

The house was one of the unpretentious orange-brick boxes that sprang up around the edges of the older Melbourne suburbs in the 1950s and 60s, almost the sunburnt rust of the red desert at the heart of Australia, our new country. These houses had about them the echo of the same vast and mysterious openness, of glaring light and secrets hidden in plain sight. It was the house my father found when he arrived as an immigrant from South Africa, six weeks ahead of my mother and the three small children, me the youngest, aged eight months.

We played on the vacant lots that punctuated the streets. But North Balwyn, a newer, outer suburb with good public schools, was being rapidly developed so that one by one, those vacant lots would disappear; ground would be broken, and then we'd have adventures within the square wooden frame that quickly rose. I got to see how the bones of sister houses to ours were laid and bricked over. We'd explore the emerging interior, breathing in sawdust and fumes, until the windows and doors were put in place, blocking our entry. Then we'd move on to the next vacant lot, until the chainsaws and back hoes were brought in, felling trees and yielding up the rich smell of broken soil.

Everything about our orange-brick house was unadorned: the square rooms, no door or ceiling moldings to catch the eye, antiseptic 1950s kitchen and bathroom. We owned little from before my parents' arrival from South Africa, the other side of the hemisphere where they'd grown up, a different halfway across the world from where their own parents had been born and raised in the Jewish shtetls of Lithuania and Latvia. My maternal grandfather supposedly stowed away at age fourteen, though I was never able to lay hands on the fact. My other three grandparents were also refugees fleeing pogroms and poverty, branches snapped from massive, ancient family trees.

Over the years, a few things made their way to our household that held fragments of family history, miraculously transported by my fleeing, impecunious forebears. A cuckoo clock brought to South Africa from Lithuania was, years later, waylaid en route to my mother in Australia, forgotten for more than a decade in my uncle's London attic. A brass samovar, which throughout my childhood had pride of place in our living room, evoked the kind of Imperial Russian drawing-room scenes I later read about in Tergenev and Lermontov. There was also my grandmother's wedding china—received as a young bride, already some years in the tiny, rural town of Koppes in South Africa's Orange Free State—decorated in orange and gold and etched with the fine lines of age. These objects were ghosts that kept to their place in daylight but broke free at night, in my dreams, taking root in my imagination as if seeking there some sort of ground-steady, continuous home.

Three of my grandparents were still alive, though to me, not having met them and so far away, in a country as foreign to me as the moon, they were more like fictional characters than real people. I'd memorized their names, the way that at school we memorized the names of centuries' worth of stuffy British monarchs. I would meet them eventually, though briefly; the rare visits sit in my memory like tiny uninhabited islands, far from the small landmass of our actual family of six, just us, with no connection to anything larger or historically rooted. When I did finally meet them, those old people, with their heavy, Eastern European accents and confusing ways, felt like strangers. They peered at me thickly, their faces sticky with emotion, bewildering against the backdrop of my world, shorn as it was of any history that could be felt remotely as mine.

When I was seven, we moved to Kew, a more established suburb, closer to the city. The new house sat at the base of a cul-de-sac that backed onto a lane that running behind our house. If I jumped over the fence, made of corrugated tin, with a sharp, rusty edge, I could shorten to walk to my friend Debbie's house from twenty minutes to five. The roundabout walking route was civilized, conventional, safe; the climb-and-drop presented dangers but was also exciting and fast.

Debbie's house was equally exciting, risky, and unexpected—under slow construction, since her father, who was a builder, worked on it only in his spare time. Rooms without ceilings, piles of tools and hillocks of sawdust, and eager conversation about how the

house would eventually look, including the splendors of the landscaped garden and the swimming pool that was to be nestled into a rock garden.

