



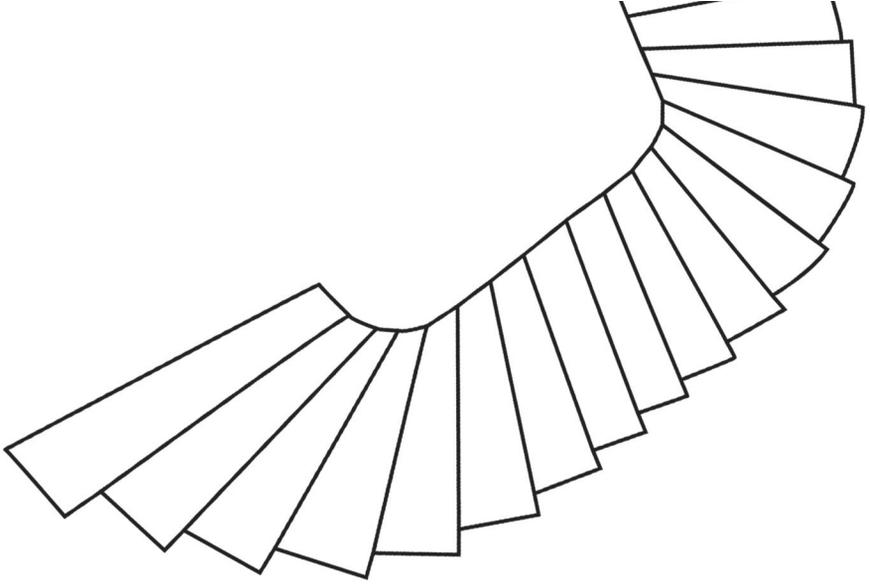
CHRIS WOMERSLEY CAIRO

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CAIRO

CHRIS WOMERSLEY



SCRIBE

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PROLOGUE

I DREAM OF CAIRO STILL. THE DREAMS ARE SO VIVID THAT, ON occasion, I wake sweating, disoriented, expecting to see honeyed light glancing off the floorboards and curlicues of dust pirouetting lazily through the morning air; to smell sweet, stale smoke and the tang of vetiver cologne; to hear the grumble of trams, and the *pock* of tennis balls being struck in the shady courts across the road. There is the acrid taste of last night's whisky in my mouth. The melancholy breeze of a simple piano tune trickles through an open window. I am filled with a sensation so much richer and more flavoursome than love, and it is this: love's ardent promise.

They are all present in the dream, as vital and alive as I remember them being in life: Max and Sally; Edward and Gertrude; James; Caroline and the awful Eve; even my Aunt Helen, although she had died some months before I moved into her apartment block. Maria is in the background somewhere, muttering her telegraphic sentences, as is Mr Orlovsky. And there is Queel, turning, turning always with a glass in his hand.

Also apparent in the dream is a quality of both anticipation and foreboding, that watermark that can only be discerned in retrospect. These dreams are like dispatches from history; I almost cannot believe what is happening there, how fierce and how

beautiful it might be. To go back might be the best thing in the world, but it is probably the worst.

The dreams are all different, but in each of them there recurs one sequence: I am standing before a wall in what might be a dilapidated palace of some sort, on which is painted an exquisite mural, similar to that on the wall of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. In my dream, however, the mural is of an archway, beyond which a dim and tangled forest fades into the distance. Arranged across the horizon is a line of mountains, a pink and dusky sky, clouds like puffs of smoke rising into the air. I stare at the mural in wonder for some time.

Gradually, I realise that a door (the size of a postcard) in the bottom left-hand corner is opening very slowly. Tiny fingers curl around the frame, fingers the size of a child's but simian in appearance; the knuckles are defined, and there is the hint of fur. The crowd of which I had sensed myself a part has fallen away. I am seized by dread. So slowly does the door move that I can't stand it. There is no sound. At last, the tiny door hangs open on its hinge. There is now no sign of the person or creature who pushed it from the other side, but it is clear to me, with the irresistible logic of dreams, that I am expected to pass through into the place beyond, and that what lies in store for me is in equal measure beautiful and terrifying.

