral.

Before entering the edifice Algeria stops to photograph it. She feels giddy and has a sense of anticipation, of elation – something good is about to happen. She zooms in on a pair double doors made of studded metal gone green. From the centre of each door glares a sabre-toothed lion with a verdigris ring between its teeth. At the foot of a three-story column is a gypsy woman in a heap. The gypsy holds up her hand and Algeria gives her a couple of Euros.

She's missed the Vespers but will wait in this cool sanctuary for the midday service. It is a tradition for pilgrims to attend this midday service in the Santiago Cathedral to hear the reading of the names and countries of pilgrims who have just completed the Camino.

The cathedral is crowded with those pilgrims, tour groups, cameras, porticos, alcoves, marble and wood statues, carvings, gold, jewels, crosses and saints, angels and martyrs, paintings, candles, chandeliers and a man-sized silver incense burner, the *botafumeiro*.

Algeria finds a place halfway to the High Altar facing a gilded statue of Santiago de Compostela, who wears a cockle-shell halo planted with rubies and

emeralds. Around St. James squirm cherubs and curls and wings and crowns and vines and stars and, beneath them, sit the people.

“*Silencio por favor,*” says a girl with a loudspeaker. “Please respect the sanctity of the Cathedral. *Silencio por favor.*”

On the cover a prayer book, on the pew beside Algeria is an embossed Christ on his cross wearing his crown of thorns. On every archvolt and tympanum above and around her, are clustered hundreds of saints and church fathers carved from stone and all their halos and Christ’s thorns turn in her thoughts, making clear the conception of passionflowers. She can’t quite relate to those Spanish priests of old who upon discovering the strange crowned flowers of New Spain, South America, were led to liken them to the Passion of Christ.

A chandelier is turned on and the High Alter glitters. The colours of light seem to be alive and coming towards her so fast she feels queasy; but it’s all so beautiful. She sits there watching the dancing glitter. The pews along the main aisle are filling up with cyclists and walkers, some just arrived and still sweating and carrying backpacks. They are all very colourful: their shirts remarkably bright.

Two Australian pilgrims squeeze into the row next to Algeria and begin a whispered conversation. Algeria cannot help but overhear that one of them is a medical doctor, and is writing a book about emotional healing.

“*Silencio, per favor,*” says the girl with the loudspeaker. Nuns walk up the aisle, and after bowing and crossing themselves at the altar, they sit to the left of St. James of the Field of Stars.

“Where was I? Oh yes, negative emotions, particularly recurring emotions, are like poisons and have an effect on the well-being of the body. If they are not expressed or released these poisons will sooner or later manifest in illness.”

Algeria's thoughts have become patterns made in colours and lights, so that she can see her thoughts on how communication – from intra-cellular to inter human – is the result of electrical changes to neurons. Even the neurons making that thought are visible and shimmering.

A nun, wearing white, lights the candles around the altar. Another, with ghost skin, comes out from the alcove of St. James and stands at a lectern. She speaks in Spanish, then sings a few lines in a voice pure and clear as a boy. For Algeria, each note has a shape in light and size and intensity. The nun speaks again, sings what she has spoken and this time she is conducting. It is a singing lesson for the pilgrims. Voices jumble into the vaulted ceilings. Algeria joins in with notes and no words. The patterns the sounds make are astonishing: like fireworks designed by Mirò and the highest note is tiny but bright enough to burn one's eyes.

When a retinue of monks enters the lesson ends. The nun vanishes behind the altar. The monks, dressed in crimson-trimmed robes, begin a chant that vibrates along the stones and through the pews. There is a smell of myrrh in the air. There is the smell of people, pilgrims, and hope, and all those smells are lights tinged with purple from the myrrh. All the lights are standing together, all singing together, all have suffered to get here, and are exhausted and are elated, and have arrived after many trials to be here in this place filled with angels carved and painted and thought in every form, squashed together, breathing together, inspired together and in doing what has been done before, they are comforted together.