Those were the days of the Apollo launches. On Saturday mornings, which I spent with Debbie, we'd watch the countdowns on the small, gray screen, which were shown over and over, on a loop: that rocket strapped to its launching pole, dense fog pouring out from its base, and the voice from Houston control, *10-9-8-7-6*, grave and important, intoning like a priest, *1, 0, Liftoff, we have a liftoff!* The camera would pan to the amassed crowd dressed in American summer garb gathered in the spectator area, faces hung with wonder and pride, necks craned to track the thrust of the rocket until it disappeared from sight. We'd turn back to our sewing, or card game, satisfied with the impressive goings-on of the wider world, and also with an accepting shrug that things like that didn't happen here, not in good old Australia. Aussies were different. Smiley, casual, unflappable, not given to airs, happy to hang with their mates, go down to the beach, fix up the old house like Deb's dad was doing—but rockets to the moon? Not so much. We felt ourselves to be far-flung and somewhat misbegotten, inhabiting the antipodes, what had been a mystery to the western imagination for hundreds of years: *terra incognita*, the unknown land.

Money was scarce in Debbie's household, though the overall impression I always had in that half-built house was of bounty: high spirits, good old Aussie can-do everything. Her father was a handsome, burly man, devoted to his family and his work, and her mother was charming and warm, relaxed about life. For me, they inhabited a casual, sunburnt realm that had a crisp and alien lightness, with an existential horizon that was beach-like, endless stretches of sand meeting a blue and untroubled sea. This kind of Aussie life seemed beyond my own reach; that forever under-construction home, half open to the sky, offered no hidden crevices or underground passages, no history to lament and haunt as was true in our Jewish home, in which there'd been talk about the Holocaust for as long as I could remember, always the resounding echo in the oft-repeated injunction—*Never Forget*.

And then there was Easter and Christmas, the closest to real-life magical events I had encountered. On Christmas morning, the neighborhood kids would run around our cul-de-sac, excitedly telling each other about their presents. For weeks, the anticipation would build. I'd seen the Christmas trees in their homes, which held an exotic, frightening allure, flashing with tinsel and ornaments. As the holiday fell at the height of Melbourne's hot summer, the Santa we imagined wore a tank top and football shorts. And then, the miracle of miracles—waking up on Christmas morning to discover *piles* of presents, under the tree. On Hanukkah, we were given a single chocolate on each night of the festival, which held its own dazzle for me, until I learned from my neighbors and school friends about the bacchanalian excesses of Christmas. After that—well, the chocolate seemed little more than a chunk of coal.

There were the holidays where my Aussie friends went fishing and boating. Once a year was the famed Melbourne Show; the chief reason for going to the Show was for the loot—Show Bags stuffed with samples, candy, toys, and games. I understood intuitively that Jewish people *didn't do these kinds of things*—at least, not the Jewish people I knew, and, specifically, not my family. We sat around reading books, having what Debbie later referred to as “intellectual conversation” (exotic, it turns out, to her), everything imbued with the recent history of the Jewish people, with words like *survivor* and *the camps*, along with a keen awareness of geographical upheaval, the coin of my realm. When I used the word *Aussie*, I was not thinking about us, about me. I was Jewish. Jews came from elsewhere—elsewheres that were horrifying and involved persecution, fleeing, murder, death. We were people without extended families, people who didn't belong to any one country, people who, in fact, had never belonged to any place, besides the shimmering, mythical location we invoked once a year at our watered-down version of Passover, when we would raise our glasses and say, in unison, *Next year in Jerusalem*. Many of our holidays commemorated nightmares. Even Hanukkah harkened back to persecution—the Jews under siege by their Greek-Syrian oppressors.

My friends, with their Aussie lightness and carnivalesque holidays and outdoorsy family doings simply lived in another world. They, to me, were Australians. Being Jewish was something altogether different. Of course, there was more to the Aussie reality than my child self could know.

It was at the beginning of fourth grade after I met Tessi, the new girl, that I came to understand that there were other truths straining behind the Aussie reality I'd gleaned from my sorties into the lives of my neighborhood friends: that the brightness and sunshine I experienced in their homes was also obscuring something else, something that the society I grew up in was calibrated to actively, criminally suppress.