Despite all that happened at Cairo, I am disappointed upon waking from such scenes to discover the dream was only that; a breath of a summer and winter long since past. I know that one can never return, but that doesn't prevent me from sometimes being overpowered by longing at the most inopportune moments. Only last week, when shopping for shirts in the city, I halted mid-conversation with a sales assistant (cuff of the potential purchase crisp and gently abrasive between my thumb and forefinger; young woman's kindly smile, a smudge of lipstick on her teeth) to

ponder what Sally Cheever might make of my choice — whether she would approve — before realising with a jolt that she left my life long ago. Years, in fact.

There are other things I remember, things so bizarre that even now, all these years later, I wonder if they happened at all, wonder if they weren't simply the product of a youthful, fevered imagination — forever associated with the smell of turpentine and oil paint; a recurring piano motif; a pistol shot; mocking laughter; my first disastrous love.

But now I am middle-aged. It happened suddenly, this ageing, almost without my knowledge and certainly without any effort on my part. I have tufts of black hair on my shoulders, mild aches in my joints. Most likely I have lived more years than remain to me. I reconsider my position on God, in case; a fumbling in the dark, like a child grasping for his blanket in the middle of the night, crying out for someone, anyone.

I imagine the three of us from a distance. Max, Sally and I. Sally stands clutching the collar of her red jacket at her chin as Max, with one arm draped over her shoulder, throws back his drink with obvious satisfaction and, perhaps, with triumph. Sally looks at the ground in front of her while Max's sweeping gaze takes in the red and orange lanterns from the previous summer that are scattered about like the seeds from a large and exotic tree; the tubs of mangy herbs; the tops of the elms in the park across the road. And there I am with my glass of champagne, stepping forwards to kiss Sally on the cheek and to shake Max's hand. The expressions on our faces are hard to read, and I'm too far away to hear what is said. There is laughter, Max's laughter, floating across the evening air.

There are times in life that score us forever, seasons or days that cast the die of our personalities so completely that it is against such periods the remainder of our lives is measured, just as there might only be a single photograph of us ever taken that captures

one's true essence. Now that I am older I find I am living two lives: my present one with its daily requirements of nourishment and warmth; and that other one, back there, when I lived with nothing and had nothing, but learned everything. I know I can never return and wouldn't wish to, were I given the chance. And yet, and yet.

Like paintings, people are taken at face value but contain a host of secrets for those who know how to tease them out; the task of the art connoisseur is akin to that of a trial judge sorting lies from the truth. There is instinct and there is science. Were you truly painted by so and so? In what year? With which materials? In essence: are you what you claim to be?

But I became an author, of all things, and although I never intended to write about that time, now there is no choice. When younger, I was free to imagine my future at will, idly, and it was a pleasant and dreamy act. But that future has gone, and now the past crooks a finger to summon me. *Come here*, it says. *We have a score to settle.*

Any memoir is a kind of confession. Here, then, is mine.



ONE

I STAGGERED FROM SPENCER STREET STATION WITH MY BULGING green suitcase and stood on the footpath, bewildered in the city light. It was January, 1986. I was seventeen years old. The railway station loomed behind me like an infernal machine into which people vanished, heads down, all business. I had been too anxious to eat much that day and felt light-headed, even faintly delirious. The pavement was baking through the soles of my shoes. The air smelled of hot chips, of vinegar, of car exhaust. A lone taxi honked. A skinny boy sauntered past with a boom-box on his shoulder, the music blasting from it distorted into sheer incomprehension.

It was too late to turn back, but I experienced a swooning feeling of solitude that was unfamiliar and utterly exhilarating. *Anything could happen to me here*, I thought. *And no one would know*. This realisation provided me with inexplicable comfort. I am never happier than when on the verge of an experience; it is, often, victory enough.