Now they are amazed together as seven monks light the man-sized Botafumeiro filled with sacred incense. The monks begin to pull at the velvet rope, all seven must hold it and run with it from one side of the altar to the other, back and forth and the intricate bronze burner rises and begins to swing, back and forth. High

over the congregation, it sweeps in an arc leaving a trail of sweet smoke. Back and forth, back and forth, and the congregation gasps and looks back and forth in awe as the monks struggle with the flying fire-vessel making it's heavy swish.

Algeria has never been to a service in such a place. She has travelled the world and what she has not seen or heard in the flesh, she has seen and heard on television. She is surprised to find this ritual so daunting. She can only imagine the effect it must have had on a peasant in the Middle Ages.

The service is in Spanish, or it could be Latin, she's not certain. Like a Medieval serf, she does not understand the words. Lack of understanding heightens the intoxication to the point that the meaning is clearer without words, just these glorious lights. She is microscopic within the building that echoes with the colours of the nun's angelic soprano, the monks' earthy baritones, and pilgrims.

She looks around at the faces of people she has seen walking along the way, or bathing or showering or eating or laughing; it's nice here with them, her light bleeding into their light.

For the first time, she sees a staggering beauty in religion, even Catholicism. It has the elegance of the living cells from which it has been created. It has come from the minds of people and those minds are composed of living cells, it is a pattern reflecting the pattern of living cells, composed of atoms, neurons, electrons, light, light... it is all light.

Each person begins as a single cell, a fertilized egg. And each religion has its first cell, be it Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Vishnu or Mohammed.

She thinks about the doctor pilgrim's research and the importance of support structures and realises that sharing is vital – secrets must be told; they cannot be kept in.

Rituals and services are natural acts of social bonding and this bonding leads to the reproduction of the organism.

She thinks about the Dalai Lama who said *all the dust and dirt around you are the product of your mind*. A symbol is only negative if you make it negative.

Until now, she has been seeing the dust of her mind on everything but now everywhere is blazing light. Religion has all the properties of life, most importantly, heredity, and the drive to create order within a universe of disorder and confusion.

There is so much to be confused about.

Rituals are expressions of the need to make sense, order from the confusion surrounding life in a universe veering towards chaos.

She alone cannot solve all the problems of the world, not even the problems of her life: here in this ancient building swimming in light with all these people she doesn't have to be alone. The burden is shared. One cell, many cells, each act and act together. Social spirituality is binding – it goes beyond individual spirituality in the same fashion a human being goes beyond a single human cell, it is collective, it is a magnificent organism. There is nothing wrong with admitting she needs help. In fact, to exist in arrogant alienation, to claim independence must be a form of delusion. There is no closed-system. She can see that in here with all the lights seeping into each other. Shared rituals are an acknowledgement of the community of all things, a reminder, a reminder we vitally need, that people are not alone, that people are part of the whole system of life, the universe, God.

Confession!

Now Algeria understands confession as a form of psychotherapy.

Hymns and prayer suddenly seem to Algeria to be a kind of genius – methods of converting energy, transferring the carnelian heat of anger and other emotions out of the individual system, spreading it, dissipating it.

The very stones and tiles, all the adornments of this building are sparkling – each one a word and together they have something of an enlightening text about them. Both a text and a building contain the magic of crossings. The writers, the publishers, the masons, the architects, their texts and their buildings, at one time their present at another their past and in the future their past becomes other people's present and all who are at some time present to those pasts have touched, have crossed. Their thoughts intersect inside the creating person's soul. Splendour indeed.

The heaven-voiced nun, who makes Catherine Wheels with her songs, and the monks in their robes crawling with the atoms of red arthropods, live in this spirit of connectedness. They live so close to the simple, natural, wall-less, gate-less life that Algeria craves. A life free from possessions. They are breathing symbols of the link to God, the Whole.

Religion adapts to its geographical and historical environment. The drive to order chaos into life: it strikes her that this is the meaning of Love, and this is the wisdom embodied in all religious organisms, too, regardless of context.

The passionflower halos on the two hundred saints sculpted out of cathedral stones above her are scintillating. Blinded by awe, the traditional Catholic form of religion seems thoughtfully evolved, like an insect.