It was because of Tessi that I got to sit in the front row to watch the moon landing, outside on the asphalt quadrangle, where the Principal had wheeled the black and white television in front of a hundred chairs we dragged out from the classrooms. When Tessi, the new fourth-grader, had arrived two weeks earlier, I was assigned to be her mate, which meant staying by her side. That first day, watching her cross the room, I'd been struck by the stick-thin ankles poking up from her scuffed shoes. My eyes traveled north—knobby knees, the same ashen color, and long thighs revealed by a uniform that was too small. Her wide-set eyes looked oddly mirror-like as if she were somehow hiding behind them; her wavy, unbrushed hair, sun-streaked blonde, swirled around her face as if in motion. Though I'd lived in Melbourne all my life, I'd never seen an Aboriginal person before; they lived off in some other world, wholly distant from ours.

Now, sitting beside Tessi in this privileged front-row seat, I peered up at the flickering images of a strange rocky surface swimming in dim half-light.

"It's the second time," Tessi whispered, leaning close.

"No," I whispered back. "No one's ever landed on the moon before."

"I mean the tellie." The Aussie word for TV. "I only ever saw tellie once before. In the jail cell."

"Look—it's landing!" I breathed, too riveted by what was happening on the screen to attend to what Tessi had said.

A week later, eating with Tessi in the shelter shed, I suddenly recalled her remark.

"What did you mean when you said you'd watched tellie in a jail cell?"

I eyed Tessi's scanty lunch; stale white bread and a wrinkled apple. I passed her half my sandwich: brown bread slathered with butter and thick with tomato and cheese.

"After they took us, they put us in a jail cell. Kept us there for two days. Me and my brothers."

Someone had told me Tessi lived in an orphanage. I'd imagined a car accident, Tessi's parents buried in a dusty cemetery on the outskirts—and no other family of any kind, not brothers, not sisters.

"What do you mean, took you?"

"Police. Priest, too, maybe. Some kind of churchman."

How could a little girl spend two nights in a jail cell? And be taken away—by the police? I felt a cloud of doubt; could Tessi be making up stories?

"They do that, you know," she continued in a flat voice. "Take us, black kids, away. When they took my cousins Bazza and Petal, mum was snake mad. Hissed it up at the police station but they said the kids were gone off to white folks. Better life for them, they said. You people got a bad culcha."

"What's a culcha?" I asked.

"You know, our stories, dances. Our lingo."

Tessi passed an anxious glance around the shelter shed. "I don't wanna get hit," she said.

"I'm not allowed to talk about this stuff."

Two months after Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon, Tessi asked me if I wanted to come over to her place.

"I don't know where you live," I said awkwardly.

"Kawara House." She winced a little with the word Kawara—a name I'd long known that had about it a frightening hush. The place parents threatened to send naughty children—bread and water, and spankings, no mum and dad—to scare them into behaving. I'd had no idea

that Tessi lived in Kawara House. I stood frozen. Tessi averted her eyes, fiddled at the waist of her too-short uniform.

"It's okay if you can't," she said, her lip twisting pitifully.

"No—I mean yes, I want to," I insisted.

"Really?" There it was again, that uncanny look in her eyes, as if they were shiny, reflective shields.

We curved along the treeless road, past an abandoned factory with shuttered windows and a block of council flats, whose windows displayed the bent slats of aged Venetian blinds, then pulled up before a large, ramshackle building.

"OK, then. Have fun!" my mother said with false cheer, her eyes wavering nervously.

The elaborate iron gates must have been grand in their day; now, they were crusted with rust. It took some tugging to dislodge the catch and, true to some haunted-house tale, the gate creaked loudly as it swung open. Tess came bounding down the front steps.

"Right on time!" she said, grabbing me by the hand. "Come on, I'll show you around. Mr. Shelbourne's at a funeral—death in the family!" She said this happily which let me know how she felt about Mr. Shelbourne, who I assumed was the master, or whatever they called the grownups in charge.