It was warmer in Melbourne than Dunley, and I had broken out in a nervous sweat. Terrified that someone might perceive me for what I really was — a boy with almost no idea of the world beyond the country town where he had spent his childhood — I set off walking with what I hoped was a purposeful air. The suitcase banged against my calf.

I had gone two blocks and was in sight of the murky Yarra River before noticing I had headed in the wrong direction. I stopped in the bright sunlight and squinted about me, cursing under my breath. I blushed as I imagined the snickering and eye-rolling this error would have prompted in my sisters. But I was self-reliant to a fault, and the thought of asking anyone for directions appalled me, so I ducked into a side street and retrieved my wrinkled street map.

In those days, that lower part of Melbourne was deserted on Saturday afternoons, an arrangement of blunt concrete canyons abutting the docklands. A gritty wind scuttled along the footpath, bringing with it cigarette butts and a crumpled chip packet. I closed my eyes to the dust. Upon opening them a few seconds later, I was startled to see a man bearing down on me with a peculiarly intense and rollicking gait. He was about twenty metres away and getting closer, talking and gesticulating. 'Get out of here,' he was yelling. 'Get away.' His voice echoed off the buildings.

He wore very tight trousers and a green pirate blouse. His hair was long, his eyes were wild and his feet were bare, but the most alarming aspect of his get-up was his lips, which were tattooed a deep blue. I looked around, unsure if I should pick up my suitcase and attempt to outrun this bizarre apparition or whether such a move would merely antagonise him. I had read in *National Geographic* that it was fatal to try to outrun a grizzly bear; preferable to back away slowly while maintaining eye contact. This wildlife knowledge was, naturally, of no use to me; we didn't even *have* grizzly bears in Australia. Not only that, but it was in this blur of trivia retrieval and frantic indecision that he was almost upon me. His bellowing had subsided to an indistinct but menacing mutter. I froze. My heels knocked on the brick wall against which I had backed. I might even have turned my head away in expectation of a blow, but he paid me no heed as he walked past and vanished around the corner into Flinders Street, leaving a waft of sweet perfume in his wake.

I retraced my steps and caught the tram at Bourke Street. Rattled after my encounter with the blue-lipped man and worried about missing my tram stop and ending up in the wilds of suburbia, I watched through the window, mentally checking off the landmarks as we went: Myer department store; Darrell Lea chocolate emporium; the cinema complex; and the famous Pellegrini's cafe, where my late Aunt Helen had taken me for lemon granitas on the few occasions I had visited her alone. So many shops, so many people. A group of boys in sharp suits were busking in the mall, crowds of onlookers. As the tram clattered up Bourke Street towards my destination, my heart began to beat wildly. Surely, disappointment could be the only result of such high expectations.

I alighted one stop past the Exhibition Building in Nicholson Street and waited on the narrow traffic island as cars whizzed by. On one side of the large, busy road were the Carlton Gardens with their tennis courts and stately avenues of elm trees. On the other side, almost hidden behind a hedge and an overgrown peppercorn tree, was the apartment block with its name spelled out in white metal lettering affixed to one of its red-brick walls: *Cairo*.

Passing into its shady gardens on that summer afternoon, I felt transported (as even now my recollections transport me) into another world. Dappled sunlight, the cool scent of bricks, the abrupt cessation of traffic noise.

I lugged my suitcase up the unusual cantilevered staircase and along the walkway to the apartment in which Aunt Helen had lived for so many years. The key turned easily in the lock. With trepidation, I opened the door and stepped inside. On the floor in front of me, spilling from the service hatch where it must have been placed, was a pile of unopened mail. Also in the hallway were three or four boxes of Aunt Helen's things that my dad had packed up to be thrown out.

The apartment was compact but even lovelier than I recalled. Light splashed through the large, floor-to-ceiling window of the main room. I put down my suitcase in the narrow entrance hallway and knew, if only dimly, that my life would never be the same.