Love is life, order, and that is heaven. As she looks at those stars around St. James' head she is certain that galaxies are *living* organisms too.

Not only do all living organisms begin life as a single cell, a fertilized egg, but all of earth's more than ten million life forms have a common ancestor cell from four billion years ago.

If time could be wound back fifteen billion years the universe would be seen to contract and contract until it too began at one point. All life that exists now, all matter is made of the matter of that single point.

Algeria, born of light, is fifteen billion years old.

Since all the cells of which she is made are divisions from the first cell, they are the first cell and so the first cell is everywhere – *the separation is an illusion*.

A priest with dark hair is about to deliver a sermon. What does it matter if she doesn't understand the words? She can see and she can feel the meaning, everybody already knows the meaning, it is the light inside them. Words are not God; they're a distraction. Algeria blinks. The Santiago Cathedral has overwhelmed her with joy and faith in life, faith in God.

So what should she do now – become a nun? Are nuns vegetarian?

At the Internet Cafe in Rua do Vilar, Algeria does a Yahoo search and finds a site listing hundreds of Catholic "congregations" – Poor Clares, Daughters of St. Paul, Bridgettines Order of the Most Holy Saviour, Sisters of the Bleeding Heart, Benedictines, Trappists, Assumptionists, Olivetans, Augustinians.

The Benedictines have potential: the order promotes study and they are active in the community. Unfortunately, Algeria cannot find a vegetarian Benedictine community. The Essenes of Mount Carmel come up in all her searches but she ignores them. They are not Catholic and she wants Catholic. Finally, she discovers the Web page of an order of Carmelite nuns in England who are vegetarians. The

monastery is in the country on a large piece of land and the nuns grow their own fruit and vegetables.

On the Website, there is a picture of the Monastery and a group of smiling nuns and next to that is an image of a nun gathering raspberries. Their day begins at five-thirty and consists of a strict schedule: Angelus, Lauds, prayer, tea, Terce, Mass, breakfast, work, Sext, Angelus, lunch, work, Siesta, None, tea, reading, work, Vespers, prayer, Angelus, Supper, recreation for one hour, Great Silence, Compline, retire, lights out at ten-fifteen.

Resolving that the Carmelites at Quiddenham are her future, Algeria leaves the Internet café and crosses the road to Jacobus, a tea and coffee bar, for a cup of tea.

She sits close to the entrance of the café so that she can watch the passing scene. As she sips her Copa Cubana, an infusion of coconut, rose and lemon, Miguel walks by.

“Thank goodness!” he says when he sees her. “I’ve been looking for you, all over. Do you feel okay?”

A strange question, she thinks. “Wonderful. No, much better than wonderful.”

“Oh, well, that’s good,” he smiles. “But you went so quickly.” He pulls up a chair next to her. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” The effect of the cathedral is wearing off but it’s still with her and his voice leaves glowing amber light trails in the air around him. She likes the way his accent makes mobiles of the English words.

Miguel shakes his head. “I was worried about you.”

“No need... and so, what are you going to do now that your Camino is over for this year?”

“I’m not certain. And you?”

“In a minute I must dash off to the pilgrim’s office to meet up with the group. They should be arriving soon.” She looks at her watch. “Actually, I’m late.”

“*Dash off*... you have a very proper English way of speaking,” he says.

She blushes and laughs. “Not really. Oh, I just remembered – I took your hanky by mistake.” She unzips the money pouch around her waist, to look for the hanky.

“Keep it.”

“Are you sure – it’s very pretty. It looks expensive.”

“Yes, I want you to have it. A gift.”

“Well...” Algeria could say “no” but she’d like to keep some proof that Miguel existed and was not just a glorious imagining; it’s not always easy to tell. “Okay, that’s nice of you... I like it, thank you.” She glances at her watch. “Goodness, I must go or I’ll be terribly late, sorry.” She shifts in her chair.

“Wait.” Miguel puts his hands around her hands. “This morning, you went so quickly, I had no time to explain to you why I have to come on the Camino. You went before I could explain about my wife.”

“That’s your business.”

“I really do love my wife and we have a child, too.”