We scampered across the wooden boards of what must once have been an elegant foyer and out through double doors at the back which led onto a large, concrete yard. Built on three sides and joining the old building were plain, red-brick structures obviously added later. I glanced around; the place seemed completely deserted.

"They're all at church," Tessi offered in that way she had of reading my mind. "Except for Mrs. Shelbourne."

As if there were some miasma of mental telepathy hanging over everything, a woman appeared at that moment in the open doorway across the concrete yard: tall, thin, wearing an old-fashioned dress with a floppy lace collar that looked like the spread wings of a giant moth. Her face was round and white, and as we crossed towards her, she turned and drifted back into the shadows.

"Don't mind her," Tessi mumbled. "She doesn't bother anyone."

I followed Tessi into the girls' dorm; sixteen cots lined up in two rows along the walls, each with its own metal side table. No desks. I pictured Tessi doing her homework curled up on the tiny cot, scratching answers into her exercise book.

We crossed to a back door which opened onto a large dirt yard sloping down to a fence where a straggly silver birch stood; its dangly leaves and silvery, worm-like pods seemed inviting, in amongst all the concrete and dirt.

"Come on—," I grabbed Tessi's hand and we scampered down to the tree. Its foliage provided shade and a feeling of protection.

"I never had a school friend before," Tessi said. "They don't like me to have friends. I think they're afraid I'll say things."

She did that twisty thing with her mouth that cut into me and made me sad.

"How come you're the only one who didn't go to church?" I asked after a while.

"Don't like it."

Why not?"

Tessi didn't answer. Instead, she said, "You go off to the Jewish R.I., don't you."

I nodded. On Friday mornings, during regular Religious Instruction, we Jewish kids, six in all the school, traipsed off for our own special lesson, held in a storeroom stacked with cleaning supplies at the back of the school. An elderly woman, Mrs. Wein, who smelled of mothballs, was brought in to teach the class. The Bible stories she told us got mixed up in my nine-year-old mind with the unpleasant, virtuous odors of naphthalene and lye, as if they, too, were antidotes to possible minor perils—moth-eaten jackets or dirty floors.

"You Jewish, then?" Tessi asked.

"Yes, I am."

"They told us at Church that the Jews killed Jesus, and so that made me think—"

"Made you think what?"

"That Jews wouldn't tell me I wasn't allowed to remember my own stories. My songs. My dreaming."

I was struggling to make sense of what Tessi was saying. Her voice had changed; it sounded gnarly, as if it were getting stuck in her throat.

"I was five when they took me away," she said softly.

"Pardon me?" I had no idea what she was talking about.

"They took us away from Mum. My brothers and me. Like we were something to steal. Mr. Shelbourne says that's rubbish. But I know it's true." Tessi tapped her temple. "I got the memory right here."

Tessi's eyes were wide; I could feel mine widen, too, with the astonishment of it—that a person, that my friend Tessi, might be stolen—pinched, as we said at school—like a pencil or a ring or a fifty-cent piece.

"Mum—I think it's her. I don't remember her face too well. A woman, anyhow. She's on the ground, kneeled down. Smashing her fists into the road. We're in a car, my brothers and me, I'm looking through the back window. Driving away, fast. She's getting smaller and smaller, she's smashing and smashing, like her hands are hammers that will tear up the tarmac. The land is suffocating, Mum is suffocating. She's gonna rip the road right off with her fingernails and all of us will fall through—back to the dreaming."

I see it, too, everything Tessi is saying, and feel the smashing within me, my own thrashing heart. Tessi's face is a blank mask; her fist opens then clutches, opens, and again tightens as if she's grasping at something.

"Mr. Shelbourne hits us. Any of our lingo comes out of our mouth and whack." Tessi swung her fist in a wide arc then slammed it into her other hand.

She paused, then, seemed to be mulling something over.

"Are Jews allowed to remember stuff?" she said finally. "Songs and everything?" Her face was open, like a child asking about the moon.

"Why yes, of course! We sing them in synagogue. Though the truth is, I don't really know what they mean."