Cairo had been a focus for so much of my imaginative energy that to find myself there was confusing. Although the apartment only had two rooms (four, including the bathroom and kitchen), I spent a bit of time on that first sunny afternoon prowling around opening and closing cupboards, peering in drawers, half expecting to encounter someone hiding in a corner. But, of course, there was no one in the apartment and there hadn't been for some months, as was evident by the stuffy air and layers of dust on the furniture. My father had come and cleared away many of Aunt Helen's personal items after her death, but there were others yet to be disposed of, household things made strange and strangely meaningful by her absence: books, photographs, an empty vase, a dish of loose change on the fridge.

Constructed in a U-shape around an overgrown garden, Cairo apartments were completed in 1936. With only two storeys, the thirty or so one- and two-bedroom apartments had been built with bachelors in mind, and the block retained many of its original features, including the service and rubbish-bin hatchways designed as modern, labour-saving features. A dining room at the rear of the block, which had once served meals, had been transformed into a milk bar long before I moved in. Three cantilevered concrete staircases provided access to the upper floor at the southern and eastern corners. Architectural flourishes were kept to a minimum, in accordance with the modernist aesthetic of the era. The apartments' front doors all had porthole windows and these, combined with the waist-high railing along the exterior walkways,

gave one the impression of being on board a liner moored at the edge of the city, waiting for clearance to set sail.

Helen's apartment was sparsely furnished, but tasteful: a green sofa, an armchair, Persian rugs over the bare floorboards, a wooden table by the window, a coffee table with a pile of magazines, a low bookcase. On the floor was a record player with a stack of old records (the soundtrack from *Dr Zhivago*, *Scottish Military Anthems*) leaning against the skirting board beside it. A floorboard under a rug in the narrow hall squeaked when stepped on.

The bedroom contained a spongy double bed, a wardrobe and a bureau of drawers upon which, among the scattering of jewellery and desiccated cosmetics, stood a framed, black-and-white photograph of Aunt Helen at a party with one hand resting on the forearm of the corpulent, bejewelled actor Frank Thring, who lived nearby.

The kitchen led off the entrance hall and was dim and poky, not much larger than a galley. A window of frosted glass set high above the sink allowed for some natural light. The kitchen's shallow cupboards contained a profusion of teacups, packets of spices, noodles, tins of tomatoes, bottles of liquor.

Opposite the kitchen was the equally small bathroom with its glorious deep bath, a mirrored cupboard, tiles of the palest green. It smelled of musty drains and peppermint mouthwash. Spider webs fluttered in the corners; the sink bore a rusty tear-drop from the dripping tap.

There was an elegant balcony off the lounge room that looked over a side street. Standing on it in the blazing sun, I could see the balconies of my neighbours on either side of this apartment, but no one appeared to be home. A car drove past in the street below, trailing a cricket commentary in its wake. I stretched out, tore off a handful of leaves and dry buds from the peppercorn tree, and held them to my face. To this day I cannot open a jar of peppercorns

without being plunged into that distant afternoon; it is an aroma (blunt, complicated; familiar yet exotic) that contains multitudes.

My assessment of the apartment didn't take long. Obviously, it needed to be thoroughly cleaned, but on that first afternoon I could do no more than lie on the couch, red satin cushion beneath my head, and gaze through the window at the swaying fronds of the peppercorn tree. Every so often, the thin curtain billowed out in the warm breeze like a woman's dress. I was exhausted, relieved, scarcely able to believe my good fortune. I imagined Aunt Helen lying here doing the same thing. I felt at rest, as if I had travelled vast distances to be here.

The heat subsided as the afternoon drew to a close. People came and went along the walkway outside. I sensed doors opening and closing, birds chirruping, voices, a woman humming an indistinct tune as she walked by, the vague sound less a melody than an enticing scent that hung on the air long after she had passed.