“You don’t have to tell me this.” She stands.

He keeps her hands. “She’s a good person and a good mother but she doesn’t understand me. She’s from a conservative, very respected family in Mexico. We married too young.”

“Miguel, really...”

“I want you to know. You think nothing I say is true but please believe me, I love you...”

“That’s silly.”

“Why?”

“It just is.”

“No it’s not. I do love you and all women. That’s why I have to come here because every year I find women who don’t believe in love anymore. Every year, it is the same. I don’t know what’s going on in the world with the men but they are failing. The women have lost faith in love. But I love the women, truly, even if it’s only for one night.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it, Miguel, but you’re a womaniser.”

“No. I don’t make anybody sad. I don’t use women. If anything, they use me. My wife thinks only about money and social status. For the sake my child, that is how I live for eleven months. But in June every year I make the pilgrimage to Santiago. I’ve got a very big family.” He laughs. “They think I am the most pious Catholic in Mexico City. But really, I make a love-pilgrimage.”

“Miguel, either you’re full of shit or else you’re an angel.” She puts money on the table for her tea. “Have a good rest of your trip.” She blows him a kiss. “Bye-bye.” Halfway across the road, she turns and calls back, “By the way, I’ve decided to become a nun.”

“What?”

Before Miguel can make any comment about it, Algeria pushes between a crowd of tourists and is gone.

Later that night, lying in bed in her room at the Aires Nunes, Algeria regrets having been so rude to Miguel. That regret makes sleep impossible. Then she has an idea. She slips on her white dress and from her collection of pages of Redouté’s roses, she selects the Sulphur Rose, *Rosa Hemisphaerica Herrm.*

With the hotel's ballpoint pen she writes a note on the side of page: *Dear Miguel, I do believe you are an angel. Thank you for the tea and the hanky. Please accept this small gift in return, and stay in touch. With love from Algeria (Algeria@hotmail.com).*

Using one of her hair bands, she attaches the note to the flowering *Passiflora Incarnata* she bought at the Santiago market the day before. Then she takes the plant downstairs and out of the hotel.

The cobbled street is deserted but not dark; there are street lamps. She retraces her steps to the Transito Salomè, to the wooden door, which still has the print of the Damask Rose tacked onto it. She is going to set the plant down there but, worried it might get taken, she tries the handle of the wooden door. As before, the door sighs when she opens it. This time Algeria doesn't go in, she simply sets down the plant, pulls the door closed and leaves. Expecting never to see Miguel again, she walks back in the gibbous moon's light under the shadow of the *Torre del Reloj*, looking forward to her new life.

It is dark already in the orchard where Algeria chooses to spend her hour of recreation. It is raining. Angelus has ended and supper too. Days ago, she was reprimanded for writing too much.

"You are not a thinker," Sister Theresa had said. "Give yourself fully to a life of prayer."

Algeria has taken a vow of wordlessness. The rain is relentless and that's fine with her; nobody can see her tears. But the message in her hand makes her smile: *Will I see you as usual in June?*

She cannot write now because of the rain but she'll reply before the morning
Angelus: 12 o'clock outside Cathedral San Isidoro on 3rd June.

In the past decade Algeria has broken up with Richard, moved to Quiddendam Monastery, and taken her vows as a Carmelite nun. Although the Sisters at Quiddendam disapprove of her writing habit, they admire her devotion to the Way. Her yearly pilgrimage to Santiago, however, is not quite the pilgrimage they imagine it to be, it's more an annual date, Platonic, of course: two weeks a year of companionship, laughter, poetry, tango dancing, green tea and lots of Santiago Tart.

The ink of Miguel's e-mail washes away in the rain. Soon Algeria will go inside to be with her Carmelite Sisters, for, in ten minutes, there will be no temptation to talk.

All conversation ceases at seven forty-five when Great Silence begins.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Illustrations from the antique tarot decks are from:

Pollack, R. (2001) *Complete Illustrated Guide to Tarot*. London: HarperCollins

Extract from Humane Education:

Anonymous author. (2002) "I don't know whether I should talk about it..." *Humane Education News*. Spring

University of Cape Town