Tessi's jaw worked slowly like she had a bit of gristle in her mouth. "Do you think they'd let me come to your R.I.?"

"Dunno. I can ask."

The flash of joy in Tessi's face came at me like a slap, leaving me suddenly fierce. "I bet Mrs. Wein will let you. She's old but she's nice."

The following Friday, ducking around the school building to the R.I. room, I saw someone crouched behind the bank of dented metal rubbish bins. I pulled ahead of the others to go see and sure enough, there she was, Tessi, hugging her knees, her eyes nervous and bright. The faint waft of mothballs—I turned to see Mrs. Wein.

"Hello girls," she said, her eyes soft.

I pulled Tessi up by the hand. "Can she stay?" I asked.

Confusion ruffled Mrs. Wein's brow.

"She doesn't like the regular R.I.," I added hastily. "The Christian one."

"All right," she said, putting her key in the lock of the door. I noticed something odd in her face—like she'd hurt herself and was apologizing at the same time.

Inside, there wasn't a chair for Tessi, so I sat with her on the floor.

"Today, we begin our study of Hanukkah," Mrs. Wein began. I heard Tessi whisper the word under her breath, *Hanukkah*.

Mrs. Wein launched into the story of the miracle of the oil—how after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Syrian King, Antiochus, only a one-day supply of consecrated oil remained, but it kept the eternal flame burning for eight days. Tessi leaned forward, a beam of intensity in her eyes. Something seemed to ignite in Mrs. Wein as if Tessi's fascination were like the *shamash*, the menorah candle used to light the others, setting Mrs. Wein's words aflame.

I closed my eyes; a vivid image leaped to my mind with such force, I let out a little gasp. Something soft crept across my lap—Tessi's fingers, seeking my own.

The image filled me, blocking out everything else. A magnificent stone structure rising from a sea of sand; a slim tower, coated in dazzling gold. People dressed in jewel tones—azure and rose, threaded with silver—swarming in the massive courtyard. Bells clanging, the air thick with incense, and the smell of ripe fruit. A feeling of exhilaration coursed through me: heady, tantalizing, unlike any feeling I'd ever known. I wanted to clutch at it, memorize it so I might reclaim it again and again. The vision froze, shimmered sensuously—and then, there was a sudden feeling of searing heat, and the vision began to burn, as if a flame had been set to celluloid, everything coiling horribly to a molten mess. I found myself gripping hard, then heard a little cry. My eyes snapped open: Tessi's face was startled as she tried to pull her hand from my finger-crushing clench.

"Sorry!" I whispered, bewildered, releasing her hand. "It's just that I—" my words stopped short.

Tessi nodded slowly, her eyes bright. "It's okay," she whispered back. "I saw it too."

What could she possibly mean? *I saw it too?*

Later, at recess, Tessi and I ran down to the alley behind the shelter shed. We crouched and I reached into my pocket and pulled out a bag of diamond-shaped eucalyptus sweets; we each popped one into our mouths.

"What did you mean," I asked, "When you said in R.I.—I saw it too?"

"The ceremony."

"What ceremony?"

"Your teacher, she said Hanukkah. I never heard that word—but it sounded like something far away, something I know. I closed my eyes, listened inside me, and I heard a new word—different, but also the same. *Wominjeka*. Then I hear it again, this time in, well, in English I guess. Welcome Ceremony. And then—everything sliding away, like with you—" Tessi looked at me meaningfully, and I knew that she knew something of what I'd seen, as if by magic. "Only different."

"Different—how?"

"Everything in my eyes, inside me, went black and white. And I saw them—a whole lot of them. My people. Koorie people. Standing very still—so still, it scared me. Paint on their bodies. Holding things—flat shields, boomerangs, stuff like that. And over there—" Tessi waved, now, off to the left, as if I could see the picture, too, the picture she'd held in her mind as I was staring within at a blazing desert scene, at the gold tower of a massive, doomed temple. "Women. Sitting down. Marks on their chests." She passed her hand across her upper chest, under the collarbone. "Means they've had children."

I heard it, the break in her voice as she said the word children. Her eyes welled with tears. "Me, there. But not there." She paused, struggling for words. "Not there...taken away... I want to see the dance, but I don't see it. They're so still, I think maybe they're dead, pretending to be alive. But then I figure it out. They're not real, those people."

"Yes, they are Tessi," I said urgently, trying to catch the thread of what Tessi was saying.

"They are real!"

"No! They're only a picture! Just a stupid picture I must have seen—someone showed me, maybe. Maybe I remember it from *Adnyamathanha Kuyani Yura*."

Tessi's face clouded.

"From who?" I asked. "Tessi, what's wrong?"

"I don't know. Those words—Koorie lingo—they came into my mouth, but I don't know what they mean! And I don't see them dance. I don't know the dance! It's just a stupid old photograph!"

I didn't know what to say.

Finally, words came. "It's true, I saw something too—something that frightened me, something I did not understand."

"Hanukkah?"

"Yes, Hanukkah. Also far away—in time. I think I saw—the beginning. Where Hanukkah began. The Second Temple. It was beautiful."

I recalled the splendor, trying to recapture that extraordinary feeling I'd had, but failing.

"Then it got—I don't know, pulled away. Like someone was destroying it."

"It was destroyed. Mrs. Wein said so," Tessi said.

"I mean—like someone was taking it all away from me. It was like someone set fire—to the picture in my head. I know, it sounds weird."

"Not to me, it doesn't," Tessi said.

"I had a terrible feeling that I didn't know what happened next," I continued. "I wanted to, but it just kind of let go of me. As if—"

"As if—what?"

I hung my head, stunned by the feeling of shame washing through me.

"As if someone, something, was just throwing me away."

Again, that slow nod, Tessi's face knowing and wise. Tears stung my eyes.

"Mrs. Wein said they found the oil," Tessi said. "Magic oil. There was only enough for one day, but it lasted for eight." She said this as if she'd been reciting the story of Hanukkah all of her life.

"You should add that part in," she continued. "You know, into your Dreaming."

My eyes closed as if drawn shut by an invisible hand—and then I saw it: an ancient candelabra wrought in fine gold, covered in tiny carvings—vines and flowers winding around the curves, little fawns, and lambs. The candles in place, the shamash being lit; a powerful, sweet smell as the wick caught, as of melting honey, and then, one by one, the eight candles also set alight, until the space around the candelabra sprang into view, a cavernous room made of stone, a huge crowd of people with somber eyes. Hanukkah—the sound of the word, rumbling and guttural, issuing softly from the lips of a thousand souls. Rededication. And in place of the ecstasy, I'd felt earlier, there was something melancholy and sweet.

I opened my eyes.

"Did you see it?" Tessi asked.

"Yes," I said, "I did."

"Then I must close my eyes and see my people, too."

Tessi screwed her eyes shut. "Help me," she whispered, a little frantically. "Help me to see it."

I had no idea what I was supposed to help Tessi see; I closed my eyes, too, hoping for inspiration.

"There's fire, there, too," I said, relieved that words had sprung to my lips. "A campfire. And stars—lots of stars in the sky. Dry earth—reddish-brown." I grabbed a eucalyptus sweet from my pocket and thrust it under Tessi's nose. "And the smell of eucalyptus leaves that have been baking all day in the sun. Only now, it's nighttime; the dance is about to begin."

Something was happening to Tessi's face; her tensed eyes relaxed, and it was as if she had come upon something unexpected and beautiful.

"Yes, I see it—"

I held my breath, watched the ripple of feeling cross Tessi's face. I wondered if Tessi's mother was there, in her mind's eye.

Tessi let out a low sigh. I had the sudden feeling I was sliding away from her as if we were no longer side by side but separated by a growing chasm.

She opened her eyes, placed a fist on her breastbone.

"Not gone," she said, her eyes shining with an unearthly light—perhaps with the starlight from her vision.

"Here," she said, giving her chest a little thump. "It's all here."